Revival and Renewal in ELT Approaches to Grammar

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Recent years have seen a change in attitudes towards the teaching of grammar. The more dramatic rejection of overt grammar teaching associated with The Bangalore project (Prabhu) has been tempered by an appreciation that grammar may have a role to play in the teaching of English that incorporates the notions of a learner centred approach which is process oriented and skills based and which goes beyond the accepted practice of a more traditionalist approach. The role of grammar in the use of language in the real world outside the L2 classroom should not be underestimated:

> As language users, we may wish to be very clear about what we want to say, or choose to be deliberately ambiguous or non-committal. We may wish to sound polite, distant, direct or even rude. We may wish to convey formality or informality according to the context in which we are operating. To do all these things, speakers use the linguistic resources which the grammar of the language makes available to them. (Cullen 222-223)

Every English language teacher should have her own perspective on what is important (and what is not) in this key element of the teaching/learning process. The importance attributed to this area of ELT practice is founded on the belief (which while not universally accepted) has been stated by various authors like, for example, Penny Ur: "There is no doubt that a knowledge – implicit or explicit – of grammatical rules is essential for a mastery of a language: you cannot use words unless you know how they should be put together" (*Grammar Practice* 4). Regardless of whether a teacher upholds this belief or rejects it, no programme of study can be

constructed without taking a position on the multiple issues associated with the teaching and learning of grammar.

   Bowen and Marks identify three fundamental aspects in their view of grammar which are paraphrased below (76-83):

   i) Teaching grammar means teaching the "most common and recurrent aspects of meaning" (e.g. modality, tense, number, gender etc) as well as grammar words (the, a/an, his/her, would/could etc);

   ii) Grammar is generalizations about how words and groups of words behave. Grammar teaching and vocabulary teaching are "two sides of the same coin";

   iii) Grammar is a system with logic, patterns and restrictions which allows users to substitute new items into its structures and equations to create new utterances.

From the above we can state that grammar teaching should always have as its foremost concern how it encapsulates meaning... what is the difference between "*I have done my homework*" and "*I am doing my homework*"? The IMPORTANT difference is whether the homework is finished or not. We use different verb tenses to communicate different meanings, not because we want to make different tenses: "Learners should not engage in the mechanical input activities of traditional grammar instruction. Remember that input should be attended to for its message so that learners can see how grammar assists in the 'delivery' of that message" (Lee, and Van Patten 155). Grammatical variation as a function of different meanings is shown through the use of different word forms and as such it is artificial to entirely separate the teaching of grammar from the teaching of lexis; for example, when learners are required to get to grips with English irregular verbs in their past simple form, are we asking them to study grammar or lexis? Indeed, it could be argued that lexis is the starting point of language production, the building blocks on which grammar is mapped in order to convey a specific meaning. So, learners might be asked to expand a newspaper headline or create a dialogue based on a shopping list. In this way "learners experience the process of using their grammatical resources to develop the meaning potential contained in lexical items and express a range of meanings which the words alone could not convey" (Cullen 224).

In this light, Nunan provides three extremely useful guidelines as to how teachers can frame their approach to the teaching of grammar (158-160):

1) *Focus on the development of procedural rather than declarative knowledge.*

Knowing the rules is not enough (declarative knowledge), it is vital that learners are also able to use the knowledge for communication (procedural knowledge). Learning grammar means using it in communicative contexts, this is learning by doing... or "experientialism".

2) *Make clear the relationship between grammatical form and communicative function.*

Effective courses/books do NOT teach grammar as an abstract system and do NOT present grammar in isolated sentences. Procedures should always include some kind of communicative context.

3) *Integrate both inductive and deductive methods into grammar teaching.*

With a deductive approach, the teacher gives a grammatical explanation followed by exercises which are designed to clarify and help learners master the grammar point. Inductive procedures are more like guided discovery where from samples of language, the learners work out the grammar for themselves.

What is clear from the first two guidelines is that much more than just "form" and "rules" are important when it comes to the teaching of grammar: "Language learners need to know far more than just how to form sentences. They also need to know the meaning of the forms they use and how to form patterns to encode the meanings they wish to convey" (Watkins 42). Teachers must give consideration to providing opportunities for their learners to make use of the language item in question in meaningful contexts: authentic language use with a communicative purpose. Nunan's third guideline states clearly the need for teachers to vary grammar teaching methodology to the extent of providing opportunities for learners to come to their own conclusions about what the item means and how it works with the emphasis being firmly on creativity and use:

Grammar is the great systematizing force of language, allowing us to be endlessly creative with a finite set of resources. But we can represent this system more or less broadly, using idealizations which are more or less finely tuned. For learners, idealizations provide a rough-and-ready map which sketches out some of the main routes through the tricky terrain of forms and meanings. (Batstone 24)

It has become something like standard ELT practice for grammar to be **presented** by the teacher prior to the learners being asked to **practice** and then **produce** the grammar in question: an efficient use of this P.P.P. approach has become somewhat synonymous with effective teaching of grammar. Under these circumstances, the main function of the teacher is to be responsible for the quality of the presentation. Ur provides a checklist to try and guide the teacher to evaluate what was (or was not) a successful grammar presentation (*A Course* 82):

- **The structure itself**: Was it presented in both speech and writing? Were both the form and the meaning taught?
- **Provision of examples**: Were enough examples in meaningful contexts provided? Can you be sure the learners understood?
- **Terminology**: Was the structure given a "grammar book" name? Was this helpful? Could any other terminology have been useful?
- **Rules**: Was an explicit rule given? Was this provided by you or elicited from the learners? Was this useful?
- **Explanation**: Was the information given appropriate for the level? How much detail was required? Were contrasts drawn with the L1 grammar? Was this technique effective?
- **Language**: Which language was employed for the explanation? Use L1 or L2? Or a combination? Why?
- **Delivery**: Were you speaking (writing) clearly? At moderated or natural speed?

This checklist assumes a rather traditionalist approach to the teaching of grammar within a largely deductive paradigm. Despite much criticism and the suggestion of alternatives, perhaps most notably Task Based Learning, the P.P.P. approach remains in widespread use, particularly at the level of "novice" or student teachers. There is a strong pragmatic appeal to the division of

grammar into "teachable" sub-units, where a new language item is presented and practiced as a discrete entity, a learnable unit within one class but this allows for little integration of grammar into a vision of language as a broader system (lexical and discourse) and neither is the learner's existing knowledge given any overt value. But "[i]t is very important to remember that learners do not learn from presentation alone, or even presentation followed by practice. . . . You will probably have to focus on the most basic functional-grammar items again from time to time, right through to intermediate level and beyond" (Davies, and Pearse 29). Generally, the language item for presentation/practice is not chosen by the learners so it is difficult to say that there is any notion of learner needs or interests: the whole procedure is very teacher-centred right from the outset. A more process oriented approach would imply that "the learner must have a degree of choice over the grammatical structures they use, and deploy them as effectively as they can to match specific contexts and meet specific communicative goals" (Cullen 223). In addition, very often learners are pressured to "produce" before new grammatical information has been properly processed and/or assimilated. Frequently little or no time is allowed for "introspection". Batsone refers to the negative impact of time pressure on language production described in recent research and concludes that "planning time makes it easier for the learner to activate her existing knowledge, giving her more opportunity to stretch her language resources and hence restructure, and ultimately to proceduralise, a more accurate working system" (81). Few opportunities are generally provided for "receptive processing of input": learners should be allowed to "notice" and experiment their understanding and refine it; a more communicative methodology would involve a different approach: "Instead of starting with a grammar point, a lesson might revolve around students' understanding content or completing a task. When a grammatical problem is encountered, a focus on form takes place immediately by drawing the students' attention to it i.e. promoting noticing" (Larsen-Freeman 39).

Grammar teaching (and learning) needs to be more individualised, personalised to facilitate "internalisation" and to make grammar "personally meaningful". The provision of freer practice is vital so that learners can actively manipulate and explore grammar in use in a "contextually relevant manner": controlled practice where focus is on form may not encourage memorization. "Information gap", "Opinion gap" or "Context gap" type activities should predominate: in these

contexts real communication is prompted by absence of shared knowledge: grammar is used for a purpose. In this respect, Scott Thornbury after describing a jigsaw activity based on teaching the article system reports claims that learners achieve success by learning about language and getting communicative practice at the same time: "they do just as well when tested on the grammar as students taught more traditionally, and they speak just as much as students doing meaning-focussed (i.e. not grammar focussed) information gap activities" (43). From this methodological perspective, the principle role of the teacher has nothing to do with designing grammar presentation phases for a lesson but rather is concerned with the control of pre- and post-task conditions and features while learners focus on "product", where learners focus on specific grammatical forms, and on "process", where learners deploy these forms in real language use rather than the product): teachers should encourage learners' gradual proceduralisation of declarative knowledge.

Batstone makes a strong appeal for an approach to the teaching of grammar which "means guiding the learner's own attention to grammar, and designing tasks which help us to teach learners the skill of using and attending to grammar in language use" (99). Teachers need to be sensitive and flexible in their approach to grammar teaching so that the factors such as learner needs and interests as well as task appropriacy and intensity are constantly being evaluated so as to ensure that their students are efficiently engaged in what might be called "learning". Indeed, pre-service teachers could benefit immensely from a more guided reflection on the teaching of grammar, perhaps through the use of a worksheet (see below).

What makes a GOOD grammar-focussed lesson?

Identify a grammar focussed lesson from your recent learning/teaching experience. Think about the questions below and reflect on what ACTUALLY happened in class.

1) Was it the first time the learners had "seen" this grammar?

_____

2) At what stage of the lesson did the grammar "appear"?

_____

3) Was the grammar "embedded" in a special context?

_____

4) How did the learners "work" with this grammar?

_____

5) How did you check the learners' "understanding" of the grammar?

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6) What kind of "extension activity" did the learners do?

_____

7) Was any **overt** pronunciation phase incorporated in the lesson?

_____

8) Were the learners required to "recycle" the grammar in a later lesson?

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