

TEACHING GRAMMAR: RESEARCH, THEORY AND PRACTICE

Background: prominence

Grammar has always been prominent in language-teaching literature and research. Historical reasons: the Latin/Greek tradition; then in the 20th century: structural linguistics and transformational grammar.

20th century methodologies: grammar-translation, audio-lingualism. Late 20th century: the communicative approach

1. Correctness and acceptability in grammar

What grammar should we be teaching?

‘Correct’ (accords with conventional grammar-book standards)?

‘Acceptable’ (accords with the speech of most fluent speakers of the language)?

Evidence from ELF speakers

There is evidence based on the VOICE corpus that certain ‘errors’ by non-native users of English are very common but do not interfere with communication. For example

she go
the people which
Your name is Ella, no?

(Seidlhofer, 2004)

Evidence from native speakers

There is evidence that native speakers commonly use non-standard forms – which also do not interfere with communication. For example

she ain't ready
there's a lot of people outside
I didn't finish yet

Questions:

Should these be accepted or not? corrected or not? Should such evidence change our conception of ‘acceptability’?

I suggest that we should continue to teach conventional standard grammar as a basis for our students’ own production because:

- these are the forms most widely used by proficient speakers of English
- learner preferences
- teacher preferences

Reservations

1. Learners should be aware that they will come across such variants in speech and writing.
2. The most important grammatical forms to teach are those that will affect communication.

The importance of grammatical accuracy

Questionnaire 1

4=strongly agree 3=agree 2=not sure 1=don't agree

1. It is important to me to know that I'm using correct grammar when speaking ___
2. It is important to me to know that I'm using correct grammar when writing ___
3. It is important to use correct grammatical forms, even if incorrectness does not affect meaning ___

Grammatical accuracy is important because...

...From the point of view of the hearer/reader, inaccuracy, even if it doesn't affect meaning, is distracting, 'uncomfortable', may lower respect for the speaker/writer

From the point of view of the speaker/writer, inaccuracy may lower self-confidence, lower self-respect as a language user.

From the point of view of the teacher, professionalism means teaching the best language we can, aiming for full grammatical accuracy for our students.

Reservations

- The fact that grammar is important does not necessarily mean that lessons should be mainly grammar-based!
- In any case, vocabulary is arguably more important than grammar.
- In some contexts, we may prioritize meanings and 'downplay' grammatical accuracy.

Implicit and explicit grammar teaching

The goal is implicit knowledge of grammar. But does this imply implicit teaching?

Questionnaire 2

4 = strongly agree 3= agree 2 = not sure 1 = don't agree

When I was taught English, it helped me use correct grammar if the teacher

- a) provided lots of opportunities to communicate ___
- b) provided lots of opportunities to read and listen to correct English ___
- c) provided explanations of grammatical rules ___
- d) provided opportunities to practice (grammar exercises) ___
- e) corrected my mistakes ___

Implicit teaching

Providing comprehensible input (Krashen, 1983)

Encouraging students to produce output (Swain, 1995)

Task-based language learning (Skehan, 2003)

Exposing students to exemplars of grammatical forms and meanings: frequency (N. Ellis, 2002): formulaic sequences (Meunier & Granger, 2008)

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; Spada & Lightbown, 1999)

Explicit teaching

- Teaching grammatical rules (R. Ellis, 2001)
- Providing practice exercises (Dekeyser, 2007)
- Explicit corrective feedback on errors (R. Ellis et al., 2006)

Research evidence

Explicit grammar teaching appears to contribute to better learning of grammar.

Norris and Ortega (2001), Ellis (2012)

But importance also of meaningful, communicative language use.

Interim summary

We shall teach standard grammatical forms and meanings.

The teaching and learning of such forms and meanings is important.

Both explicit and implicit strategies should be used when teaching grammar.

Some implications for classroom teaching and teaching materials: combining explicit and implicit classroom strategies

Explanations: proactive or reactive

May be 'proactive': based on a grammatical syllabus.

May be 'reactive': based on something that has come up in a text or task ('focus on form').

Explanations: deductive or inductive

May be deductive: the teacher or textbook explains, the rule is then implemented in examples (or practice)

May be inductive: the teacher provides examples, learners then work out the rule

Explanations: use of L1?

The use of the L1 in grammar explanations may be very helpful for two main purposes:

1. To explain underlying rules
2. To contrast L1 with L2

Explanations: to be followed by practice exercises?

Yes: according to skill theory (Dekeyser, 2007)

No: according to model of consciousness-raising (Ellis, 2001)

Probably: minor points of grammar do not need to be practised in focused exercises. Major features which are very often used wrongly – probably benefit from practice.

Corrective feedback

A consensus that corrective feedback is helpful to learners in acquiring grammar.

But should we correct when the students are communicating through fluent speech?

What does the research say? (Lyster & Ranta, 1997)

Simple ‘recast’ was most often used, but least ‘uptake’! Recasts may not be perceived as correction at all!

The best results are gained from explicit corrective feedback + some active processing.

The correction-during-communication paradox

If we correct during communicative work unobtrusively so as not to harm communication – the correction may be ineffective.

If we correct more effectively using explicit feedback and ‘processing’ – we may damage the communicative value of the activity.

The answer: professional teaching judgement, taking into account pedagogical considerations such as the overall goals of the course, student preferences, how crucial / important the error is, the frequency of the error, the level of the student, the personality of the student ...

Learning by heart

The aim is to equip the learner with a repertoire of automatic grammatical ‘chunks’

- Jazz chants (Graham, 2006)
- Dialogues (Ur, 2009)
- Rhymes
- Songs
- Plays, sketches

Focus on form

The basis of the lesson is a communicative task. The teacher takes brief ‘time out’ to focus on a grammatical point, as a result of

- Error-correction
- Student question
- An interesting feature noticed by the teacher
- Difficulty of comprehension
- Difficulty of self-expression

Originally, spontaneous (Long and Robinson, 1998); later, planned (Ellis et al. 2002).

The grammar may even be built in to the original task or text.

In some classrooms, focus on form activities look very like conventional exercises (Shak & Gardner, 2008)

Practice

Based on skill theory:

- declarative stage
- proceduralization
- automatization

Practice is the ‘proceduralization’ stage, where the learner produces the target forms ‘...while temporarily leaning on declarative crutches’ (Dekeyser, 1998: 49)

Practice may be mechanical or meaningful: it is usually more effective if it is meaningful.

Examples (the present perfect):

1. Make sentences using the present perfect

1. Lina can't find her key. (lose)
2. Peter weighed 80 kilos before, now he weighs 60. (be on a diet)
3. Mark and Dana are delighted. (pass the test)
4. Becky won't be playing today. (break her leg)
5. Sam will be late. (have an accident)
6. We aren't going on holiday after all. (change plans)

2. Find someone who...

...has met someone famous. _____

...has read all the Harry Potter books _____

... has visited Egypt _____

... has been in a car accident _____

3. Sentence completion

Since this time last year, I have

4. Focus on meaning, free sentence-making

Think of a situation (using the present perfect) that would produce the reaction...

- | | | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| 1. Oh dear! | 4. Congratulations! | 7. What a pity! | 10. I'm sorry! |
| 2. Wonderful! | 5. Help! | 8. Thank you! | 11. Oh no! |
| 3. What a surprise! | 6. What a relief! | 9. Welcome! | 12. (sigh!) |

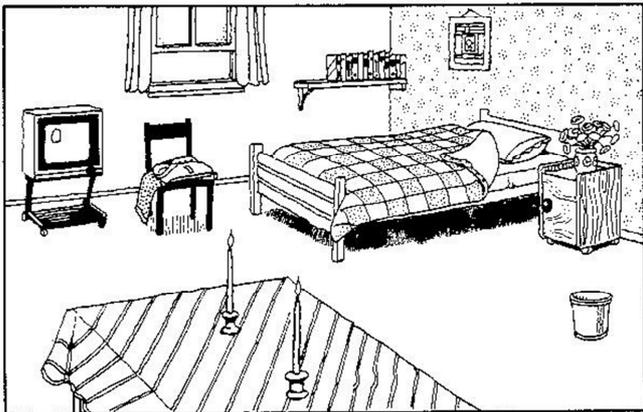
5. *Focus on meaning, full paragraph writing.*

Today is picture B. What has happened since yesterday (picture A)

Picture A



Picture B



6. *Focus on communication*

You are a committee of experts who have to interview candidates for a specific course or profession. What will you ask them?

Your candidate is requesting:

- to become a marriage counsellor
- to become a kindergarten teacher
- to join the police force
- to work on a summer camp for teenagers
- to become an ambulance driver

Summary and conclusions

In order to learn grammar well, students need some explicit grammar teaching as well as lots of communicative work.

Grammar teaching should include:

- Explanations (pro- or re-active, deductive or inductive)
- Corrective feedback
- Learning by heart
- 'Focus on form'
- Meaningful practice

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