

## PRINCIPLES OF LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING FOR EXPANDING AND IMPROVING CLASSROOM INPUT STRATEGIES

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### ABSTRACT

*This study analysed the possibilities of implementing principles of language teaching and learning for expanding and improving classroom input strategies. Thirty-three English as a foreign language student teachers participated in the study for four weeks. Data were collected through Likert-type surveys, written assessments and a third-party interview. Findings indicated that (1) participants showed a high level of perceived knowledge; (2) participants showed a high level of content knowledge on written tests; (3) students expressed positive attitudes towards the learning approach (i.e., grounding input strategies in well-established principles of teaching and learning); and (4) participants performed better in the post-videotaped evaluation than in the pre-videotaped evaluation.*

**Keywords:** classroom input strategies, principles of language teaching and learning, English as a foreign language (EFL), student teacher

### INTRODUCTION

Several studies have revealed that the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom continues to be dominated by the transmission model where the teacher is the sole repository of knowledge. This model fails to provide students sufficient time to comprehend messages and use them in actual, meaningful discourse in the target language in class (Al-Hazmi, 2003; Al-Hazmi & Scholfield, 2007; Ali 2008; Al-Khwaiter, 2001; Hiep, 2007; Khan, 2011; Lahlali, 2003; Nasir, Yusuf & Wardana, 2019; Syed, 2003; Vaish, 2008; Xie, 2008). Some teacher educators and researchers agree that lack of meaningful input within the EFL classroom, or ‘a failure’ to make input more comprehensible and meaningful as it is referred to by Li and Walsh (2011), may bring about disengagement with students and poor student achievement (Alexander, Doddington, Gray, Hargreaves & Kershner, 2010; Kang & Hyatt, 2010; Marcellino, 2008; Ryan, 2015; Skidmore, 2006; Wray & Kumpulainen, 2010). However, building on the professional argument about the lockstep rigidity found in language teaching methods and the consensus that no method could claim supremacy (Celce-Murcia, 2014: 10), researchers suggest that attention now be turned to the ways in which teachers can work effectively in their educational context to shape language learning and teaching (Adamson, 2004; Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014).

In the post-method era, the teacher does not follow a certain method or approach to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Therefore, in order to help student teachers make input more

comprehensible and meaningful within the classroom, which can provide more opportunities for language learners to understand the target language and make input more comprehensible and meaningful (Hatch, 1983; Lee & VanPatten, 1995; Doughty & Long, 2003), there is a need to intervene at the school and classroom level through teacher education programmes. One approach to achieve this is helping EFL student teachers ground their teaching in ‘well-established principles of language teaching and learning’ (Brown, 2002: 17). Unlike other possible approaches (e.g., using methods which are specific in terms of the procedures and material), grounding student teachers’ teaching in well-established principles of language teaching would enhance numerous ‘micro-strategies’ (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, 2003, 2006) within the classroom which can lay a foundation for them as autonomous, self-directed and reflective individuals to develop their own teaching practices, strategies and materials.

## **PRINCIPLES OF LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Language teaching has been recently influenced by many language educators who have argued that there is no one ‘best’ method that achieves the goals and needs of all learners and programmes (Adamson, 2004; Celce-Murcia, 2014; Littlewood, 2011; Nation, 2018; Savignon, 2007; Spada, 2007). Aspects of language teaching practices that take into account how to create meanings for students in their educational context should be emphasised (Duff, 2014: 241). Therefore, language educators make a distinction between the restricted version of communicative language teaching involving aspects of language teaching which are commonly observed in Western teaching contexts, particularly those involving European target languages, and the wider version of communicative language teaching which is available to all types of classroom context (Holliday, 1994). Within the broader version of language teaching, Kumaravadivelu (2006) argues that teachers should be encouraged to: deal with increasingly diverse and changing classroom environments and see them with new eyes (principle of practicality); become sensitised to their students’ linguistic, social and cultural backgrounds and needs (principle of particularity); and accommodate often-conflicting and ambiguous previously held beliefs about students and their classroom motivations (principle of possibility).

Language teaching in the post-method era calls for practices or strategies of teaching designed to reflect local needs and experiences as an alternative to method (e.g., Allwright & Hanks, 2009; Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2006; Littlewood, 2011; Savignon, 2007). Although this type of teaching has been criticised as a ‘more holistic, redefined communicative language teaching’ (Bell, 2003: 326), it generates high concern for creating more space for teachers as principled pragmatists who shape their students’ classroom learning and comprehension through informed teaching and critical reflection (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Therefore, the aim is not to follow a particular method or approach but to help teachers enhance their own teaching practices which are sensitive to their own specific contexts (Nation, 2018: 142-143).

One of the recent frameworks of principles which should be viewed as ‘a provisional specification’ (Stenhouse, 1975) was formulated by Ellis (2014). His framework can be considered facilitative to second language acquisition (SLA). It includes 12 principles informed by both cognitive and sociocultural learning theories (see Table 2). Ellis argues that teachers need to subject these principles to critical scrutiny based on their reflections on their teaching.

Ellis (2014: 31-32) refers to a case study of an English language teacher named Juanita Watts as a good example of how language teachers can improve their classroom teaching practices by developing well-grounded principles of language teaching and learning. Watts drew on the 12 principles proposed by Ellis (2014) to teach upper-intermediate learners in a private language school in Auckland, New Zealand. Watts used the principles to promote ‘micro-strategies’ (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, 2003, 2006), which she referred to as ‘the kinds of interaction that have been hypothesised to promote language learning’. Watts drew on principle 8 to investigate the negotiation of meaning and how to make input more meaningful to her students. She also used principle 9 to explain how and why two students interacted very differently inside the classroom. In addition, she reported that principle 4 helped her use an information-gap task (i.e., spot the difference), because this caters to the kind of incidental acquisition that fosters implicit knowledge. Watts concluded that her lesson benefited from making explicit the principles that informed her action.

Similar to Ellis, Lightbown (1985, 2000) also calls for explicit principles on how language teachers can best promote their teaching. Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2003, 2006) proposed a framework of 10 principles or ‘macro-strategies’: 1) maximise learning opportunities; 2) facilitate negotiated interaction; 3) minimise perceptual mismatches; 4) activate intuitive heuristics; 5) foster language awareness; 6) contextualise linguistic input; 7) integrate language skills; 8) promote learner autonomy; 9) raise cultural consciousness; and 10) ensure social relevance. Such a framework provides teachers the independence to enhance their situation-specific micro-strategies which are general plans derived from currently available theoretical, empirical and pedagogical knowledge related to L2 learning and teaching (Kumaravadivelou, 2006: 201). However, the principles proposed by Ellis (2014) were used for the current study. They formed part of content knowledge in the course materials which participants were required to study.

## CLASSROOM INPUT STRATEGIES

The principles formulated by Ellis (2014) were covered in the study to help participants expand and improve their classroom micro-strategies. Classroom micro-strategies are usually referred to as input strategies, or what Doughty and Long (2003) refer to as elaborating input. Elaboration in this context has several meanings. It refers to the myriad ways in which EFL teachers modify classroom discourse, that is, the manner in which they use English language to make it comprehensible to EFL students (Ahmadpour Kasgari, 2018; Doughty & Long, 2003). In the present study, the terms ‘classroom micro-strategies’ and ‘input strategies’ are used interchangeably to refer to interactive strategies, use of the target language and use of English (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Input strategies**

Interactive strategies: Confirmation checks, comprehension checks, being accessible for questions, recasts
Use of the target language: Modelling, gestures, visuals, examples, visual representation, repetition, clear enunciation, lower speech rate, rephrasing, high frequency vocabulary, less slang, fewer idioms, shorter sentences, simplified language, use of cognates, explicit correction, formulaic expressions, praise and encouragement
Use of English: Use of English for directions, explanations or confirmations

## METHOD

### Participants

The study context was an EFL teacher education programme offered by a public university located in the western region of Saudi Arabia. After completing a bachelor's degree in English, aspiring graduates complete a two-semester, 36-credit-hour programme that qualifies them to teach EFL at all levels of public schools. The programme requires an internship to provide students with the opportunity to apply what they acquired in the courseworks to an EFL classroom setting. This study had 35 participants, all of whom agreed to participate; however, two participants quit the programme. The results were therefore reported for the remaining 33 participants. This included all the EFL student teachers who had been accepted into the programme for the academic year 2015-2016. The ages of participants ranged from 24 to 33 years, with a mean age of 26.86 (SD = 6.47). The course in which the students enrolled was English Language Teaching Methods. It is a two-credit course offered in the first semester of the programme. The course meets for two hours each week during 14 teaching weeks of the semester. It introduces students to different English language teaching approaches and methods, with an emphasis on the current communicative approach and its applications within the EFL classroom.

### Class format

Educators describe a number of active learning strategies. They specifically call for faculty to create a context where the learner is motivated to learn without thinking of the lecturer as the only source of knowledge to a more interactive style of learning in which the lecturer must downplay his or her authority for students to take ownership of their learning. Similarly, Cavanagh (2011), for example, found that students valued activities that provided opportunities for them to interact in ways that engage them and support their learning. One of the strategies proposed for creating such environments is conceptual workshops. Conceptual workshops are structured in a way to help students collaborate with each other to understand classroom material (Finkel, 1999). Johnson and Johnson (1994) demonstrated that participation in cooperative learning settings, compared to that in individualistic or competitive learning settings, was a strong predictor of academic success and development. Such learning environments help participants to engage with the materials in a manner that stimulates their reflections and awareness. McMullen (2014), for example, found that conceptual workshops helped her students to stay actively engaged in class, clarify their thinking and gain a deeper understanding of classroom material.

In the present study, four conceptual workshops were designed to help students work together in order to engage with the principles of language teaching and learning proposed by Ellis (2014) in deep and interesting ways to improve their use of input strategies. Decentring the researcher in the classroom freed students to explore the principles and discuss them with one another without fear of 'getting it wrong', as the questions were designed to keep them on track and to ensure that they progressed through the material in a particular direction. Each workshop focused on analysing and fine-tuning three principles of teaching and learning. During each conceptual workshop, students were placed in small groups of approximately six students each to clarify and develop shared understandings of the principles and their relationship with the input strategies

they would use within the EFL classroom. Each conceptual workshop prepared students to undertake a principled evaluation that informed their actions to make their input strategies more explicit, in order to make the input within the EFL classroom more meaningful. The researcher facilitated their learning process, but did not participate in the discussion. The average time that the class took to complete the workshop was 75 minutes. When students finished the workshop, the instructor started lecturing for the remaining time of the class.

### **Study hypotheses**

The following four hypotheses were formulated to achieve the study objectives:

- (1) Participants will demonstrate a high level of perceived adequacy of course material covered in the study.
- (2) Participants will achieve a high level of content knowledge in the course materials covered in the study.
- (3) Participants will express positive attitudes towards the learning approach (i.e., grounding input strategies in well-established principles of teaching and learning).
- (4) Participants will perform better in the post-videotaped evaluation than they did in the pre-videotaped evaluation.

### **Data collection**

After the workshops, all the participants finished a Likert-type survey intended to find out about their perceptions of adequacy of course material covered in the workshops (see Table 2). The participants indicated their responses on a five-point scale ranging from ‘not at all’ to ‘comprehensively’. Students also completed a written post-test assessment designed by a colleague from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the university, containing objective test questions regarding their knowledge about 12 principles. After the workshops, all the students also completed a Likert-type attitude survey designed by the researcher (see Table 3). It included seven positively and negatively keyed items. The response descriptors and positive/negative polls were varied in an effort to maintain the respondents’ focus of attention. Additional questions pertained to the participants’ opinion of the workshops, possible irritants regarding workshops structure and their participation, and any observed changes in the group.

To learn about the participants’ use of input strategies after participating in the study, pre- and post-videotaped evaluations were conducted. Students were videotaped individually for the first 15 minutes of their class period. The video evaluation involved a checklist of input strategies. Two graduate students, who voluntarily participated in the study, individually indicated the input strategy used by the observed student teacher. Independently judged pre- and post-test evaluations were analysed using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient that showed an acceptable inter-judge reliability of 0.84 and 0.89. In addition, in the last class meeting, an external interviewer from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction audiotaped the students responding to a series of questions about their learning experiences without the presence of the instructor.

## Data analysis

To determine whether student teachers felt that the principles to be developed had been covered, the mean responses and associated standard deviations for the appropriate survey questions were calculated. The objective questions were scored (out of a possible 100 points). The student attitudes towards the principles that inform students' use of input strategies were analysed by organising the responses for each participant followed by the related mean and standard deviation. To reverse negatively keyed items, high scores on the negatively keyed items were transformed to low scores (thus indicating low levels of the attribute being measured), meaning that a score of 5 was recorded as 1 and a score of 4 was recorded as 2. Because the five-point scale included 3 as a neutral point, a score of 3 was left unchanged. By reverse-scoring all of the negatively keyed items, the items were made consistent. Video assessments were analysed by comparing the percentage of items observed across the videotaped pretest and post-test. Scoring of the video assessments consisted of a liberal score based on both evaluators' assessment that placed the advantage toward the student. For an input strategy to be counted as 'not observed', both evaluators had to mark the relevant specific interaction strategy as 'not observed'. If either evaluator counted a classroom interaction strategy as 'observed', the interaction strategy was evaluated as 'observed'. This procedure allowed latitude for the lesson contents that may have differed from those taught in the videotaped post-test.

## RESULTS

It was found that all mean responses regarding the material covered in the workshops were 3.75 or higher on a five-point scale, with an overall SD range of 0.33 to 0.92 (see Table 2). Generally, the students seemed to think that the class had appropriately covered the principles. Based on a possible total of 100, written assessment scores ranged from 87 to 95, with a mean of 87.47.

**Table 2: Students' perceptions of the adequacy of course material covered in the workshops**

Questions	Responses					M	SD
	Low		High				
	1	2	3	4	5		
How well do you think the workshops have covered...							
Principle 1: Instruction needs to ensure that learners develop both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence.	-	1	3	21	8	4.1	0.77
Principle 2: Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning.	-	1	4	19	9	4.1	0.72
Principle 3: Instruction needs to ensure that learners also focus on form.	-	-	1	21	11	4.3	0.53
Principle 4: Instruction needs to be predominantly directed at developing implicit knowledge of the L2 while not neglecting explicit knowledge.	-	2	6	15	10	4	0.87
Principle 5: Instruction needs to take into account the learner's built-in syllabus.	-	1	6	10	16	4.24	0.87
Principle 6: Successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input.	-	-	2	12	19	4.52	0.62
Principle 7: Successful instructed language learning also requires opportunities for output.	-	-	3	9	21	4.55	0.67
Principle 8: The opportunity to interact in the L2 is central to developing L2 proficiency.	-	-	-	13	20	4.61	0.50
Principle 9: Instruction needs to take into account individual	-	-	-	4	29	4.88	0.33

differences in learners.							
Principle 10: In assessing learners' L2 proficiency, it is important to examine free as well as controlled production.	-	2	4	9	18	4.3	0.92
Principle 11: Learners need to engage collaboratively in talk about linguistic problems and try to agree on solutions to them.	-	-	-	7	26	4.79	0.42
Principle 12: Instruction needs to take into account the subjective aspect to learning a new language.	1	-	1	9	22	4.55	0.83
Overall	1	7	30	149	209	4.41	0.67

Note: A dash (-) indicates no response

Overall, the students appeared to be satisfied with the workshops. All mean responses were 4.09 or higher on a five-point scale, with a standard deviation range of 0.44 to 0.88 (see Table 3). However, the survey responses appeared to indicate that the student teachers worried about acting as study participants ( $M = 2$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ). In addition, when asked if they were being introduced to principles of teaching and learning for the first time, all of them (100%) responded 'yes'. When asked which class format they would prefer (a lecture-based or mixed-method class) to improve their input strategies through developing principles of language teaching and learning, three students said that they preferred the lecture format and 30 students said that they preferred the mixed-format. The participants wrote several positive comments and one suggestion in response to the item, 'Please write any comment you would like to share about your learning experience.' The comments included the following: 'I started to ground the way I interact with my students in well-established principles', 'The workshops helped me think about how I can tell that students are successfully understanding what they read and listen to in my classroom', 'I am now aware of why I should use different strategies with different students inside the classroom', 'I had opportunities to share every incident I was observing about how to help quite students to participate inside the classroom with my group in the workshops', and 'I was able to compare my understanding of classroom interaction and how it changed when I developed principles of teaching and learning'. One student provided the following suggestion: 'I think we need more time to subject the principles to critical scrutiny.' Another student wrote, 'Sometimes I feel like I need more opportunities to study the principles more based on my reflection on my actions in the classroom.'

**Table 3: Student responses indicating perceptions of the principles**

Questions	Responses					M	SD
	Low		High				
	1	2	3	4	5		
Were you interested in grounding your input strategies in well-established principles of teaching and learning?	-	-	2	23	8	4.18	0.53
Did the principles help you undertake a thoughtful evaluation of your input strategies?	1	1	-	16	15	4.30	0.88
Were you worried about learning the principles to improve your input strategies?	2	1	5	12	13	2	1.12
Did the principles make your input strategies more explicit?	-	1	3	19	10	4.15	0.71
Was it boring to improve your input by developing principles of teaching and learning?	24	8	1	-	-	4.70	0.53
Do you recommend the principles to student teachers in other courses?	-	-	-	8	25	4.76	0.44
Do you think you are going to benefit from the principles in the future?	-	1	2	8	22	4.55	0.75
Overall	27	12	13	86	93	4.09	0.71

Note: A dash (-) indicates no response

The videotaped pretest scores ranged from 16.33% to 25.67% with a mean of 21.64. The videotaped post-test scores ranged from 63.33% to 93.33% with a mean of 84.79. The result was significant at  $p \leq 0.05$  (z-score of -4.457345, p-value of 0.000000).

In the last class meeting, an external interviewer from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction taped students responding to a series of questions without the researcher present. When the interviewer inquired about the structure of a conceptual workshop, one participant said, *'We study three principles in the chapter on a weekly basis. We discuss them in small groups and talk about how they would inform our strategies in class.'* Another student added, *'We are also provided with a list of input strategies to be scrutinised in the light of the principles. We are familiar with some of them. Others are new to us.'* When the interviewer inquired about the duty of the instructor, one participant said, *'He was always encouraging us to draft our own reflections in small groups while referring to a list of strategies as we write.'* Another commented, *'And finally, he makes sure he displays examples of students' completed reflections for all to read.'*

When asked about how effectively they felt they improved their input strategies by developing principles of language teaching and learning, the students' comments were extremely positive. They remarked that grounding their teaching in well-established principles created opportunities for them to expand and develop their input strategies. One student said, *'Principle 4 motivated me to ask students a lot of questions to help them develop implicit knowledge.'* Another student added, *'The same principle informed me that I should repeatedly write new words on the board to help students focus on forms.'* One student commented, *'I benefitted from Principle 9. It helped me to use different strategies to make input meaningful in class and to make certain that different students are excited and stay excited.'* Another student stated, *'Principle 1 and 10 helped me understand why I should use verbal expressions that are fixed in form to check my students' comprehension from time to time.'*

## DISCUSSION

All the student teachers reported being affected by the experience in ways that challenged their understanding of the respective roles of students and teachers. Study findings indicated promise in the potential value of the learning approach of grounding EFL teaching in well-established principles of language teaching and learning. Additionally, the study results showed an acceptance of the approach by the EFL student teachers. One possible reason for the positive results may be the learning environment that the conceptual workshops created for student teachers. Such a supportive learning environment would positively affect EFL student teachers' learning and attitudes towards the learning approach. Such arguments are in line with the literature findings that conceptual workshops would help student teachers to stay actively engaged in class, clarify their thinking and gain a deeper understanding of classroom material (McMullen, 2014: 65).

The results for question 3 in the survey ('Were you worried about learning the principles to improve your input strategies?') might be explained by the fact that teachers sometimes experience fear concerning obtaining undesirable achievements, giving unsatisfactory evaluations, reaching the limitations of knowledge or skills (McCrickerd, 2012), appearing unintelligent to their peers and instructors (Fassinger, 1995), or being laughed at (Samson,



Proyer, Ceschi, Pedrini & Ruch, 2011). In many instances, the student teachers were observed to be blushing or sweating in addition to behaving in ways that indicated they were afraid, such as when speaking with difficulty or attempting to distract attention from anxiety-provoking stimulus (e.g., asking a student to lead a discussion) by conducting avoidance behaviours like excessive talking, conversing with other students or asking the instructor irrelevant questions. The suggestion that more time is needed to subject the principles to critical scrutiny might be explained by the fact that developing principles of language teaching and learning must involve a longer learning curve for the student teachers to undertake a thoughtful evaluation of their own teaching. This may help with a programme-wide culture change with regard to assisting EFL student teachers to ground their teaching in well-established EFL principles. Working towards such a clear idea of 'ongoing regeneration of practice' (Jaworski, 2006: 190) would situate student teachers in contexts that provide opportunities for greater involvement.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

There are some important points to note with regard to this learning approach. First, it is of great value to talk about not only how to implement the approach, but also why it is used with students. Students are required to perceive the reason for this type of learning as they may not be familiar with such a learning approach. Second, students may initially be hesitant or anxious about getting involved in conceptual workshops. It is essential to debrief them after the first conceptual workshop to obtain their input for developing the structure specifically for their class. Lastly, lecturers may find it really difficult to implement conceptual workshops because of the extra demands placed on them to give up more control of the teaching and facilitate more of the learning. Implementing a mixed-method format (lecture and conceptual workshop) for the first meetings is recommended prior to implementing the conceptual workshop format.

Although the present study would point researchers toward useful procedures that can be applied in future research and practice, there are several limitations to the study. One limitation here is that this study was conducted with a limited number of male Saudi EFL student teachers in a particular academic course. Results might vary according to the number, setting, gender, language proficiency level, and educational and cultural backgrounds of participants. Another limitation is that the principles in the present study have been derived predominantly from the computational model of language acquisition that focuses on acquiring and using language (Ellis, 2014). Future research may draw on a set of principles based on the broader conceptualisation of SLA.

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