TEACHING GRAMMAR: DOES GRAMMAR TEACHING WORK?

> The researches of many commentators have already thrown much darkness on this subject, and it is probable that, if they continue, we shall soon know nothing at all about it. (Mark Twain)
> I'm no longer sure that what is important is more important than what is not. (Wisława Szymborska)
> Litel misteak is not mestak. (Inscription found on school blackboard circa 1975)

Why do people worry so much about grammar teaching?

Despite all the work that has been done on first- and second-language acquisition, we know surprisingly little about how languages are learnt, and even less about how they can best be taught. Theories come and go, assertions are plentiful, facts are in short supply. This is nowhere more true than in the area of grammar. The trouble with teaching grammar is that we are never quite sure whether it works or not: its effects are uncertain and hard to assess. If we teach rules, sometimes students manage to apply them and sometimes they don't. Practice may have some effect, but carry-over to spontaneous production is often disappointing. If students speak more correctly as time goes by, is this because of our teaching, or would they have got better anyway? Research on methodology is inconclusive, and has not shown detectable, lasting and wide-ranging effects for implicit versus explicit instruction, for inductive versus deductive learning, or for separated-out study of structure versus incidental focus on form during communicative activity. Understandably, teachers are unsure how much importance they should give to grammar, what grammar they should teach, and how they should teach it. Language-teaching fashions consequently oscillate from one extreme, where grammar is given star billing, to the other, where it is backgrounded or completely ignored.

Should we teach grammar at all?

Currently, the theoretical pendulum is near the 'backgrounding' end of the swing. In recent decades grammar teaching has been called into question for several reasons. These include:

- A resurgence of the long-standing disillusionment with the results of heavily grammar-oriented approaches: 'He can recite long lists of irregular verbs but can't ask for a cup of coffee'.
- The associated rise of more 'communicative' meaning-centred approaches involving situational, functional, notional or task-based syllabuses, and a consequent shift of focus away from grammar.
- The view, associated particularly with Stephen Krashen, that 'learning' (the conscious assimilation of information about language structure) cannot lead to 'acquisition' (the development of the unconscious ability to produce the relevant structures spontaneously).
- The post-Krashen view that, while conscious attention to language form may after all be necessary, this will only lead to acquisition if it coincides with communicative use of language, so that the separate study of grammar, decoupled from communication, is ineffective.
- The development of large electronic corpora, leading to an explosion of interest in lexis, an increased understanding of the lexis-grammar interface, and a feeling in

some teachers' minds that all of grammar therefore reduces to vocabulary: 'We don't do grammar any more. We follow the lexical approach'. (One should perhaps beware of anything called 'The … approach' or 'The … method' – not because of what it does, but because of what it stops one doing.)

There has been something of a split in teachers' reactions worldwide to these developments. Many non-native speaking teachers have gone on teaching grammar very much as before, not always for clearly thought-out reasons. Native-speaking teachers, on the other hand, have often been influenced more strongly by recent Applied Linguistic theory. (To be cynical, some native-speaking teachers have found the downgrading of grammar extremely convenient. The Direct Method and its descendants absolved them of the need to learn anything about the grammar of their students' languages; now they don't need to learn about the grammar of their own language either.)

The need to teach grammar

In this article I shall take the position that, in general, grammar does need to be taught to foreign-language learners. I shall not defend this view in detail, but briefly:

- Languages have structural features that are complicated and hard to learn. For learners to master them, adequate experience, understanding and use of these features are necessary. Where time is limited and learners have little out-of-class exposure (as in most language-teaching situations the world over), this can only be brought about with the help of pedagogic intervention: explicit teaching and systematic practice informed by a syllabus of known problems. (For detailed discussion, see Swan 2005.)
- Grammar has not gone away because we have rediscovered lexis. In English, relative clauses follow their nouns; prepositions can come at the ends of clauses; adverbs cannot generally be put between a verb and its object; there are two 'present' tenses which are used in different situations. These are not facts about words – they are facts, which many students need to learn, about general linguistic categories. It is true that some wide-ranging structural generalisations have lexical components – English question formation can be presented as if it was a fact about the verb 'do', or perfective aspect as if it was a fact about 'have'. However, this merely amounts to some rather unconstructive relabelling, and tells us nothing new that will help in teaching these difficult structural points. And while children arguably learn the grammar of their mother tongues by starting with lexical 'chunks' which are later analysed and generalised from, there is no good evidence that this is a generally viable strategy in second-language learning.

So I shall assume, without further argument, that we need to teach grammar. If this is so, what exactly should we teach, how much priority should we give it, and how should we teach it?

There is grammar and grammar.

If we are unsure whether grammar-teaching works, it may be partly because the question is too general. The word 'grammar' covers very many different kinds of thing, not all of which are equally teachable or learnable. As Jan Hulstijn puts it in an important article (1995), 'not all grammar rules are equal'. Let's look at three examples.

- To make a *yes/no* question in Mandarin Chinese, put 'ma' at the end of the corresponding statement.

- To make a question in English, put the auxiliary verb before the subject. If there is no auxiliary, introduce the dummy auxiliary *do*, and proceed as before (remembering that *do* has a distinct 3rd-person singular present form *does*). But don't do any of this if the question has as its subject an interrogative expression such as *who* or *what* – in this case, the structure is that of a statement.
- When using a Russian noun, be sure to give it the right ending. A singular Russian noun can have up to six different endings depending on its grammatical role (e.g. subject, direct or indirect object, possessor, object of one or other preposition). Not all nouns take the same set of endings: the forms for a given noun depend on which of three grammatical classes ('genders') and several subclasses it belongs to. Further, many nouns have irregular forms which deviate from these patterns.

It is clearly pointless to generalise about whether conscious learning of a grammatical feature can lead to accurate spontaneous use, without taking into account the complexity of the feature and the amount of processing necessary for its accurate and appropriate production. The rule for Chinese question formation is easy, and can probably be picked up with little or no formal teaching. English question formation is more difficult, and is likely to be learnt more quickly and accurately with the help of systematic teaching and practice. Russian noun inflections are a learners' nightmare, and conscious learning and practice of these forms may well not enable students to get them right.

Fortunately, English does not have the kind of morphological complexity which makes Russian so difficult. It does, however, have other areas of grammar where it is difficult or impossible to provide learners with rules which are both accurate enough to provide a basis for making correct structural choices, and simple enough to be remembered, internalised, and acted on. Such areas include, for instance, the expression of the future (*will*, *going to* or present progressive?), many aspects of article usage, the three options for noun compounding (compare *table leg*, *John's leg*, *leg of lamb*), or tense/aspect problems such as the use of the present perfect. While some learners may achieve mastery of these points through long exposure, explicit teaching will have limited success.

Prioritising: comprehensibility and acceptability

Leaving aside those points that can be picked up without teaching, and those that cannot reliably be taught or learnt, we are still left with far more grammar than we can ever fit into any teaching programme. How are we to decide what to concentrate on and what to drop?

In general terms, there are only two good reasons for teaching a point of grammar. One is to do with *comprehensibility*: if we teach the point successfully, learners will make themselves understood better, or will understand better, than if we don't. Unfortunately we can't measure the functional load of a structure – the extent to which getting it wrong, or using it inappropriately, will hinder communication. Context contributes to meaning in unpredictable ways, so that a mistake which causes communication to break down on Tuesday might pass unnoticed on Wednesday. However, we can make informed guesses. We can be reasonably sure, for instance, that 3rd-person *'s* rarely contributes to comprehensibility; it is a linguistic fossil, irrelevant to the mechanisms of modern English. On the other hand, the active/passive distinction is obviously more significant: if somebody says *'John told about the meeting' instead of 'John was told …', the wrong meaning is signalled, and context will not necessarily disambiguate.

It would be nice if we could take comprehensibility as our only criterion. Unfortunately, many learners are under pressure to achieve a higher level of accuracy than is needed for effective communication. Students may have to satisfy examiners; and even in these 'communicative' times, examinations often impose criteria that have little to do with effective language use. Someone who makes frequent small mistakes may also be unacceptable to a potential employer: defective grammar could reflect badly on the organisation in question. Speakers of a foreign language want native-speaking interlocutors to accept them on equal terms; but someone whose language is grammatically deviant may be regarded, unfairly, as uneducated or even unintelligent. And learners themselves may seek high standards of accuracy, feeling – as they have a perfect right to – that they want their command of a language to come close enough to native-speaker performance to satisfy their own personal aspirations.

So comprehensibility may clash with *acceptability*, making it difficult to decide what to teach and what not to. None the less, it is helpful to keep these two criteria in mind. And if we feel – as we often may – that a point of grammar is not only difficult to teach, but contributes little in either area (the present perfect, for example?), then we should not hesitate to give it low priority or drop it altogether.

Other criteria

Two other rather obvious criteria are the *scope* of a rule, and the *frequency* of the relevant item. The rules defining the structure and use of the English future perfect, for instance, have very wide scope – nearly all verbs have future perfect forms – but they apply to a very infrequent structure. On the other hand, the rule specifying the plural of *child* has extremely narrow scope – only one noun now forms its plural in that way – but the word is very frequent. Balancing scope against frequency, we will probably decide to teach *children* – if we feel that the comprehensibility/acceptability factors are important enough – but not to worry about the future perfect. In another case we might make the opposite choice, giving scope priority over frequency.

Another criterion is *relevance*: the grammar that we teach should relate to learners' problems with English. This is self-evident to non-native teachers. An Italian teacher knows very well what aspects of English are difficult for Italian learners, and what points need no attention because they can be picked up, or transferred from the mother tongue. Native speakers teaching abroad have to find these things out. Without knowing something about how their learners' language works, they are in danger of teaching unnecessary points and overlooking others which are important. Courses and grammar-practice books published for a global market need to be used critically and selectively for this reason. Speakers of Arabic, German, French, Turkish and Japanese all have different kinds of problem with English relative clauses: one-size-fits-all materials cannot take facts of this kind into account. Where a teacher is working with multinational classes, there is obviously a limit to the extent to which he or she can personalise grammar instruction so as to do justice to L1-specific problems. However, knowledge about such problems is an essential part of the toolkit of an EFL teacher. Fortunately information about how particular languages work, and the problems their speakers encounter when they approach English, is nowadays not hard to get hold of.

Teaching too much grammar

Thinking about comprehensibility, acceptability, scope, frequency and relevance, then, can help us to prioritise effectively, selecting for attention those items which are likely to be most useful to our students. Failure to prioritise can cause valuable time to be wasted on relatively unimportant grammar points; in extreme cases teachers may

effectively be teaching grammar instead of English. There are all sorts of reasons for this. Teachers may do grammar simply because it's in the textbook. (The celebrated mountaineer George Mallory explained his obsession with Everest with the words 'Because it's there'. This may be a good reason for trying to climb a mountain, but it is a thoroughly bad reason for uncritically teaching a point of grammar.) And then, grammar is (or at any rate seems) reasonably tidy and systematic, compared with, say, the jungle of vocabulary or the swamp of skills teaching. Grammar is testable – and there is a pleasantly symmetrical satisfaction in teaching things that can be tested and then testing what you've taught. Grammar rules provide a (largely illusory) sense of security, standing out as signposts in the complicated landscape of language learning. For some teachers, grammar has a quasi-symbolic character-building role: it was an important part of the educational discipline that turned them into the splendid people that they now are, and they want their learners to enjoy the same benefits. And – occasionally – one finds teachers who like grammar because, more than anything else in language, it sets them apart from their learners, giving them the prestige and power that come with superior knowledge. In these computer-literate times, teachers almost certainly have students who know vocabulary that they don't. And non-native teachers may well have students with a better pronunciation than theirs. But the teacher is the only person in the classroom who knows what the past perfect progressive passive is. Stick to grammar and you stay on top.

Misguided perfectionism

A common reason – and the worst – for doing too much grammar is a kind of misguided perfectionism. Teachers naturally want to set high standards for themselves and their learners. This is in itself admirable, but it can easily transmute into error-phobia. Non-native teachers are often seriously distressed by the fact that they themselves sometimes make mistakes, feeling that this is a sign of failure to master their subject. Their anxiety may be projected onto their teaching, leading to a perfectionist concern for accuracy that is nothing short of disastrous. Teachers who treat learners' mistakes as weeds to be ruthlessly rooted out, who pick up every error and allow nothing to pass uncorrected, do an immense amount of harm. If students can never get to the end of a sentence without a correction, they understandably become reluctant to produce sentences at all – why should they keep trying when everything they say is wrong? And so they end up in a condition that a German teacher I was talking to described as 'fehlerfreies Schweigen' – error-free silence. They make no mistakes, because they say nothing.

Teachers with this attitude can find themselves trapped in a battle of wills, where students continue to make unimportant mistakes (because they know perfectly well that they are unimportant), while the teachers continue to correct them, repeatedly re-teaching the points and setting remedial exercises. It can be hard for teachers when students refuse to learn what they teach – it seems like an affront to their professionalism, a mark of failure – but it is worth asking who is right: the teacher who thinks a small structural point matters or the student who thinks it doesn't.

Small children aside, people who learn foreign languages do not usually achieve native-speaker accuracy, and this includes teachers. To pretend the contrary is unrealistic, counterproductive and damaging. There is a marvellously comforting remark about the impossibility of achieving perfection in parenting, attributed both to Bruno Bettelheim and D W Winnecott: 'A good enough parent is good enough'. The same is true of language teaching: high standards are important, but a good enough teacher is good enough, and good enough English is good enough. Realising and

accepting this can relieve teachers of a great deal of unnecessary guilt and anxiety, and prevent them from wasting valuable time doing remedial work on small points of grammar. There are more important things to do.

How should we teach grammar?

Once we have decided what to teach, how do we teach it? An enormous amount has been written about the methodology of teaching grammar. Much of this is useful; unfortunately there is also an awful lot of nonsense around. Dogmatic prescriptions and proscriptions abound ('Stop doing that - it's wrong. As a result of recent research, we now know ….'). However, 'grammar' is many different things which are best taught and learnt in very different ways. Learners and teaching situations also vary widely; an approach which works well for one kind of student in Britain or the US may be totally inappropriate for someone else studying English for 3 hours a week in his or her own country. Level is crucial: the more learners know, the more effectively grammar work can be integrated into other more communicative activities; the lower their level, the more likely they are to benefit from separated-out syllabus-based explanations and practice. We should reject nothing on doctrinaire grounds: deductive teaching through explanations and examples, inductive discovery activities, rule-learning, peer-teaching, decontextualised practice, communicative practice, incidental 'focus on form' during communicative tasks, teacher correction and recasts, grammar games, corpus analysis, learning rules and examples by heart – all of these and many other traditional and non-traditional activities have their place, depending on the point being taught, the learner and the context.

Explanations

The purpose of grammar explanations is not simply to describe structural features; it is to build bridges from the learners' present knowledge to the knowledge we want them to have. If we are going to, so to speak, take learners from A to B in this way, we need to look carefully at both ends of the bridge. Where is A? What do the learners know about a point already, by virtue of either its similarity with a mother-tongue structure or of their previous experience? Where is B? It can't be too far away from A, or the bridge will collapse. Given too much information, learners won't assimilate it. Explanations don't have to give the whole truth: they must be true enough to be useful, but also short, simple, and clear enough to be taken in, remembered and acted on. It should also go without saying (but unfortunately doesn't always) that explanations should be in the mother tongue if possible. The old dogma that the mother tongue should never be used in language teaching has not been taken seriously by linguists for decades. And, as far as grammar is concerned, it defies common sense. (Suppose you were starting to learn, say, Mongolian. Would you want your grammar explanations in Mongolian?)

Examples

When I started teaching, textbook examples were often extremely unrealistic. One I remember is 'Birds fly high' – particularly bizarre because it was presented for transformation into the past. (When would you say 'Birds flew high'? After the comet struck and the atmosphere was skimmed off?) Such examples are still found occasionally – I was recently shown an exercise on irregular plurals which contained the remarkable statements 'The oxen are stepping on my feet' and 'Those people have lost their teeth'. Nowadays, however, the pendulum has swung the other way, and the flavour of the month is authenticity. Some scholars, indeed, say that we should

present no examples which have not been spoken or written during authentic communication. This sounds good, but a quick look at a corpus can dampen one's enthusiasm. A typical corpus example of *fly* with a third-person plural subject is 'He says DC10 aircraft fly out of Europe every day to distribute flowers all around the world in what is an extremely valuable industry' – scarcely an improvement on 'Birds fly high'. Corpus examples are generally hard to interpret taken out of the context that gives them their authenticity, and are full of nuisance vocabulary that distracts attention from the relevant grammar point. What we need, surely, is not corpus authenticity but classroom authenticity: not 'real' examples, but realistic examples which serve our pedagogic purposes.

Exercises

The communicative approach has brought us a greatly enriched repertoire of exercise-types, enabling learners to practise grammar while saying real and interesting things to each other. The communicative emphasis on pair-work and group-work is particularly beneficial: if students speak one at a time, nobody gets enough practice to master a grammatical feature. However, contemporary theory has given many teachers a bad conscience about doing anything that is not 'communicative'. If students practise past tenses by telling each other their life stories, this is GOOD; to revise irregular verbs by filling in gaps in sentences is BAD. I am all for life stories, and gap-filling is pretty unexciting, but here as elsewhere we can benefit from some common sense. Students often need to get used to building a structure, or to contextualising it appropriately, before they are ready to use it more freely. In this respect, undemanding 'mechanical' exercises which enable students to think about one thing at a time have obvious value.

Will it work?

A common objection to systematic grammar teaching is that what is learnt may not carry over into spontaneous use. Students learn rules, and get their grammar right during practice, but they still make mistakes when they are speaking or writing more freely. 'Declarative knowledge isn't the same as procedural knowledge,' we are repeatedly told; 'Practice doesn't make perfect' – as if these were reasons for not providing declarative knowledge or doing practice. Well, of course practice doesn't make perfect – nothing does. Carry-over from rule-learning and controlled practice, through semi-controlled work, to correct spontaneous use, is very difficult to achieve – that is one reason why languages are hard to teach. The fact that a procedure doesn't guarantee success is not, however, a reason for abandoning it. Generations of teachers have felt that explicit syllabus-based grammar teaching and practice can help students along the rocky road towards reasonably correct spontaneous production, and the insights that the teaching profession has accumulated and passed on always need to be taken seriously. Planting seeds may not guarantee that they will grow; but not planting them is scarcely a superior strategy.

References

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