

Newmark, L. (1966). 'How not to interfere with language learning'.

Begins by noting the predominance of contrastive analysis in applied linguistics and language teaching,

"...the weight given to teaching various things is determined not by their importance to the user of the language, but by their degree of difference from what the analyst takes to be corresponding features of the native language." (p. 77)

as well as the predominance of reinforcement theory in behaviorist psychology, and its use in language teaching practice (i.e. step-by-step instruction)

Points out that language learning is *not* linear, i.e. an accrual of component parts (as implicitly presumed by contrastive analysis and behaviorists)

If it were, language would take children a lifetime to learn, and would be unlearnable by adults

Moreover, the communicative and functional whole of language is more than the sum of its structural parts

L2 acquisition by children within the critical period relies on learning language in complex chunks and in context:

"...acquisition cannot be simply additive; complex bits of language are learned a whole chunk at a time. Perhaps by some process of stimulus sampling the parts of the chunks are compared and become available for use in new chunks. The possible number of 'things known' in the language exponentiates as the number of chunks increases additively, since every complex chunk makes available a further analysis of old chunks into new elements, each still attached to the original context upon which its appropriateness depends." (p. 78)

This is not what is found in much current language teaching practice, however:

"...consideration of the details supplied by linguistic and psychological analysis has taken attention away from the exponential power available in learning in natural chunks. In present psychologically oriented learning programs the requirement that one specify the individual behaviors to be reinforced leads (apparently inevitably) to an artificial isolation of parts from wholes; in structurally oriented textbooks and courses, contrastive analysis leads to structural drills designed to teach a set of specific 'habits' for the well-formation of utterances, abstracted from normal social context." (p. 79)

Main point of the article:

"The argument of this paper is that such isolation and abstraction of the learner from the contexts in which that language is used constitutes serious interference with the language learning process. Because it requires the learner to attach new responses to old stimuli, this kind of interference may in fact increase

the interference that applied linguists like to talk about -- the kind in which a learner's previous language structures are said to exert deleterious force on the structures being acquired." (p. 79)

Difference between structural well-formedness and pragmatic appropriateness:

"But the kinds of linguistic rules that have been characterized so far (syntactic, phonological, and semantic) bear on the question of well-formedness of sentences, not on the question of appropriateness of utterances." (p. 80)

Emphasis on communicative and functional competence: the ability to "say what you want to say" and accomplish what you want to accomplish

Basic common sense approach:

"The odd thing is that despite our ignorance as experts, as human beings we have always known how to teach other human beings to use a language: use it ourselves and let them imitate us as best they can at the time. Of course, this method has had more obvious success with children than with adult learners, but we have no compelling reason to believe with either children or adults that the method is not both necessary and sufficient to teach a language." Newmark (1966), p. 80

How to adopt this approach for use with adults in the foreign language classroom, an obviously artificial setting?

"The idea of using models as teachers is hardly new in applied linguistics..." (p. 81)

"The sad fact is, however, that the drill material the model has been given to model has intrinsic features that draw attention away from the situation and focus it on the form of the utterance." (p. 81)

Forcing production prematurely is precisely what induces L1 interference:

"If what the learner observes is such that he cannot absorb it completely within his short-term memory, he will make up for his deficiency if he is called to perform before he has learned the new behavior by padding with material from what he already knows, that is, his own language. This padding -- supplying what is known to make up for what is not known -- is the major source of 'interference', the major reason for 'foreign accents'." (p. 81)

"There is no particular need to combat the intrusion of the learner's native language -- the explicit or implicit justification for the contrastive analysis that applied linguists have been claiming to be necessary for planning language-teaching courses. But there is need for controlling the size of the chunks displayed for imitation. In general if you want the learner's imitation to be more accurate, make the chunks smaller; increase the size of the chunks as the learner progresses in his skill in imitation.

...If we limit our demand for immediate high quality of production, we may well find that his behavior is adequately shaped by the same ad hoc forces

that lead a child from being a clumsy performer capable of using his language only with a terribly inaccurate accent, and in a limited number of social situations, to becoming a skillful native speaker capable of playing a wide variety of social roles with the appropriate language for each." (p. 82)

Subsidiary role of grammar instruction:

"The student's craving for explicit formulation of generalizations can usually be met better by textbooks and grammars that re reads outside class than by discussion in class." (p. 82)

"The important point is that the study of grammar as such is neither necessary nor sufficient for learning to use a language."

The role of technology ("the new videotape recorders") in supplementing live language instruction