J. F. LEE AND A. G. BENATI, SECOND LANGUAGE PROCESSING AND DELIVERING PROCESSING INSTRUCTION IN CLASSROOMS AND VIRTUAL CONTEXTS


While the acceptance of a grammatical component in Australia’s national English curriculum suggests that the ‘no-grammar’ era is finally drawing to a close, the structural aspects of grammar remain less accepted than the functional. In language pedagogy, the structural elements of syntax (word order) and morphology (inflection) struggle to be viewed as pertinent to meaning-based methodologies, such as Communicative Language Teaching. The question so often posed is: if students need to conduct interviews with patients or write Accountancy essays, why should they receive grammatical instruction? Since Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research has revealed that in the teaching of grammatical features such as subject-verb agreement, tense and articles do contribute to language learning success, SLA researchers have pursued various means to show how grammatical structure can be taught in a meaning-oriented fashion. Lee and Benati, both Heads of Language Departments, take up this aim in their two texts Second Language Processing: An analysis of theory, problems and possible solutions (2007) and Delivering Processing Instruction in classrooms and virtual contexts: research and practice (2007). These books aim to promote and extend Van Patten’s theory of input processing and its practical application, Processing Instruction (PI) (Van Patten 2004).

Believing as I do that second language processing research can fine-tune grammar teaching to learners’ communicative and formal needs, I jumped at the opportunity to review these books. As I read them, however, I wondered why two such similar works were published by the same authors in one year. Both introduce VanPatten’s theory in the initial chapters and follow by presenting several empirical studies. Although Delivering Processing Instruction focuses somewhat more on PI than Second Language Processing and explores its effectiveness in virtual contexts, the content of both works overlaps considerably. Still, as someone who has tried to teach and learn the intricacies of grammar, the basic message made sense – since second language learners need to understand a form
before they will produce it, they benefit from assistance with input processing problems. Why, one must ask, couldn’t this argument have been compressed into one book, perhaps using *Second Language Processing* as the base? *Delivering Processing Instruction* is less theoretically sophisticated and suffers from stylistic and proofreading infelicities. To show how the two books compare, I’ll consider their theoretical chapters and then their empirical components.

*Second Language Processing* opens with a reader-friendly account of the theory which follows Krashen (1983) in hypothesising that input is a more important aspect of language acquisition than output, but sensibly differs in recognising that instructed grammatical input can become ‘intake’ to the developing system. The first chapter sketches VanPatten’s intriguing proposal that three input processing principles and their corollaries ‘filter input’ due to the limits of Working Memory. While I would have liked some reference to the psychological research which apparently underlies these principles, they shed light on the meaning orientation of acquisition, as the following principle (P1) and one of its corollaries (P1b) illustrate:

\[ P1 \text{ Learners process input for meaning before they process it for form.} \]
\[ P1(b) \text{ Learners will tend to rely on lexical items as opposed to grammatical form (e.g. morphological markings) when both encode the same semantic information.} \]

To show how learners can be directed away from meaning to notice target form and interact with it, chapter 2 builds on VanPatten’s theory by surveying the role of input enhancement. Since some of this research shows that input enhancement may not be enough to guarantee the processing of form, chapter 3 presents VanPatten’s notion of structured input, its methodological counterpart, PI, and previous studies showing its effectiveness. Its components are clearly explained and accompanied by examples of structured input activities (SIA) and teaching guidelines. These SIA present students with some sentences (aural or written) which are structured with two aims: firstly, to “push” students through a processing problem arising from the principles and secondly, to aid processing for meaning. For instance, since P1(b) means that students rely on Adverbials rather than verb morphology to interpret future tense, one SIA for teaching Italian presents sentences with the morphology only and directs students to “Notice the spoken stress of the third person singular of the future tense” (p.44). After the form-focused part of the activity, the students engage with a meaning-based aspect of the same input, such
as ticking boxes to indicate whether or not the New Year resolutions in the sentences apply to them.

Once I had digested all of this in chapters 1 to 3 of Second Language Processing, I found it irritating to re-read virtually the same content written in a poorer style in the initial chapters of Delivering Processing Instruction. The only difference between them is the more detailed summary of some other PI studies conducted within this framework, which could have been integrated into a single, more definitive work. These studies show how PI prompts superior interpretation and the same production as the output approaches of traditional (grammar) instruction (TI) and meaning-based output instruction (MOI) and how SIA alone is responsible for these outcomes (the reliance on acronyms is rather overwhelming). There is no survey of CALL, despite the supposed focus on virtual learning environments.

Although the three final empirical chapters of Second Language Processing cohere with its theoretical framework by investigating whether input enhancement or SIA is the significant variable, these studies are too similar. All deal with this same issue, have essentially the same design and come to the same conclusion: “We have now demonstrated that no matter if the structured input is enhanced or not, it is the structured input which accounts for the grammatical gains” (p. 125). So, the impression is relentless and deadening despite the variety in grammatical forms (e.g. subjunctive, future tense morphology), languages (Italian, Japanese) and principles (e.g. non-meaningful and redundant forms, meaningful forms versus lexical items). The point could have been made by the strongest study, an investigation of the effect of PI on sentence-final positions in Japanese past tense morphology (chapter 6). It is superior to the others in method (it is the only one with a control group and two post-tests) and findings (it has the most significant results for both interpretation and production).

As with its chapters on the paradigm, the empirical chapters of Delivering Processing Instruction sing a similar song to those in Second Language Processing. The innovative element is that two of the three studies, by comparing PI in classroom and virtual environments, show that it is equally effective in either mode. Although this is good news for the theory, it seems a bit odd in a book supposedly focusing on virtual learning. The most refreshing chapter (4), co-authored with Aguilar-Sanchez and McNulty, addresses the issue of individual differences within the cohort which, as in all studies within this framework, consisted of participants scoring 60% or below on the pre-test. It found that the low-medium performance group benefited from PI while the high performance group did not, suggesting a ceiling on PI’s effectiveness.
The impression remains from these two books that in the race to publish the empirical studies, depth is sacrificed. One example of this is the treatment of output and the related matter of developmental sequences in production. Probably one shouldn’t be surprised that Lee and Benati neglect output/production when their proposal concerning input is a strong one. Nevertheless, they refer to production studies (e.g. White, 1998) in their review of the input enhancement literature and measure (written) production in their own studies. Thus, some recognition of the findings of SLA production studies is in order. In the first instance, this would highlight the grammatical gains in production revealed by studies such as White’s. To not do so, gives readers the (mistaken) impression that structured input is the only way to go about teaching grammar. Secondly, due attention to investigations of developmental sequences in speech production would suggest that the target analysis of the production data has skewed the results from assessment tasks such as the following:

Complete the following sentences by putting the verb in brackets in the appropriate tense.

Immagino che Alessandro _______ (parlare) molte lingue.

(I think that Alessandro _______ (speak) many languages.)

(Delivering Processing Instruction, p. 134, my translation)

In this Italian example, the student is supposed to write the correct form of the subjunctive. However, as Lee (2002) himself found, the analysis of “partially-accurate or target-like” as well as correct forms (Second Language Processing, p. 31), leads to improved results in production. One wonders why Lee and Benati’s 2007 books don’t follow suit. Is it because they don’t want to recognise the developmental dimension of language learning raised by sequences in production data? If so, no matter how much empirical evidence these authors manage to accumulate for their input hypothesis, they and other practitioners will have to face the facts of learner language when students try to use forms such as the subjunctive. No amount of ‘force’, one of Lee and Benati’s favourite metaphors, will suffice. (See Pienemann, 2005 for a second language processing approach to the constraints on producing subordinate clauses.)

In all, Lee and Benati’s works provide an up-dated version of a theory and pedagogical approach which illustrate one way to teach grammatical form meaningfully. I believe that students exposed to PI would not “hate grammar” because the grammatical meaning and form are brought home simply, saliently, and in context. However, they may well
get bored with SIA, considering the trite content (e.g. famous people), similar formats and tendency towards the sentence-level. Greater use of reading texts as the basis for SIA, following some of Lee’s (e.g. Lee 2003) earlier investigations, would have been a welcome addition. So, Lee and Benati make a useful contribution to the grammar debate, although, by synthesising their insights into one book rather than two, they could have obtained a better quality outcome.

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REFERENCES