A Field of His Own

Bill VanPatten

Spending just a bit of time with MSU Professor of Spanish & Second Language Studies Bill VanPatten, and it comes as no surprise that he calls himself a language scientist.

“That’s actually what I am. But I’m in a traditional humanities department. I’m the only scientist in the department. Everyone else in the department of Romance and Classical Studies is a traditional humanist. So they do literary studies and cultural studies and film studies. Typical of most programs around the country, most of my colleagues are concerned with cultural production, and our programs—both undergraduate and graduate—are based around cultural production.

“As the lone scientist in the department, I’m interested in how language grows in the mind/brain, and what the constraints are on that. And then what implications there may be for language instruction.”

Back at MSU for a second stint (his first position out of college was also at MSU in the 1980s), VanPatten has been working in the Department of Romance and Classical Studies for the past three years. He is internationally known for his work in second language acquisition and second language instruction, and has published six books, seven edited volumes, six language textbooks, and 100-plus articles and book chapters.

“Leaving all humility aside, the field I work in is the field that I founded. Input processing and second language research is based on a model I developed in the late ’80s/1990s. It has both theoretical and applied parts that relate to language instruction, for example,” VanPatten says. “In fact, two of my articles from the early- to mid-1990s are still the most cited articles in the field of second language study today.

“It’s cutting edge in the sense that, for a long time, people have looked at language as something static, and the way you learn language is something static; that there’s a rule to learn. You understand how this rule in language works, you practice it, and that’s how it gets in your head.

“And I came along and said, ‘Mmm, I don’t think so. I think it’s much more like child language acquisition, where what happens is that you have stuff in your mind/brain that organizes language independently of anything else you do; instruction or practice.’”

VanPatten says that in learning a language, what you need to do is process stuff from the input. You need to process language that you hear and read. And, in processing that language, you get data that you need and the linguisticism builds up over time.

The model, he says, is called input processing, and from that, a pedagogical intervention was derived called processing instruction.

“We can then look at what happens if, instead of making people practice language, you give them samples of language and you make them do things with that language so they have to process that language in certain ways. “And sure enough,” he says, “we see growth in language in the mind/brain.”
“Nobody starts at the top. Nobody starts at the middle,” VanPatten says. “You start at the beginning. Getting out of school is just the first step. No matter what you want to do, though, have some passion for it, and things will come together for you. They always do. And most of you still have 60-70 years to go.”

Over the years, Professor VanPatten’s work and research have lead to him becoming a leader in language advocacy, too.

“Language advocacy is basically politicizing and commercializing the importance of language as a tool; as a cultural tool, and as a human tool. So advocacy means you do everything you can to value languages and promote languages; to show their worth.”

One example Professor Van Patten holds out is economic-based, and deals with an 18- or 19-year-old student who is bilingual and a like-age monolingual student going up for the same job.

“A second language can offer a true benefit to an employer. Pragmatically speaking, a student with a second language can easily command $5,000 more in salary than a monolingual candidate, because they can make the case that, ‘I can speak, read, write and translate another language. You should pay me more as a result.’”

But, beyond the pragmatic case and benefit to the employee, there are real benefits for the employer, too.

“Research shows that bilingualism does two things to your mind/brain,” he says. “First, it helps you develop a cognitive flexibility that a lot of monolingualists don’t get.

“And, because you are constantly juggling two languages, your brain is constantly multi-tasking, so it can actually process information better and faster than people who are completely monolingual.”

VanPatten says that this ability is crucial in today’s world, as he believes the most influential factor affecting undergraduates today is the increasing globalization of the planet. He says that any student who thinks they are living in isolation is fooling him or herself, and if they don’t see that now, they will once they graduate and are out in the real world.

“That’s what a student gains by studying in the College of Arts and Letters, and a department such as Romance and Classical Studies, for example,” says VanPatten. “A true appreciation for and sense of globalization.

“The College walks the walk in this respect. I think it helps when you have a Dean who has both formally and personally been exposed to multiple cultures and languages. We get a lot of directed initiatives from Dean Wurst in the languages and global studies, and that’s not the case everywhere.”

VanPatten’s advice to students beyond learning a second language: “Study abroad sometime. You need to study and work in another culture,” he says. “It’s extremely important. I don’t care if it’s England. I’ve lived in the UK, and their culture is very different from ours.”

He adds that graduates should remember the following: “You are young; have some patience.

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VanPatten closes by saying that knowing another language may be helpful there, too.

“Research verifies that cognitive benefits derive from the way that languages map onto the neuro parts of the brain. It’s pretty clear that the onset of Alzheimer’s and dementia in bilingual populations is later by 6-7 years. It doesn’t keep you from getting dementia and becoming senile. But your brain will last longer if you are bilingual before it happens.”