

SEVEN BAD REASONS FOR TEACHING GRAMMAR – AND TWO GOOD REASONS FOR TEACHING SOME

too much grammar

Grammar is important; but most of the time, in most parts of the world, people probably teach too much of it. I think we can identify at least seven reasons for this.

1 *Because it's there*

Asked why he tried to climb Everest, George Mallory famously replied 'Because it is there'. Some teachers take this attitude to the mountain of grammar in their books: it's there, so it has to be climbed. But the grammar points in the course book may not all be equally important for a particular class. The book may have been written for students with different purposes from our students, studying in a different environment, perhaps with different mother tongues and different problems. It may have been designed for learners with more time to spend on grammar than we have. The book may simply have been written by a grammar fanatic. It is important to choose grammar points relevant to our students' needs, rather than blindly going through the syllabus from left to right.

In a well-known experiment (Hughes and Lascaratou 1982), mistakes made by Greek secondary-school children were shown to Greek teachers of English, British teachers of English, and British non-teachers. Members of each group graded the mistakes on a scale from 1 (least serious) to 5. Interestingly, the mistakes which the Greek teachers regarded as most serious were often those that troubled the native speakers least, and vice-versa. Some examples, with the average gradings given by the Greek teachers ('GT') and the British non-teachers ('BN'):

- *We agreed to went to the cinema by car. (GT4.6; BN2.2)
- *We didn't knew what had happened. (GT4.4; BN1.8)
- *Dizzys from the wine we decided to go home. (GT4.2; BN2.1)
- *The people are too many so and the cars are too many. (GT3.0; BN4.3)
- *The bus was hit in front of. (GT2.6; BN4.3)
- *There are many accidents because we haven't brought (*meaning* 'broad') roads. (GT2.4; BN4.1)

The native speakers generally gave higher marks to mistakes which impeded their understanding: discussing the reasons for their assessments, many mentioned 'intelligibility'. The non-native teachers seemed more disturbed by infringements of common grammar rules; in discussion they referred frequently to 'basic mistakes'. They seemed most upset by the fact that learners continued to break rules which had been taught at an earlier stage of the course and which they 'should' therefore have mastered. They were, effectively, teaching grammar 'because it was there'.

2 *It's tidy*

Vocabulary is vast and untidy. We may attempt to systematise it by teaching semantic fields, superordinates and hyponyms, notional/functional categories and the rest, but ultimately vocabulary remains a big muddle. Pronunciation is more easily analysed (if you leave out intonation and stress), and it can be presented as a tidy system of phonemes, allophones, syllable structure and so on. However, in Tom McArthur's immortal words, pronunciation is that part of a student which is the same at the end of a language course as at the beginning. That leaves grammar. Grammar looks tidy *and* is relatively teachable. Although English grammar does not have the kind of inflectional apparatus which makes German or Latin look so magnificently systematic, there are still many things in English that can be arranged in rows or displayed in boxes. Grammar can be presented as a limited series of tidy things which students can learn, apply in exercises, and tick off one by one. Learning grammar is a lot simpler than learning a language.

3 It's testable

Many students like tests. It is hard to gauge your own progress in a foreign language, and a good test can tell you how you are doing, whether you have learnt what you wanted to, and what level you have reached. Educational authorities love tests. They show (or appear to show) whether children are learning and teachers are teaching properly; they rank learners; and (if you incorporate a pass-mark) they can be used to designate successes and create failures. Unfortunately it is time-consuming and difficult to design and administer tests which really measure overall progress and attainment. On the other hand, grammar tests are relatively simple. So grammar is often used as a testing short-cut; and, because of the washback effect of testing, this adds to the pressure to teach it. So we can easily end up just teaching what can be tested (mostly grammar), and testing what we have taught (mostly grammar).

4 Grammar as a security blanket

Grammar can be reassuring and comforting. In the convoluted landscape of a foreign language, grammar rules shine out like beacons, giving students the feeling that they can understand and control what is going on. Although this feeling is partly illusory (structural competence only accounts for a proportion of what is involved in mastery of a language), anything that adds to learners' confidence is valuable. However, the 'security-blanket' aspect can lead students and their teachers to concentrate on grammar to the detriment of other less codifiable but equally important aspects of the language.

5 It formed my character

As a student, I worked hard to learn the rules governing capitalisation in German. The authorities have now changed them, without consulting me, in the interests of 'simplification', and my investment has gone down the drain. I am not pleased: if you have struggled to learn something, you feel it must be important. Many foreign-language teachers spent a good deal of time when younger learning about tense and aspect, the use of articles, relative clauses and the like; they naturally feel that these things matter a good deal and must be incorporated in their own teaching. In this way, the tendency of an earlier generation to overvalue grammar can be perpetuated.

6 You have to teach the whole system

People often regard grammar as a single interconnected system, all of which has to be learnt if it is to work properly. This is an illusion. Grammar is not something like a car engine, where a fault in one component such as the ignition or fuel supply can cause a complete breakdown. It is more realistic to regard grammar as an accumulation of different elements, some more systematic than others, some linked together tightly or loosely, some completely independent and detachable. We teach – or should teach – selected subsystems, asking for each: 1) How much of this do the students know already from their mother tongue? (A German, unlike a Japanese, knows the main facts about English article use before his/her first lesson.) 2) How much of the rest is important? 3) How much of that have we got time for? To try to teach 'the whole system' is to ignore all three of these questions.

7 Power

Some teachers – fortunately, a minority – enjoy the power. As a teacher you can get a kick from knowing more than your students, from being the authority, from always being right. In language teaching, grammar is the area where this mechanism operates most successfully. A teacher may have a worse accent than some of her students; there may be some irritating child in the class with a vast vocabulary of American pop idiom of which the teacher knows nothing; but there is always grammar to fall back on, with its complicated rules and arcane terminology. Even if you have a native-speaking child in your class, he or she won't be able to talk coherently and confidently about progressive infinitives or the use of articles with uncountable nouns. If you can, you win.

grammar in society

Societies like grammar. Grammar involves rules, and rules determine 'correct' behaviour. Education is never neutral, and the teaching methods in any society inevitably reflect attitudes to social control and power relationships. In countries where free speech is valued (up to a point), language classes are likely to let students talk, move about, and join in the decision-making (up to a point). In more authoritarian societies, students are more likely to sit in rows, listen, learn rules, do grammar exercises, make mistakes and get corrected (thus demonstrating who is in control). Examination design follows suit, showing whether the authorities want future voters who are good at expressing themselves or ones who are good at obeying rules. (Guess which.) Examination syllabuses the world over also generally include a component which requires great mental agility, is of doubtful value to most people, and is regarded as a touchstone of intellectual capacity. In Western societies maths has taken over this responsibility from Latin, but the grammar of foreign languages plays a useful supporting role.

the results: teaching grammar instead of English

Where grammar is given too much priority the result is predictable and well known. 'Course books' become little more than grammar courses. Students don't learn English: they learn grammar, at the expense of other things that matter as much or more. They know the main rules, can pass tests, and may have the illusion that they know the language well. However, when it comes to using the language in practice they discover that they lack vital elements, typically vocabulary and fluency: they can recite irregular verbs but can't sustain a conversation. (As J K Jerome put it a century ago, few people care to listen to their own irregular verbs recited by young foreigners.) Such an approach is also psychologically counterproductive, in that it tends to make students nervous of making mistakes, undermining their confidence and destroying their motivation.

the other extreme

There are bad reasons for *not* teaching grammar, too. When, as sometimes happens, there is a reaction against grammar-heavy syllabuses, people often tend to fly to the other extreme and teach little or no grammar. This happened in Britain in the 1970s, when the communicative approach (in itself an excellent development) was widely taken as a justification for teaching 'functions and notions' or 'skills' *instead of* grammar. One of the results of this unfortunate trend was the appearance of a generation of British teachers and teacher trainers many of whom were seriously ignorant of the structure of the language they were professionally concerned with teaching. Doing too little grammar (whether out of misguided principle or sheer ignorance) is of course as damaging as doing too much.

good reasons for teaching some grammar

There are two good reasons for teaching carefully selected points of grammar.

- 1) **comprehensibility** Knowing how to build and use certain structures makes it possible to communicate common types of meaning successfully. Without these structures, it is difficult to make comprehensible sentences. We must, therefore, try to identify these structures and teach them well. Precisely what they are is partly open to debate – it is difficult to measure the functional load of a given linguistic item independently of context – but the list will obviously include such things as basic verb forms, interrogative and negative structures, the use of the main tenses, and the grammar of modal auxiliaries.
(But we also need to remember that even minor mistakes, which do not affect comprehensibility on their own, can do so if they cluster – so we may need to address some of our students' most frequent errors as well as their most serious errors.)
- 2) **acceptability** In some social contexts, serious deviance from native-speaker norms can hinder integration and excite prejudice – a person who speaks 'badly' may not be taken seriously, or may be considered uneducated or stupid. Students may, therefore, want or need a higher level of grammatical correctness than is required for mere comprehensibility. Potential employers and examiners may also require a high – often unreasonably high – level of grammatical correctness, and if our students' English needs to be acceptable to these authorities, their prejudices must be taken into account.

What points of grammar we choose to teach will therefore depend on our circumstances and our learners' aims. Whatever the situation, though, we must make sure that we are teaching only the points of grammar that we need to in the light of these factors, and – of course – that we are teaching them well. If we can manage to focus clearly on these principles, we have a better chance of teaching English instead of just teaching grammar.

Reference

Hughes, A. and C. Lascaratou. (1982) 'Competing Criteria for Error Gravity' *English Language Teaching Journal*, 36/3, 175–182.