

Interview with Dr. Bill VanPatten at The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Boston, November, 2016

By Karen Rowan, IJFLT editor

Incoming AATSP President Bill VanPatten is Professor of Spanish & Second Language Studies at Michigan State University, as well as an Affiliate Faculty Member in the Cognitive Science Program, and the Tea with BVP podcast Co-host



I had the opportunity to sit down with Dr. Bill VanPatten, co-host of Tea with BVP (www.teawithbvp.com a podcast on second language acquisition) and ask him to share his thoughts.

What are the three most important things from Second Language Acquisition theory that you would like to see make their way into classroom practice?

1. Lots of comprehensible input in the classroom

Stop thinking about textbooks and syllabi and think about getting language use going on in class, and by “language use” I mean teachers using as much language, particularly at the early levels, with their students, as possible. So that would be

creating units around themes and interesting questions that are age, level, and context appropriate. What I might do with a 19-year-old might be different than what I would do with a 12-year-old, but the fundamental idea is the same: that teachers have to use the language in class to communicate ideas, to use what we call “comprehensible input,” so that learners can understand what the teacher is saying.

2. Not talking at students, talking with students

Second, we’re not talking at students, we’re talking with students, so when we talk about teachers providing lots of language and input in the class, we’re not saying you stand up there and talk, we’re saying, you say one or two things and then you get the students involved.

So you might say, “Look at this guy here. His name is Ralph. What do you think? Is he a student or a teacher?” (It will depend on your level, if you recognize those words. They are cognates in Spanish. I teach Spanish and French.)

“What is his name? He’s a student at MSU, right? Is Ralph a typical student? What’s this under his arm? It’s a newspaper. A typical student reads a newspaper? Do you read the newspaper? No. Do you read the newspaper? No. How do you get your news? The internet?”

So the idea is that you are never talking at students. Students are always involved with you. Even though they give you yes/no, shouting out one word, or whatever they are so actively engaged with you that they are paying attention to everything that you do. And so that’s an important part of the flip side, what we call an appropriate level of interaction. Students have to be engaged and interacting with the teacher.

3. Let purpose and tasks drive what we do and inform how we design units and lessons

The third thing I’d want teachers to walk away with is that when we talk about using language in class, we want to be as purposeful as possible. In the sense that when people talk in real life they talk for a reason, even if they gossip they gossip for a reason. So for example, we’re right now talking, Karen. We’re talking for a reason, and you have a task at hand, which is to get me to answer some questions and my task is to provide some information so that you can convert it into something for [IJFLT]. We have a purpose.

Then we go out tonight and we have drinks and we start to say, “What did you think about the conference?” and we start evaluating the conference. We have a

purpose because we're trying to find out what we think about the conference. So language use and communication in real life is always purposeful. So how can we get purpose in the classroom? We can't always. But the more we try to do that the more our students see our classes as places where communication happens as opposed to language practice, so I always advocate trying to think of some kind of tasks that we can build our curriculum around and inform what we do. And tasks can be broadly defined. By "tasks," I don't mean pair work. Interview your partner and find out what he did last night. That's not a task. That's just a language practice activity.

We need things where people are getting information from each other because they are going to use that information for something.

So even with, like, TPRS [TPR Storytelling®], you're building a story. That's a task. The story has a beginning, middle, and end. So we're going to create a story. That's a task. Or we're going to fill out this form. Or we're going to get information from each other and then compare ourselves to this age-normed thing between these ages, 10-15, 15-20. So we're always getting information to do something. How can we make language use in the class purposeful?

What should administrators, supervisors, or observers be looking for in a language classroom?

[Regarding] acquisition-based teaching evaluation at the college level or K-12, these [are the five criteria on which] I base observation of my teachers at Michigan State:

1. The teacher understands the role of input in the classroom
2. The quality of the input is appropriate for this level
3. The teacher understands the limited role of output at this level
4. The teacher understands the nature of tasks
5. The teacher appropriately limits the use of the textbook in the classroom

(For more on this topic, listen to Tea with BVP - Episode 39: Live from MIWLA: Educating our Administrators)

This interview was followed immediately by Tea with BVP - Live From ACTFL 2016! (<http://www.teawithbvp.com/#tea-with-bvp-section>)