



PACE: Teaching Grammar Through Storytelling

by [Randa Taftaf](#)

In a standards-based foreign language classroom, students are actively involved in their own learning and are given a multitude of opportunities to exchange information, negotiate meanings and concepts, offer opinions, and much more. Therefore, communication is the beating heart of a standards-based foreign language class. So, why would grammar as a skill be taught any differently? The days of deductive and inductive grammar teaching approaches that assume students can memorize or “pick up” grammatical concepts are over! Let’s explore an example of a more communicative, dialogical approach that is sociocultural in nature and Vygotskian in essence, dubbed the PACE Model (Donato & Adair-Hauck, 1992).

The PACE model was created by Donato and Adair-Hauck (1992) as a model for contextualizing lessons with learners about language in the form of a cultural story or any other interesting text (Shrum & Glisan, 2000). PACE is an acronym in which each letter stands for a stage in the process: Presentation, Attention, Co-Construction, Extension.

Presentation

The first step in PACE is Presentation. During this stage, prepare students for the grammatical feature to come through an interesting cultural context. Because storytelling is a great element to include in second language instruction because of its natural occurrence in our daily lives, this context could be a story, a folktale, a dialogue, or a narrative. The only restrictions are that the grammatical feature should be well represented and used meaningfully in the chosen text and “that the story and target structure are appropriate to the learners’ actual and potential levels of development, as instruction in the [zone of proximal development] suggests” (Shrum & Glisan, 2000, p. 224). Then, present the text orally in the form of a story or narrative to arouse interest. The presentation should also be interactive, getting the students involved in the story through oral discussions and exercises designed specifically for this purpose. After the students fully understand the story, it’s time to move on to the next step.

Attention

After grasping the full meaning of the story, students can now concentrate on other elements of the story, such as the language used. Draw attention to a certain aspect of the language or highlight a specific grammatical feature. Ask students to find patterns, repetitions, and/or examples of the featured structure by asking questions that direct attention to the grammatical structure or through the use of other various mediation tools. An important issue to remember is that research has shown that learners do not always process input in ways that we expect (Herron & Tomasello, 1992). Therefore, it is important for you to be attentive of the students’ development to ensure that both the story and the grammatical focus are well in the students’ zone of proximal development (ZPD; Vygotsky, 1978; see the [definition and description](#)).

Co-Construction

After the students have recognized a specific pattern in a grammatical feature, it is time for a grammatical explanation. In PACE, the grammar is co-constructed in the third stage. Do not explain the grammar, but rather discuss it with the students. Through a series of guided questions or in more of a conversation about form and meaning, students hypothesize and guess the use of this certain grammatical structure. This requires the students to use higher order thinking skills, such as evaluation and analysis. This conversation is not a discussion in which you ask all of the questions. It is a dialogue in which, at some points, you may offer an observation to model to students the process of reflecting on language. You should be aware that the assistance you provide is adapted and may range from brief clues about the target form to explicit instruction, if needed (AlJaafreh, 1992; AlJaafreh & Lantolf, 1994). By reasoning with the learner and closely monitoring the learner's contribution, you can assess the student's ZPD and how much help he or she will need to gain full understanding of the concept.

Extension

It's finally time to ground the information through Extension, the final stage of PACE. In this stage, students are given the opportunity to use their new grammar concept communicatively and creatively. The extension activity should be interesting and related to the theme of the lesson, and it should allow for creative self-expression. In this way, students get the chance to actually use the new concept meaningfully and connect it to their existing knowledge. The Extension activities can also address cultural perspectives embodied in the story (Adair-Hauck & Donato, 2002, West & Donato, 1995).

PACE: An Example Lesson

For the sole purpose of this article and for making the PACE model easier to understand, I have chosen a well-known story.

Theme: The Three Little Pigs (American Literature)

Grammar Objective: The comparative and superlative forms of adjectives

Class Description: Beginner ESL class

Before the start of the lesson, introduce the new vocabulary and tap into students' background knowledge to pave the way for PACE. New vocabulary could be taught using vocabulary cards.

Presentation: Provide two to three interactive activities in which the students learn the story. This phase usually incorporates a form of technology. For example:

1. The story of the "Three Little Pigs" is illustrated and displayed in six to eight slides as a Prezi or PowerPoint presentation. For the first presentation, tell the story with the aid of the slides. Involve the students by distributing vocabulary cards: when a student hears the vocabulary word, he/she raises the corresponding vocabulary card. For example, as the instructor mentions the wolf in the story, the students can raise their "wolf" cards.

2. For the second presentation, print the slides of “The Three Little Pigs,” mix them, and distribute them. Ask the students to work together to put the slides in the order of the original story.
3. For the third presentation, the students work together to retell the story of one slide in the target language in complete sentences using each other and the vocabulary cards as scaffolds. For example, the students should be able to produce the sentence, “The wolf blew their house down” to describe the slide with the assistance of the vocabulary cards and their peers.

Attention: Display the text visually and highlight certain parts to draw student attention. For example, you could add a slide to the Prezi that displays a few sentences from the story. In these sentences, highlight comparative and superlative forms to draw the students’ attention to them. For example, “the house made of wood is **stronger than** the house made of straw. The house made of straw is **the weakest**.”

Co-Construction: Discuss the grammar form, meaning, and function. In this example, the discussion might be about the comparative and superlative. Ask the students questions about how the comparative and superlative were used in the story (e.g., “The brick house was **the strongest**”). Why were these forms used and what is the purpose of this function? After thoroughly discussing the use of the superlative and comparative in “The Three Little Pigs,” the students can then discuss the use of the comparative and superlative in real life. They continue this conversation about grammar and work through any discrepancies, questions, or comments until they have an understanding of the grammar.

Extension: Allow the students to put what they learned to practice. This part usually allows room for student creativity. For example, the students could retell the story from the perspective of the wolf, or they could retell the story and change the ending. The purpose of the extension is to recycle the new vocabulary and the use of comparative and superlative in their new stories.

Conclusion

Using the PACE strategy for teaching grammar allows teachers to explore their students’ ZPDs and provide direct and accurate scaffolding to meet their specific needs. Through these grammar conversations, dialogues, and interactions, students are more involved in the learning process and more responsible for their own language learning. Rather than presenting the grammar to the students (didactic approach) or requiring them to figure out the concept on their own (inductive approach), PACE allows students to engage in an analysis of the language which requires higher order thinking skills and to understand the logic behind the construction of the language (Shrum & Glisan, 2000). In this way, students are no longer memorizing rules that they do not understand, but rather constructing and deconstructing the building blocks of the language itself to be able to construct their own output of the language correctly.

References

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