

## FROM STRUCTURED INPUT TO PURPOSEFUL OUTPUT: AN EXAMPLE WITH THE FRENCH *IMPARFAIT-PASSÉ COMPOSÉ* DISTINCTION

Cette *Finestra* présente une technique pédagogique que l'on appelle l'input structuré (*Structured Input*), conçue pour aider les apprenants de langue seconde à faire des connexions « forme-sens » à partir des données grammaticales auxquelles ils sont exposés. Après avoir défini les principes à partir desquels fut développé l'input structuré, cet article montrera par l'exemple comment créer des activités à input structuré et les intégrer dans un cours de langue adoptant une approche communicative. Ces exemples constitueront une séquence de grammaire toute prête sur la distinction imparfait/passé composé, dont l'objectif est de permettre à l'apprenant de parler de ses expériences professionnelles en vue de la préparation d'un entretien d'embauche en français.

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### Introduction

Language instructors and researchers generally agree on the fundamental role of input (i.e., the meaningful, communicative language learners are exposed to) in second language (L2) acquisition (e.g., Ellis & Wulff, 2015; Gass & Mackay, 2006; Krashen, 2009; Lantolf et al., 2015; Long, 2007; Swain, 1985; VanPatten, 2015). Many also acknowledge, however, that some of the linguistic forms available in L2 input—especially grammatical forms—can be more difficult to acquire than others. Structured Input (SI) is a research-based pedagogical technique which was specifically developed to aid L2 learners in making form-meaning connections from grammatical input, so that these forms can eventually be acquired. Despite a significant body of empirical evidence supporting its effectiveness (see Leeser, 2021 for a recent review), SI is still underutilized in language teaching materials<sup>1</sup>. This *Finestra* seeks to encourage

language instructors to incorporate SI activities into their classes, demonstrating how to design SI activities and integrate them into a communicative language curriculum.

Drawing upon VanPatten's Input Processing Theory (IPT; e.g., VanPatten 1994, 2004, 2015), this article first outlines the major cognitive strategies that learners use when attempting to understand a message in a L2. Next, it explains how to manipulate L2 input accordingly, in order to optimize L2 acquisition. Lastly, this *Finestra* provides a concrete example of how SI activities can be developed and integrated into a communicative language class meant to enable learners of French working towards a B1 level to use the *imparfait* and *passé composé* tenses accurately as they talk about past professional experiences to prepare for a job interview.

<sup>1</sup> For instance, the only French textbooks that systematically use SI are *Liaisons* (Wong et al., 2019) and *Encore* (Wong et al., in press).

## What do learners actually do with input ? An Input Processing perspective

IPT seeks to explain why L2 learners are able to make some form-meaning connections but not others, and to describe the cognitive strategies they use during sentence comprehension. Based on ample empirical research on these issues with speakers of different first languages and ages, and learners of a variety of L2s, IPT articulates a set of principles that outline the strategies learners employ when processing L2 input. As we will see, while these strategies can be useful for learners to infer the general meaning of a message, they also tend to drive their attention away from grammatical forms and prevent them from correctly interpreting sentence structure.

IPT posits, first, that learners search above all for meaning in the input, before they process the form of the input. This unconscious strategy, referred to as the Primacy for Meaning Principle, is very useful for learners to gain a general understanding of a message. However, it also means that learners are more likely to attend to content words and lexical words such as nouns, adjectives and ad-

verbs, rather than gender marking on adjectives, verb-tenses, or articles. IPT also states that learners tend to process the first noun encountered in a sentence as the agent, a strategy referred to as the First Noun Principle. This can be problematic, for example, for the comprehension of passive and causative structures in French. Lastly, IPT's Sentence Location Principle indicates that learners process words at the beginning of a sentence first, followed by those in the final position, and only then those in the middle. From these main principles derive various sub-principles, listed in Table 1. Understanding these principles is critical to design effective instructional materials and activities that align with learners' cognitive strategies and support their acquisition of grammatical structures.

# Understanding these principles is critical to design effective instructional materials and activities that align with learners' cognitive strategies and support their acquisition of grammatical structures.

**Table 1**

*Principles of IPT (based on VanPatten, 2015).*

<b>1.</b>	<b><i>The Primacy of Meaning Principle:</i></b> Learners process input for meaning before they process it for form.
1.1	<i>The Primacy of the Content Words Principle:</i> Learners process content words in the input before anything else.
1.2	<i>The Lexical Preference Principle:</i> If grammatical forms express a meaning that can also be encoded lexically (i.e., that grammatical marker is redundant), then learners will not initially process those grammatical forms until they have lexical forms to which they can match them.
1.3	<i>The Preference for Non-Redundancy Principle:</i> Learners are more likely to process non-redundant meaningful grammatical markers before they process redundant meaningful markers.
1.4	<i>The Meaning Before Non-meaning Principle:</i> Learners are more likely to process meaningful grammatical markers before non-meaningful grammatical markers.
<b>2.</b>	<b><i>The First Noun Principle:</i></b> Learners tend to process the first noun or pronoun they encounter in a sentence as the subject.
2.1.	<i>The L1 Transfer Principle:</i> Learners begin acquisition with L1 parsing procedures.
2.2.	<i>The Event Probabilities Principle:</i> Learners may rely on event probabilities, where possible, instead of the First Noun Principle to interpret sentences.
2.3.	<i>The Lexical Semantics Principle:</i> Learners may rely on lexical semantics, where possible, instead of the First Noun Principle (or an L1 parsing procedure) to interpret sentences.
<b>3.</b>	<b><i>The Sentence Location Principle:</i></b> Learners tend to process items in sentence initial position before those in final position and those in medial position.

Directly informed by the principles of IPT, SI activities are designed to help L2 learners overcome their non-optimal processing strategies and make necessary form-meaning connections from grammatical forms in the input.

### When theory directly informs pedagogical practice: Structured Input

Directly informed by the principles of IPT, SI activities are designed to help L2 learners overcome their non-optimal processing strategies and make necessary form-meaning connections from grammatical forms in the input. It is this emphasis on processing that sets SI activities apart from other input enhancement techniques, which primarily focus on noticing—the conscious recognition of a form in the input (Schmidt, 1994). With SI activities, learners engage with input that has been *structured*, or altered, to make them attend to the target form in order to interpret meaning. Creating SI activities thus involves identifying and addressing the processing principles that make the target form or structure difficult to acquire.

To illustrate, let us consider the *imparfait/passé composé* distinction in French. Beginner and intermediate-level L2 learners often struggle to correctly choose the *imparfait* to describe ongoing activities, habitual events, and states of being in the past, as opposed to the *passé composé*, which is used to describe completed actions and changes in states of being.

From an IPT perspective, the *imparfait/passé composé* distinction poses several processing problems. According to the Preference for Meaning principle, when

presented with a sentence such as “*elle voyageait régulièrement pour le travail*” and asked whether or not the action is presented as habitual in the past, learners are most likely to process the form “*voyageait*” for its meaning (the action it refers to), before they process its grammatical features (the *imparfait* ending). The Lexical Preference Principle also suggests that learners will first rely on the adverb “*régulièrement*” to understand that the action is habitual, because learners search for meaning in lexical words first. Furthermore, the Preference for Non-Redundancy Principle indicates that learners will not, at the initial stages of L2 acquisition, encode information from the verb tense, as long as it is already encoded elsewhere (i.e., the form is redundant).

A logical first step to help learners encode the information carried by the *imparfait* in a sentence comprehension activity is thus to deprive the input from other aspectual cues; such as deleting the adverb “*régulièrement*” and leaving learners with “*elle voyageait pour le travail*”. This forces learners to attend to the verb tense in order to identify whether the action is habitual. Making this form-meaning connection is essential for them to eventually acquire the *imparfait/passé composé* distinction and use those tenses accurately as they produce meaningful, communicative language.

Once the processing problems are identified, and a way to structure the input accordingly has been found, creating SI activities becomes quite easy. The examples of activities presented in what follows are designed for a pedagogical unit whose objective is to enable learners to talk about past professional experiences to prepare for a job interview. It will be assumed that learners are familiar with the vocabulary and have already studied the basic use and forms of the *imparfait* and the *passé composé* in context. They should also have worked on the basic characteristics of the CV in French and prepared their own CV.

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## SI Activities

SI activities can be of two different types: referential activities and affective activities. Referential activities have a right or wrong answer and promote initial form-meaning connection making. The instructor can then check whether learners have made proper form-meaning connections, and confirm learners' choice.

**Activité 1** is a sample referential SI activity where learners are asked to identify whether the activities that Leila completed during an internship are presented as occasional or habitual in the past.

Notice that the input in **Activité 1** is structured in such a way that the only cue enabling learners to make their decision is the verb tense. Furthermore, learners work on only one type of distinction (habitual vs. occasional) and one person (the third person singular). This is all to promote more efficient processing.

To keep the focus on meaning and to make the activity communicative, learners are asked, in (b), to go back to the statements and react to them, telling a partner whether or not they too, have ever performed the listed activities. Only brief statements are required. This is to ensure that learners are not pushed to produce sentences involving the past tenses distinction before they have had sufficient opportunities to process it during sentence comprehension.

**Activité 2** is another sample referential activity that presents learners with questions which can be asked during a job interview. It aims to push learners to interpret the *imparfait* tense to mean that an activity was ongoing in the past, and to identify actions in the *passé composé* as involving in some type of result, since such actions are presented as completed.

Here again, learners must solely rely on the verb tenses to encode meaning and respond correctly, as no other cues are provided. The activity focuses on one distinction (ongoing actions vs. actions resulting in a change), and only the 2nd person plural is used. The sentences are meaningful and the questions could very well be used in a job interview.

### Activité 1.

- (a) **Décidez s'il s'agit d'activités que Leila faisait habituellement pendant son stage, ou d'activités qu'elle a faites hier, exceptionnellement.**

Hier, exceptionnellement ...      Habituellement, ...

1. elle créait des tutoriels vidéo.
2. elle organisait des déjeuners de travail.
3. elle a écrit des rapports.
4. elle a développé des codes informatiques.
5. elle dînait devant l'ordinateur.
6. elle faisait des présentations.

- (b) **Échangez avec un partenaire. Avez-vous déjà fait/faisiez-vous ces activités auparavant ?**

Répondez par « moi aussi » ou « pas moi ».

### Activité 2.

- (a) **Voici quelques questions qui pourraient être posées lors d'un entretien d'embauche. Pour chaque série de deux questions, entourez en rouge celle qui porte plutôt sur les compétences et expériences acquises par les candidats, et en noir celle qui porte plutôt sur les circonstances dans lesquelles des compétences et expériences ont été acquises.**

1. (a) Quelle formation **avez-vous suivie** ?  
(b) Quelle formation **suiviez-vous** ?
2. (a) Vous **travaillez** pour une grande entreprise ?  
(b) Vous **avez travaillé** pour une grande entreprise ?
3. (a) Quels projets **avez-vous développés** ?  
(b) Quels projets **développez-vous** ?
4. (a) Vous **aviez** des conflits avec vos collègues ?  
(b) Vous **avez eu** des conflits avec vos collègues ?

- (b) **Dites à un camarade de classe si on vous a déjà posé ces questions. Laquelle trouvez-vous la plus difficile ?**

To make the activity more meaningful and communicative, in (b), learners are asked to tell a partner if they have ever been asked these questions, and which one(s) they would find the most challenging to answer. Answers such as "oui", "non", or "la question 4" would be sufficient here, as the goal is to provide learners with an opportunity to further engage with the SI, respond to it, and share some information with a classmate, but not to push sentence production just yet.

After a few referential activities have been completed, affective activities can be introduced. These do not have right or wrong answers but instead encourage learners to express an affective response to SI and reinforce form-meaning connections they have already made (which is why affective activities come after referential activities).

### Activité 3.

#### (a) Les affirmations suivantes vous correspondent-elles ?

1. Je me **sentais** plutôt confiant.e.
2. J'**ai manifesté** mon intérêt pour l'entreprise.
3. J'**ai su** répondre à toutes les questions.
4. Je **portais** un ensemble tout neuf.
5. J'**ai hésité** à parler de la rémunération.
6. J'**ai pris** mon temps pour répondre aux questions.
7. J'**ai prêté** attention au langage corporel du recruteur.
8. Je **voulais** vraiment le poste.

#### (b) Comparez vos réponses avec un.e camarade.

**Activité 3** is a sample affective SI activity asking learners whether different statements applied to them during their last job interview.

Note that the affective activity continues to provide learners with SI that addresses the relevant processing principles. Learners also continue to respond to input, yet their answers may vary based on personal experiences.

### Activité 4.

#### (a) Gwénola écrit à son ami Sébastien pour lui raconter son entretien d'embauche. Choisissez les verbes pour compléter correctement l'e-mail.

#### Nouveau message

Destinataire : sebastienlegal@mymail.com

Objet : Entretien terminé !

Salut, Séb !

Comme promis, je te raconte mon entretien chez Ergo+

Quand **je suis arrivée/j'arrivais** pour mon rendez-vous, la secrétaire **a été/était** au téléphone mais elle **m'a fait/me faisait** signe de patienter. J'**ai attendu/J'attendais** depuis un long moment quand, finalement, on **m'a appelée/m'appelait**.

Le directeur **m'a reçue/me recevait**, **s'est présenté/se présentait**, et **m'a demandé/me demandait** mon CV. Heureusement, je **l'ai eu/l'avais sur moi**. Il **m'a interrogée/m'interrogeait** sur mon parcours, alors je lui **ai parlé/parlais** de mes études et de mes stages. J'**ai été/J'étais** un peu stressée.

À la fin, il **m'a donné/me donnait** des détails sur le poste. J'aurai une réponse dans deux semaines.

Voilà. Un entretien classique, en fait. Maintenant, je croise les doigts !

Gwénola

#### (b) Comparez vos réponses avec un camarade, puis, dites si vous trouvez aussi que Gwénola décrit un entretien classique.

## A gradual move from input to output

Once students have had plenty of opportunities to process the target form from SI, we can gradually shift towards output and engage learners in producing messages about past experiences as a preparation for a job interview simulation.

**Activité 4** facilitates this transition from input to output by requiring learners to select the correct form for each verb (either the *imparfait* or the *passé composé*) in an email. Students can then read the email and assist one-another in making corrections as a first, controlled step towards output.

**Activité 5** is an output activity that invites learners to complete sentences about their past experiences, providing them with opportunities to use the *imparfait* and the *passé composé* in short written statements. These sentences can then be read in small groups, where students can expand upon their experiences. To promote communication between students, the activity also asks students to recommend experiences that their classmates should share during a job interview.

At this point, we can expect students to be ready for the final task: (a) preparing job interview questions and (b) simulating an interview for a job that requires French language competencies. To conclude the teaching unit, I would finally ask students, in (c), whether they feel ready for a job interview in French, if they believe their classmates are ready, and if they have any advice to share.

### Activité 5.

#### (a) Complétez ces phrases avec des détails personnels pour parler de votre parcours.

1. Dans mon enfance, je/j'...
2. Pendant ma dernière année à/au ...
3. Au moment d'entrer à l'Université...
4. Au cours de mes études universitaires...
5. En stage...
6. Après une discussion sur mon orientation professionnelle, mon conseiller et moi...
7. Le semestre dernier...
8. Pendant mon premier entretien d'embauche/mon dernier stage/l'organisation d'un événement récent...

#### (b) Comparez vos réponses en petits groupes. Lesquelles conseilleriez-vous à vos camarades de partager lors d'un entretien d'embauche.

### Tâche finale : Simulation d'entretien d'embauche

#### (a) Échangez les CV français que vous avez rédigés récemment. Lisez le CV de votre camarade de classe et écrivez dix questions sur son parcours et ses expériences passées.

#### (b) Simulez un entretien pour un poste demandant que le candidat parle français.

#### (c) Discutez. Seriez-vous prêt pour un véritable entretien ? Pourquoi, ou pourquoi pas ? Quels conseils avez-vous pour vos camarades ?

## Conclusion

This paper aimed to demonstrate how implementing SI activities can help L2 instructors address learners' default cognitive strategies and promote L2 acquisition and accuracy in the communicative language classroom. Specifically, this article outlined the processing strategies (i.e., the Preference for Meaning, the Lexical Preference and the Preference for Non-Redundancy) which, according to IPT, can affect learners' ability to connect the *imparfait* and the *passé composé* tenses to their respective meaning. The article then presented ways to structure the input accordingly and to progressively move towards output. It is my hope that reading this article will encourage language educators to develop their own SI activities and keep seeking research insights to inform their teaching practices.

Once students have had plenty of opportunities to process the target form from SI, we can gradually shift towards output.

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