Pedagogical Options for Teaching Grammar

Kevin Roach

Auckland University of Technology

To teach grammar or not to teach grammar? That is the question. Strictly speaking, however, this was the question. It would be fair to say that, 20 years ago, with the advent of Communicative Language Teaching, grammar instruction became less of a concern than facilitating communicative activities in the classroom through pair and group work. Of course, some English language teachers continued to explicitly teach grammar. And on the face of it, many so-called communicative activities were merely dressed up to disguise the fact that grammar was still a focus. But, undeniably, the thinking of the time was that students would somehow pick up the grammar given opportunities to become immersed in meaningful language practice.

Arguably, the pendaulum has once again swung in favour of explicit grammar teaching. But gone are traditional grammar syllabuses. Grammar is now best incorporated into a more meaningful focus. It is recognized that *form, meaning and use* are inextricably entwined and that grammar is, after all, one of the resources, along with adequate vocabulary and knowledge of cultural and discourse conventions, our learners need in order to communicate effectively. This is as true of written language as it is for spoken language. 'Grammar in context' is now a buzzword. And so it should be. And, although there are still questions over the actual nature of linguistic knowledge, research has indicated that second language learners do benefit from formal grammar instruction, but only if they are "ready" to do so; that is, if the structure is compatible with their developmental level.

Insights from applied linguistics, however, often fall short of concrete suggestions for classroom practice.[1] Simon Borg, an English language teacher and applied linguist with an interest in grammar teaching and teacher beliefs, has gone as far as to say that, in the absence of any clear guidance, 'teachers create their own pedagogical maps'. It

---

[1] Much of the discussion in this Password article relates to classroom practice. It is recognized, however, that all classroom contexts differ and that, for example, teaching grammar in adult migrant ESOL may well have a different focus to that of ESOL programs in NZ secondary schools. For Home Tutors, I recommend a reading of Peter Wilburg's invaluable One-to-One: A teachers handbook to provide useful ideas of how to incorporate grammar instruction into one-on-one contexts.

is true that recent publications aimed at teachers have been helpful, such as <u>New Ways in Teaching Grammar</u> and Scott Thornbury's <u>How to Teach Grammar</u>. So also have recent methodology textbooks, such as Tricia Hedge's <u>Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom</u>. For teachers wanting a comprehensive reference text, <u>The Grammar Book</u>, by Marianne Celce-Murcia and Dianne Larsen-Freeman, is an invaluable resource. A clear, state-of-the-art overview is provided by Dianne Freeman's <u>Teaching Language: From grammar to grammaring</u>. But, ultimately, as Simon Borg suggests, in the classroom, teachers perhaps need to chart their own territory.

In the remainder of this <u>Password</u> article I would like to offer some practical suggestions for teaching grammar, suggestions I hope can provide some guidance in what is recognized as an ill-defined area of pedagogy. These suggestions originate from what prominent applied linguist, Rod Ellis, has termed *pedagogical options*. These options stem from research on the learning of grammar, but also are framed in terms easily recognized by English language teachers. I will illustrate these *pedagogical options* by focusing on the simple past tense. Other structures, however, could equally be the focus. It is also important to recognize that such *pedagogical options* need not be distinct, stand alone options; indeed, in practice they are combined. Teachers frequently do this, for example, by providing an explanation, followed by controlled and free practice. Practice is also often combined with corrective feedback. The only 'rule' is receptive language before productive language.

Pedagogical Options for Teaching Grammar

Option	Examples
Explicit Instruction Involves the teaching of rules, patterns, etc.	♦ Provision of a regular / irregular chart (often contained in the appendices of student grammar texts) ♦ Chalk and talk explanation of regular / irregular past tense forms (perhaps in conjunction with a written explanation from a grammar textbook of a suitable level) ♦ Chalk and talk explanation of rules governing pronunciation of regular past tense
Noticing Involves drawing attention to the structure: recognition only	♦ Teacher reads out a list of regular past tense verbs; students identify whether ending with /d/, /t/ or /Id/ ♦ Students read a recount text (first for meaning) and highlight all the past tense verbs, categorizing into regular and irregular. If you cannot find a suitable recount in a textbook, write your own (eg. the weekend, a day out, a barbeque party, a childhood memory). ♦ Students read or listen to a (taped) recount and answer comprehension questions that require an understanding of the past tense.
Practice Can be both oral and written Can be either at sentence level or discourse level.	Oral: ♦ Monday morning recount of weekend activities ♦ A mock job interview, where students answer questions about past work experience Written: ♦ Gap-fill exercises (exemplified in student grammar textbooks) ♦ Students write a recount (eg. the weekend, a day out, a party). Best to provide models prior to asking students to write
Corrective feedback Involves correcting students' errors, in both oral and written language	Oral: Teacher corrects students' oral language, drawing attention to errors, in (i) contexts where the past tense is an explicit focus (ii) where-ever possible in other contexts, taking into account affective issues. There are different ways of achieving this: eg, asking for clarification, reformulation, and repetition with emphasis, shaking one's head. Written: Teacher corrects students' writing, drawing attention to errors. Again, there are various ways of doing this.

References

Borg, S (1998). Teachers' pedagogical systems and grammar teaching: A qualitative study. *TESOL Quarterly* 32, 1: 9-37.

Celce-Murcia, M & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1999). *The Grammar Book: An ESL / EFL Teacher's Course*, 2nd Edition. Heinle & Heinle.

Ellis, R. (1998). Teaching and research: Options in grammar teaching. *TESOL Quarterly* 32, 1: 39-60.

Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom*. Oxford University Press.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2003). *Teaching Language: From grammar to grammarin*g. Heinle & Heinle.

Pennington, M. (ed) (1995). *New Ways in Teaching Grammar* (New Ways series). Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.

Thornbury, S. (1999). *How to Teach Grammar*. Longman

Wilberg, P. (1987). *One-to-One: A Teacher's Handbook*. Language Teaching Publications