



Department of Linguistics

L1 use in the language classroom

Dr. Kevin McManus

January 2026



Session aims

- Why is L1 use in the language classroom a polarizing question?
- Research evidence on instructed second language learning
- Asking the question: Can drawing on students' experiences and knowledge of other languages maximize language learning?
- Evidence-based recommendations for effective language learning
 - ACTFL's Guiding Principles
 - World-Readiness Standards for Language Learning

Setting the context

- L1 use in language teaching is controversial
- Dominant approach has been no L1 use in L2 classrooms
 - Still prevalent in many teaching approaches
 - Instructors ban L1 use (McMillan & Turnbull 2009)
 - L1 use reflects poor/inadequate pedagogues (Cook 2001, Chambers 1992)
 - Because L1=L2 (e.g., Krashen), L1 has no place in L2 learning

Setting the context

- Turning point informed by:
 - Practice and research about the nature of learning
 - Connections between learning and teaching
 - Psycholinguistics
 - Bilingual education
- Despite national recommendations, there is considerable confusion about the status and appropriateness of L1 use in the classroom

L1 use in the language classroom

- Beliefs about L1 use in the classroom
 - What are these?
 - Where do they originate?
- Do your beliefs about L1 guide your teaching?
- What place does L1 have in your language classroom?

L1 use in the language classroom

- Tea with BVP, <https://learning-languages.squarespace.com>
- Radio show about language learning and language teaching
- Two callers with descriptions about L1 use in their own classrooms (episode 32)
 - Alison (23.32)
 - Keeping learners on task with translation (clarify meanings of words, move on quickly)
 - Judicious use of L1 can help learners stay on class (prevents derailing the task)
 - Meredith (30.25)
 - L1 for classroom management and housekeeping
 - Changes over the course of the semester/year

What does the research say?

First things first...

- Language teaching that is underpinned by language learning research
- How understanding how humans use and process language can benefit L2 teaching
 - Crosslinguistic influence
 - L1 vs. L2 processing routines
- Language teaching research about instructional effectiveness

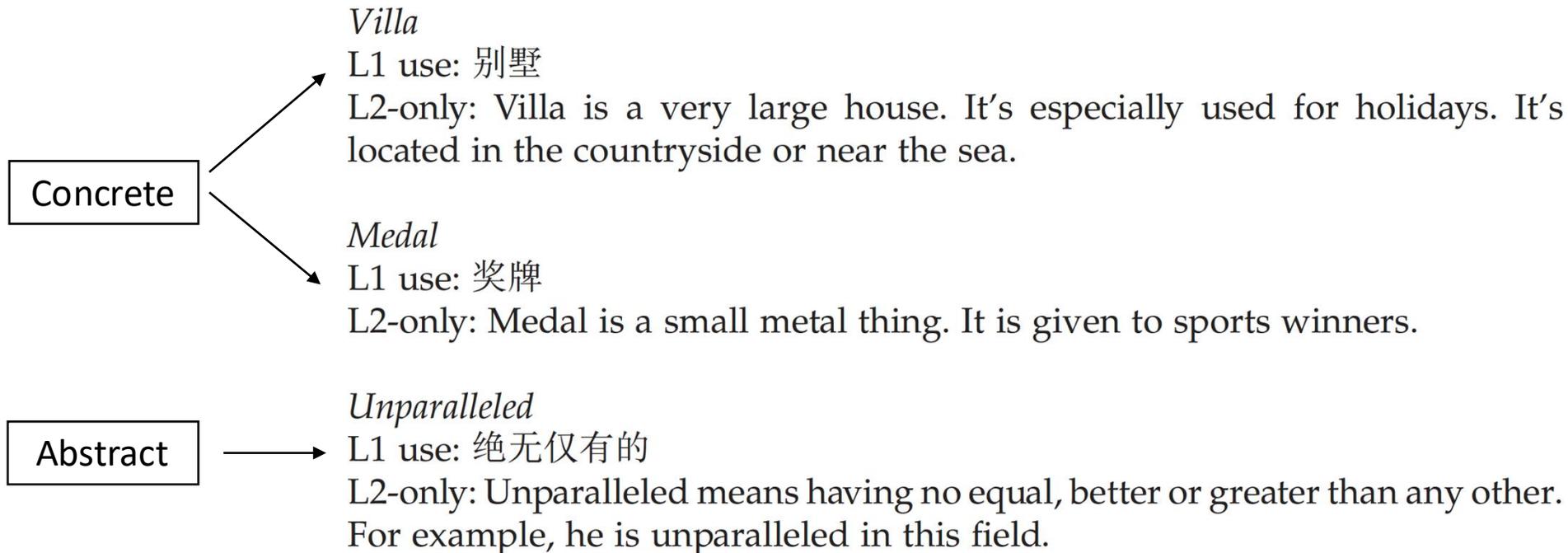
L2 vocabulary learning

Research evidence: L1 use for vocabulary

- What is the impact of using L1 for teaching L2 vocabulary?
- A target word's meaning is explained using its L1 equivalent.
- A target word is explained in L2
 - Definition, paraphrase, circumlocution, exposition, contextualization

Research evidence: L1 use for vocabulary

Appendix 1: Examples of lexical information provided through teachers' L1 use and L2-only explanations



Why might L1 use be theoretically helpful?

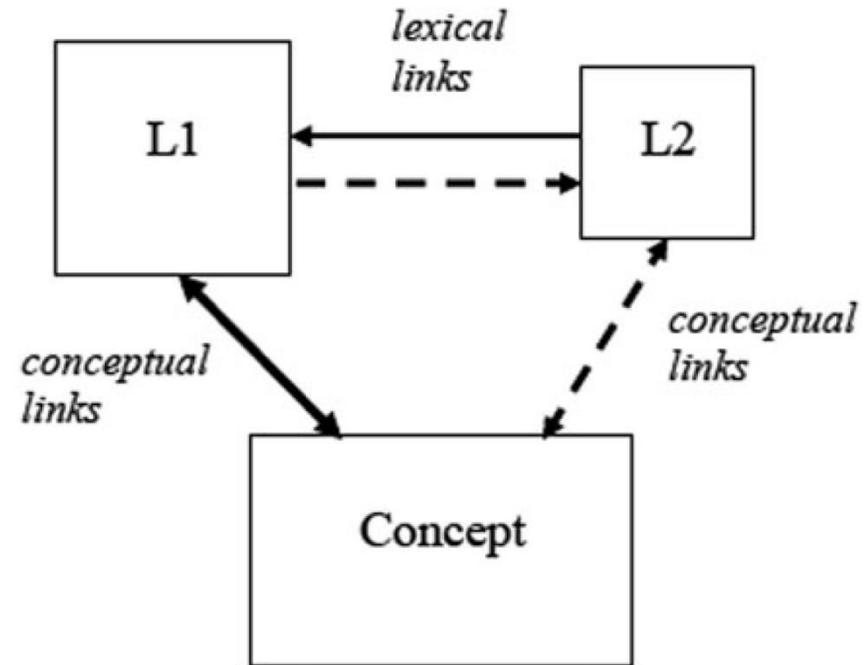


Figure 1. The revised hierarchical model (adapted from Kroll and Stewart 1994)

What about L2 use?

- L2-use is clearly helpful in providing L2 input, an essential component for L2 development
 - BUT, quantity is not the only thing that matters
- Challenges to processing pieces of lexical information will likely reduce their chances of arriving at an accurate understanding of the target word's meaning.
 - Words and meaning have to be connected for learning to develop

Findings

- For both concrete and abstract words, L1-use and L2-use groups improved, but improvement was higher for L1-use group, even after instruction
- L1 use promoted more learning for easy (concrete) and difficult (abstract) lexical items
- L1 use promoted greater retention after teaching

Why was L1 use the most helpful for vocabulary learning?

- L1 use vs. L2 use explanations might be retrieved and processed differently.
 - When a translation equivalent is offered, a direct link will be formed between an L2 word and its translation.

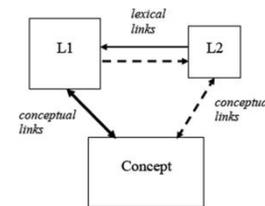


Figure 1. The revised hierarchical model (adapted from Kroll and Stewart 1994)

- Learning L2 vocabulary through L1 translations tends to occur in a comparatively straightforward manner
- likely to more easily and successfully facilitate learning of concrete and abstract word meanings.

Why was L1 use the most helpful for vocabulary learning?

- In contrast, processing an L2-only explanation is more complex:
 - learners have to make efforts to comprehend and integrate the lexical information, to match it with their established conceptual knowledge, and then to infer the target word's meaning.

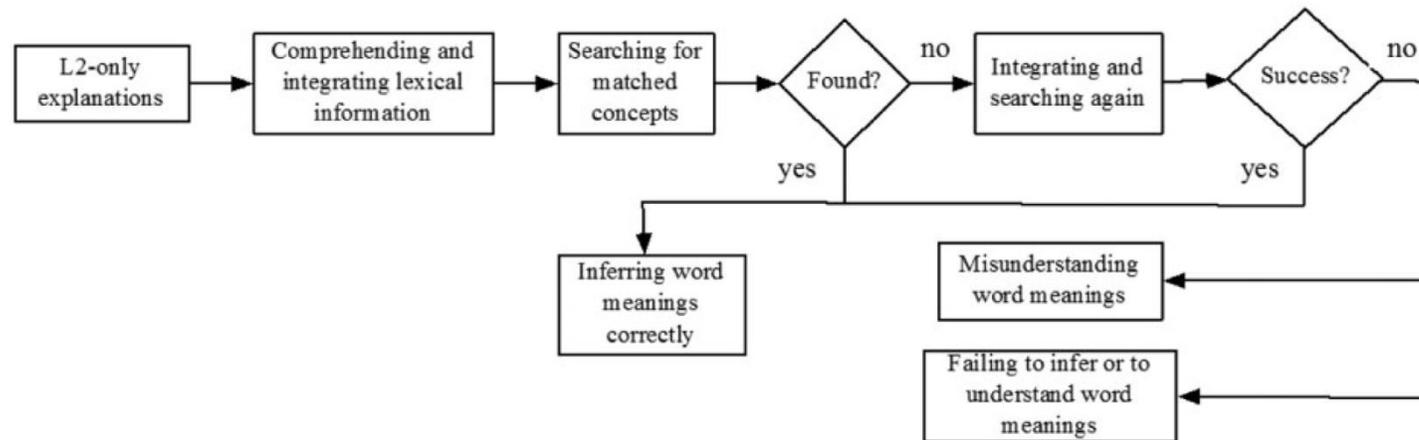


Figure 4. A flowchart of processing L2-only explanations by learners

Conclusions

"The ways in which NNSTs explained L2 words impacted learners' acquisition of concrete and abstract words. **The present study observed the superiority of teachers' L1 use over L2-only explanations.** The mechanisms by which learners comprehended, integrated, processed, and retrieved pieces of lexical information affected how well they remembered L2 words. Although there are processing differences between concrete and abstract words, **teachers' L1 use was found to work more effectively than L2-only explanations for both types of words**"

(Zhao & Macaro 2016, p.93)

Take-away?

- Type of explanation matters!
- Understanding how learning happens (i.e., the cognitive processes that underpin learning) can promote better learning
- L1 use can reduce ambiguity, and resulting cognitive costs, that are costly to L2 learning
- **IMPORTANTLY:** L1 is used to efficiently connect L2 words with meanings/concepts

L2 grammar learning

Research evidence: L1 use for grammar learning

McManus, K. & Marsden, E. (2017). L1 explicit instruction can improve L2 online and offline performance. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 39(3), 1-34.

McManus, K. & Marsden, E. (2018). Online and offline effects of L1 practice in L2 grammar learning. A partial replication. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*.

- Can L1 use promote learning of difficult and late-acquired grammar features
 - Passé Composé vs. Imparfait distinction

Aspect distinctions

- Directly addressed Comparisons goal area of World-Readiness Standards
 - Crosslinguistic differences in how languages express ongoing and habitual meaning
 - How do English and French differ
 - How are English and French the same
- Instruction used videos and images that depicted events
- Learners asked to think about how would you say that in English and/or French
- Compared learners thinking about L2+L1 vs. L2-only

Aims

- Draw attention to:
 - English and French express the same meaning, but in different ways
 - Similarities between English and French
 - Differences between English and French
- = Get learners to notice how English works
- = Get learners to notice how French works

Ongoing meaning

- Learners watched the short video showing a man eating an apple
 - He never finished eating the apple
- L2+L1 group:
 - How would you describe to an English-speaker what you just saw
 - He is eating an apple
 - He was eating an apple
 - How would you describe to a French-speaker what you just saw
 - Il mange une pomme
 - Il mangeait une pomme
- L2-only group:
 - How would you describe to a French-speaker what you just saw
 - Il mange une pomme
 - Il mangeait une pomme

Noticing English features

- Draw attention to English features

He is eating an apple

vs.

He was eating an apple

- Past vs. present?

Noticing English features

- Draw attention to English features

He was eating an apple

vs.

He ate an apple

- Finished vs. ongoing?

Noticing French features

- Draw attention to French features

Il mange une pomme

vs.

Il mangeait une pomme

- Past vs. present?

Noticing French features

- Draw attention to French features

Il mangeait une pomme

vs.

Il a mangé une pomme

- Finished or ongoing?

Practice!

- Lots of practice in interpreting the meaning of French and English sentences
 - He washed the dishes [Past or Present]
 - She walks the dog [Past or Present]
 - Elle court dans le parc [Past or Present]
 - She was eating a sandwich [Past or Present]
 - Elle jouait au foot [Past or Present]
 - He sings a song [Past or Present]
- Learners are trained to notice the same English and French features in both languages in the practice
- Learners are taught through systematic contrasts

Summary of teaching

- Traditional teaching method is reversed:
 - Meaning introduced before forms
 - Learners begin by thinking how to express a meaning, rather than what meaning does this form express
 - Meaning is introduced via videos and images, not words
- Learners think about how they would express the meanings
- Learners trained to notice the same features across languages
- Learners complete L1 and L2 interpretation practice
 - Rare for students to learn about their L1 and then practice it

Findings

- No development for Control (i.e. no training)
- Limited development for L2-only
 - Benefits limited to immediately after instruction
- Significant and long-lasting benefits for L2+L1
 - Improvement maintained after instruction
 - Significantly better performance in a variety of tasks (speaking, reading, listening)

Findings

- Significant advantage for L2+L1 instruction
 - Contrasts with traditional teaching methods
 - Evidence supporting that L1 use can benefit L2 learning, specifically
 - Learning how English works
 - Practice interpretation English sentences
- Few benefits for L2-only instruction
 - Consistent with what we know about past tenses:
 - Difficult to learn and late-acquired

Take-aways

- Meaning before form
- Think about how different languages express the same meanings is extremely helpful for long-term learning
- Videos and images rather than words
 - Makes the link to meaning clear
- L1 and L2 practice

More research about the benefits of L1 use in L2 learning (a selection)

Ammar, A., Lightbown, P., & Spada, N. (2010). Awareness of L1/L2 differences: does it matter? *Language Awareness*, 19, 129-146.

Horst, M., White, J., & Bell, P. (2010). First and second language knowledge in the language classroom. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 14, 331-349.

Kupferberg, I. (1999). The cognitive turn of contrastive analysis: Empirical evidence. *Language Awareness*, 8, 210-222.

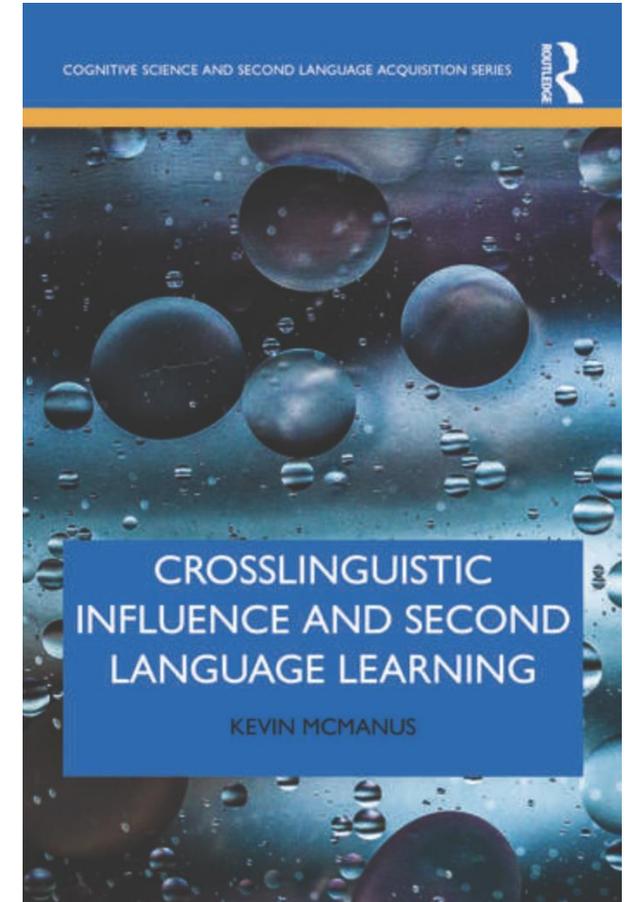
Laufer, B., & Girsai, N. (2008). Form-focused instruction in second language vocabulary learning: A case for contrastive analysis and translation. *Applied Linguistics*, 29, 694-716.

Spada, N., Lightbown, P. M., & White, J. (2005). The importance of form/meaning mappings in explicit form-focused instruction. In A. Housen & M. Pierrard (Eds.), *Investigations in Instructed Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 199-234). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

González, P. (2008). Towards effective instruction on aspect in L2 Spanish. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 46(2), 91-112.

White, J., & Horst, M. (2012). Cognate awareness-raising in late childhood: teachable and useful. *Language Awareness*, 21, 181-196.

This research and more summarized in this book:



National recommendations

ACTFL: Going for 90% plus

In May 2010, the *American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages* (ACTFL) launched the following position statement:

- [...] The pivotal role of target-language interaction in language learning is emphasized in the *K-16 Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*. ACTFL therefore recommends that language educators and their students use the target language as exclusively as possible (90% plus) at all levels of instruction during instructional time and, when feasible, beyond the classroom. In classrooms that feature maximum target-language use, instructors use a variety of strategies to facilitate comprehension and support meaning making. For example, they:
 - provide comprehensible input that is directed toward communicative goals;
 - make meaning clear through body language, gestures, and visual support;
 - conduct comprehension checks to ensure understanding;
 - negotiate meaning with students and encourage negotiation among students;
 - encourage self-expression and spontaneous use of language;
 - teach students strategies for requesting clarification and assistance when faced with comprehension difficulties; and
 - offer feedback to assist and improve students' ability to interact orally in the target language

Why?

- It helps frame L1 and L2 use in the classroom so that L2/gesture becomes preferred for:
 - Clarifying meaning
 - Checking that students understand
 - Providing instructions
- For ACTFL, these were situations where L1 was used because it saved time and was easier.
 - In other words, L1 use in these contexts was not necessary
- As we will see, L1 functions as an extremely powerful tool at promoting L2 learning when used appropriately
 - Difficulty = when is it appropriate

World-Readiness Standards

World-Readiness Standards



WORLD-READINESS STANDARDS FOR LEARNING LANGUAGES

The *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* define the central role of world languages in the learning career of every student. The five goal areas of the Standards establish an inextricable link between communication and culture, which is applied in making connections and comparisons and in using this competence to be part of local and global communities.

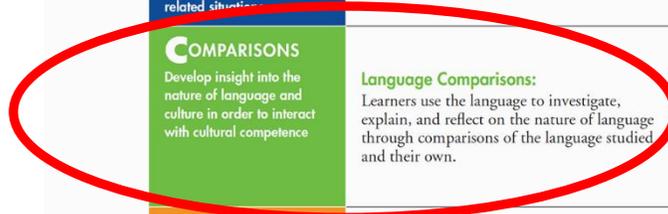
The *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* create a roadmap to guide learners to develop competence to communicate effectively and interact with cultural competence to participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world.

World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages



WORLD-READINESS STANDARDS FOR LEARNING LANGUAGES

GOAL AREAS	STANDARDS		
<p>COMMUNICATION Communicate effectively in more than one language in order to function in a variety of situations and for multiple purposes</p>	<p>Interpersonal Communication: Learners interact and negotiate meaning in spoken, signed, or written conversations to share information, reactions, feelings, and opinions.</p>	<p>Interpretive Communication: Learners understand, interpret, and analyze what is heard, read, or viewed on a variety of topics.</p>	<p>Presentational Communication: Learners present information, concepts, and ideas to inform, explain, persuade, and narrate on a variety of topics using appropriate media and adapting to various audiences of listeners, readers, or viewers.</p>
<p>CULTURES Interact with cultural competence and understanding</p>	<p>Relating Cultural Practices to Perspectives: Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the cultures studied.</p>	<p>Relating Cultural Products to Perspectives: Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the products and perspectives of the cultures studied.</p>	
<p>CONNECTIONS Connect with other disciplines and acquire information and diverse perspectives in order to use the language to function in academic and career-related situations</p>	<p>Making Connections: Learners build, reinforce, and expand their knowledge of other disciplines while using the language to develop critical thinking and to solve problems creatively.</p>	<p>Acquiring Information and Diverse Perspectives: Learners access and evaluate information and diverse perspectives that are available through the language and its cultures.</p>	
<p>COMPARISONS Develop insight into the nature of language and culture in order to interact with cultural competence</p>	<p>Language Comparisons: Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own.</p>	<p>Cultural Comparisons: Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.</p>	
<p>COMMUNITIES Communicate and interact with cultural competence in order to participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world</p>	<p>School and Global Communities: Learners use the language both within and beyond the classroom to interact and collaborate in their community and the globalized world.</p>	<p>Lifelong Learning: Learners set goals and reflect on their progress in using languages for enjoyment, enrichment, and advancement.</p>	



“The five Cs of learning languages”

For more information, see World-Readiness Standards (2015), pp. 37-62



Goal area: Comparisons

- Develop insight into the nature of language and culture in order to interact with cultural competence
“Language learners discover and come to understand and use diverse patterns and perspectives inherent in both language systems and cultures in order to function competently in varied linguistic and cultural contexts. Through the study of a new language system and of how such a system expresses meanings in culturally appropriate ways, learners gain insights into the nature of language and the communicative functions of language in society, as well as the multifaceted nature of interaction between language and culture.”

World-Readiness Standards (2015), p. 142

C LANGUAGE COMPARISONS

Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own.

This Standard focuses on the impact that learning the linguistic elements in a new language has on students' ability to examine their own language, and to develop hypotheses about the structure and use of languages. From the earliest language learning experiences, students can compare and contrast the two languages and the ways in which they express meaning in both sound and writing systems in all three modes of communication. As learners come to understand how language works in another language, their understanding of language conventions and functions expands. This awareness carries over to their first language as they apply this deeper understanding to improve their effectiveness at communicating and understanding messages. Additionally, learners acquire vocabulary in another language that often will aid them in determining the meaning of certain words in their first language. Words cannot always be translated literally because they carry different significance in other cultures, Certain expressions have no translation. Building such awareness develops the learners' skills in all the languages they may use in their life and work.

In a nutshell:

Students learn how different languages structure meaning differently

For example...

What can we do in the classroom?

Who does these activities?

Answer as quickly as you can!!!!

1. The parents

walks the dog

2. The child

work in a bank

3. The cat

cry all night

4. The adults

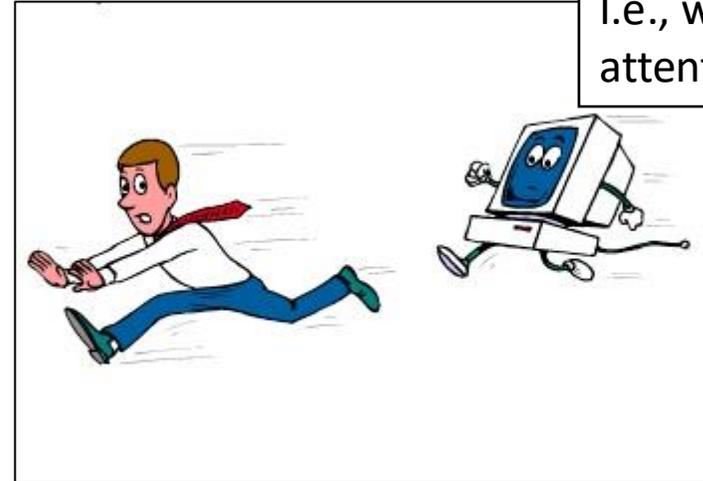
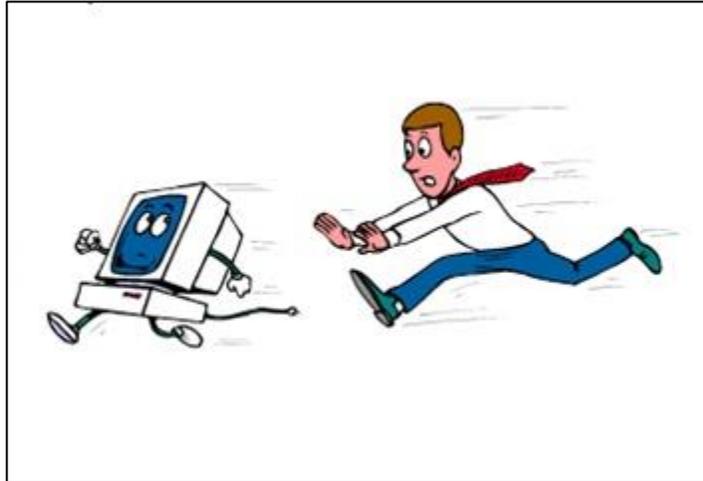
listen to the news

How did you complete this activity?

i.e., what did you have to pay attention to?

Which picture matches the sentence?

The computer chases the man



How did you complete this activity?

I.e., what did you have to pay attention to?



Which picture matches the sentence?

Den Jungen liebt der Teddybär.

How did you complete this activity?

I.e., what did you have to pay attention to?



-
- Taking out the cues that learners rely on
 - Repeated practice in perceiving the input (phonemes, syntax) to map to meaning/function

Problem:

Learners tend to ignore certain bits of grammar

WHY?

*Another part of the sentence might express a similar meaning
And learners are familiar with, or expect, that part*

Last weekend, I ate a sandwich

It happened in the past!

Ignored!

English 'habits' entrenched

Der Mann verfolgt den Hund.

Subject comes
first in English

Ignored!

common sense, expectations

The children
The man

works in a bank.

Ignored!

Children don't work in banks!

-
- Task-essential practice:
 - Force learners to attend to form and meaning at the same time to complete the task

Normalement, elle joue au foot
(normally, she plays football)

-
- Task-essential practice:
 - Force learners to attend to form and meaning at the same time to complete the task

elle joue au foot
(she plays football)

-
- Task-essential practice:
 - Force learners to attend to form and meaning at the same time to complete the task

elle joue au foot
(she plays football)

-
- Task-essential practice:
 - Force learners to attend to form and meaning at the same time to complete the task

elle joue au foot
(she plays football)

Summary

- We can create meaning-based activities that direct learners' attention to specific aspects of language
 - Word order
 - Verb endings
 - Agreement
- We need to do this because L1 background influences what we pay attention to
 - E.g., speakers of rich morphology languages (e.g., French, Spanish) are naturally drawn to verbal morphology
 - Learners complete the same activities in L1 and L2 to draw attention to processing differences (as shown by the research)

Thank you for your attention!

kevin.mcmanus@pitt.edu