

# THEORETICAL OPTIONS AND COURSE BOOK REALITY: GRAMMAR TASKS IN POPULAR INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

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## Abstract

*This paper reports on a study into published materials focusing on grammar. A number of methodological options are reported in the literature in SLA (Second Language Acquisition). Based on analysis of 181 grammar tasks from the ten best selling ELT course books in New Zealand in 1998, the relative frequencies of occurrence of 4 methodological options were obtained. Findings showed the methodology oriented predominantly towards conventional options rather than the innovative options discussed in the literature. The options that predominated were output, and direct explicit knowledge rather than input, and indirect explicit knowledge.*

## Introduction

The use of published materials in language teaching is now more widespread than ever before (Tomlinson 1998). Furthermore, a high expectation is often placed on published materials and teachers expect them to reflect developments in theory and seen in the literature.

Recent years have seen an increase in interest in teaching grammar in the literature and theoretical inroads have been made. For example, attention has shifted from the question of whether form focused instruction (FFI) works to examining what kind of FFI might work best (Ellis 1997). A range of options for teaching grammar – some conventional and others more recent and innovative – have been discussed in the literature (Schmidt 1990, Fotos and Ellis 1991, Fotos 1993, VanPatten 1993, Cadierno 1995, DeKeyser and Sokalski 1996, Ellis 1997, Doughty and Varela 1998, Ellis 1998, White 1998).

Instructional materials are an important site for finding out the extent to which theory has diffused into practice, to see which of the possible methodological options the grammar tasks in them are based on.

Tasks have been defined as "... any proposal contained within the materials for action to be undertaken by the learners, which has the direct aim of bringing about the learning of the foreign language" (Littlejohn 1998: 198). Candlin (1987) and Breen (1987) define 'tasks' as predesigned,

structural language learning endeavours that offer teachers and learners a 'frame' for learning and teaching. *Tasks-as-workplans* (Candlin 1987, Breen 1987) are tasks that have implicit or explicit objectives, content appropriate to those objectives, specified working procedures, and information about the situation and conditions under which the task is to be done. In relation to pedagogical grammar materials, Batstone (1994) uses the term task to refer to 'extracts' of purely grammatical information and also 'noticing activities'. The rationale behind this is that a chunk of explicit grammatical information in a textbook is a task in the sense described above in that it provides a frame for learning or teaching, and contains an implicit objective. The objective is for the learner to understand a feature, or features, of grammar. Task, therefore, is a broad category including simple and brief exercises, complex and lengthy problem solving activities, as well as chunks of explicit grammatical information. This is different to, say, Willis's (1996) definition where tasks are defined as activities where learners use the target structure for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome.

## Methodological Options in Grammar Teaching

Theoretical inroads have led to new ways of conceptualising grammar instruction. For example, Ellis (1998) uses a computational model for second language acquisition (SLA). In this model, Ellis identifies four possible points where form focused instruction (FFI) can intervene in interlanguage development to set up, whether directly or indirectly, the optimal conditions for second language acquisition. Methodological options discussed by Ellis (1998) are outlined below.

### Input

Attempts are made to contrive texts in such a way that learners notice specific target forms as they try to comprehend texts and do not actually produce the structure in question but rather respond nonverbally or in a verbally minimal way (Ellis 1998). These have also been referred to as *structured input* activities (VanPatten 1993, 1996). The following is an example of a structured-input task targeting predicative adjectives.

#### Example

Do you agree or disagree with these statements?

- Quiet people are boring.
- I am bored when someone tells a joke.
- People who gossip a lot are very irritating.
- I get irritated with small talk
- It is interesting to talk about yourself.

(Ellis 1998: 44)

Learners simply indicate whether they disagree or agree. The psycholinguistic rationale behind this is that language acquisition occurs as learners notice the new structure in input rather than when they attempt to produce it. In other words, with regards to the example above, the comprehension-based task is focussed on a specific grammatical structure – predicative adjectives – in an attempt to intervene in learners' interlanguage development. Whether learners actually notice the structure, is another question altogether.

### Explicit L2 knowledge

Attempts are made to develop learners' explicit understanding of second language (L2) rules (Ellis 1998). This option subdivides further into 2 options: direct (deductive) in which learners are given a rule of some kind and indirect (inductive) in which learners are expected to formulate a rule of some kind based on data they are given. The indirect option corresponds with Ellis's use of the term *consciousness-raising*. It involves helping learners discover rules by themselves.

#### Direct explicit instruction

##### Example

To form a third person singular in the present tense, add -s to the verb  
(Batstone 1994: 2)

#### Indirect explicit instruction

This task follows a text comparing people with Alzheimer's disease with non-sufferers.

##### Example

Examine each symptom, as described in the text, and note down which verb form is used to refer to 'normal people' and 'people with Alzheimer's disease'. The first one is done for you.

Symptom	Normal people	People with Alzheimer's disease
Memory loss	present simple tense	may + verb
Familiar tasks		
Language problems		
etc.		

What does this analysis suggest about the differences in the meanings of *may*, *can*, and *could*? (Ellis 1997: 164)

## Output

Attempts are made to get learners to produce the target structures in some way.

### Example

#### Complete the sentences

The words in capitals at the end of each sentence can be used to form a word that fits suitably into the blank space. Look at the example first.

The contestants protested about the judges' ..... <i>unfairness</i> .....	FAIR
The audience expressed their ..... by booing and whistling.	APPROVE
Marks will be deducted in the exam for grammatical .....	ACCURATE
She frowned at them to show her .....	PLEASE

(Jones 1985: 67 cited in Batstone 1994: 134)

## Negative Feedback

Attempts are made to show learners where they have failed to produce a form correctly. This is a feature of classroom practice, rather than the basis of tasks in course books. Therefore, this option was not examined in the study.

Form-focused instruction may involve combinations of different options (Ellis 1998). For example, explicit instruction followed by output-oriented practice and negative feedback (Ellis 1997) or explicit instruction followed by input-oriented practice in the form of structured input activities. The latter has been termed *processing instruction* (VanPatten 1993, 1996).

While we know the methodological options for grammar instruction are reported in the literature and can find some examples of them in published course books materials, we do not know to what extent the newer options have diffused into practice and become course book reality.

## The study

The study aimed to identify which methodological options for grammar instruction reported in the literature were represented in textbooks popular in New Zealand in 1998.

The data for the study was collected from ten popular, intermediate-level, English-language textbooks. These were identified by a major retailer of ELT books in Auckland, New Zealand as the textbooks having the highest volume of sales in 1998.

The textbooks fell into three main categories:

- Grammar

Works specifically focused on provision of grammar instruction: *Collins COBUILD Student's Grammar*, *English Grammar in Use*, and *How English Works: A Grammar Practice Book*.

- General English

*Intermediate Matters: Student's Book*, *Headway Australasia: Intermediate Book*, *The New Cambridge English Course*, and *New Headway English Course: Intermediate*.

- Culture/Language

Works aiming to combine teaching about different aspects of life in New Zealand and general English instruction: *Discover New Zealand: English for Speakers of Other Languages*, *Everyday life in New Zealand: English for Speakers of Other Languages*, and *New Zealand: A language survival kit*.

A computerised random number generator was used to select one unit or chapter from each of these textbooks. On the assumption that the content of published course materials are relatively consistent in their format, structure and underlying methodology, these units were seen as fairly representative of the work as a whole.

Tasks were identified on the basis of definitions of Breen (1987), Candlin (1987) and Littlejohn (1998). Refer to pages 3 and 4. The ten course book units yielded 181 tasks which were categorised into the following methodological options:

- Input
- Indirect explicit-knowledge (Ind. E.K)
- Direct explicit knowledge (Dir. E. K.)
- Output

Some grammar activities were seen to combine 2 options (for example explicit instruction and output-based practice). These were counted as two separate tasks.

## Findings

Frequency data relating to grammar tasks representing four methodological options: input; direct explicit knowledge (Dir.E.K.); indirect explicit knowledge (Ind.E.K.) and output oriented are shown in the tables below. Table 1 shows both the options found in the course books overall and in three types of course books. Table 2 shows the options found in individual course books. For the purposes of comparison, frequency information was converted into percentages.

Tasks representing methodological options				
	Input	Dir. E.K.	Ind. E.K.	Output
Overall Freq and %	19 (10.5%)	42 (23.2%)	14 (7.7%)	106 (58.6%)
Type of course book				
grammar	0 (0.0%)	92 (50.8%)	15 (8.3%)	74 (40.9%)
general	35 (19.3%)	27 (14.9%)	18 (9.9%)	101 (55.8%)
culture/language	23 (12.7%)	8 (4.4%)	9 (5.0%)	141 (77.9%)

**Table 1:** Methodological options in tasks from 10 course books

Findings showed that generally, the methodological options preferred in the textbooks were output and (to a lesser extent) direct explicit knowledge.

In regard to the three categories of course books, the methodological option used varied in frequency of occurrence. Output oriented tasks predominated in general and culture/language type course books. Direct explicit knowledge oriented tasks predominated in grammar course books but occurred relatively infrequently in general and culture/language course books. The grammar course books contained no input tasks.

Tasks representing methodological options %

Course book	Arbury	Arbury	Bell	Bradley	Catt	Murphy	Soars	Swan	Swan	
Willis	1992	1995	1995	1996	1995	1994	1996	1990	1997	
1991										
Input	9.1	6.3	27.5	0.0	23.1	0.0	17.1	33.3	0.0	
0.0										
Dir. E.K.	0.0	12.5	20.0	14.3	0.0	66.7	7.3	16.7	25.0	60
Ind. E.K.	4.5	6.3	12.5	14.3	3.8	0.0	12.2	0.0	25.0	
0.0										
Output	86.4	75.0	40.0	71.4	73.1	33.3	61.0	50.0	50.0	
40.0										

**Table 2:** Methodological options in tasks in individual course books

The same researcher returned to the data at two points to confirm the initial coding to check for reliability. A sample of the tasks were coded by another person.



## Discussion

Has the real world of published instructional materials caught up with the literature? In regard to methodological options for focusing on forms, the answer would appear to be no. For example, input-oriented tasks, for which there is a large and growing literature, were in little evidence in the ten course books used in this study. This indicates that the knowledge gained through experimental research and theoretical advances made in this field has filtered down only marginally to inform the practice of course book writers and publishers. In other words, many of the kinds of FFI tasks and techniques present in the experimental research, are not present in published materials. This includes, for example, structured input tasks, processing instruction, and, to any great extent, consciousness-raising tasks. In the case of input-based FFI, some may argue that the research is too recent. However, approaches to input-based instruction date back to at least the beginning of the 1980s (Krashen 1981, Winitz 1981, Littlewood 1984) with the current vein of research commencing in the early 90s.

As a result, we can say that there is only a limited amount of crossover from knowledge gained from theoretical and experimental research in FFI, to published course book materials. Conventional options for form focused instruction predominate and innovative options (e.g. structured input, processing instruction, consciousness-raising tasks) are under-utilized.

## Two ways of Adapting Tasks

Given the fact that published materials may lag behind the literature, fail to incorporate the range of options for grammar instruction identified in the literature, fail specifically to offer input options which would indicate a message oriented approach to FFI, one possible solution is to adapt the existing materials. Below are two ways grammar tasks in published materials can be adapted to take into account two under-utilised methodological options: the structured input option and the indirect explicit knowledge option. It should be stressed first though that one option is not necessarily a substitute for the others and that a range of options may be preferred in a balanced approach to communicative language teaching.

### *Option 1. Adapting a typical output task into an input task*

One way of adapting existing material is to simply revise more traditional output tasks as input tasks as this example shows.

## a) Original (Murphy 1994: 37):

*Brian changed his lifestyle. He stopped doing some things and started doing other things.*

	studying hard		smoking
He stopped	going to bed early	He started	going out in the evening
	running three miles every morning		spending a lot of money

*Write sentences about Brian with **used to** and **didn't used to**.*

- |                           |         |
|---------------------------|---------|
| 1. He used to study hard  | 4. .... |
| 2. He didn't use to smoke | 5. .... |
| 3. ....                   | 6. .... |

## b) Revised as an input task:

Put up your hand if you used to do any of the following things.

1. You didn't use to study hard.
2. You used to smoke
3. You used to go to bed early
4. You didn't use to go out in the evenings
5. You used to run several kilometres every morning

As mentioned earlier, this has the effect of shifting the focus from attempted production of the grammatical structure to more simple comprehension. This approach could be taken to simplify material for lower level learners, or, alternatively, as a first step in the introduction of the new structure. The output practice could then be reserved for a later stage when learners' interlanguage is more fully developed.

*Option 2. Adapting an output task into indirect explicit knowledge task*

Another way to adapt published materials to incorporate indirect explicit knowledge tasks would be to give learners the answers to standard output tasks, but not the explicit instruction which is normally provided. The new task then would be to deduce the rules. In this way it would become an indirect direct knowledge (consciousness-raising) task. This could also be followed up with a comparison between the rules constructed by the learners and the rules offered by the course book.

## a) Original explicit instruction and sample output task (Swan and Walter 1997: 74-75)

**Word order: adverbs with the verb**

**Adverbs** that go **with the verb** include words expressing **frequency** (e.g. **always, often, usually, never**) and **certainty** (e.g. **definitely, probably**). Note the exact position:

AFTER AM/ARE/IS/WAS/WERE

*You **are** usually right.*

AFTER AUXILIARY VERBS

*She **has** probably forgotten.*



*It was **certainly** cold.*

BEFORE OTHER VERBS

*He **always** forgot my birthday.*

*I **often** get headaches.*

*I **can never** wake her up in time.*

NOT BETWEEN VERB AND OBJECT

*He ~~forgot always~~ my birthday.*

*I ~~get often~~ headaches.*

### Can you put the adverbs in the right places?

1. You are here when something happens. (usually)
2. Her mum cooks a meal in the evening. (always)
3. We book that April holiday in January. (usually)
4. They think that we have got bread. (probably)
5. You should look where you are going. (always)
6. She is going to stay overnight (probably)
7. etc.

### b) Revised as an indirect explicit knowledge task

#### Task

1. Read the example sentences and note how the adverbs are used before or after:
  - i. Forms of BE (am, is, are, was, were).
  - ii. Auxiliary verbs (e.g. has, have, can, etc.)
  - iii. Other verbs
2. Where can't you put adverbs?
3. Can you classify the adverbs in any way?
4. Now compare your analysis with the information in the textbook.

#### Example sentences

1. You are usually here when something happens.
2. Her mum always cooks a meal in the evening.
3. We usually book that April holiday in January.
4. They probably think that we have got bread.
5. You should always look where you are going.
6. She is probably going to stay overnight
7. etc.

For lower level students, this task could be stripped back even further to simply focus on one or two aspects of the adverb placement rules. For example, the students could just be given data containing adverbs after forms of *be*.

## Conclusion

Despite growing interest in recent years in FFI and the emergence of various innovations in grammar teaching such as input-based instruction and consciousness-raising these theoretical options remain mostly that - theoretical. The findings of this study indicated that the reality is that grammar is dealt with in tasks in course books, by and large, with conventional long established methodologies. That is, focused mainly on providing explicit knowledge and output-based production practice. Teachers wishing to expose their learners to a wider range of methodological options for FFI and incorporate more recent options may be well advised to scrutinize the grammar tasks in course book materials in relation to the literature and design or adapt materials accordingly.

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