

## TEACHING GRAMMAR: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM RESEARCH? (CLESOL CONFERENCE PLENARY SESSION)

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### A. Preliminary questions

This talk began with a questionnaire. Here are the questions, together with the answers given by the majority of the audience.

#### As a teacher

Do you think it's important for your students to learn correct grammar.

Majority response: Yes.

#### As a learner, thinking back to your own learning of a second/foreign language

1a. Does it help you if you have available an explicit rule to explain something in the TL grammar?

Majority response: Yes.

1b. Do you prefer to work out the rules for yourself, or to be given them (by teacher or grammar book)?

No clear majority.

2. Does it help you if your teacher can contrast the TL usage with that of your mother tongue?

Majority response: Yes.

3. Do you feel that grammar exercises (even if not communicative) help you to learn?

Majority response: Yes.

4. Do you usually like to be corrected if you make mistakes?

Majority response: Yes.

Some of these responses are in line with current research-based opinion, some would appear to be in conflict with it. In cases of conflict, we are thrown back on our own commonsense and professional judgement:

The purpose of making research on form-focused instruction accessible to teachers ...is not so that they can be told whether or not to teach grammar or how to teach it, but to raise consciousness of the kinds of issues that may help them in their decision making.

Ellis, R. 1997. *SLA research and language teaching*, OUP: 46

The crucial point is that the proposal (from research) is not to be regarded as an unqualified recommendation but rather as a provisional specification claiming no more than to be worth putting to the test of practice. Such proposals claim to be intelligent rather than correct.

Stenhouse, L. 1975. *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*, London: Heinemann: 25

## B. Some research issues

I would now like to look briefly at a number of research studies connected to the teaching of grammar, approaching them along the lines suggested in the quotations above, and stating frankly my own preferences in interpreting and implementing the different findings and theories.

1. **Form-focused vs. meaning-focused instruction** (Krashen, 1982; Spada, 1996; Doughty & Williams, 1998). The extreme meaning-focused position, as expressed by Krashen, is that real language acquisition takes place only through intake from 'comprehensible input' and there is no place for form-focused instruction (teaching rules) except insofar as it helps us to monitor our speech or writing when we have time to plan and think about it. Other researchers, however, have found that such 'naturalistic' exposure does not, on its own, lead to target-like levels of proficiency, and that explicit attention to rules and their application can help prevent 'fossilisation' of incorrect forms. This approach would correspond with the audience's – and my own – intuitions as expressed in the questionnaire answers above.

2. **The Natural Order** (Pienemann, 1985). Studies have found that learners tend to acquire grammatical structures in a certain order, and that teaching a structure before a learner is ready for it does not result in learning. This finding is, I feel, of limited practical use to teachers. First, nobody yet has listed the exact order in which all English grammatical structures are naturally acquired; second, it appears that the first language makes a difference to this order, it is not universal; and third, our classes are inevitably heterogeneous, so each student will reach a different stage at a different time. What we can learn from this research, then, would be limited to an awareness that such an order exists, and therefore we should not get frustrated if some of our students do not seem able to internalise certain structures however well we feel we have taught them: they may just not be ready for them. We have to teach them anyway, because some of our class may be able to benefit now; and there is some evidence that learners are able to 'incubate' an item prematurely taught, and actually 'notice' it in the future, when they are ready (Schmidt, 1993)

**3. The role of explicit knowledge of grammar** (Ellis, 1997, Johnson, 1996, Dekeyser 1997). If most researchers agree that there is a place for rule-learning in the acquisition of grammar, they are divided on the issue of the exact function of this knowledge. Essentially, there are two schools of thought on this. Rod Ellis argues that it is important to have explicit knowledge of rules, and that if the learner is aware of these they will integrate them into their own acquisition system when they are ready: there is no point trying, through form-focused practice, to induce them to internalise them when their personal linguistic development may not be at an appropriate level. Dekeyser and Johnson would argue that rules *can* be automatised through form-focused practice, in the same way that declarative knowledge is converted to procedural knowledge in other skills. For example, when you are learning to drive, the instructor will tell you ('declarative') how to start the car moving; later, through practice, you learn to do the same series of actions automatically ('procedural'), without actually saying the instructions over again. Here, my own teaching and learning preferences are on the side of the usefulness of practice, as, it would appear, are those of the respondents to the questionnaire given at the beginning of this talk.

**4. Error correction** (Krashen, 1982; Doughty and Varela, 1998; Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Krashen's position on this would be that error correction does not help real 'acquisition' of language, but only feeds into the 'monitor'. This position is supported by the phenomenon, familiar to all teachers, of a mistake which you corrected on one occasion, but which is made again on the next day: on many occasions learners do not appear to internalise or learn from our corrections. Other studies, however, have found that learners do benefit from error correction, even if the results of a correction are not immediate and obvious. And your responses to the questionnaire would indicate that the majority of learners do want to be corrected.

My own opinion is firmly on the side of correction: first, because that's what learners want, and, all things being equal, I think we teachers should respect learners' wishes; and second because even if correcting is only of limited effectiveness, commonsense would argue that if there's one thing that is less effective than correcting, it is: not correcting.

**5. Age** (Long, 1990; Swain, 1995; Marinova-Todd et al., 2000). To move to a completely different topic: do children learn language – including correct grammar – better than adults? Folk wisdom says they do, based on the experience of seeing children transplanted to a new linguistic and cultural environment and picking up the language to native-like or near-native levels of proficiency, apparently fast and painlessly. We cannot, however, logically conclude from this that small children are naturally better language learners. The reasons for the phenomenon can be found elsewhere: a) the children have an enormous number of hours of exposure to the language per day, far more than any FL school programme could offer; b) they are very highly motivated: learning the language is often a matter of social survival; and c) the ratio of teacher to student is



typically one-to-one rather than one teacher to twenty or thirty students. Put the same small children in a school situation where they have, perhaps, two to four hours of English a week, in classes of twenty or more and no particular personal reason to learn – and the picture is very different. In such a situation, on the whole the older the student, up to adulthood, the faster and more efficiently they learn. And the research is pretty unanimous on this point (see the survey article by Marinove-Todd et al. referred to above).

I am totally on the side of the research in this case, which fits my own experience trying to teach English as a foreign language to young children. Invariably, the older the classes the faster and more effectively I manage to get them to learn. When we come to grammar teaching: younger children do not have the cognitive abilities ('intelligence' in non-p.c.-speak!) to understand and apply the abstract generalisations that form the basis of grammar rules: so with regard to grammar teaching we are deprived, in these classes, of a very useful language-learning strategy. Young children can learn correct grammar: but they need an enormous number of hours in order to do so through repetition and habit-forming rather than analysis and conscious application.

**6. Inductive versus deductive rule-learning.** (Fortune, 1992). Learners are divided as to whether they prefer to work out the rule themselves from the evidence (inductive) or be presented with it by the teacher or textbook and then apply it to new sentences (deductive). An interesting bit of research was done by Fortune, in which a group of learners were asked how they liked to learn rules, and expressed, on the whole, a preference for the deductive approach. After exposure to a number of both inductive and deductive tasks, a significant proportion of them changed their minds and said they preferred inductive – though the majority remained in favour of deductive. One of them came up with a statement with which many of the present audience expressed agreement: I like to work out the rule for myself, but then I like the teacher to check and tell me if I'm right!

From the point of view of the teacher, my conclusion would be that we need to provide opportunities for both. However, I would add the proviso: make sure that induction-based tasks are in fact reasonably easily doable and success-oriented: that the learners are probably going to be able to elicit an acceptable generalisation. Otherwise you are liable to find yourself with half an hour of frustrating 'floundering' and wrong guesses, which is a waste of time and demoralising for all concerned.

**7. Form-focused versus formS-focused grammar teaching.** (Long and Robinson, 1998) An interesting distinction is made in the literature between 'formS-focused' teaching and 'form-focused'. FormS-focused is the type of teaching which takes place in a 'traditional' grammar lesson, where we start from a grammatical syllabus and plan to teach a certain structure in a certain lesson. In 'form-focused' teaching the teacher does not plan to teach a particular structure as the basis of a lesson, but responds to a grammatical topic if it comes up in the course of an essentially communicative process: for example, if a learner makes a mistake, or requests clarification of a grammatical point, or if



the teacher feels that something needs explaining. This leads logically to a task-based methodology (Skehan, 1997, Willis, 1996). My own feeling is that 'formS-focused' lessons are useful as a basis for systematic teaching of the grammar; but should be supplemented consistently by form-focused teaching incidentally within communicative task work.

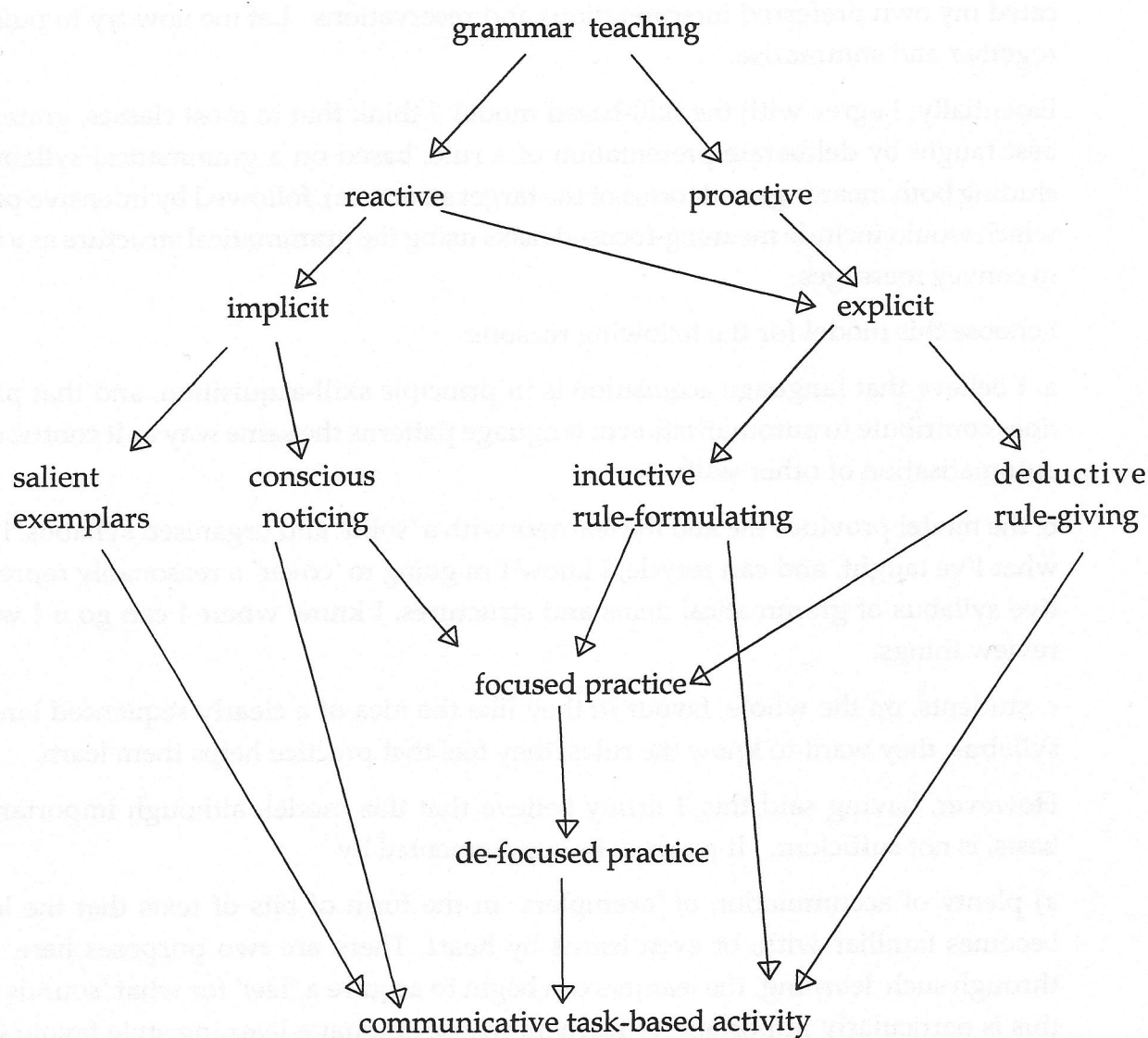
**8. Rule-application versus the accumulation of exemplars** (Skehan, 1997). Young children then, tend to learn correct grammar simply through accumulating experience of the different grammatical forms in meaningful contexts. They learn a large number of 'exemplars' without analysing them, and come to a feel for what 'sounds' right. In a sense, this was what the audio-lingualists were aiming for: an intuitive feel for correct 'patterns' through a lot of repetition and exposure. It appears, however, that there is an important place for the learning of a large number of 'exemplars' even within an essentially rule-application-based methodology, and for learners of all ages. This is partly because people have different learning styles: some like applying rules, others prefer to learn more intuitively. But it is also because even when you are learning a rule, it is most effective if you already have a 'vocabulary' of exemplars of the way this works in real language, so that learning the rule can bring about an 'aha!' moment: right, that's why we say ....! So that the rule-learning becomes a moment of recognition and understanding, rather than a totally new, disconnected bit of information.

For this reason, I am very much in favour of a lot of learning by heart at the early stages – and even later stages – of language instruction: meaningful dialogues, plays and sketches, rhymes, songs and chants – all these contribute to effective grammar learning no less than – some would even say more than – the conventional rule-based methodology. And it makes most sense to combine the two.

### C. A route descriptions

Assuming, then, that there is a place for plenty of intuitive learning of exemplars of grammar in action within meaningful discourse – what is the place of explicit grammar teaching, in the sense of deliberate explanation of grammatical rules and their application? This question may be clarified by following the various routes indicated in the flow-chart below.

(Note: by 'implicit' learning of grammar, I mean encouraging learners to 'notice' grammatical structures in context, but refraining from deliberate explanation of rules governing them. Deliberate rule-explanation would imply 'explicit' grammar teaching.)



Which of these routes do you / would you follow yourself in your teaching?

#### D. A personal summary

In discussing various research studies and theories in the literature above, I have indicated my own preferred interpretations and reservations. Let me now try to pull these together and summarise.

Essentially, I agree with the skill-based model: I think that in most classes, grammar is best taught by deliberate presentation of a rule, based on a grammatical syllabus (including both meanings and forms of the target structure), followed by intensive practice which would include meaning-focused tasks using the grammatical structure as a means to convey messages.

I choose this model for the following reasons:

- a. I believe that language acquisition is in principle skill-acquisition, and that practice does contribute to automatising of language patterns the same way as it contributes to automatising of other skills.
- b. the model provides me and the learners with a 'solid' and organised syllabus: I know what I've taught, and can recycle, I know I'm going to 'cover' a reasonably representative syllabus of grammatical items and structures, I know where I can go if I want to review things.
- c. students, on the whole, favour it: they like the idea of a clearly sequenced language syllabus; they want to know the rules; they feel that practice helps them learn.

However, having said this, I firmly believe that this model, although important as a basis, is not sufficient. It needs to be supplemented by

- a) plenty of accumulation of 'exemplars' in the form of bits of texts that the learner becomes familiar with, or even learns by heart. There are two purposes here. First, through such learning, the learners can begin to acquire a 'feel' for what 'sounds right': this is particularly important for learners whose language-learning style favours intuitive rather than conscious learning processes. Second, when the teacher eventually focuses explicitly on a structure and explains it, the learner has already come across it in the form of 'chunks' of familiar text, and can 'recognise' the newly-explained structure in terms of exemplars he or she already knows.
- b) incidental focus-on-form in the course of communication tasks, where the teacher reacts to problems that come up during the activity in the form of errors or student questions or teacher-initiated explanation of a language point that is seen as tricky.



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