

The Passport: An approach to learning which encourages students to focus on form autonomously

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Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Show him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.

Old Proverb

Introduction

It seems that as teachers we are often handing out fish to our students in class for them to digest: a new lexical item, an explanation of a grammatical point, the correct way to pronounce a word. The students gladly accept these teacher-supplied items of form and another day in class goes by. However, it might be better for all concerned if, as the old proverb above suggests, we give students the skills to capture their own form, since we know the language learning process is a lifetime activity which necessitates many hours spent outside of the classroom without teacher guidance.

In this paper, I'd like to describe an approach to learning (termed 'the passport'), which is designed to let students capture items for themselves. The approach helps students to focus on form autonomously, encouraging them to actively intervene in (and create) form-focused events rather than relying on the teacher to handle these. It is based on a learning cycle which is needs-driven as well as student-driven, compared to the more traditional learning cycle where the teacher tries to second guess the requirements of the class which is considered to be a homogeneous body without individual needs. First, I will lay out the background to the argument that form is best handled by the individual student, and introduce the notion of learner intervention before describing the workings of the passport. Finally, I will show how the passport is closely tied in with the notion of autonomy.

Learner intervention

Current second language acquisition theory (Ellis, 1985; Krashen, 1982) suggests that massive amounts of message-focused interaction are needed if language acquisition is to take place, but recently there has been support for the introduction of some focus on form in the classroom (e.g. Long & Crookes, 1992). How this form should be supplied is the subject of much controversy. The traditional approach is to present students with items of form in isolation and then have students practice through drills etc. in the hope that they will incorporate these items into message-focused interaction, an approach which tends to separate form and message. The modern approach, however, looks to integrate the two by raising students' awareness of form so that they can attend to this during message-focused activities. Two recent theories that utilize this approach are Schmidt's 'notice-the-gap' theory (Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Schmidt, 1990) and Rutherford and Sharwood-Smith's (1985) 'consciousness-raising', both of which

stress the need for conscious awareness of form on the students' behalf if acquisition is to take place.

The modern approach to form has led to the notion of teacher intervention (Bygate, 1994), which implies that the teacher can step in at appropriate moments to supply students with, and raise their awareness of, the form required for a message-focused task. This could be at any time during the task cycle, for example, during the mid-task phase when teacher steps in to negotiate with a student in the hope of making certain forms more salient. The teacher here is trying to bring to the attention of the student the particular item of form while at the same time integrating form with message.

However, since it is only the student who can decide what form they will attend to in the message and the attention they will pay it, then it seems logical to suggest that it is only the student who can intervene in the language learning process to raise her awareness of form. Teacher intervention, no matter how well intended, cannot do this since 'awareness' is such a subjective state of mind. In other words, the notion of 'learner intervention', where the student takes on the responsibility of attending to form in the environment, assumes greater precedence than teacher intervention. Since each and every student will differ in what language features prove to be important at any particular point in time, we can see how learner intervention and autonomy in focus on form is paramount. This autonomy is emphasized in the passport which provides students with a means to intervene on their own behalf in the language learning process.

The Passport

The passport itself is a small notebook (approx. 8 x 11 cm) which fits in the student's shirt pocket or other place where it can be kept near at hand. It is so called because of the condition that it should be carried around at all times and is needed for entry into class (while allowing for the occasional student who forgets to bring it). As a student is immersed in the English environment of class (and outside of class), there will be times when she notices items of form. When this occurs, the passport should be taken out and the item written down or 'captured'. Later the student attempts to learn the items which have been captured and eventually use them in her own output. These four stages of the passport learning cycle are shown in Figure 1 below. A brief description of each phase follows.

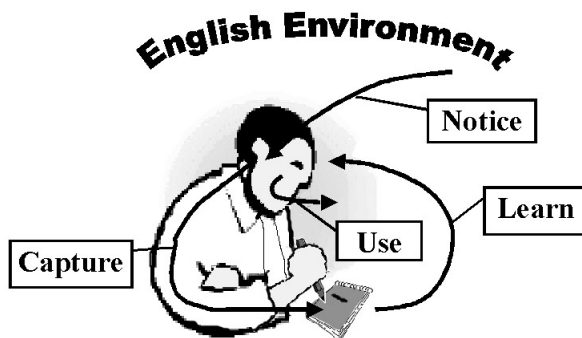


Figure 1: The passport learning cycle

Notice

Noticing is a concept put forward by Schmidt & Frota (1986) to explain the acquisition of certain forms over others during a five-month study in which Schmidt kept a running diary of his attempts to learn Spanish. They suggest that learners will acquire certain forms more rapidly if they are present in the input and noticed. The term 'noticed' in this context is difficult to operationalize but it roughly means that Schmidt became consciously aware of the form in input (verb forms in this case) and subsequently made a note of the form in his journal. Items that had been taught through formal instruction but which had not been noticed were less likely to be acquired. The authors say:

“...if [Schmidt] was to learn and use a particular type of verbal form, it was not enough for it to have been taught and drilled in class. It was also not enough for the form to occur in input, but [Schmidt] had to notice the form in the input.”

(Schmidt & Frota, 1986, p.281)

Whilst the noticing hypothesis is still in need of empirical verification, several commentators have suggested it is an important part of language acquisition (e.g. Robinson, 1995) and there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that it does occur on a regular basis with most language learners (including the author).

If we take noticing as given, then, the need for autonomy in focus on form becomes more real since it is not enough for students to learn an item of form which the teacher presents to them through formal instruction. Instead they have to consciously notice it in input, an event which can only be created and managed by the individual student concerned. No amount of teacher intervention could possibly lead students down such a path since noticing by definition is such a subjective event.

The passport makes use of noticing as its prime means for capturing form. As students are immersed in the language, certain items of form become more salient to the student compared to other items. It is difficult to say what causes one particular item of form to be noticed but an anecdote from my own language learning experience may help the readers to understand the concept and perhaps bring back instances of noticing in their own language learning. Some years ago when I was learning Korean, I came across the word *samang* several times in the newspaper. I wondered what the word meant, but didn't look up the meaning in a dictionary. A few days later while traveling on the bus, I heard people saying that Kim Il Sung, the leader of North Korea, had died which was big news at the time. I got off the bus right in front of a newsagent's stand. All the newspapers had *samang* in big letters on the front page together with a picture of Kim Il Sung. The word shot right back into my head and I realized that it means 'death'. I quickly captured the word and have never forgot it since.

While there may be as many anecdotes about noticing as there are words in the English language, one point seems to be true of most noticing events and that is they are very personal and unique experiences which implies that they need to be handled by the individual student concerned.

Capture

When a student notices an item of form, it is a signal that she is ready to acquire that item. The student should therefore capture the item by writing it down in the passport without delay. It is imperative that they write down the item as soon as possible, since within a few seconds the item can be forgotten and lost forever. Hence the need to keep the passport close at hand, even when the student is not in class. The motto to be given to the students and constantly reinforced is, 'Don't avoid the call of nature.'

Capture items you notice!

It is difficult to say how many items a student should capture a day and each student will have different needs, but if the language is being studied intensively, then 10 items per day is a suitable figure based on past experience with my students. Any more than this means the student is probably trying to capture too much and treating the passport as a 'catch-all' book which it is not intended to be.

Learn

After the student has captured a number of items, she should go about learning these items. How she does this is usually a matter of personal preference but a regular routine of taking out the passport and reviewing the items at particular times during the day, say while riding on the train to class or last thing before they go to bed, is recommended and often adopted by students. During the learning phase, the students are raising their awareness of the items giving them a greater chance of noticing it again in subsequent input. (A computer program to aid learning of the items can be downloaded from www.geocities.com/kgu2001/download/hangul.zip)

Use

The final phase of the learning cycle is termed the use phase. The word 'use' here is employed in a fairly loose sense since form is quite heterogeneous in nature ranging from highly frequent and useful items which students will rapidly acquire and incorporate into their own output, to infrequent passive vocabulary. Thus there is no requirement that students need to use every item of form in their own output.

After a student has noticed and captured an item, there will often be times in the coming days and weeks when the item appears again in the input. These are important events because they give the student the opportunity of noticing the item a second and third time which helps to reinforce her understanding of the form. Other items may not be noticed again for some time, especially if it is a low frequency item. However, this does not mean capturing and trying to learn the item has been a waste of time. Quite often, a word or grammatical point can reappear months or years after it has first been noticed and captured. In this case, the initial notice and capture effort by the student will help her to acquire the item the second time round.

The Passport and Autonomy

The passport learning cycle of 'notice-capture-learn-use' is needs-driven and student-driven compared to the more traditional cycle where the teacher supplies the class with the items of form. Furthermore, the cycle demonstrates clearly to students that they are in charge of their own linguistic destinies from beginning to end and thus is a powerful tool for promoting autonomy. Students can see clearly that if any part of the cycle is broken, then language acquisition will not take place and fossilization is likely to occur. For example, when students are not actively engaged in using the language, they notice form less and instead have to rely on the teacher to feed them.

This does not mean that the teacher cannot continue to use the traditional learning cycle and present items to the class as a whole. Indeed, there may be form that would be difficult for students to pick up by themselves (e.g. content-specific vocabulary). But the learning of form seems to be such a personal, autonomous activity which only the student can take charge of and manage. Students need to make a 'strategic investment...in their own linguistic destinies' (Brown, 1991, p.256) and this can only be achieved if, as teachers, we convince students of the need to fish for themselves and give them the means to do so. The passport hopefully can fulfill

both of these objectives.

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