

Johan Vandewalle's Approach to Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract. Studying language can be considered one of the most complicated and ever-changing domains that is influenced by the interplay between theory, research, and practice. Dr. Johan Vandewalle is a rare breed in this dynamic field whose career and personal life as a linguist, teacher, and polyglot has contributed immensely to the contemporary attitudes on multilingual learning and teaching. His methodology places greater attention on immersion, cultural integration and communicative competence as key to successful language acquisition. Contrary to the grammar-based or memorization-based approach to teaching, Vandewalle promotes the one based on natural interaction, real world, and cross-linguistic awareness. The paper examines the theoretical background of Vandewalle, his adherence to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) studies and his practical approaches to instruction, such as task-based and learner-centered instructions. It also investigates how his multilingual background shapes his pedagogical model and makes a difference compared to approaches of Stephen Krashen and Robin Callan. Vandewalle offers a comprehensive approach by connecting linguistic theory and classroom practice to present a comprehensive framework of cultural sensitivity, linguistic competence, and learner autonomy. At the end of his study, it is concluded that his model is a visionary paradigm of language education- the model enabling the learners to be ready to communicate efficiently and meaningfully in a multilingual and multicultural world.

Keywords: *Johan Vandewalle; language learning; multilingualism; communicative language teaching; second language pedagogy; immersion; task learning; learner control; cultural integration.*

Introduction

One of the most popular issues within applied linguistics is language acquisition, which involves the investigation of the way, in which individuals' study other languages other than their native one. This discipline has undergone a paradigmatic change in the last decades where behaviorist and grammar-translation method has been replaced by communicative and learner centered models. It is in this changing scene that Dr. Johan Vandewalle has now become an outstanding personality whose intellectual and pedagogical studies have brought about the gap between linguistic theory and actual language teaching. Vandewalle is also a well-known Belgian linguist, educator, and polyglot who has acquired more than twenty languages and contributed greatly to the research and education of the

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Turkic languages. Multidimensional qualifications enable him to bring together theoretical linguistics and real-life experience, thus presenting a special platform on the most appropriate ways of learning and teaching languages. He promotes the idea that language is not a system of rules that are to be memorized but a living means of interaction and culture. In contrast to the traditional, teacher-centered approaches including accuracy, translation, and grammar drills, the method by Vandewalle puts more emphasis on meaningful communication, integrating cultures, and going through immersive experiences of learning. According to him, the learners learn better when they are exposed to real-life situations- communicating with native speakers, being involved in real-life contexts, and interpreting language within a larger cultural context. His philosophy is consistent with the current tendencies in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory, which accentuate the significance of meaningful input, interaction, and engagement of a learner. This paper will attempt to examine the foreign language learning approach taken by Johan Vandewalle in its theoretical and practical approaches. It will look at the principles of the approach that he has been based on such as immersion, multilingual awareness and contrastive linguistic analysis and how his pedagogy incorporates communicative and task-based learning. In addition, the paper positions the model proposed by Vandewalle on the broader discussion on pedagogy of language in comparison to the approaches of Stephen Krashen and Robin Callan. Finally, this study aims to showcase the contribution of Vandewalle to the modern language education field and to show how his integrative model is based on linguistic theory, cross-cultural knowledge, and learner autonomy could offer useful insights to the educator, the curriculum developer, and the researcher who wants to facilitate successful multilingual communication in a more and more interconnected world.

Theoretical Foundations. The theoretical approach of foreign language learning of Dr. Johan Vandewalle is deeply found on the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory as well as sociocultural linguistics. His approach combines these frameworks into one unified model which focuses on communication, interaction, and cultural immersion as the main keys to successful language acquisition. The central idea of Vandewalle is that the process of language learning is not only a cognitive or mechanical one but is a social and communicative one. This philosophy echoes the effort of Vygotsky (1978) who contended that learning is possible through social interaction and mediating through culture. This concept is further developed by Vandewalle, who proposes the idea that languages should be learnt in the context of real-life communicative interactions, and not in the context of abstract grammatical exercises. To him, meaning comes first before form, learners take in the linguistic structures in the best way possible when the structures have communicative uses. The assumption makes his approach like the Communicative Language Teaching movement that appeared at the end of the 20th century as a reaction to the shortcomings of grammar-translation and audiolingual strategies (Richards and Rodgers, 2014). In CLT, an emphasis is laid on fluency and meaning making as compared to accuracy and repetition. Vandewalle builds upon this base to emphasize the inseparable nature of contextualized input, the exposure to the real life linguistic and cultural contexts in which language is used naturally and purposefully. In the frame of the theory of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), the thoughts of Vandewalle are comparable to the theory of the Input Hypothesis by Stephen Krashen (1982) who argues that language acquisition takes place when a learner is exposed to prematurely understandable

input that is just above his/her level of competence (i+1). Vandewalle however improves and expands Krashen model by stating that comprehensible input is not enough without active output and interaction. He notes that the learners need to not only know the language but also to be able to generate it by negotiating meaning which reinforces cognitive as well as communicative growth. This bilateral focus makes his model in line with Output Hypothesis presented by Swain (1985) according to which language production is a crucial factor in the formation of linguistic accuracy and fluency. In addition, Vandewalle also considers the perspectives of sociolinguistics and intercultural communication research by acknowledging the fact that effective communication is not only about linguistic competence, but also cultural and pragmatic awareness. He incorporates idiomatic phrases, courtesy rules, and cultural nuances into his instructional resources by doing so he equips learners to be culturally competent communicators, rather than grammatically correct speakers. The theoretical underpinnings by Vandewalle also exhibit a connection with the constructivist learning theory whereby knowledge is actively created based on experience and not passively taken. His task based and immersive learning environments reflect this philosophy: students learn language by solving problems, working in groups, and exploring and not by memorizing. The other peculiar characteristic of the theoretical orientation of Vandewalle is that he bases his argument on contrastive linguistic analysis especially in the Turkic language family. He explains how the similarities and differences in structures can help people understand and learn languages faster by comparing grammatical and semantic patterns of related languages- Turkish, Uzbek and Azerbaijani (Vandewalle, 2000). This multilingual consciousness is the supplementary theoretical ground of his pedagogy in connecting linguistic analysis to cognitive thinking and metalinguistic consideration. Overall, the theoretical model created by Vandewalle entails the synthesis of several sets of linguistic and pedagogical thoughts into an integrative model. It combines input-based learning (Krashen, 1982), output-based interaction (Swain, 1985) and sociocultural engagement (Vygotsky, 1978) to create a dynamic model of language acquisition which places importance on grammatical competence as well as intercultural competence and autonomy of the learner. His theory is therefore a comprehensive view of the process of language acquisition; that of meaningful communication, in cultural immersion and the internalization of multilingual experience.

Practical Methodology: Immersive and Communicative Learning. The practical methodology by Dr. Johan Vandewalle is the smooth implementation of his theoretical principles to the real world language teaching. The very idea is immersion, the whole and naturalness of the exposure of the target language to the learners through natural and real communication along with the culture. In contrast to the conventional grammar-based teaching, the model by Vandewalle attempts to recreate the learning environment under which people learn their first language: meaningful interaction, contextual perception, and participation. *The Immersive Learning Environment.* Vandewalle also believes in an environment in which the target language is always provided to the learners, in and out of the classroom. In this way, the students are motivated to process and generate language directly without translation and relying on their native language. (Mammadova, K.) Vandewalle (1995) also says that a person should not just learn a language but live the language, which is a belief that indicates his belief in experiential learning. In these types of immersive classrooms, the classroom becomes a tiny world of reality. Real life materials like films, songs, interviews and media clips are often used to give the

learners an exposure to the natural patterns of speech, to idiomatic expressions and cultural specificities. The interactive sessions, peer discussions, and group activities are used to complement such activities by simulating real world communicative situations. Immersion aims at helping learners to think and react in the target language. Through this, students will achieve intuitiveness of understanding and automatic response skills, which cannot be achieved through standard translation-based methods. Another aspect that Vandewalle highlights is the emotional and psychological side of immersion: the feeling of confidence, drive, and pleasure that one feels as a part of genuine interactions with the target culture. *Meaningful Interaction and Communicative Learning*. The approach developed by Vandewalle is strongly based on the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which implies that the process of learning a language is the most effective when it is meaning-oriented, but not form-oriented (Richards and Rodgers, 2014). Communication is the process and the end of teaching in his classrooms. Grammar and vocabulary are presented as the means of expressing meaning and not isolated items that need to be memorized. The common examples of Vandewalle-inspired lesson include task-based learning activities, including role plays, interviews, debates, and information-gap exercises. Such activities are aimed at facilitating the process of meaning negotiation, problem-solving and spontaneous interaction - all key aspects of communicative competence. It emphasizes fluency, accuracy and the use of correct expression as opposed to memorizing the correctness. Moreover, Vandewalle urges teachers to become facilitators as opposed to being the traditional instructors. His model puts language patterns, which are to be discovered by students, instructed and facilitated by the teacher rather than told. Such a change boosts autonomy among the learners and changes students into active agents of their learning.

Integration of Cultural Context. The most striking feature of the approach used by Dr. Johan Vandewalle is his deep focus on the incorporation of culture in the process of learning a language. To Vandewalle, culture and language are inseparable; in order to learn a language well, one must involve his/her worldview, values and model of behavior of the people speaking a particular language. He continues on the fact that linguistic competence without cultural knowledge leads to mechanical communication which lacks authenticity and meaning. This view has been supported by the principles of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) that has been advanced by Byram (1997) who insists that the real communicative skill entails not only the linguistic precision but the skill of understanding, relating and responding to various cultures. Vandewalle develops this idea, integrating cultural understanding at all levels of learning, such as vocabulary choice and reading materials, classroom interaction and evaluation.

Language as a Cultural Code. To Vandewalle, language is a cultural code, which is a mirror of the collective consciousness, social norms and historical identity of a community. Thus, when one teaches a language, it is not possible to rely only on the instruction of grammar and vocabulary; he/she should also use cultural symbols, traditions, and patterns of discourse. His series of textbooks, Haydi Turkece Konusali, (Gezels and Vandewalle, 2004) contains dialogues that mirror the everyday Turkish life, including family meetings, transactions in the market, the habits of hospitality, and show of politeness, which allow the learner to internalize the cultural construct under the linguistic forms. At this level of integration, the learners also gain pragmatic competence, knowing not only what to say, but how,

when, and why to say it in a culturally appropriate way. This skill is particularly essential in such languages as Turkish where structure, civility and the hierarchy of relationships cannot be ignored in the daily interactions.

Task-Based and Reflective Practice. The use of task-based learning (TBL) and reflective practice is one of the central elements of the Dr. Johan Vandewalle approach to pedagogy as he uses these two methods as the fundamentals of creating communicative and autonomous students. His methodology is based on the principles of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), a teaching methodology that does not consider language as a memorizing system, but as a means of accomplishing valuable purposes by means of real-life activities (Ellis, 2003; Willis and Willis, 2007). According to the interpretation given by Vandewalle, task-based learning can serve as a mediator in two aspects between theory and practice: between linguistic form, communicative purpose, and cultural context, in a single integrative model of pedagogy. *The Role of Tasks in Learning* The work of Vandewalle is more focused on tasks, which are not extraneous exercises, but the primary medium of learning. Every activity is aimed at simulating real-life communication situations, which demand learners to speak the target language in the context of meaningful and purposeful language use. They can be the preparation of a trip, a job interview, a discussion of a social problem, an explanation of a cultural practice, or a practical problem that is to be solved in the target language. Tasks play several pedagogical roles. They: Encourage genuine communication, meaning should be given priority as compared to accuracy. Promote meaning negotiation to enable the learners to re-word and clarify their ideas. Combine linguistic, pragmatic and cultural proficiencies into one communication event. Give a natural environment to the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar structures since structures are acquired by real applications and not by drills. According to Vandewalle (2017), such intentional and aim-focused activity does not only develop linguistic fluency but also helps the learners to be better thinkers and creators and learners develop their problem-solving skills, which are critical in the real world. *The Role of the Teacher: The Instructor to the Facilitator.* In the conventional teacher-centered classrooms, the instructor is the main source of knowledge and rectification. Vandewalle, in contrast, puts the teacher as an facilitator and co-communicator, as an instructor that will be taken through the process of discovery and self-expression. Teachers can scaffold to the extent of defining communicative goals, linguistic assistance, and exemplification of patterns of interaction. This facilitative practice is inspired by a sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) specifically, the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which posits that learners can perform better when they are facilitated by means of collaborative interaction. Vandewalle modifies this principle by promoting pair and group collaboration, in which learners develop knowledge together by means of dialogue and peer negotiation. This kind of collaboration makes the classroom interactive and the learner-centered and develops it into a learning process where students have ownership. *Reflective Practice and Metacognitive Development.* The other highly important element in the framework provided by Vandewalle is the development of reflective practice, which will enable the learners to judge on their progress and learning methods. Reflections are done during performance of the tasks and after the performance, which makes the students think over what they have learned, what they have done with the language and what they can do better. Reflective activities can be in the form of self-assessment checklists, learning journals, post-task discussion or peer feedback session. All these, learners are able to establish

a metacognitive awareness or the ability to plan, monitor, and analyze language use in a conscious manner. Vandewalle views reflection as the means to turn students into active consumers of information into autonomous and self-regulatory learners who are able to develop language throughout their lives. This reflective aspect is in line with the concept of Dewey (1933) and Schoen (1983) who stressed that reflection was the pillar of professional and intellectual development. Vandewalle uses the principles in language teaching, where it is important that learners do not only perform the language, but learn to comprehend how they do it.

In Task-Based Learning, Assessment and Feedback. Vandewalle framework of assessment integrates assessment with tasks, as opposed to confining it to summative tests. The learners are tested on the proficiency of their use of language in communicative context, in an effective and appropriate manner. Fluency, interactional competence, pragmatic appropriateness, and task completion are some of the criteria that are in use instead of grammatical accuracy. Feedback is formative and dialogic. Vandewalle insists on collaborative feedback in which teachers and learners discuss results. The peer feedback is also an essential element because it promotes social learning, empathy, and self-reflection. Learning is a process of continuous improvement as opposed to measurement of knowledge, through this performance, reflection, and feedback cycle.

Combination of Task with Cultural and Multilingual Environment. One of the most innovative and original approaches of Vandewalle is the inclusion of culture and multilingualism in the communicative processes using the approach towards the tasks. As an example, students can be requested to make a comparative analysis of greetings in various cultures, analyze an idiom in a social context, or speak about cultural taboos in the target language. These activities will not only cultivate linguistic abilities but also nurture intercultural communicative competence to equip the learner to face cross-cultural interactions in real life in an efficient way. Vandewalle promotes in multilingual classrooms that learners should make comparisons between the target language and their mother tongue, which makes them understand better using contrastive reflections. His conviction in the effectiveness of multilingual awareness to increase cognitive flexibility and speed of acquisition is found in this comparative task design.

Conclusion

The method of learning foreign languages suggested by Dr. Johan Vandewalle can be seen as an important contribution to the sphere of applied linguistics and teaching languages. His model is a perfect blend of theoretical knowledge, pedagogical novelty as well as intercultural consciousness and has provided a complete package which is more realistic of the realities of communication in the 21st century. In contrast to the classical models of language teaching where the one concentrates on memorization or strict grammar rules, the methodology developed by Vandewalle insists on communication, culture, and cognition as the three concepts that lead to the success of language learning. Conceptually, the model by Vandewalle is a combination of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory and sociocultural learning models. He is in agreement with the idea of comprehensible input that Krashen proposes but adds to it the need to engage in active learning, produce meaningful output and reflect on it. Vandewalle, basing his ideas

on the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky, places the language learning in a real-life context of a socially appropriate interaction and accentuates the importance of the knowledge being built in cooperation with experience and conversation. At the working level, his approach makes the classroom a learner-centered and interactive one. The immersion, tasks, and real communication allow the students to feel that the language is not a collection of rules, but a living, dynamic system. The applications of materials of the culture with embedded material and real-life situations would make learners internalize not only the linguistic forms, but also the social and cultural conventions that make the forms have some meaning. This is because of his devotion to intercultural communicative competence, which makes learners understand the importance of being empathetic and culturally conscious communicators who are able to operate successfully in multilingual and multicultural environments. Besides, the incorporation of reflective practice by Vandewalle enables learners to oversee their learning process. His approach promotes autonomy and metacognitive awareness, which are much more useful abilities than are just observable in the classroom, by encouraging self-assessment and critical reflection. Such a change of teacher-centered teaching to learner-centered discovery is the change in the method of pedagogy, which meets the tendencies in modern global education. The contributions of Vandewalle also have far-reaching implications on curriculum design and teacher education. His ideals support programs that provide the balance between linguistic correctness and communicative and cultural competence. Following his model, language teachers are now being incited to be facilitators, cultural mediators, and co-learners, and not information transmitters. Through this, they can create classrooms in which the learning of language is not merely learned but lived, a classroom in which learners are able to actively construct meaning, work through cross-cultural boundaries, and gain a greater understanding of linguistic diversity. Finally, in his holistic model, Vandewalle goes beyond the frames of the traditional pedagogy integrating theory, practice, and culture into one, coherent vision. It is a reminder that the process of learning language is not only intellectual but also a human experience, as it is something that brings people together, makes cultures meet and identities. With the process of globalization steadily growing in multilingual communication and cultural interchange, the approach taken by Vandewalle is not only topical but also necessary. His vision enables the educators and researchers to have a lasting roadmap of language teaching that looks towards the future, one that takes authenticity, empathy and adaptability as the real indicators of linguistic competence. To conclude, the legacy left behind by Johan Vandewalle is the way he revisited the definition of language education as a process that brings together mind, culture, and community. His model helps learners prepare to succeed in the world where linguistic and cultural knowledge of others is no longer an asset, but a necessity.

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