At the 2010 ACTFL Annual Convention and World Languages Expo in Boston, the Research Special Interest Group (SIG) sponsored a panel presentation entitled The Relative Effects of Focus-On-Form Interventions on L2 Acquisition. At this informative and interactive presentation, Bill VanPatten of Texas Tech University, Andrew Farley of Texas Tech University, and Silvia Peart of the U.S. Naval Academy presented three papers describing the latest research on processing instruction, an input-based pedagogical technique that is informed by second language acquisition (SLA) research.

VanPatten began by explaining the basic theories that underpin processing instruction, the first of which is Krashen’s (1985) input hypothesis. According to Krashen, languages are learned through exposure to comprehensible input that is just beyond the learner’s current level (i+1). However, many second and foreign language classrooms tend to place a heavy emphasis on output practice, usually through mechanical and/or pattern drills that focus exclusively on process. Processing instruction pushes learners to attend to both grammatical form and target language meaning simultaneously. VanPatten said that output does play an important role for the building of fluency and accuracy in the target language, but output is not a direct path to acquisition. Since processing instruction is an input-based approach, it has the potential to affect learners’ developing linguistic systems (input that is converted to intake is an input-based approach, it has the potential to affect learning). VanPatten said that output does play an important role for the building of fluency and accuracy in the target language, but output is not a direct path to acquisition. Since processing instruction is an input-based approach, it has the potential to affect learners’ developing linguistic systems (input that is converted to intake is an input-based approach, it has the potential to affect learning).

What is Processing Instruction?

Processing instruction has three major components: (a) explicit explanation of grammar, (b) information on processing strategies, and (c) structured input tasks and activities. A key feature of processing instruction is structured input, which is input that is manipulated in order to elevate the communicative value of grammatical forms. Structured input can be created by removing lexical redundancies. For example, in the sentence María worked on her paper for three hours yesterday, second language learners of English would not need to notice or process the bound inflectional morpheme –ed because the lexical item yesterday conveys a past tense meaning. In order to elevate the communicative value of the targeted grammatical form, the redundant lexical item should be removed. Thus, without the word yesterday, learners would be forced to notice and process the grammatical morpheme –ed in order to extract meaning (temporal reference). Input processing occurs when learners make a form–meaning connection, which is the connection between a grammatical form and the referential meaning that it encodes (e.g., –ed = past).

While it takes quite a bit of thought and effort to create structured input activities, current SLA research indicates that these activities are highly effective for learning difficult aspects of grammar in the second language. In the second edition of their book Making Communicative Language Teaching Happen, Lee and VanPatten (2003) explain in detail how to create effective structured input activities. Farley’s 2004 book, Structured Input: Grammar Instruction for the Acquisition-Oriented Classroom, is also a great resource for teachers, as it provides numerous examples of structured input activities in a variety of languages.

Another important aspect of processing instruction is explicit information on processing strategies. According to VanPatten (1993, 1996, 2002, 2004), language learners often engage in processing strategies that are flawed, which can cause misunderstandings and/or delays in the acquisition process. For example, learners of Spanish usually have difficulty processing object pronouns correctly. Second language learners tend to process the first word that they encounter in a sentence or an utterance as the subject or agent (VanPatten, 2004). However, since Spanish is a pro-drop language (the subject pronoun can be dropped), it is not uncommon to find object pronouns at the beginning of sentences where learners’ tendency is to process them as the subject. At the panel presentation, VanPatten gave the following example: Lo ve María. He stated that Spanish language learners often misinterpret the sentence as He sees María, rather than the correct interpretation María sees him. Thus, information on processing strategies would help learners circumvent this processing problem. With processing instruction, learners are cautioned about their tendency to engage in faulty input processing prior to receiving aural or written input sentences that contain problematic forms.

At the panel presentation, VanPatten stressed that processing instruction is a pedagogical technique that is not meant to be used every day. He noted that communicative classrooms are not supposed to focus exclusively on target language grammar; rather, processing instruction should be “parachuted in” as needed to help learners overcome flawed input processing strategies.

After VanPatten gave a thorough explanation of processing instruction, all three panelists (VanPatten, Farley, and Peart) provided an overview of the prior research on processing instruction,
and they each presented papers that support the use of processing instruction as an effective pedagogical intervention in language classrooms.

If you would like to learn more about how to incorporate processing instruction into your own classroom, you may wish to explore the references here [see box to right]. Further, if you are interested in learning about how research and theory inform instructional practices, please consider joining the ACTFL Research SIG and/or attending Research SIG events at the ACTFL Annual Convention. To join, simply check the appropriate box on the ACTFL dues (renewal) form and include the $5.00 payment when you send in your dues. During the convention, the SIG membership meets to provide a supportive critical community to discuss and guide the national and local agendas toward meaningful research on the teaching and learning of languages.

Victoria Russell is an assistant professor of Spanish and foreign language education at Valdosta State University.