

TEACHING GRAMMAR: RESEARCH, THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Preliminary note:

This presentation is from the perspective of the practitioner rather than the linguist; the focus is mainly on implications for classroom teaching.

Background: prominence

Grammar has always been prominent in language-teaching literature and research

Historical reasons:

- the Latin/Greek tradition
- 20th century: structural linguistics and transformational grammar
- 20th century methodologies: grammar-translation, audio-lingualism

Late 20th century: the rise of the communicative approach would imply a lowering of the emphasis on grammar; but in fact it continues to arouse interest in research and to have a major role in the classroom worldwide. Some questions are, therefore:

- Is learner mastery of correct grammar a major aim in (communicative) language teaching?
- (And what is ‘correct’ grammar anyway?)
- If mastery of grammar is a major aim, how should it be taught?

Research and theory: selected issues

‘Correct’ or ‘acceptable’ grammar?

‘Correct’ is associated with ‘prescriptive’ and ‘acceptable’ with ‘descriptive’

But in practice, these are very similar, as long as the native-speaker corpora, mainly based on conventional written texts, are used as data for description. If the data are from ELF speakers worldwide, the picture changes somewhat.

English as a lingua franca

There is evidence from the VOICE corpus that certain ‘errors’ are very common but do not interfere with communication. Examples are: the omission of present simple third person –s; the use of *which* to refer to a person; the substitution of the present progressive for present perfect progressive with *since/for*.

Should such uses therefore be accepted? or should they be corrected? Should this evidence change our conception of ‘acceptability’ where English is being taught as a lingua franca (Jenkins, 2006)? This is becoming somewhat of a political issue, with forms like *she goes, the*

people who and so on being identified with a ‘native speaker’ model and native speaker hegemony (‘native speakerism’, ‘linguistic imperialism’); whereas they are in fact typical also of the speech of many (most?) non-native ELF users.

So probably we should continue to teach conventional ‘correct’ forms because: a) though widespread, there is no evidence that usages such as *she go* actually outnumber the standard *she goes* among users of ELF; b) learners expect to be taught what they see as ‘standard’ grammar; c) teachers see the teaching of acceptable grammar as part of their professional remit.

The main implication of the VOICE research, I believe, is a change in priorities: teachers, syllabuses and materials should prioritize those features whose misuse might produce misunderstanding, and lay less emphasis on those which do not (Seidlhofer, 2006).

The grammar of spoken English and e-grammar (the grammar of instant messaging and some emails)

Spoken English grammar is characterized by some specific features such as:

- the use of non-sentence fragments
- unconventional or inconsistent sentence structure
- ellipsis
- ‘heads’ and ‘tails’
- chunks: ‘fillers’, vagueness tags etc.

(Biber et al., 1999; Timmis, 2005)

How far are these to be taught?

Two problems: a) many of these are unacceptable in the grammar of formal spoken and written registers, and therefore teaching them might confuse, and b) many are language-universal, and therefore probably unnecessary to teach.

Probably the only really important aspect to teach is the chunks (arguably vocabulary rather than grammar).

E-grammar is characterized by some of the features of spoken English, but predominantly by the need to save on keystrokes: so less capitalization and punctuation, the use of abbreviated forms etc (Crystal, 2001).

Again, many of these are unacceptable in more formal registers (including some emails).

A tentative conclusion:

Correct, standard grammar remains, in my opinion a valid, if politically incorrect, concept, and a legitimate objective of teaching.

But we need today to be more aware of the need to prioritize those forms that are essential for international communication, and to be aware of the appropriateness of different grammatical forms for different local and discourse varieties.

Implicit and explicit teaching

The goal is implicit knowledge of grammar; but it does not necessarily follow that grammar should be *taught* implicitly.

Implicit teaching

Krashen (1983): 'input hypothesis'

Long and Porter (1985): 'interaction hypothesis'

Swain (1995): 'output hypothesis'

Exemplar-based theories of grammar acquisition:

Ellis (2002): frequency

Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), Wray (2000): formulaic sequences

Explicit teaching

Explicit grammar teaching appears in most cases to be helpful

Spada (1997), Norris and Ortega (2001)

The relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge

The non-interface position

The weak interface position

The strong interface position

'Noticing'

Schmidt (2001): There is no such thing as unconscious acquisition of a second language.

Noticing is necessary for learning, and intake is that part of the input which has been noticed.

Incidental learning is, however, possible, provided that noticing takes place

The teachability hypothesis

There is a natural developmental sequence of acquisition of morpho-syntactical structures, impervious to teaching. Teaching of a grammatical feature will be effective only if the learner is developmentally ready to acquire it. Teaching of a feature when a learner is not ready may have a detrimental effect (Pienemann, 1984).

Towards practice: methodological proposals

Traditional ‘PPP’

Generally condemned:

‘A discredited, meaning-impooverished methodology’ (Skehan, 1997:94)

But predominant in coursebooks (Nitta and Gardner, 2005) and classrooms. Why?

Communicative: input based

The Natural Approach

Immersion content-based programs?

Otherwise not widely used

Communicative: Task based

‘Instruction in which learners are given tasks to complete in the classroom makes the assumption that transacting tasks in this way will engage naturalistic acquisitional mechanisms, cause the underlying interlanguage system to be stretched, and drive development forward.’ (Skehan, 1997: 95)

But there is some evidence that small-group tasks may not work like this (Seedhouse, 1999); and these proposals disregard substantial evidence that explicit grammar teaching probably aids learning.

Task-based + focus on form

A communicative task, with incidental focus on form

‘... focus on form... overtly draws students' attention to linguist elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication’ (Long, 1991: 45-46)

May be based on, for example, error correction, noticing of salient forms in texts, or teacher- or student-initiated attention to a grammar feature

Originally: unplanned, brief (Long, 1991), but later largely planned, extended (Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen, 2002; Shak & Gardner, 2008)

Task based + consciousness-raising

Practice is not helpful (some research, practitioner experience, the teachability hypothesis). But awareness of grammatical forms and meanings may facilitate later acquisition

So it is important to have occasional lessons where learners’ attention is drawn to forms, often in the shape of an explicit rule, involving discussion of examples, and some intellectual effort

Practice-based teaching (neo-PPP?)

This is defined as the transformation of declarative into procedural knowledge by a process of automatization through practice (Dekeyser, 2007). There is some theoretical underpinning in skill theory, and research evidence that practice is helpful, whether input- or output-based (Van Patten and Cadierno, 1993; Muranoi, 2007).

Implications for classroom teaching

It is difficult to take practical decisions for classroom teaching based on research evidence and theoretical models. There are two main reasons for this: a) varied, sometimes incompatible, conclusions from different studies; and b) little attention paid in the literature to purely pedagogical factors (e.g. student motivation, student expectations, exam backwash, classroom management and discipline, time limitations, etc.). Very often the decision as to how to teach grammar will be influenced far more by pedagogical factors than by those based on second language acquisition research.

I suggest that there are five basic components of grammar teaching that have been supported by research and experience; all have a place, in principle, in the teaching of grammar, but in what proportion they will be used will depend on context and pedagogical factors. These five components are the following:

1. Task-based instruction + focus on form

The basis of the lesson is a communicative task. We may teach bits of grammar / vocabulary / spelling before, during or after: but the focus is always on the communicative task.

Example: *Discuss how far you agree with the following statements*

The teacher should correct me when I make a mistake.

AgreeDisagree

The teacher should ask other students to correct me when I make a mistake.

AgreeDisagree

The teacher should get me to correct myself.

AgreeDisagree

The teacher should make me rewrite essays after she's corrected them.

AgreeDisagree

The teacher should not only correct me, but also explain why what I said was wrong.

AgreeDisagree

Meaning-focused work: Pair/group work, followed by a full-class summary and discussion.

Form-focused work: discussion and possibly practice of modal *should*; object / reflexive pronouns (*correct me/myself*)

2. Presentation + practice-based instruction

A grammatical rule, presented inductively or deductively

Then: practice activities, progressing from mainly form to mainly meaning focus.

a. Mainly form-focus

A. Discrete items

- 1. A car is than a bicycle. (fast)
- 2. Chinese is than English. (difficult).
- 3. A lion is than a dog. (big).

B. Full text

Glenda: I don't know which dress to buy, the red or the green!

Sally: Well, the red one is (expensive), the green one is much (cheap).

Glenda: yes, but the red one is much (pretty). Which do you think suits me(well)? ...

b. Form and meaning

Compare the people in this family.

Use the adjectives *big, fat, thin, small, big, tall, young, short, old*

Karen is.....Ben.

Jill is.....

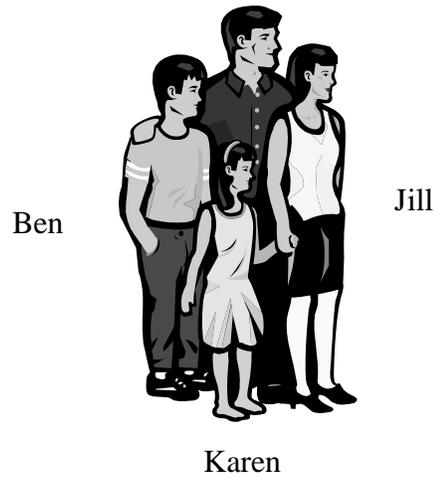
Ben

.....

.....

.....

.....



c. Focus on meaning

Choose one of these pairs of items. How many different ways can you think of comparing them? Use the comparative form of the adjective.

A radio and a computer

A rabbit and a snake

Playing football and reading a book

Harry Potter and Professor Dumbledore

d. Focus on communication

A. Performance task

You have enough money to go on holiday abroad. You might:

- a) go skiing in Switzerland
- b) go on safari in Kenya.

Prepare a (written or spoken) presentation comparing them. Present the arguments for or against each; decide which you'd prefer and say why.

B. Discussion

Debate based on comparison. e.g. 'Computers are better than books'. 'It's better to live in the town than in the country'.

3. Communication only

Examples (receptive)

listening to recorded or improvised speech; extensive reading; watching movies, TV ...

Examples (productive)

talking, communication games; exchanging information; creative or transactional writing

4. Form-focus only

Examples:

'Tip of the day' – isolated language points; grammar rule explanations; contrast between similar features; analysis of formulaic sequences; discussion of 'word grammar' of specific lexical items; comparison with L1

5. Exemplar-based

Examples:

Familiarization or learning by heart of chants, poems, tongue-twisters, proverbs, dialogues, songs, sketches or plays etc.

Variable selection and emphasis

The above components would need to be 'mixed and matched' according to contextual factors such as: the teacher's preferences and professional judgement; pedagogical factors such as those listed above; situational constraints.

Two examples

1. 'ELF' at elementary level in a state school

Teaching is likely to be predominantly based on presentation and practice and exemplar learning (because of the low entry level, and need to master basic grammar quickly in very limited lesson time), plus input-based communicative activities (little opportunity to encounter the target language outside the classroom). Pure form-focus and task-based group work + focus on form are likely to be used only occasionally (widespread lack of motivation and sometimes discipline problems)

2. Young adults in a university EAP course.

Teaching is likely to be based mainly on text-based communicative tasks + reactive form-focus (learners are at a relatively high level, and usually well-motivated and disciplined, can benefit from rich input and challenging tasks), with frequent use also of focused discussion of forms and of purely communicative tasks. Presentation and practice, and exemplar-based learning will probably be used rarely: learners have probably already mastered most essential grammar points; identifying which they don't know will be best done in the course of tasks, rather than imposing a pre-set syllabus of presentation-practice which may not be appropriate to their needs.

In conclusion

Research and theory have not produced a consensus on the best way to teach grammar; they have, however, produced many interesting and suggestive insights.

The practical five-component model proposed here is one possible basis for decisions about grammar teaching in specific contexts.

Essentially, the decision as to the best way to teach grammar has to be taken by the practitioner within a specific situation, informed by research and by his or her own professional experience- and reflection-based judgement.

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