WHY WE SHOULD TEACH GRAMMAR: INSIGHTS FOR EFL CLASSROOM TEACHERS

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Abstract

Controversies about whether or not to teach grammar still reign in the current language pedagogy. Those who are against grammar teaching hold the view that grammar should not be taught since grammatical features can be acquired unconsciously in a natural setting. The protagonists of grammar teaching, however, argue that grammatical features need to be taught in order to facilitate the process of acquisition. Without questioning the legitimacy of the fact that grammatical features can be acquired unconsciously, this article argues that formal instruction is needed particularly in EFL contexts. Given this argument, the article addresses three important questions: (1) On what theoretical grounds should grammar teaching be based? (2) When should grammar instruction be given? and (3) How should grammar be taught?

Keywords: the process of acquisition, grammatical features, formal instruction.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most contentious issues in the field of language pedagogy and second language acquisition (SLA) concerns whether one should teach grammar in the classroom. At one extreme, there are those who adopt what Ellis (1995, 1999) calls the *zero position*. They maintain that grammar does not need to be taught since it contributes little to the acquisition of communicative competence in a second language. Krashen (1982), for instance, consistently argues that grammatical competence can only be acquired if learners are exposed to comprehensible, meaningful, and relevant L2 input materials. Thus, input is deemed sufficient to aid acquisition, and direct intervention of grammar instruction is felt unnecessary. At the other end of the spectrum of pedagogy, there are those who are in favor of grammar instruction. White (1987) claims that grammatical features cannot be acquired simply by exposing learners to comprehensible input, and thus formal instruction is necessary. Celce-Murcia (1991) also asserts that though the debate as to whether or not grammar should be taught still continues, grammar instruction should not be

dismissed. Similarly, Larsen-Freeman (1995), while acknowledging the possibility of natural acquisition of grammar, concurs with the teaching of grammatical features. Drawing on the insights from research on language acquisition, Ellis (2002) states that learning a language in a natural setting (i.e., without formal instruction) does not guarantee the acquisition of grammatical competence as L2 adult learners often fail to achieve high levels of accuracy.

With these two conflicting views, language teachers, particularly those who teach English as a foreign language, might be in a state of uncertainty and might ask themselves which of these perspectives is correct. If they adhere to the former, they do not have to bother with the formal instruction. What they have to do is to provide learners with meaningful L2 input materials, through which grammatical features can be unconsciously acquired. However, if, presumably, they take the latter position, they are faced with other fundamental questions such as: (1) On what theoretical grounds can they base and justify their teaching instruction? (2) At what level of language proficiency should grammar be taught?, and finally (3) How should grammar be taught?. Arguably, these are questions of greater interest to language teachers, which are still germane to the contemporary language pedagogy. The purpose of the present paper is, therefore, to provide possible answers to these questions.

WHAT ARE THE THEORETICAL GROUNDS FOR TEACHING GRAMMAR?

The strong theoretical foundations in favor of formal instruction derive primarily from the psycholinguistic perspective, or, to be precise, from second language acquisition (SLA) theory. This theory has been put forward as a compelling argument to justify formal instruction in second and foreign language contexts. One of the well-known theories in second language acquisition is *input processing theory* (Van Patten, 1996). This theory stresses the importance of manipulating input in the process of students' interlanguage development. The relevance of this theory in grammar teaching is that as students' interlanguage development can be readily influenced by manipulating input (Ellis, 1995). Pushing learners to consciously attend to specific grammatical features available in the input can promote noticing, which is necessary for the mental representation of the features and the internalization of them. Inducing noticing in learners is deemed critical since it becomes one of the necessary conditions for input to become intake—a subset of input that has been attended or comprehended.

One of the input processing studies was conducted by White, Spada, Lightbown, and Ranta (1991). In an attempt to look at the potential effectiveness of form-focused instruction and correction for the acquisition of English question formation, they compared two groups of French-speaking learners of English: the first group (the experimental group) was exposed to a variety of input enhancement activities on question formation, and their performance – both on paper and pencil tasks as well as on oral communication – was assessed on a pre-post test basis, while the second group (the control group) was given no grammar instruction. The performance of the two groups was then compared. Based on their study, they found that grammar instruction could help learners develop syntactic accuracy, and that the instructed group significantly outperformed the uninstructed group.

Another input processing study was conducted by Tuz (cited in Ellis, 1995; see also Ellis 1999) with the target structure involving *psychological predicates* such as *like*, *attract*, *worry*, and *disgust*. Such verbs are said to pose considerable difficulty for Japanese learners in both comprehension and production. This is particularly true when the verbs are used in the marked order construction such as *Mary worries her mother* (Stimulus+ verb + experiencer), which is often understood as *Mary worries about her mother* (Experiencer + verb + stimulus) (Ellis, 1995). Comparing the comprehension-practice (processing) group with the production-practice group, each receiving different treatments, Tuz found that the former excelled the latter in both a comprehension and a production test of the structure (see Ellis 1999 for a comprehensive review of studies of input processing instruction).

Another theory closely related to input processing theory is the Universal Grammar (UG). This theory is also used as the basis that provides a compelling argument in support of formal instruction. According to this theory, human beings are biologically endowed with certain abstract principles together with knowledge of the parameters through which the principles are realized in different language (Ellis, 1999). The learner is said to possess the same language principles irrespective of the languages they learn, the difference being the setting for the language parameters (Cook, 1994). The implication of the UG theory in language pedagogy is that learners need to be exposed to minimal input (in the form of explicit grammar instruction) so that the parameter setting can be activated, and this activation eventually enables them to select the possible parameters.

Another theory that provides justification for formal instruction is called *consciousness-raising* (C-R). This is a type of form-focused instruction that attempts to draw the learner's attention to the formal properties of the target language (Rutherford & Sharwood Smith, 1985; Ellis, 1997b), without necessarily requiring them to produce the features.

This can be done by supplying the learner with either positive or negative evidence. "Flooding" the learner at the input stage constitutes positive evidence, while drawing the learner's attention on the non-occurrence or ill-formedness of the grammatical features in the target language constitutes negative evidence. Negative evidence is, in fact, another term for explicit correction of the learner's misapprehensions of the grammatical structures. The use of negative evidence is necessary and even desirable for at least two reasons. First, positive evidence in the form of "input flooding", although helpful, may not be sufficient to destabilize interlanguage and prevent fossilization (Ellis, 1997b). Second, negative evidence provides the learner with feedback they need to reject or modify their hypotheses about how the target language is formed or functions (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). The pedagogical value of negative evidence comes from the considerations of learnability, which as Yip (1994) points out, "involves the mechanism of progression from one state of knowledge to the next (p. 125). Indeed it is these considerations that constitute a cogent theoretical argument in support of C-R. In an attempt to probe the benefit of C-R, Yip (1994) conducted a study on English *ergative*-a verb that can be used both transitively and intransitively, which she observed, posed a logical problem of acquisition that cannot be resolved by positive evidence. Using a judgment task which contains such ergative verbs as *shatter, break, melt,* and *happen,* Yip found that many of her students, even the advanced students, rejected acceptable ergative constructions such as *The mirror shattered during the last earthquake* and *My car has broken down,* and they judged these constructions to be ungrammatical. Alternatively, the students corrected the constructions using their own version, and thus becoming *The mirror was shattered during the last earthquake* and *My car has been / was broken down*. What is interesting in Yip's study is that her students accepted the incorrect ergative construction *What was happened here?* as an acceptable construction in English, and as such, judged it as grammatical. However, after having undergone C-R sessions, her students showed dramatic improvement in that they were sensitive to the misapprehensions about the ergative construction in English. Based on this finding, Yip concludes that C-R can be effective, at least in the short term, in directing learner's attention to the ill-formedness of the grammatical features of the target language.

AT WHAT LEVEL OF LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY SHOULD GRAMMAR BE TAUGHT?

The question of when formal instruction should be taught is hotly debated in second or foreign language pedagogy. This controversial issue

still persists today. Those espousing the dictum of behaviorism might concur with the teaching of grammar at the early stage of language learning. The underlying construct of this view is that correct and accurate production of a language from the start should be encouraged so as to become the learner's habit. As Brooks (1960) asserts, "Error, like sin, is to be avoided at all cost." This perspective, nevertheless, runs counter to the current pedagogical view. The occurrence of error in language learning is considered normal because as Corder (1981:6) points out, "We live in an imperfect world, and consequently errors will always occur in spite of our best efforts." Given these contradictory views, the key question now is when grammar should be taught.

The variable most frequently referred to in arguments refuting the ineffectiveness of formal instruction is related to the learner's stage of development. Grammar instruction, as Pienemann (1984, 1985) argues, can be successful in promoting language acquisition provided that the learner's interlanguage is close to the point when the structure to be taught is acquired in the natural setting. This contention leads Pienemann to propose the so-called "teachability hypothesis", which suggests that the teaching of grammatical structures of L2 that are beyond the student's current stage of development may not be effective. In other words, there are psycholinguistic constraints which govern the process of acquiring L2 grammatical structures. It is these constraints that are often used as the basis of invalidating the teaching of grammatical structures to the beginners. Nevertheless, research by Spada and Lightbown (1999) reveals that learners are not restrained by psycholinguistic constraints since those who were still at an early stage in the acquisition of question forms were able to learn question forms at an advance stage as a result of formal instruction. The findings of this study suggest that the effectiveness of grammar acquisition depends less on the learner's stage of development than on the type of instruction.

Ellis (2002) proposes two reasons for not assisting beginners with grammar instruction. For one thing, learners do not need grammar instruction to acquire considerable grammatical competence. For another, the early stage of L2 acquisition is naturally characterized by agrammaticality (not really synonymous with ungrammaticality). Language learners begin by learning formulaic chunks, stringing them into sequences that convey meaning. This is demonstrated in the following utterances, typical of children (see Ellis, 2002:23):

> Me no (= I don't have any crayon)
> Me milkman (= I want to be milkman)
> Dinner time you out (= It is dinner time so you have to go out)
> Me no school (= I am not coming to school on Monday)

However, it is important to note here that we cannot simply overgeneralize the above proposal and apply it to all learning contexts. The relative truth of the first reason should not be taken for granted, though it is applicable in certain contexts. In foreign language contexts where linguistic gaps between the student's L1 and the target language are wider, the exposure to considerable grammatical competence from the early stage of learning can make the gaps narrower. As for the second reason, tolerating the agrammaticality from the very start of learning a foreign language tends to produce what Skehan (1996), as cited in Hinkel and Fotos (2002), calls fossilization and classroom pidgins. It is at this stage we see the need for grammar instruction at the early stage of learning, suggesting that formal instruction is not the prerogative of the adolescent (see Rutherford and Sharwood Smith, 1985; Sharwood Smith, 1990). However, the ways we assist the beginners with formal instructions proposed here are different from what has been generally assumed. We are certainly not interested in nor do we support the teaching of highly conscious metalinguistic learning of rules or paradigm to the beginners. Nor do we wish to arm the learner with sophisticated and detailed analysis of grammatical rules as mandated by grammar-translation methodology. What we intend to do is to equip the beginner learner with an explicit knowledge of grammatical forms in the framework of a communicative paradigm, which stresses the meaningfulness of the language. There are many ways of drawing the learner's attention to grammatical forms without indulging in metalinguistic discussion. Using typographical conventions such as underlining or capitalizing is one way (Rutherford and Sharwood Smith, 1985), and exposing the learner to instances of grammatical forms that are germane to the topics they experience everyday and that have a high frequency of occurrence is another. Granted that the rules being taught have a communicative need as well as communicative value and are not so metalinguistically obtuse that the learner must struggle with them, they can offer linguistic insights in a more efficacious manner (Robinson 1996, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2001).

HOW SHOULD GRAMMAR BE TAUGHT?

This question implies a specific type of grammar-*pedagogical grammar*, which is defined by Odlin (1994:1), as "the types of grammatical analysis and instruction designed for the needs of second [foreign] language students." It is certainly not grammar in a purely formal linguistic sense, but rather a grammar that considers social contexts and psychological aspects of learning. Two central questions arise from the definition above: (1) What types of grammatical analysis are congruent with the learner's needs? and

(2) What kinds of teaching instruction meets the learners' needs? The first question is concerned with what grammatical features should be presented to the learner, and the second deals with how those elements should be taught. Prior to addressing these questions, we need to have a broader conception of what grammar actually entails.

In the traditional approach of language teaching, grammar was taught to the learner by focusing only on linguistic forms, i.e., the analysis of language elements (e.g., sounds, structure, and vocabulary). However, with the advent of communicative methodology, the goal of language study shifted its orientation from focusing on forms to focusing on meaning and communication. As a result, language is seen as consisting of three interacting dimensions: form (accuracy), meaning (meaningfulness), and function (appropriacy). It is for this reason that grammar is conceived as encompassing not only form (morphosyntactic), but also meaning (semantics) and context of use (pragmatics) (Celce-Murcia, 1991; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Larsen-Freeman, 2001).

Apparently, other things being equal, grammatical analysis for language learners should embrace the three interacting dimensions of form, meaning and function; that is, the selection of the grammatical structures intended to be taught should take into account these three dimensions (see Larsen-Freeman, 2001 for discussion of ways to teach the grammatical points using the three perspectives of form, meaning and function).

Another question that we shall address now is how to teach the grammatical structures; that is, what kinds of instructions can help promote and facilitate the acquisition process. Drawing on the insights from both the theoretical rationales and empirical evidence of formal instruction discussed previously, two possible techniques or strategies can be proposed here. One of the possible techniques is to provide the learner with *consciousness-raising activities*, which are designed to make learners aware of the grammatical features in the input. In this sort of activity, learners are provided or "flooded" with exemplars of grammatical features of the TL that can be presented either deductively or inductively. The aim of such an activity is to construct a conscious mental representation of the target language features, with production of that feature kept to be minimum (Ellis, 1997a). Consciousness-raising is useful in that it can help learners develop their explicit understanding of the linguistic properties of the TL that are perceived to be problematic. Cases in point include English dative alteration (Fotos & Ellis, 1991) and English ergative construction (Yip, 1994), and thus these two features can become ideal candidates for explicit metalinguistic articulation.

Another possible technique is using what Ellis (1995) calls *interpretation activities*, which are designed to draw the learner's attention on the linguistic features in the input by making learners notice and

understand the features and the meanings rather than producing them. Noticing, then, becomes a central concern, because as Ellis posits, "no noticing, no acquisition." (p.89). However, as Ellis (2002) emphasizes, interpretation activities involve more than just simply comprehending the linguistic features; they also require learners to process them. As such, interpretation activities employ bottom-up processing (i.e., attending to the linguistic features) rather than top-down processing (i.e., using the contextual information to process linguistic features). What interpretation tasks and consciousness-raising have in common is that they belong to input processing instruction, and they defer the production of the target language. The difference lies on the fact that consciousness-raising focuses primarily on the linguistics forms, while interpretation tasks deal with not only forms but also meaning. However, the extent to which these two proposed form-focused instructions can effectively assist the acquisition process remains unclear.

In a more recent treatment of the role of formal instruction, grammar points are taught through contextual analysis, in which grammatical features are presented by taking into account relevant contextual information and the entire co-text (Celce-Murcia, 2002). By having students examine a form, its distribution and its meaning as well as its use in a context. The teaching of grammatical features beyond the sentence level is believed to offer an advantage since it has been convincingly argued that the majority of grammatical problems that teachers of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) have to deal with are not context free but rather are clearly functionally motivated (Celce-Murcia, 2002), and miscommunications often occur not at the morphosyntactic (formal) level of utterance decoding, but rather at the pragmatic (functional) level of utterance interpretation (Toth, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Without disparaging or questioning the legitimacy of the idea that the acquisition of grammatical competence, as has been attested in second language research, can be acquired naturally, this article has shown that formal instructions do no harm in assisting learners of English in developing and attaining a reasonable degree of accuracy. It even suggests that a direct intervention (in the form of formal instruction) in the learner's interlanguage development can bring about pedagogical significance. What is more, the place of grammar instruction in language pedagogy has been suggested by both cogent theoretical accounts and as empirical insights. It should be acknowledged, however, that some of the answers given to the questions addressed above are not necessarily conclusive, and therefore remain open for further debate and continuing research. Different perspectives based on alternative theories are also possible.

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