



***Teaching grammar directly—oui ou non?
What do current methodologies say about teaching grammar in the World Language
classroom?***

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This curriculum unit is recommended for:
French II, all World Language teachers of all levels

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Teaching Standards: See [Appendix 1](#) for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

Synopsis: This paper is more than just a curriculum unit. Rather, it is intended to be a short handbook for how to teach world languages, particularly grammar, in alignment with the most current research and scholarship. Because most teachers are still using textbooks as the basis of their world language courses, they are unable to truly apply modern teaching methods. My interest in updating my own beliefs and methods began when my district hired an expert to help us rewrite our curricula for levels I, II, and III. In the first sections, the approach of Communicative Language Teaching is explained so that teachers will understand how to structure course syllabi without the use of a textbook. Next, out-of-date methods for teaching grammar are debunked in an effort to show teachers why it is necessary to modernize our methods. Then, current, research-based methods for teaching grammar are explained. Finally, those methods are exemplified with classroom lessons and activities that focus on how to teach the *passé composé* and direct object pronouns *le*, *la*, and *les* during a unit on food in the first semester of French II. Despite its focus on level II, the information in this paper should be useful to world language teachers of all levels.

I plan to teach this unit during the coming year to 50 students in French II.

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Ana Hummel

Introduction

Research on how students learn languages has undergone a serious transformation over the past few decades, but much of that knowledge hasn't filtered down into actual classrooms. My school district recently wrote new curricula for world language levels I, II, and III based on cutting-edge methods with the help of a nationally-known consultant, Greg Duncan.¹ During the process, I discovered that most teachers, myself included, were using out-of-date methods to teach grammar, mostly because we didn't know what methods we should be using instead.

Therefore, the purpose of this unit is threefold: first, to explain the current language teaching methodology of Communicative Language Teaching; second, to explain how to teach grammar within this framework; and third, to provide examples of grammar lessons and classroom activities that are aligned with the new methodology.

The activities in this unit are aligned with the food unit in my district's new level II curriculum, including strategies and activities to teach *passé composé* and the direct object pronouns *le, la, les*. However, the principles explained in this unit are applicable to all world language teachers at all levels.

Instructional Context

I teach in an ethnically and economically diverse suburban high school with approximately 1,750 students. Fifty-nine percent of our students are economically disadvantaged, 59% are black, 17% are white, 10% are of mixed ethnicity, and 3% are Hispanic.

My school has a partial International Baccalaureate (IB) magnet program with approximately 600 students. We have both the Middle Years Program (grades 6-8 at the adjacent middle school and continuing on to grades 9-10 at the high school) and the Diploma Program (grades 11-12). In the IB program, students must be well-rounded by taking IB courses in six subject areas, doing large amounts of community service, physical activity, and creative activities. In their senior year, they write a 4,000-word research paper on a topic of their choice, and they take six exams in May that may earn them college credit, similar to AP exams. IB is a program for serious students who want

to get the most out of their education, yet it is open to all students with no entrance requirements other than being on grade level on statewide reading and math tests in 8th grade. Consequently, the students in our program run the gamut from those who are less inclined toward academics to those who are Ivy League-bound.

In the IB program, students are required to take a second language every year of high school. They begin their sequence in middle school with level I, and continue through high school to level V. I generally teach most or all of the IB French classes at my school, meaning that I usually teach the same group of students for all four years of their high school experience. Because I teach them year in and year out, each group of students becomes a family and I am lucky to have a much more personal relationship with my students than most teachers do. Instructionally, it means that I have the benefit of being accountable mostly to myself: If we don't get to a particular topic in French II, I can easily pick it up in French III. I enjoy this stability and flexibility, which is unique to French at my school, since in the Spanish department, with its many teachers, each teacher only gets a particular class of students for one year and then passes them along to the next teacher.

Part One: The “New” Methodology of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Second language instruction has gone through waves over the years with different methods coming in and out of vogue. Grammar translation and audiolingualism (ALM) both fell out of favor and were replaced in the early 1980's by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which is still the primary framework. The key principles of CLT follow. First, the point of learning a language is learning to communicate, therefore expressing meaning is the primary goal. As such, fluency is primary, meaning that accuracy must be secondary. Language must be presented in context, and students learn by repeated trial and error.²

Question: What Went Wrong With CLT? Answer: Textbooks.

In my experience, the implementation of CLT in actual classrooms has only been partly successful: on the one hand, in education programs we are taught to be communicative and to use the textbook as a resource, not as a curriculum, but most school districts mandate the use of a particular textbook and many go so far as to mandate which chapters must be covered in the interest of standardizing instruction across schools. When teachers are required to cover a certain number of chapters, each of which is chock-full of grammar, a lot of what we know about CLT goes out the window in an effort to “get through” the curriculum. As a result, many teachers are not really allowed to use current methods in their classes, because we are hindered by our textbooks.

Personally, I have recently realized that the result of 10 years of teaching experience is that I have “forgotten” much of what I learned in my graduate work in education at the

University of Virginia in 2002-2004. I learned many of the principles and methods of CLT, but when I entered the profession and was presented with a pacing guide that told me what chapters of the textbook I had to cover, I wasn't able to truly adhere to the principles of CLT. Add to that the "Fill-Ins" section of the AP exam, in which students must be able to conjugate *every* verb in *every* tense, and teaching verb tenses and insisting upon accuracy became a mandate. My reality essentially forced me to spend a lot of class time teaching and drilling grammar, marking up students' papers with my red pen, and then being frustrated that my students were still making "dumb" mistakes.

I am grateful that my district recently decided to modernize our methods, and that national curriculum-drivers such as the AP tests have been modified to make this possible. Three years ago, my school district, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, hired Greg Duncan, a national leader in curriculum design based on cutting-edge methods and research, to oversee the redesign of our curriculum for levels I, II, and III.³

Prior to this, our mandated curriculum essentially consisted of a certain number of chapters in the textbook series we had adopted. In French I, we were to cover the first seven units of Discovering French Bleu, for example.⁴ With this textbook and its many ancillary resources, all the teacher really had to do was to teach whatever was on page 1, and then whatever was on page 2, and so on. Substitutes who didn't even speak the language could "teach" these classes by having the students read the explanations in the book and then do the subsequent practice activities. Certainly, many teachers engaged their students with thoughtful teaching of the content and creative activities, but the curriculum itself did not require this. The textbooks we used, while adhering to the 'communicative competence' trend in theory, covered so much grammar that teachers spent most of their class time on such things as conjugating verbs in various tenses. When we assessed our students, we were primarily concerned with how accurate the students' language was, using our red pens to bloody up their tests. Teachers spent a lot of our time teaching students *about* the language, instead of teaching them the language. While some students learned well with these methods, the vast majority of students did not continue their language study beyond the required number of years and were certainly not capable of communicating much of anything in the target language (L2).

At the time, we defined each level of the language by the tenses that were taught in it. Level I was present and the basic past tense (*passé composé* or *pretérito* in Spanish), Level II was preterite versus imperfect, and probably some future and conditional. Level III was the subjunctive, more complicated uses of future and conditional, and perhaps some (or all!) compound tenses. By the end of the level III book in most textbook series, nearly *all* verb tenses and other grammatical forms had been taught. But should a level III student be able to accurately produce language involving nearly all the tenses and other grammatical structures? The textbooks would sure make you think so.

Personally, I always struggled with this system. I felt bad that I couldn't get through *passé composé* and *imparfait* in level II even though I was supposed to, according to the pacing guide. I was embarrassed that it took me so long to teach just the *passé composé*, and even after working on it for months and months, my students still couldn't produce it consistently (not to mention accurately) in writing or in speaking. My final speaking exam in French II was designed to elicit past, present, and future time frames, and I was constantly disappointed at how poorly my students switched between tenses and how they often used past for future and vice versa. What was I doing wrong?

It turns out that it wasn't really my teaching that was the problem, but rather the expectations that we had for our students, by way of the textbook authors. Greg Duncan pointed out that the publishers' primary goal is to make money, not to actually have students learn. Textbooks are completely out of sync with what we know about how people learn languages, and at what pace they do so. Our current proficiency target for the end of Level II is Novice High, at which point a learner cannot even come close to doing what I expected on my former speaking final exam. In order to continue, knowledge of the proficiency levels is essential. Below is a brief explanation of the ACTFL Proficiency Scale.

A Summary of the ACTFL Proficiency Scale⁵

In 1986, the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the governing body of language instruction, first published their proficiency scale, which includes 10 different levels and is based on the federal government's ILR scale⁶ and takes into account actual data on how people learn languages. The Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced stages each include 3 levels (Low, Mid, and High), with Superior capping them off. Language learners begin at the Novice Low level, with no functional knowledge of the language. As they learn, they progress through the levels, with some levels taking longer than others, and of course, with various learners progressing at different rates according to their motivation, aptitude, etc. Here are summaries of what learners can do at the various proficiency levels.

Novice speakers have no functional ability in the language. If they were to be dropped in the country, they would not be able to cope. They communicate on the word and phrase level, using primarily memorized phrases. Even sympathetic listeners have a hard time understanding them.

Intermediate speakers can survive in the target language. They communicate on the sentence level about familiar topics. They can create with the language (as opposed to relying on memorized chunks), ask simple questions (not just memorized ones like Novice speakers), and handle a straightforward transaction. Intermediate speakers are most accurate in the present time frame, but can also dabble in past and future times.

Advanced speakers communicate at the paragraph level and can thrive in the target language. They can narrate in the past, present, and future time frames, although they will still make mistakes occasionally. They can handle a complicated transaction.

In North Carolina, the target for Level I students is Novice Mid, and for Level II students it is Novice High. In other words, even after two years of the language, most students will still have no functional ability to survive in the language, which is to be expected based on what we know about how students learn languages. It might sound like we are lowering our standards, but really we are moderating them to be in line with how student learn language in the real world. Intermediate Low is the target for level III, Intermediate Mid for level IV, and Intermediate High for level V. Students in K-12 classroom settings do not typically reach the Advanced level.⁷

Applying the Proficiency Scale to Classroom Expectations

Learning about proficiency levels completely changed the way I viewed the grammar I taught. According to the new NC Essential Standards, students aren't expected to get beyond the Novice level until level III of the language. So why do level II textbooks include nearly every tense that exists in the language? There is a serious mismatch in what textbooks include and what we know about second language acquisition. In reality, it takes a lot of time and practice to be able to manipulate verbs in various tenses. Only at Advanced proficiency levels can speakers narrate in past, present, and future time frames. For me to expect my level II students to do so was completely inappropriate.

Part Two: From Textbooks to Themes: Using the Proficiency Guidelines to Write a New Curriculum

Because our expectations for students, which were guided by textbook content, were entirely unrealistic, in the summer of 2010, our district hired Greg Duncan to guide us through writing our own, non-textbook-based curriculum. A group of teachers from the district was selected to work with him to write curricula for Levels I, II, and III. He taught us about the ACTFL proficiency levels, how long it takes for students to progress from one to the next (i.e. what the target proficiency level for each course should be), and then “hooked” us by presenting us shocking data from the STAMP test.⁸

Shocking Data about Students' Speaking Proficiency

The STAMP (Standards-Based Measure of Proficiency) test is a web-based test of language proficiency created by Avant Assessment. It is used by school districts, universities, and governments to assess learners' proficiency in the four skill areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, and is highly regarded by language learning authorities. Duncan presented us with STAMP test data that showed that after level I, the majority of students tested at Novice High on ACTFL's scale in speaking. The shocking

revelation from that study was that students continued to test at Novice High after levels II, III, and IV! In short, students were never progressing in their speaking proficiency, presumably because they never had time to absorb what they were being taught. Our overemphasis on moving along to the next tense and keeping up with pacing and ‘trying to finish the book’ meant that while students were learning *about* the language (that many tenses and other grammatical constructions exist and how to form them), they were never able to *use* anything but the most basic and frequent of content—level I content. If students could only speak at the Novice High level after four years of instruction, what was the point of studying a language?

After this presentation, we were convinced that our old textbook-based methods were ineffective, and we wanted to know what to do instead. Duncan led us through the process of creating a modern level I curriculum. He directed us to create thematic units of instruction without much regard to grammar, as opposed to the units that are typically in textbooks that appear to be thematic but are really just ‘grammar in disguise,’ in which the author decides that a particular tense should be taught and then creates a thematic context within which to contextualize it. Essentially, the authors start with a grammar outline of the textbook and then fill in thematic vocabulary to make it seem communicative. For example, in *Discovering French III*, the subjunctive unit is about chores and helping out at home, so students can learn to say “*Il est nécessaire que tu fasses la vaisselle*” (It’s necessary that you do the dishes). Once Duncan clued us into this, it was so obvious that this is what the textbooks do.

Instead of ‘grammar in disguise,’ we designed a level I curriculum using the principals of backward design⁹ by first deciding what the students needed to be able to *do* with the language (i.e. “I can” statements, also known as objectives), then creating vocabulary lists to allow them to accomplish those goals, and then figuring out what grammar they would need to be able to use the vocabulary to effectively communicate. Phase Two consisted of creating the assessments for the thematic units, and Phase Three involved creating a bank of activities to help teachers plan their daily lessons.

A Summary of the New Methodology Taught by Greg Duncan

A short explanation of the new methodology that Duncan taught us is that instead of focusing on grammar (or ‘grammar in disguise’) like we had in the past, we now teach functional chunks of vocabulary that students need to communicate about various topics, and only teach them “the grammar they need when they need it.”¹⁰

Instead of long vocabulary lists that are primarily single words, we give students phrases that they can memorize and use immediately, without having to put words together to create a sentence. Compare this to the first day of Level I: we teach students that “*Je m’appelle ____*” means “My name is ____.” We don’t explain to them that *je* is a subject pronoun, *s’appeler* is the verb “to call oneself” and it’s reflexive so you need to

use the pronoun *me*, which goes in front of the conjugated verb, and *appeler* is an *-er* verb so you drop the *-er* and replace it with an *-e* because that's the *je* ending...we know that at the Novice Low level, students don't need to know *how* the sentence was created, they just need to know the sentence. Instead of throwing out this method of comprehensible input after day one, we now continue to use it throughout the students' years of language study. In short, we focus on giving the students language they can use to *speak*, to communicate. They learn the language, instead of learning *about* the language. In order to emphasize communication, we must allow ourselves to deemphasize accuracy, because we can't do both in the short amount of time we have with our students. This can be a hard pill to swallow for teachers, but in the end we must acknowledge that for the most part, accuracy problems do *not* usually impede comprehensibility. If a student conjugates a verb wrongly or forgets an article, s/he will still be understood.

Part Three: Grammar in the New Methodology

Greg Duncan's motto is "Give them the grammar they need when they need it," as opposed to giving them the grammar we think they should know because they are in level I, II, or III. Therefore, in each unit that we wrote, we included only the grammatical structures that students needed to be able to accomplish the "I can" statements. This turned out to be a *lot* less grammar than what we were used to, and some of us questioned whether we would be holding some kids back, because some students *want* to know grammar and have questions about the underlying systems of the language (although we need to admit to ourselves that the students who feel this way are the exception rather than the rule). The new curriculum allows for students who want to progress at a faster pace if they so desire. If individual students want to know *why* something is the way it is, it's entirely appropriate to sit down with them and explain it to them as an individual, but the entire class doesn't need to know. Obviously, in this new curriculum, students will learn much less grammar than in previous years, but they will be able to actually *use* what they do know. In the past, our students were verb-conjugating machines, but they couldn't communicate in the language with any confidence or fluency. Students in my level II classes typically started in August by warning me that they "didn't know anything" from French I. Since we switched to the new curriculum, I haven't heard anything of the sort. Students come out of level I able to use the target language to talk about the topics they have studied, confident in their language use. Instead of measuring progress by how many tenses students had been taught, we now measure progress by how many topics a student can communicate about and how proficient they are in doing so. Our students can now speak!

Teacher Concerns about the Reduction of Grammar in the Curriculum

Upon learning about our new curriculum, many teachers expressed concern that if we didn't cover enough grammar and expect high levels of accuracy, our students wouldn't

be capable of passing the AP and IB exams at the end of high school. Duncan's argument at the time was that instead of targeting the maybe five percent of Level I students who will make it to AP, perhaps we should target the majority of them so they can actually communicate. Thankfully, the powers-that-be have changed with the times with the release of new exams. The new AP exam and rubrics reflect this by significantly lowering the standard of grammatical variety and accuracy required.¹¹ In addition, the infamous "Fill Ins" sections of the exam, where students had to know every conjugation of every tense and in which one function word (and *only* one function word) correctly went in the blank, have been dropped. The new IB exam and rubrics also have lowered their expectations for quantity and correctness of grammar. For example, on the essay section of the new IB Standard Level exam, students are scored by how accurately they can write "simple sentence structures" and "complex sentence structures."¹² Hopefully, the changes in these two exams, which create a trickle-down effect all the way into level I, will allow teachers to use these new methods without fear that their students will be underprepared for these summative exams.

Change is Hard!

The introduction of this new curriculum into our system and into my personal teaching has been a bit rocky, as change always is. It is such a complete change from what I had done for years that it has been daunting to figure out what to do instead. I have had so many questions about how I'm supposed to be teaching. I now know that drilling verb conjugations isn't useful, but how am I supposed to fill the class time that that frees up? How am I supposed to be teaching grammar, if not directly like I did in the past? How much accuracy should I demand of my students? Less than before the curriculum change, but how much less?

On frustrating days, I have found myself asking: Is all this change really necessary? I *like* teaching grammar, as most language teachers do. I like the mathematical nature of it, with its formulas and rules. Is what I did in the past really so wrong? I considered myself a successful teacher in the past, so why fix it if it ain't broke?

Finding answers to these questions is why I chose to do this grammar seminar through Charlotte Teachers Institute. I wanted to have the opportunity to do research of my own to understand how and why language teaching methods have changed, instead of just taking Duncan's word for it. The process has been illuminating. The following sections of this unit explain why older methods of teaching grammar are not effective and how to teach grammar instead.

What's wrong with "old" grammar methods?

Many of the resources I used had compelling arguments for why much of what I did when teaching grammar directly was ineffective. In reading Bill VanPatten's book,¹³ I was frustrated to find that he made a strong argument for throwing out everything I'd

ever done in teaching grammar and doing things his way instead. According to his research (and upon reflection I must admit that my own experience confirms his findings), most everything we do with textbooks runs contrary to how students learn the target language. What convinced me of the accuracy of the research is that I saw the same conclusions drawn by multiple sources.

Lee and VanPatten's book on CLT explains learning a language as such: "acquisition involves the creation of an implicit linguistic system, one that exists outside of awareness."¹⁴ Their guiding principle, which is the bottom line of language teaching in my opinion, is that "input plus interaction is the most optimal context for language acquisition."¹⁵ Students learn to use correct grammar through other methods than direct grammar teaching and practice. They do this primarily through input ("input" is any language that is going into the learner, via reading or listening; "output" is any language the students produce themselves, via speaking and writing). Students seem to absorb (one might say acquire) knowledge about the language that they have never been explicitly taught, such as being able to say that something "sounds right" or "sounds wrong" despite never having learned a particular rule to explain why it's right or wrong. They do this through input: the more exposure a student has to the language, via reading and listening, the more language they learn, including grammatical constructs.

Bayram Pekoz, an ESL researcher, succinctly explains a few of the primary problems with current grammar instruction methods.¹⁶ First, generally the teacher is the one presenting the rules, but students learn better when they are the ones to formulate the rules for themselves. Second, just one grammar presentation is not enough. Students need repeated lessons in order to improve accuracy with that grammar feature. Third, linguistic terminology can overwhelm students. Learners need to be able to *use* relative pronouns, but they don't need to know the term "relative pronouns." The only time it is useful to teach terminology is when it will facilitate a common vernacular between the teacher and the class for future use; it should be restricted to the most commonly encountered grammatical points. Last, grammar must be taught in "digestible segments" to allow cognitive processing to occur.¹⁷ As we will see later, VanPatten argues for teaching only one form of a verb at a time.

Below is a list of methods that have been shown to be ineffective.

Part Four: Teaching-Strategies for Grammar that *Don't* Work

Present-Practice-Produce (PPP)¹⁸ and the Importance of Input

This is a common method that I have used for years without knowing its name. It is essentially a traditional grammar lesson. First, the teacher presents the grammatical topic, then the students do practice activities that are usually decontextualized and on the sentence-level (fill-in-the-blank verb conjugation exercises are common), and then the

students move onto producing the target structure in less constrictive ways. The problem with PPP is that it skips an essential step in second language learning: input.

When students go straight from learning a structure to producing it, their brains miss the opportunity to absorb the structure into their interlanguage system ('interlanguage' is the term used to describe the language as the student knows it, as opposed to the term 'language' which is the actual language, which is complete and correct).¹⁹ Lee and VanPatten explain learning a language as such: "acquisition involves the creation of an implicit linguistic system, one that exists outside of awareness."²⁰ Input is the primary way that languages are learned. When exposed to input, the learner's brain is constantly reorganizing what it knows about the language. Learning a language is basically a process of wiring and rewiring the brain as the learner develops hypotheses about the language and then modifies those hypotheses as they receive more input. Note that most of this happens subconsciously, without the learner specifically "telling" their brain information. This subconscious processing explains why learners know a lot more about the L2 than they are actually taught. In skipping the crucial Input stage of CLT, PPP fails the test of being an effective method in the current methodology.

Using Paradigms such as Verb Charts to Memorize Grammatical Information

Bill VanPatten makes a case against using verb charts, songs to memorize verb endings, and other visual representations of the forms of a grammatical structure, which are called 'paradigms' in linguistics, to teach grammar rules and structures.²¹ We often think that these are practical and helpful ways to memorize verb conjugations and other structures (such as a chart explaining à contractions displayed as mathematical formulas where $a + le = au$, etc.), but the problem is that students can recall the information only in the same form in which it was originally remembered. He argues convincingly that if students learn the verbs in a chart form or as a song, they can recall them only in that chart form. This is true according to my experience. I often see students singing the "-er verb song" in their head during tests to recall which ending to use. Even when speaking, sometimes they'll go through the verb chart out loud until they arrive at the intended form. This means that they *know* the forms, but they can't recall them efficiently in real time because the knowledge isn't in an accessible part of their brain. Another issue with paradigms is that apparently, they serve no cognitive purpose other than perhaps an affective one: some students want to know the "big picture" and/or want a way to organize the information they have learned.²² While paradigms may have a place in learning, they aren't a good way to introduce the material or to have students memorize it initially. Please see below for an explanation of how and when to use paradigms well.

Drill, Baby, Drill

We all know that drilling, often in the guise of "exercises," is supposed to be bad, but I would guess that many of us still do it, albeit less commonly than before the CLT movement. Lee and VanPatten argue that output drills of any kind are useless. The

students may get good at doing the drill, but the brain pathways aren't the same as those used in spontaneous production, so they can't actually *use* the forms in real life.²³

Using Discrete-Point Grammar Tests

This is a phenomenon all teachers have faced. After directly teaching a particular tense or grammar point and requiring students to memorize the information (usually with the help of verb charts), students do well on a discrete-point grammar test, but they can't actually use that grammatical feature in real conversation. When tested, they *know* how to use it, but they *don't*, unless the activity is designed explicitly to practice it. Having taught grammar directly in my class, I have experienced this on a regular basis. My students understand the subjunctive, can conjugate it well, can even write sentences using it correctly when the activity calls for that, but they never actually utter the subjunctive in conversation, and very rarely use it in writing unless they are forced to. There is a lot of research that suggests that even if students can successfully complete a discrete-point grammar test, they can't use the same grammatical forms accurately in everyday conversation and communicative tasks, even if they are actively monitoring for it.²⁴ This makes sense. We know that we are supposed to test how we teach, and if our test is going to require students to conjugate verbs in the appropriate tense in order to fill in blanks, then teaching them that way will be successful. If our goal, however, is for students to use the tense in real-life communication, then paper and pencil practice, drills, and tests won't work.

Why Haven't You Learned This Already?

As teachers, we sometimes get frustrated with our students for continually making mistakes on structures that seem to be easy, but turn out to be incredibly hard to master. We can get frustrated, thinking that the students just need to study more. I know of a teacher who once spent an entire school year only on preterite versus imperfect and was constantly frustrated with her students for never mastering it, despite spending countless hours of class time practicing it. She believed that if the students just paid more attention and studied more, and committed the rules to memory, they would be able to do it...in essence, that it was a work ethic problem. The research shows, however, that choosing between preterite and imperfect is one of the hardest things in a language and takes a very long time to learn.²⁵ Also, some learners' interlanguage systems will simply not be ready to learn this, and no matter how much practice they do, that won't change. They won't acquire it until they're ready.

Why Some Structures are Difficult to Learn

Adjective agreement is an example of a structure that "should" be easy. In French, even though this concept is introduced within the first few weeks of French I, and then retaught every time there are new adjectives in a vocab list, I have found that even my

French V students rarely produce the correct agreements. If I ask them to edit for adjective agreement specifically, they can mostly get them right, but in oral communication and unedited writing, only the most common of adjectives come out correctly. Another “easy” structure, *à* and *de* contractions (i.e. *à + le = au*), are simple to understand, but very hard to implement. Few students catch their mistakes on their own, no matter how many years of French they’ve had.

There are several reasons why these structures are so hard to master. First, what these two structures have in common is that they are absent in English. Whenever a structure is necessary in L2 but absent in L1, it will inevitably be hard for learners.²⁶ Another reason they are hard to learn is that they are not necessary for comprehension. If a student forgets to contract an *à* and a *le*, there is no breakdown in communication.²⁷ Finally, in the case of adjective agreement, it is redundant. If the article before the noun shows the gender, and if the interlocutor (the person with whom the student is speaking) already knows the gender of the noun, then making the adjective agree is unnecessary.²⁸ After discovering these reasons in my research, it makes sense that my students don’t improve at using such grammatical constructs.

“But that’s how I learned it!”

Teachers tend to teach the way they learned because “that’s how I learned the language and it worked for me!” VanPatten points out, correctly, that no teacher became an advanced speaker of the language because of the methods they used in middle and/or high school.²⁹ We got to the advanced stage of proficiency through other, more practical and real-life methods that involved extensive quantities of input, such as study abroad, living in some sort of semi-immersion setting, wide-ranging reading, viewing TV or movies in the L2, etc. He argues that we learned the language *in spite of* classroom instruction! Personally, I wouldn’t go that far, but I must acknowledge that I was always one of the best students in my language classes in high school. The way the language was taught made sense to me and jibed with my learning styles. I became a language teacher because the methods mentioned above worked for me, but upon reflection, I realize that they *didn’t* work for the majority of the other students in my classes. Therefore, my goal as a teacher needs to be to teach in a way that works for all of my students (or at least a majority), not just for the very best students. I was the anomaly in the classroom: the one kid who ended up becoming a language teacher. Just because it worked for me, that doesn’t mean that that’s how I should teach it.

The reality is that second language learning is a very slow, messy process. Contrary to what textbooks would have us believe, learners cannot accurately produce advanced tenses, or even simpler more common tenses, easily or frequently until the later levels of the ACTFL Proficiency Scale. Expecting otherwise is a fool’s errand.

Should We Bother Teaching Grammar At All?

While those of us in typical middle and high school settings have overemphasized grammar, some in immersion settings, following the work of Stephen Krashen, have gone too far in the other direction, placing little or no emphasis on accuracy or grammar instruction. Krashen's pivotal work in the 1980's changed how we think about language acquisition. His "Natural Method" advocated against teaching grammar, arguing that learners would naturally pick up the grammar through comprehensible input.³⁰ He believed that teachers should try to mimic the setting and circumstances in which learners acquired their mother tongue; in other words to recreate childhood in the classroom and to allow students to acquire the language naturally. He made a distinction between "acquiring" a language and "learning" one. Learning is what takes place in a classroom setting, where students are taught linguistic rules. Students then "monitor" the language they create (essentially, they have to think through what they are trying to communicate). In acquired language, students don't have to think. The language just comes out naturally as it does with our mother tongue. Krashen emphasized input above all else. He believed that all students needed to learn a language was to receive adequate amounts of comprehensible input at the $i + 1$ level: i being what the student already knows, and $+ 1$ being a level slightly above that, so that they are constantly able to understand the input but are also being exposed to new material, so that they don't stagnate in their acquisition. At the time, Krashen didn't believe that any grammar instruction was necessary.

Evidence of the inadequacy of Krashen's method comes from studies done in Canadian immersion schools, in which English speakers learned French. It was found that because the students received no grammar instruction and weren't corrected by their teacher, a "classroom pidgin" developed, in other words, the students' incorrect use of the language became the norm in their classroom³¹. Despite large amounts of input and years of immersion, the French they spoke never became grammatically accurate.

The take-home message from these studies is that grammar instruction *does* have a place in the second language classroom (although it's worth noting that most teachers go too far with this and spent too much time on grammar and not enough on comprehensible input). Various researchers find that explicit grammar instruction, albeit using new methods and not the old ones, does speed up the language learning process.³² As grammar researcher Diane Larson-Freeman puts it, "The point of education is to accelerate the language acquisition process, not be satisfied with or try to emulate what learners can do on their own."³³

Several of the sources I used argue that the goal of grammar instruction shouldn't be that the students are able to actually *use* the structure, but rather to make them *aware* of the structure so that their interlanguage system can pick it up when it's ready.³⁴ VanPatten notes that classroom learners *do* have better grammar than non-classroom

learners, possibly because grammar instruction makes the learner sensitive to the grammar in the input—they notice the grammar in the input they receive, and therefore grammatical rules assimilate into the learner’s understanding of the language. His position is that explicit explanation is unnecessary,³⁵ and instead, we should use carefully constructed input activities to improve students’ grammatical knowledge and accuracy.³⁶ Think of grammar instruction as “input enhancement.”

The Primacy of Input and the Debate over Output

I was surprised to find in my research that in the new methods I discovered, the bulk of classroom time is to be spent on input. The role of output is actually quite controversial, contrary to what I would have believed. To me, it makes sense that if the goal is to be able to speak the language, one would need to speak the language to accomplish that goal. However, Diane Larsen-Freeman made an explicit effort to find research showing the efficacy of output, and was largely unsuccessful in doing so. Currently, there is very little empirical data showing that output practice is a necessary component of learning the L2, although that may be because researchers are primarily looking at “output” as “drills.”³⁷ Instead of accepting that output practice is pointless, Larsen-Freeman chalks that up to the research being in its infancy.³⁸

Personally, my experience tells me that students *want* to practice new features they’re learning. Simply giving them input doesn’t make them feel that they know and understand the feature. They want to produce it themselves. Compare learning a grammatical feature to learning to parallel park. Reading step-by-step instructions for parallel parking is helpful, and watching someone demonstrate it is also helpful, but until you get behind the wheel and actually try it for yourself, you don’t feel that you really understand it.

In my opinion, my students’ affective needs for practice override the lack of research proving the efficacy of output. If I don’t give them opportunities to produce the new feature, they get frustrated and feel that they’re not learning anything or making progress in their language acquisition. Even though I am fully aware that output practice will not ensure that they master the new feature, practicing it makes them feel they know it better and is therefore certainly worth their time. Students with stronger language acquisition gifts, or students who are extremely motivated to improve, will make a conscious effort to use the new feature and some will be successful in using it accurately in presentational and eventually interpersonal communication.

Another reason to allow for output practice is to meet the needs of diverse learners. Reading and hearing are effective ways of learning for some students, but others will need to say and/or write the feature to “get it.”

Part Five: Teaching Strategies and Classroom Activities for Grammar that Work

While it is clear that we do still need to teach grammar, we need to do it differently than we have in the past. We must update our methods to be more in line with what is now known about how students learn a language. The purpose of the rest of this unit is to answer the question of what we *should* be doing for grammar instruction.

The most important thing I learned in my research is that there is no “right way” to teach grammar. The research is in its infancy so there isn’t an exact answer to the question “How are we supposed to teach grammar?” Every time I sit down to do more research, I discover yet another philosophy and another method of teaching grammar. I feel as though I could research this topic forever and never feel fully informed. As such, the strategies and activities I suggest below just scratch the surface of potentially successful methods. What follows are explanations of some methods that are supported by research and/or experts. After each method I include activities that exemplify how to use that method to teach a particular grammar point. For more teaching strategies and classroom activities, please see a longer version of this paper at my teacher wiki at madame.cmswikispaces.wikispaces.net.

Bill VanPatten’s Method of ‘Structured Input’³⁹

Bill VanPatten’s method of ‘structured input’ is the best example of teaching grammar in CLT that I found. His primary principle of language learning is that students pay attention to meaning first.⁴⁰ During comprehension activities, their brains are focused on understanding the input. They can’t focus on both meaning *and* structure at the same time, so if we want them to focus on structure, then we have to ensure that the meaning of the input is clear and already known.

Next, it is best to focus on one form at a time when presenting new structures.⁴¹ One form at a time means *one conjugation* at a time; in other words, teaching an entire lesson just on *one* of the six forms of the verb. This is quite a novel concept: teachers typically teach the whole ‘chart’ of six conjugations when teaching a new tense. Teaching one at a time will take longer, slowing down the presentation and input, but in the long run students will know the tense better, and they will be much better at understanding and producing the most common forms, such as the *je* form which is what they will use the most. That will then be the stable form to which they will anchor the other ones. When presenting a new grammatical form, decide which forms students need to be able to do the task, then teach only those forms that they need. Teaching all the forms is counterproductive.⁴²

Here are the basic steps for ‘structured input.’⁴³

1. Give the learners information about the target structure. (Note: only give the essential information, which should only take a minute to present. This is *not* like

- a traditional lesson in which the teacher presents the entire structure. Think of this as a snapshot of the grammar concept: a movie trailer, not the full feature film. Don't give them more than what they must know to be able to follow along in the rest of the steps of this method.)
2. Warn them about processing strategies that might negatively affect their ability to learn the form during comprehension activities. (Again, a snapshot, not a listing of all of the irregular verbs they may get hung up on, for example. The days of long PowerPoints with exceptions to the rule or typical mistakes are over!)
 3. Do structured input activities that push the students to process the target structure during input by manipulating the input so that the student must pay attention to the structure in order to be able to do the activity. In other words, take away any vocabulary that might allow the learner to understand the input without paying attention to the structure being used. In structured input activities:
 - a. Start with sentences and move to connected discourse
 - b. Do both listening and reading activities
 - c. Have the learner do something with the input—not just listen to it or read it. Here are 6 types of activities to have them do something with the input:
 - i. Binary options: this includes any activity where students have a choice of 2 answer choices.
 - ii. Matching: anything where the student associates information from the input sentence and something else, for example, matching the name of an object to a picture of it, matching an activity to a day of the week, or matching cause and effect.
 - iii. Supplying information: for example, fill-in-the-blank activities in which the student listens to or reads the structured input. Note that the student doesn't actually produce the target structure in their response, but uses previously-learned information to supply the information.
 - iv. Selecting alternatives: also known as multiple choice.
 - v. Surveys: students survey a variety of classmates and responds to survey questions when asked by classmates.
 - vi. Ordering and ranking: students can order activities chronologically or in terms of likelihood or importance.⁴⁴

Lesson: Using Structured Input to Teach the Passé Composé in French II

Context: The students have already learned the *futur proche* (*aller* + infinitive) in a previous course. In the first unit of French II, they learned *passé composé* as memorized phrases only in the *je* and *tu* forms with vocabulary about “things you do after school.” In the second unit, which is about food, they are to learn *passé composé* for *-er* verbs.

Activities A, B, and C, which are adapted from VanPatten,⁴⁵ are designed to first sensitize the students to the differences between the *passé composé* and the *futur proche* with *-er*

verbs. In reading, it is easy to figure out which tense is which, but aurally, they can be hard to distinguish because they sound very similar. Both tenses involve two verbs, and for *-er* verbs, the past participle (for *passé composé*) and the infinitive (for *futur proche*) sound exactly the same. An additional confusion is that students frequently have a hard time distinguishing between *aller* and *avoir*

Note that students are unlikely to pay attention (and therefore learn) things that seem unnecessary, including tense.⁴⁶ Tense is almost always clear via the context, meaning that if you conjugate the verb incorrectly, it doesn't usually impede comprehension. In order to force learners to focus on a grammar point that is not particularly salient, we must draw their attention specifically to it by removing any lexical items that would give away the tense. In other words, remove words like "yesterday" from the text so that students *must* attend to the verb forms in order to determine past, present, or future time frame. Students must carefully listen to the first verb to hear if it is *aller* or *avoir*.

Grammatical focus: The lesson is on the *passé composé* in the *il/elle* form of regular *-er* verbs that are conjugated with *avoir* only. (Remember to teach *one* form at a time.)

1. Teach the form: explain how the feature is formed: *il/elle* form of *avoir* + past participle (for *-er* verbs, drop the *-er*, add *é*).
2. Warn them about "particular processing strategy that may negatively affect" their ability to pick up the form during comprehension activities.⁴⁷
 - point out the small difference between 'a' (*il/elle* form of *avoir*, used in *passé composé*) and 'va' (*il/elle* form of *aller*, used in *futur proche*)
 - point out that for *-er* verbs, past participles sound exactly the same as infinitives (used in *futur proche* and verb + infinitive constructions such as "*Il peut/veut/préfère/etc manger.*")

3. Structured input activities:

Activity A. Past or Future? Listening for time reference. (This is an example of a binary choice activity.)

Directions: Number your paper from 1-6. As you hear each sentence, write P for past or F for future.

Teacher Script:

1. Anne va commander de la soupe aux oignons au café.
2. Céline a payé 15€ pour un gâteau à la pâtisserie.
3. Claire a mangé une grande pizza.
4. Elodie va payer 10€ à l'épicerie pour des serviettes en papier.

5. Georges va acheter du fromage de chèvre au marché.
6. Marie a commandé un croque-monsieur au café.

Activity B. Matching

Directions: Listen to each sentence. Mark the appropriate time that the event occurred or will occur.

Answer choices:

A: last Monday

B: right now

C: next Monday

Teacher Script:

1. Hugo va manger de la tarte après le dîner.
2. Julie va commander du cassoulet au restaurant.
3. Latifah a mangé beaucoup de fruits.
4. Paul a acheté du thé et du coca pour la fête.
5. Sandrine va acheter des produits laitiers à la crèmerie.
6. Thomas a mangé trop de glace.

Activity C. Did you do it, too? (Supplying information) (In this activity the vocabulary begins branching out from food-related vocab to vocab learned in the previous unit. It also uses the *je* form of *-er* verbs. Before beginning, briefly review the form *j'ai _____é*, which they learned as memorized vocabulary in the previous unit.)

Directions: Respond to the questions you hear about what I did this weekend by saying if you did it too or you didn't do it, using « Moi aussi » or « Pas moi ».

1. J'ai mangé de la pizza ce week-end. Et toi ?
2. J'ai envoyé des textos ce week-end. Et toi ?
3. J'ai lavé le chien ce week-end. Et toi ?
4. J'ai commandé beaucoup de nourriture au restaurant ce week-end. Et toi ?
5. J'ai regardé un bon film ce week-end. Et toi ?

Activity D. What order ? (Ordering and ranking)

Read about what I did yesterday after school. Put the activities in order from what I did first to what I did last. Not all the activities will be used.

Hier, après l'école, j'ai travaillé avec un élève. Après ça, j'ai acheté de la nourriture au supermarché. J'ai acheté des pommes, des oranges, et du pain. Puis, dans la voiture, j'ai écouté la radio et chanté avec les chansons. A la maison, j'ai nettoyé la cuisine et puis j'ai préparé le dîner. J'ai diné. Finalement, j'ai regardé House à la télé.

___ ate dinner
___ cleaned up the kitchen
___ listened to the radio
___ made dinner
___ sent texts
___ updated Facebook

___ walked the dog
___ washed the car
___ watched TV
___ went grocery shopping
___ worked with a student

Output Practice Activities

This section combines Bill VanPatten's Method of 'Structured Output'⁴⁸ with Diane Larsen-Freeman's advice on creating output activities. Remember that output is any activity where the student is producing language, such as speaking or writing. Larsen-Freeman offers the following directives for designing output activities that practice grammar in an effective way. First, the activity must be meaningful and engaging. Take the word 'meaningful' literally: full of meaning. Students need to put into situations that require the use of the target structure to communicate and get meaning across, not in decontextualized or mechanical practice.⁴⁹ If students are not engaged in the activity, we all know that learning will not occur. Her second principle is that the teacher must be aware of whether the activity addresses form, meaning, or use.⁵⁰ If the goal of the activity is to practice a grammatical form, students must be made to use the form frequently. One way to do this is the game "Twenty Questions," which if played by the whole class allows for the students to be exposed to the grammatical pattern repeatedly. Another way to do this is to create a series of activities that all require frequent use of a grammatical pattern. If meaning is the learning challenge, TPR is a good way to practice. If the teacher asks students to put the book on top of their desk, next to it, underneath it, etc., they will make meaning of the form without any type of explanation needed. Finally, if use is the goal, students must be put in situations where they have the choice of multiple forms and they must choose the correct one. A way to practice this is what I call "slash sentences" in which the student is given the components of a sentence and must put them together to create a real sentence.

Lee and VanPatten give good guidelines for how to create Structured Output activities that are partly an extension of Larsen-Freeman's ideas. They have two overarching principles for these activities. First, the students must exchange information that is not known to them, in other words, they should have a real interaction in which they are learning new information from each other: this makes the activity meaningful and communicative. Second, the activity should require the students to use a particular grammatical structure or form to express meaning.⁵¹

The guidelines for creating output activities are almost the same as those for input activities: present one thing at a time, keep the focus on meaning, move from sentences to connected discourse (meaning don't force the learner to produce strings of sentences right away),⁵² use both written and oral output, and the learner must have some knowledge of

the form or structure (note, this just means that the learner should already know about the form, not that they know *everything* about the form!).⁵³ The most interesting of the guidelines is that other students (or the teacher) must respond to the content of the output: in order for the communication to be meaningful and real, a partner must listen to the output, comprehend it, and respond, as in a real conversation. Structured output activities should follow structured input activities.⁵⁴ As such, the following activities are a continuation of the above sequence for *passé composé* in French II.

Activity E. Twenty Questions: *Qu'est-ce que tu as mangé hier ?*

Grammatical focus: *tu* form of *manger* in the *passé composé* (briefly teach the *tu* form before beginning)

Step 1: One student volunteers to be in the “hot seat” (a stool I put in the front of the room). The premise, which makes the activity engaging, is that this student ate a very weird combination of foods for dinner last night and the class has to figure out what those foods were. Either the volunteer can choose the strange meal, the teacher can assign the foods, or the student can pull random foods out of a hat. During the activity, the class takes turns asking “*Est-ce que tu as mangé _____ hier soir?*” inserting different foods into the blank. As each food is revealed, the student in the hot seat draws the food behind him on the board. By the end of the activity, the students have both produced as output and heard as input the form “*tu as mangé*” many, times, which should lead them to automaticity of that structure.

Step 2: Once the students have “gotten” the structure above, vary the activity to include *acheté*, *payé*, and other *-er* verbs. Be sure to stop before they’ve had too much and have gotten bored!

Activity F. *Qu'est-ce que tu as acheté pour la fête?*

Grammatical focus: *tu* form of *acheter* in the *passé composé*

Step 1 : You’re throwing a party for a classmate. Make a list of 5-8 foods/drinks you bought last night for the party.

Step 2: Your partner now has to figure out what you bought, but they aren’t allowed to use any words for foods/drinks (kind of like the game Taboo). They have to describe the foods instead. You can only answer with *Oui* or *Non*.

Ex: *Est-ce que tu as acheté un fruit ? Est-ce que tu as acheté quelque chose de ... (bleu, grand, sucré, salé, etc.) ?* [Provide these two sentences as templates.]

Activity G. *Qu'est-ce que tu as fait ce week-end?*

This activity expands on *passé composé* to other *-er* verbs that are not just food-related by recalling high-frequency activities vocabulary from French I. It also asks the students to use both the *je* and the *tu* forms of the verbs.

Directions: Find out what your classmates did over the weekend. Walk around the room asking people if they did the following activities. If they did, have them sign their name in the box for the activity. [Create a grid with pictures for French I and II activities in each box, such as a TV, various sports, music, texts, etc.]

Ex. Question : *Est-ce que tu as joué au foot ce week-end?* Answer : *Oui, j'ai joué au foot.*
Or Non, je n'ai pas joué au foot.

Modifications : All of the above activities can be modified to fit the current unit of vocabulary and the grammar focus.

Using Paradigms such as Verb Charts Effectively

As explained above, using paradigms such as charts, songs, etc. as ways to remember information is problematic because students can only recall the information in the same form in which it was originally remembered. Instead of using these at the *beginning* of a lesson to present the forms, it is better to use them after the students already understand a good amount of information in them and have been successful at using that information. To use the previous *passé composé* sequence as an example, by the end of the sequence, the students have been exposed to all singular forms of the *passé composé*. At the end of the sequence, if your students have an affective need for organization and for seeing “the big picture,” it would be appropriate to give notes on the chart, having the students put in the verb forms they have learned, and then filling in the other forms that were not focused on.⁵⁵ That way, the students have the verb chart in their notes to reference when they need to know a different conjugation or to refresh their memory, and high flyers can attempt to use new forms of the structure. In sum, use paradigms *after* a lesson as a way to review and organize information, as opposed to using it at the start of a lesson as a way to teach the information.

Induction

Inductive learning is used to allow learners to figure out grammatical rules for themselves through examples and sometimes non-examples. Deductive learning, on the other hand, is the more traditional method of presenting the rules first, and then giving examples. I have used induction successfully in all levels when I want to focus on (or introduce) a challenging grammar point. In lower-level classes, I use it primarily as an “input flood” of the new material, allowing students to read a text which has lots of examples of the

target structure that are highlighted or bolded, then pair up (or work in small groups) to discuss *what* the structure means and *how* it is being used. The students figure out the rules for themselves, then as a whole class they share them and I confirm their findings, and then I give notes on the topic so they have something to study from and to reference. The example that follows shows how I introduce the direct object pronouns *le, la, les, l'* in French II during the food unit.

Lesson: Understanding Direct Object Pronouns in Context

In Level II of our new curriculum, students are introduced to *le, la, les, l'* during a unit on food called “*Bon Appétit!*” These object pronouns are incredibly hard for students to both conceptualize and use. Here are the steps of the lesson, with clarifying details in parentheses.

1. Project the following text, which I wrote, in which object pronouns are highlighted. The vocabulary is all either known or easily comprehensible through context and from the current unit of study. (When introducing new grammar, make sure the text is comprehensible and easy to understand so students can focus their attention on the grammar to be learned.)

Voici mes préférences de nourriture. J’adore les fruits et les légumes. Je **les** mange à chaque repas : le petit déjeuner, le déjeuner, et le diner, et aussi comme casse-croute. Les pommes, les fraises, les poires, j’adore ça, mais les bananes ? Je **les** déteste ! Comme légume, je préfère le brocoli, les haricots verts, et les oignons. J’adore les champignons : je **les** mange à chaque opportunité. Ils sont délicieux.

Pourtant, je ne mange pas de viande...je ne **la** mange pas parce que je suis végétarienne. Le porc, je ne **le** mange pas parce que les cochons sont mignons. Le bœuf, je ne **l'**aime pas parce que les vaches font « moo . » Le poulet, je ne peux pas **le** manger parce que les poulets sont maltraités. Et même le poisson et les fruits de mer, je ne **les** mange pas parce que c’est mauvais pour les océans.

Je suis très particulière en ce qui concerne les boissons. Je n’aime pas la majorité des boissons. Le coca, le thé glacé, le citron pressé, le café, je ne **les** bois pas parce qu’ils sont dégoûtants pour moi. Je préfère l’eau. Je **le** bois tout le temps, n’est-ce pas ?

En ce qui concerne les desserts, je **les** ADORE. Je suis accro ! Mais, j’essaie d’être bonne : jusqu’au Thanksgiving, je ne mange pas de sucre. Je ne **le** mange ni dans la tarte, ni dans les gâteaux, ni dans les pâtisseries, et même ni dans les céréales ! Mais, je prends toujours du yaourt...j’ai besoin de ça pour vivre !

2. Give the students time to read the text either alone or in pairs.

3. Instruct the students to “figure out what is going on with the highlighted words” while working with a partner. Circulate while students work through this. (I don’t give them any more information than that, first because it creates a challenge for them, and second, because it’s not necessary—they can figure it out on their own. If particular pairs are heading in the wrong direction during their discussion, I ask leading questions to focus their attention on the task at hand, such as “What’s your hypothesis for why I highlighted those particular words?”)

4. Whole class discussion. I ask the following questions and select volunteers to share their answers. After I gather enough responses, I clarify and/or restate what has been discovered.

- a. “What’s going on with the highlighted words? What are your hypotheses?”
- b. “What do they mean?” (it/them)
- c. “How do you know which one to use, out of *le*, *la*, *les*, *l’*?” (I point out two particular object pronouns and ask “Why is this one “*le*” and this other one “*la*?” students figure out that the object pronoun matches the gender and number of the word. I do a few more pairs to ensure comprehension.)
- d. “What’s up with *l’*? When do you use it?” Point out examples to ensure they understand that *l’* is NOT used before a plural noun. If needed, I go into the text and change a food item into a word that starts with a vowel to ensure the point is clear.
- e. “How is this *le* different from this *le*?” I point out a *le* that’s an object pronoun and another that’s just the article “the” to help students see the distinction between them. I point out that the same word is used to mean two different things, and used in two different ways. They look the same, but aren’t. For example in English, “back” can mean a body part OR a direction...same word, different meaning.

5. Whole-class read through. Students translate the text in choral response as I point to each word. I make a big show of pointing out that word order isn’t linear when there’s an object pronoun in the sentence. (You may wish to do this before #4 if you doubt that slower learners have understood the text. Better to catch them up now so they can follow along with the rest of the lesson instead of being confused throughout.)

6. Whole class discussion. I ask the following questions and select volunteers to share their answers.

- a. “Where do they go?” (I guide students into saying that they go before the conjugated verb (or first verb, or just verb if only using simple tenses).
- b. I point out how odd this is, for the object to go before the verb instead of after, as in English word order and French word order (when using a noun instead of a pronoun). I point out that Subject-Verb-Object word order is deeply ingrained in our brains, and when that word order is modified, it becomes really challenging. This is similar to VanPatten’s idea of pointing out a particular processing strategy that might negatively affect their

learning of the structure. Note that I don't use the term object yet, I just use the French or English word "it" or "le."

- c. "Success! You got it! Now let's write it down so you have something to study from!" (And so their affective needs for an organizational tool are met!)

7. Give brief notes on what you've just taught.

8. Output practice game: to encourage students to try to use these new object pronouns in speaking, I gave each student a strip of 5 tickets and asked them to write their name on the back of each. Whenever they heard someone use an object pronoun, they give them one of their tickets. The ticket recipient writes their first name on the front, and then tapes the ticket next to their name on a chart in the back of the room (like an elementary school-style "star chart"). The goal is to earn 5 tickets. This can count for whatever type of grade the teacher wants, or simply be a fun practice activity. My students have been thrilled to try to use the object pronouns during class to try to earn tickets!

How to Improve Grammatical Accuracy in Writing

How much time do you spend correcting errors on students' written work? Likely, too much. One of my least favorite things to do as a teacher is to grade a class set of essays because it requires full mental focus, is draining, and takes forever. According to the research that Casanave compiles in her book,⁵⁶ there is no clear evidence that correcting errors in writing actually improves the accuracy of future writing. In fact, it may harm the students' progress by discouraging them from taking risks or even writing at all: the affective filter is definitely raised when a student gets back a paper that is dripping in red ink. Truscott believes that teachers' time would be better spent doing other things and that students don't get any benefit from having their work corrected.⁵⁷ Ferris thinks that correcting errors is good, but doesn't have any solid reasons to back that up, other than students expect to be corrected, and sometimes they want it: they don't feel they're making progress unless they can see their errors (or perhaps they don't believe the teacher actually read the paper!).⁵⁸

In my personal experience, when I return a paper that I have corrected, unless I require the students to rewrite it, they glance at their mistakes and file the paper away in their binder, with their errors going in one ear and out the other. When I have them rewrite the paper in an attempt to force them to learn from their mistakes, I doubt that they are paying enough attention to those mistakes for them to have any learning impact; they are just doing the assignment to get it done.

If correcting mistakes doesn't improve a student's writing, what does? According to Casanave's research, the answer is practice, practice, practice. In a study of a writing course in which students wrote over 10,000 words in one semester but received absolutely no feedback on their work, their accuracy did improve over time.⁵⁹ In addition, the students were proud because they could see their own writing improve over time,

simply because they were able to write the same number of words in much less time than before. In other words, fluency and accuracy both increased. This is an argument for free writing: allowing students to just write, about any topic, without the work being collected, corrected, or graded.

Perhaps instead of marking up students' papers, we could spend our time noting common mistakes in the set of essays and then going over those common mistakes with the students, and then having them find those mistakes in their own work, or in the work of a peer through peer editing. Through that process they would have to pay attention to what they wrote to find their errors, and then correct them on their own.

All of that said, it is useful to correct errors that actually impede comprehension. When a breakdown in communication happens, students need to be aware of it so they can determine how to get their message across.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this unit was to offer teachers some methods of teaching grammar that are aligned with CLT and therefore take into account what we know about how people learn languages. This unit is most certainly not a definitive account of CLT or an exhaustive study of how to teach grammar in the new methodology. As teachers, we are all lifelong learners, so I encourage teachers to do their own research about how to modernize their teaching methods, perhaps starting with Lee and VanPatten's book [Making Communicative Language Teaching Happen](#). My own practice has been rejuvenated by this research process and I look forward to continuing my own study of how best to teach French. For a longer version of this paper that includes other teaching strategies, please see my teacher wiki at madame.cmswikispaces.wikispaces.net.

Resources

Bibliography for Teachers and Students

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. "ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012." Actfl.org, accessed October 15 2013, http://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/public/ACTFLProficiencyGuidelines2012_FINAL.pdf.

ACTFL is the national organization for world language teachers. Their proficiency guidelines have set the mark for what learners should be able to do at various proficiency levels. ACTFL is also the creator of those proficiency guidelines, upon which all teaching and learning should be based.

College Board. "AP French Language and Culture 2013 Scoring Guidelines." AP Central, accessed November 16, 2013, http://media.collegeboard.com/digitalServices/pdf/ap/apcentral/ap13_french_lang_scoring_guidelines.pdf.

This link has the rubrics for the new AP French exam.

"Avant Assessment." STAMP Proficiency Assessment, accessed October 26, 2013, <http://www.avantassessment.com/stamp>.

The STAMP Proficiency Assessment tests students' proficiency levels in all four skills (reading, listening, speaking, writing). In an ideal world where education funding flowed freely, we would assess our students using this proficiency test instead of teacher-created, teacher-assessed assessments, which are not normed and therefore subjective.

Casanave, Christine Pearson. *Controversies in second language writing: dilemmas and decisions in research and instruction*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004.

Casanave has very useful information about how to improve students' accuracy.

Chung, Siaw-Fong. "A Communicative Approach to Teaching Grammar: Theory and Practice." *The English Teacher* Vol.XXXIV. 33-50, accessed September 5, 2013, <http://www.melta.org.my/ET/2005/A%20COMMUNICATIVE%20APPROACH%20TO%20TEACHING%20GRAMMAR.pdf>.

Cook, Vivian. *Linguistics and second language acquisition*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993. Print.

This famous book is Cook's critique of Krashen's work.

Duncan, Greg. "About Greg Duncan." Interprep: Visionary leadership in foreign language education, accessed October 26, 2013, http://www.interprepinc.com/interprepinc.com_wwwroot/About_Greg_Duncan.html.

Greg Duncan is the expert my school district hired to bring us into the 21st century by writing a new curriculum. He travels regularly to spread his knowledge and help other districts move away from textbooks and towards a truly communicative system. Without him, I would still be teaching using outdated, ineffective methods.

Frantzen, Diana. "Preterite/Imperfect Half-Truths: Problems with Spanish Textbook Rules for Usage." *Hispania* Vol. 78, No. 1 (Mar., 1995), 145-158, accessed November 19 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/345237?uid=3739776&uid=2&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21103014687383>.

This article explains why preterite vs. imperfect is so hard to teach and to learn.

Hadley, Alice Omaggio. *Teaching language in context*. 3rd ed. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 2001.

Teaching language in context is one of the most used textbooks in world language methods classes in teacher education programs, and for good reason. She takes a practical but thorough approach to teaching teachers how to teach. This is an excellent resource to read cover to cover, or to use for reference.

Hammerly, Hector. *Fluency and Accuracy: Toward balance in language teaching and learning*. Vol. 73 of *Multilingual Matters*, 1991), 5.

This work explains the "classroom pidgin" effect in Canadian French-immersion programs. This work was how we learned that straight-immersion programs, with no emphasis on teaching or correcting errors, are not a sufficient way to teach a language. Without instruction and correction (thoughtfully and sparingly used, of course), students create their own version of the immersion language with inaccuracies. Contrary to Krashen's original theories, these mistakes do not get fixed simply through input; rather, they must be directly addressed.

Hinkel, Eli, and Sandra Fotos. *New perspectives on grammar teaching in second language classrooms*. Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum, 2002.

This work offers articles by different authors with varying points of view about how best to teach grammar. It is an interesting read that gives the teacher many different ideas to ponder in the search for successful grammar teaching and learning.

International Baccalaureate. "Language B guide: External Assessment." occ.ibo.org, accessed October 26, 2013, http://ibpublishing.ibo.org/live/exist/rest/app/pub.xql?doc=d_2_ablan_gui_1102_2_e&part=3&chapter=4.

You must have IB login (and work at an IB school) to access this document, which includes the rubrics for the IB Paper 2 assessment, which is a 250-400 word paper written in 90 minutes at the end of senior year.

"An overview of the history of the ILR Language proficiency skill level descriptions and scale by Dr. Martha Herzog." *Interagency Language Roundtable*, accessed November 23, 2013, <http://www.govtilr.org/Skills/IRL%20Scale%20History.htm>.

The ACTFL proficiency levels are an adaptation of the federal government's scale for language proficiency.

Krashen, Stephen D. and Tracy D. Terrell. 1983. *The natural approach: Language acquisition in the classroom*. Hayward, CA: Alemany Press.

This book was the "game changer" that introduced Krashen as one of the most important experts in Second Language Acquisition. It advocates his "Natural approach," steering the field away from audiolingualism and other now-outdated methods.

Lado, Robert. *Linguistics across cultures; applied linguistics for language teachers*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957. Print.

This work presents Lado's Contrastive Analysis.

Larsen-Freeman, Diane. *Teaching language: from grammar to grammaring*. Boston: Thomson/Heinle, 2003.

Larsen-Freeman's writing style is very accessible to teachers. She is a teacher herself, so she is a credible source. This book explains her new approach to teaching grammar, and is extremely well-founded in current research.

Lee, James F., and Bill Van Patten. *Making communicative language teaching happen*. 2nd ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003.

Bill VanPatten's methods book was perhaps the most useful of the sources I used. He has solid ideas about how to teach grammar (and everything else) that are based on his own (and others') research. If I taught pre-service teachers, this would be the textbook I would mandate for use in my methods classes.

Monroy, Deborah. "Pesky Pronouns: Helping students of French with object pronouns."

Charlotte Teachers Institute, accessed October 15, 2013, <http://charlotteteachers.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/10.03.07.pdf>.

Monroy is a long-time French teacher in my school district, and a veteran of Charlotte Teachers' Institute. This is her curriculum unit about how to teach pronouns in French.

Nelson, Marie Wilson. *At the point of need: teaching basic and ESL writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1991.

This pioneering book was the first to instruct teachers to wait until "the point of need" to teach things. In this method, students learn at their own pace, and in the order that is natural to them. The teacher gives them what they need when they need it. Greg Duncan's work is based off of this principle.

Pekoz, Bayram. "Integrating Grammar for Communicative Language Teaching." *The Internet TESL Journal*, accessed September 21, 2013, <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Pekoz-Grammar.html>.

Pekoz explains new ways to teach grammar within the CLT framework.

Public Schools of North Carolina. "North Carolina World Language Essential Standards." *North Carolina Essential Standards*, accessed October 15 2013, <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/acre/standards/new-standards/foreign-language/world-language.pdf>.

North Carolina's Essential Standards are the standards upon which all instruction in NC must be based. Rather than being broken down by course level, as in the past, they are now divided by proficiency level. This document has useful information about how to organize one's understanding of what learners are capable of during the number of contact hours they have in a given year.

Richards, Jack C., and Ann Burns. *The Cambridge guide to pedagogy and practice in second language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

This Cambridge book has short, concise definitions of the current problems in SLA and how to address them.

Selinker, Larry, "Interlanguage," *International Review of Applied Linguistics* 10 (1972): 209-31.

Selinker did not invent it, but his work gave life to the term 'interlanguage.'

Terrell, Tracy David. "The Role of Grammar Instruction in a Communicative Approach."

The Modern Language Journal 75, No. 1 (Spring, 1991). 52-63, accessed September 5, 2013, <http://www.fhs.d211.org/departments/foreign/Methods%20DOCS/grammar.PDF/>.

Terrell, one of the preeminent SLA researchers, explains in this article that grammar does need to be taught, and offers suggestions for how to do so.

Valette, Jean Paul, and Rebecca M. Valette. *Discovering French nouveau! Bleu*. Evanston, Ill.: McDougal Littell, 2004.

This is the textbook used before switching to a non-textbook based curriculum in my district. It is one of the most popular French textbooks currently in use nationwide. It's primary benefit in this new curriculum is as a source of comprehensible input activities, both for listening and reading.

Wiggins, Grant P., and Jay McTighe. *Understanding by design*. Expanded 2nd ed. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005.

This is the most famous book about "backward design," in which teachers first determine how the students will be tested, and then design curriculum around that.

Implementing North Carolina Essential Standards

Note: Not a single North Carolina Essential Standard mentions the words ‘grammar’ or ‘accuracy’ in relation to grammar. Below are the only standards for the Novice High level that involve ‘structures.’

NH.CLL.1.2: Generate conversations using familiar vocabulary and structures in short social interactions.

The activities in this unit give students the opportunity to practice grammatical structures in social activities.

NH.CLL.3.3 Produce simple dialogues and short skits using familiar structures and vocabulary.

The activities in this unit give students the opportunity to practice grammatical structures in dialogues.

Notes

¹ Greg Duncan. "About Greg Duncan." Interprep: Visionary leadership in foreign language education, accessed October 26, 2013, http://www.interprepinc.com/interprepinc.com_wwwroot/About_Greg_Duncan.html.

² Siaw-Fong Chung. "A Communicative Approach to Teaching Grammar: Theory and Practice." *The English Teacher* Vol.XXXIV. 33-50, accessed September 5, 2013, <http://www.melta.org.my/ET/2005/A%20COMMUNICATIVE%20APPROACH%20TO%20TEACHING%20GRAMMAR.pdf>.

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⁵ American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. "ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012." Actfl.org, accessed October 15 2013, http://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/public/ACTFLProficiencyGuidelines2012_FINAL.pdf.

⁶ "An overview of the history of the ILR Language proficiency skill level descriptions and scale by Dr. Martha Herzog." *Interagency Language Roundtable*, accessed November 23, 2013, <http://www.govtilr.org/Skills/IRL%20Scale%20History.htm>.

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¹¹ College Board. "AP French Language and Culture 2013 Scoring Guidelines." AP Central, accessed November 16, 2013, http://media.collegeboard.com/digitalServices/pdf/ap/apcentral/ap13_french_lang_scoring_guidelines.pdf.

¹² International Baccalaureate. "Language B guide: External Assessment." http://ibpublishing.ibo.org/live/exist/rest/app/pub.xql?doc=d_2_ablan_gui_1102_2_e&part=3&chapter=4.

¹³ James F. Lee, and Bill Van Patten. *Making communicative language teaching happen*. 2nd ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003, 123.

¹⁴ James F. Lee and Bill Van Patten, *Making communicative language teaching happen*, 132.

¹⁵ James F. Lee and Bill Van Patten, *Making communicative language teaching happen*, 119.

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- ¹⁶ Bayram Pekoz. "Integrating Grammar for Communicative Language Teaching." *The Internet TESL Journal*, accessed September 21, 2013, <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Pekoz-Grammar.html>.
- ¹⁷ Bayram Pekoz. "Integrating Grammar for Communicative Language Teaching."
- ¹⁸ Jack C. Burns and Ann Burns. *The Cambridge guide to pedagogy and practice in second language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012: 202.
- ¹⁹ Larry Selinker. "Interlanguage," *International Review of Applied Linguistics* 10 (1972): 209-31.
- ²⁰ James F. Lee and Bill Van Patten, *Making communicative language teaching happen*, 132.
- ²¹ James F. Lee and Bill Van Patten, *Making communicative language teaching happen*, 127.
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- ²⁴ Tracy David Terrell. "The Role of Grammar Instruction in a Communicative Approach." *The Modern Language Journal* 75, No. 1 (Spring, 1991), 54, accessed September 5, 2013, <http://www.fhs.d211.org/departments/foreign/Methods%20DOCS/grammar.PDF/>.
- ²⁵ Diana Frantzen. "Preterite/Imperfect Half-Truths: Problems with Spanish Textbook Rules for Usage." *Hispania* Vol. 78, No. 1 (Mar., 1995), accessed November 19 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/345237?uid=3739776&uid=2&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21103014687383>.
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- ²⁸ James F. Lee and Bill Van Patten, *Making communicative language teaching happen*, 144.
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- ³⁰ Stephen D. Krashen and Tracy D. Terrell. 1983. *The natural approach: Language acquisition in the classroom*. Hayward, CA: Alemany Press.
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