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Teaching Grammar: Rethinking the Approach

ABSTRACT

In this article Margaret Kettle examines grammar, its image problem and some new developments aimed at improving its teaching and learning in the TESOL classroom.

Introduction

Grammar and how it is taught appear to be once again on the TESOL agenda — if indeed they ever left it. Scrutiny of how we as TESOL practitioners teach grammar has intensified and as a result much of the discussion in current TESOL publications and conference papers is revolving around suggestions for improved practice. A new approach is in the wind — one which moves the focus in grammar teaching and learning away from learner output to teacher input and the nature of that input. The emphasis is on increasing learners' understanding of the meaning properties inherent in English grammatical structures. It is argued that this understanding better enables learners to access the system of choice which drives native speaker usage of structures in 'real' communicative situations. Integral to the approach are tasks and techniques which promote analysis of target structures and their meanings in authentic text. For this reason one suggestion for improved practice in grammar teaching is the adoption of a text-to-grammar sequence of presentation.

The aim of this paper is to highlight some of these alternatives being proposed for grammar teaching and to identify ways that they can be implemented in the TESOL classroom. The long-term aims are to contribute to our effectiveness in grammar teaching and to overcome some of the negativity which seems to stalk grammar. For the purposes of this paper grammar is defined as "A systematic analysis of the structure of a language" (Crystal, 1992, p. 159).

Some of the problems in current grammar teaching

Let me start with the assertion that grammar has an image problem. Whether it is in a TESOL context or a situation of English for native speakers, grammar is often approached with

trepidation, if not outright suspicion — by some teachers and students. To cite some examples:

- From an intermediate student in response to a grammar question on an end-of-course evaluation form: "I want to learn English grammar systematically. Sometimes the grammar order is confused".
- From an advanced student in response to the same question: "I need more (grammar). I'd like your teachers to explain more correctly".
- The response of most students across all levels to the same question about grammar: "boring".
- The apprehension expressed by some teachers on survey forms about teaching grammar coupled with requests for workshops on methodology.
- The reaction of a member of the audience to Rod Ellis's claim at a recent public lecture (*The Evaluation of tasks in language teaching* University of Queensland, 6.3.96) that grammar is intrinsically interesting: "Try telling my students that".

Such views on grammar, of course, are not held by all language teachers and their students. Yet, with varying degrees of intensity, they do exist throughout the language teaching and learning community. The factors contributing to this situation are no doubt many and varied. The point is, however, that our effectiveness as teachers is reduced if students are unmotivated and uninterested. On the basis of readings, discussions with colleagues and observations of classrooms, I venture three suggestions for grammar's poor image ratings. The reasons relate to teaching. I agree with Rod Ellis that grammar is intrinsically interesting. The problem lies not with the nature of grammar itself but with its teaching. The suggestions are:

1. A lack of English grammatical knowledge on the part of teachers. For those of us who went to primary and secondary school in Queensland during the late 1960s and onwards, the explicit study of our native language was deemphasised in the curriculum. My only forays into the organisation and workings of English were:

- a noun is a naming word
- a verb is a doing word, and
- an adjective is a describing word.

Discussions with younger teachers entering the TESOL field often reveal similar experiences

and concerns that their limited grammatical knowledge will reduce their teaching effectiveness. This comment is not a hankering for the days of parsing and dry grammar rules. Rather it is recognition of the situation in which many of us are left to be self-teaching from grammar references and other sources of grammatical wisdom. Until such time as our knowledge has increased and our methodologies have matured, we run the risk of being ill-equipped to handle explanations and questions in the classroom.

2. Another possible explanation for student concerns about grammar in the classroom is that there is too little grammatical input from the teacher. This lack of explicit teaching could relate to Point 1. It could also relate to a belief on the teacher's part that the communicative approach translates into setting up opportunities for students to talk to each other and then departing the scene, that is, unfettered talking equals learning. Ellis (1995) acknowledges that a number of applied linguists (e.g. Krashen, 1982; Prabhu, 1987) have argued in favour of what he terms a *zero position* in terms of grammar teaching. This position proposes that attempts to teach grammar should be abandoned and learners allowed to develop their interlanguages by actively engaging in communication in the L2. However Williams (1995) claims that many researchers and teachers are beginning to question if it is enough to provide students with interesting input and opportunities to practise and interact. She points to research, mainly from immersion programmes, about growing support in language classrooms for instruction that includes explicit form-focused

3. Discussion about the nature of instruction leads to the final suggestion for grammar's low popularity ranking. A perusal of many coursebooks and syllabuses used in English language teaching reveals an instructional approach that presents language structures as discrete entities with little or no indication of a connection between them. For example, the widely-used *Headway* series presents the expression of future time in three different units over two coursebooks:

Unit 5 — *Headway* Intermediate *will* and *going to*

Unit 12 — *Headway* Intermediate present continuous

Unit 7 — *Headway* Upper-Intermediate present simple/ future continuous/perfect

My own research (Kettle, 1994 & 1994a) and comments from colleagues confirm that such a presentation format fails to give students the big picture, that is, the meaning properties inherent in grammatical structures, the relationships between the structures, the implications for use in communicative situations beyond the classroom and the consequences of inaccurate usage. Unaided by such an overview, students are left with the misconception that English grammar lacks system and accessibility. In the case of

expression of future events, many simply resolve to use *will* or the Present Simple. This is contrary to native speakers who in communication indicate the nature of a future event by the deliberate choice of a particular grammatical structure. Their grammatical knowledge, albeit mostly unconscious, makes clear distinctions between the use of *will*, *going to*, the Present Continuous and the Present Simple for the expression of futurity (Kettle, 1994a).

Other authors have observed the problems associated with this dissected approach to teaching grammar. Ferguson (1991) argues that many currently-used coursebooks, syllabus proposals and reference works fail to elucidate the link between lexicogrammatical forms and their meanings. As a result, arbitrariness prevails over systematicity and the student's learning burden is increased. Meziani (1988) is concerned that methods of teaching English verbs do little to provide students with a deeper understanding of the tense system as a whole. Verb forms are taught in terms of uses and students are provided with lists of uses. No explanation is given of the system underlying these uses. Rutherford (1987) attributes this teaching approach to those teachers, past and present, who view language learning as accumulating entities. The view is that language learners begin learning the second language from point zero and steadily accumulate mastered entities until they have reached a particular level of proficiency. Nowhere in this approach is there acknowledgement and exploitation of the learner's familiarity with language due to the mastery of L1. Learning L2 is considered external to and alienated from L1.

The alternatives

The proposed alternatives are infusing the literature with terms such as consciousness-raising (Rutherford, 1987; Ellis, 1995), focused-noticing (Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds, 1995), a situated process view of grammar learning (Pennington, 1995) a meaning-based approach to grammar teaching (Kettle, 1994). The thread linking these proposals has two strands: (i) a determination to shift the focus of teaching to input rather than output, although production remains important, and (ii) that the input be embedded as much as possible in working text. Proposals call for a text-to-grammar model of language instruction where the teaching starts with text and moves to a grammar focus. This model contrasts with much of current teaching practice which follows a grammar-to-text, or accuracy-to-fluency (Thornbury, 1995) model. The alternative proposes that learners first determine the meaning of a particular text. Afterwards the teacher uses a variety of tasks and techniques to provide input on how the grammatical structures contribute to that meaning.

The following discussion looks at examples of these tasks and techniques and their implementation in the TESOL classroom. The examples are mine unless cited otherwise.

I. A focus on input rather than output

Ellis (1995) advocates an emphasis on activities which facilitate grammar comprehension, that is, the ability to identify and comprehend the meaning(s) of grammatical structures. He calls these tasks *interpretation tasks* and maintains part of their role is to encourage the learner to notice the difference between the meaning conveyed by the grammatical structure in the input and how they are using it. This noticing, or cognitive comparison (Ellis, 1995) can be achieved by drawing the learner's attention to common learner errors. Ellis argues that it is through noticing and understanding specific grammatical features in input that acquisition gets started. He believes production does not serve as the primary means for acquiring new linguistic knowledge although it can lead to greater accuracy.

(i) An example of an interpretation task (Ellis, 1995)

(a) Psychological predicate verbs such as *love, bore, worry, offend* and the problems of comprehending and producing them in sentences (adapted from Ellis, 1995).

Activity 1 *Comprehending*

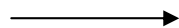
Listen to the sentences (here only one example) and decide if they describe the sentences. If you think they do, put a tick. If not, a cross.

1. She appreciated his singing.



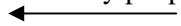
Activity 2 *Paying Attention*

Draw arrows to show who is experiencing the feeling described by the verb in the sentences below.



Example: Often people love dogs.

Example: Often cats annoy people.



1. Junko likes cats.
2. Sabine prefers dogs.
3. Ahmed worries his mother.
4. Big dogs frighten little children.

Activity 3 Responding Personally

Respond to these sentences about yourself with:

True Partly true Not true

1. Big dogs frighten me.
2. Intelligent dogs impress me.
3. Noisy dogs annoy me.

Activity 4 What's the Difference?

Listen to the conversation between John and his friend Shozo. What should Shozo have said?

John: You know. I don't really like big dogs. I get scared of them.

Shozo: Yeah. I am the same. I frighten big dogs.

John: Sorry?

Shozo: I frighten big dogs.

John: Oh, you mean you get frightened by big dogs.

Shozo: Yeah. And aggressive dogs. I overwhelm aggressive dogs.

The input above could be consolidated with an activity which requires the students to reflect on the nature of the psychological verbs used by listing them in the appropriate column below.

Example

→	←
Often people love dogs.	Often cats annoy people.
like impress	worry disgust

(ii) Ways to investigate the meaning of grammatical structures

(a) Past Tense

Teacher input can be used to shed some light on the use of the Past Tense in English. Many learners have the mistaken belief that Past Tense is about time. This leads to confusion when they are presented with Past Tense structures to express conditional situations and polite requests. Teacher input can help students to understand that Past Tense structures denote distance. The greater the distance from the speaker's 'here' point of orientation, the 'stronger' the Past Tense form. This concept is illustrated in the following tables which are intended as a teacher reference.

* events in the past

now	past but related to now	past with no relation to now	prior to past but related to past
Present Tense	Present Perfect	Past Simple	Past Perfect
I <u>live</u> in Brisbane.	I <u>have lived</u> in Brisbane for four years.	I <u>lived</u> in Germany from 1990 to 1991.	I <u>had visited</u> Germany once before I <u>went</u> to live there in 1990.

* conditional situations

reality	possibility (small distance from reality)	improbability (greater distance from reality)	absolute impossibility (greatest distance from reality)
0 conditional	1st conditional	2nd conditional	3rd conditional

If you <u>heat</u> ice, it <u>melts</u> .	If it <u>rains</u> , I <u>will stay</u> at home.	If I <u>won</u> lotto, I <u>would give up</u> work.	If I <u>had studied</u> , I <u>would have passed</u> the exam.
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* polite requests

little distance = reduced formality and politeness	greater distance = increased formality and politeness	Less distance = less formality and politeness	Greater distance = greater formality and politeness
<u>Can</u> I close the window?	<u>Could</u> I close the window?	<u>Do</u> you mind if I <u>close</u> the window?	<u>Would</u> you mind if I <u>closed</u> the window?

(b) The importance of the speaker's 'here' point of orientation

Teacher explanations can explicate the semantic properties that differentiate the following grammatical structures:

Those that reference the speaker's 'here' point of orientation	Those that reference away from the speaker's 'here' point of orientation
here	there
this/these	that/those
come	go
bring	take

(iii) *Consciousness-raising*

Rutherford (1987, pp.18-20) defines consciousness-raising as a means by which the learner is taken from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Having already learned a language, the student is familiar with the uses of language; what is unfamiliar are the ways in which these uses are realised in the new language. Consciousness-raising can act as a bridge between the learner's prior knowledge and their yet to be developed knowledge of the grammatical devices required by English. Suggestions for areas of teaching where consciousness-raising can be applied include:

a. Word order, for example:

English Subject Verb Object Place Time

German Subject Verb Time Object Manner Place

b. Use of the Continuous form, for example:

English — yes

At the moment I am reading a book.

I was reading a book when the telephone rang.

German — no

Im Moment lese ich ein Buch. (At the moment read I a book.)

Ich las ein Buch als das Telefon klingelte. (I read a book when the telephone rang.)

2. *From the text to the grammatical structure*

Lewis (1986, p.85) maintains that the communicative or contextual meaning of a sentence is a combination of (i) expectation, (ii) situation and (iii) the basic meanings of the words and structures used. Many of the gap-fill activities in English language teaching materials focus on (iii) at the sentence level. Little consideration is given to (i) and (ii). As a result the activities are devoid of context and are communicatively sterile. An alternative approach involves establishing the context and its constraints and then zeroing in on the behaviour of the grammatical structures in that setting. Teaching writing through genres provides a clear example of this approach.

Aim

- to teach the writing of instructions

Situation

- manual on how to operate a washing machine

Expectation

- that the instructions are sequential, brief and clear.

Language response

- sequence words or markers

- imperative verb forms
- simple sentences

Another version of the approach is the *Fluency to Accuracy* model proposed by Thornbury (1995). In this model, presentation starts at the text level and moves to a grammar focus. Thornbury believes that such a progression is more consistent with the way languages are learned 'naturally'. An example of a *Fluency to Accuracy* presentation is as follows:

Using a newspaper article (adapted from Thornbury, 1995)

Aim

- to focus on the use of past simple and present perfect simple to make meaning in an authentic text
- to establish the difference in meaning between past simple and present perfect simple
- to investigate the meaning of the other grammatical structures occurring in the text.

Materials

newspaper article and prepared worksheets

Procedure

(1) **Headline** — students predict content of the story from the headline.

Toll climbs to 364

(2) Teacher elicits and provides relevant vocabulary. Pre-teaches other important content words.

to urge (v)

toll (n)

to roll (v)

motorist (n)

to incinerate (v)

motorcyclist (n)

(3) Students are provided with the text of the article, minus the grammatical structures that are the focus of the lesson. Understanding of the article is the first step and is promoted through activities such as:

- i. Students count the number of paragraphs and are helped to identify the main message in each one.
- ii. Students look at details, that is, the details of the accidents mentioned in this article. With the teacher's help, they construct an account of the article's content, i.e: what

- happened; when; where; how; who is saying what and the relevance to now
- iii. Branching into broader issues such as the major causes of road accidents in students' home countries.

(4) The lesson now moves to the grammar and accuracy part of the lesson. Students complete the article, inserting the verbs which are provided in infinitive form in the brackets.

Toll climbs to 364

Police _____ (to urge) drivers to be extra careful on roads this weekend after the Queensland road toll _____ (to reach) 364, 49 more than the same time last year.

A 30-year-old man _____ (to die) after rolling his car at Aubigny, 30km west of Toowoomba, on Thursday night. He _____ (to be) Rodney Frederick Baker, of Mt Tyson, via Oakey.

A motorist and a motorcyclist _____ (to die) on Ipswich Rd, Wacol, about 8.25am on Wednesday.

Police also _____ (to name) a man who _____ (to incinerate) in a crash on the Gaven Way, Gold Coast, on Monday. He _____ (to be) Stanley Race, 66.

(The Courier-Mail, 31.10.95)

(5) Students negotiate answers with each other in pairs or small groups. They must justify their answers.

(6) Teacher shows complete text of the article, preferably an enlargement of the original newspaper format.

Toll climbs to 364

Police have urged drivers to be extra careful on roads this weekend after the Queensland road toll reached 364, 49 more than the same time last year.

A 30-year-old man died after rolling his car at Aubigny, 30km west of Toowoomba, on Thursday night. He was Rodney Frederick Baker, of Mt Tyson, via Oakey.

A motorist and a motorcyclist died on Ipswich Rd, Wacol, about 8.25am on Wednesday.

Police also named a man who was incinerated in a crash on the Gaven Way, Gold Coast, on Monday. He was Stanley Race, 66.

(The Courier-Mail, 31.10.95)

(7) The teacher uses the text to draw students' attention to the respective meanings of the Present Perfect Simple and Past Simple. Present Perfect with its present and past characteristics creates the meaning of a present-past link. Native speakers use this grammatical form when they want to make this link. Past Simple, on the other hand, has no present characteristics and consequently creates a meaning of disassociation with the present. The speaker can use this form to communicate that an event is embedded in the past with no direct links to the present. The article also provides opportunities to explore other grammatical structures including passive voice (*was incinerated*) and temporal prepositions (*on Wednesday, about 8:25am*). The lesson is learner-centred with diverse teaching potential. An essential ingredient of such a lesson is teacher knowledge and the ability to teach grammar spontaneously.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested some of the problems with grammar teaching in TESOL classrooms. Alternatives have been proposed which argue that learning can be better facilitated with a focus on teacher input rather than on learner output. Tasks and techniques are advocated which promote learner understanding and awareness of grammatical structures and their meanings. Authentic text is considered an ideal starting point for analysing target structures and the meanings they encode. A colleague provided a clear example of this approach in his teaching of the Past Continuous in passive form. During the viewing of a videotaped news bulletin he drew students' attention to the structure. They listened to it several times, identified the context and discussed why Past Continuous in the passive form was chosen by the reporter. It is the argument of this paper and many authors involved in the current discussions that these students, through their increased understanding, have a greater possibility of mastering the structure. Whether this is the case or whether the traditional approach of presenting, practising and producing grammatical structures is equally as effective are just two of the questions which remain to be researched and discussed in the future.

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