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A pedagogical proposal for teaching grammar using consciousness-raising tasks

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Abstract

There are more than one way to define *grammar* as such within the SLA (second language acquisition) paradigm. Grammar may be defined as a formal mechanism according to which language works; as a functional system used to convey meaning; or as a resource to be consulted by both teachers and learners of the language, among other options. In view of these viewpoints, the question arises as to which concept of grammar should be considered more appropriate in ELT mainstream. This widespread concern has provoked a manifest interest among practitioners, linguists and researchers worldwide. A comprehensible answer to this question entails detailed examination of the current literature on the teaching of grammar to offer some sensible and practical contribution to the profession. This paper explores the role of grammar in second language learning. Two different ways of approaching the teaching of grammar in the EFL classroom were critically analyzed: traditional *grammar practice* and *consciousness-raising*. Some areas of convergence and divergence between these two approaches were highlighted and some examples of consciousness-raising tasks for the teaching of grammar *per se* were presented, along with the principles underlying each of them. Finally, some pedagogical recommendations were offered and some related areas for further research were suggested.

Key words: grammar teaching, noticing, acquisition.

INTRODUCTION

The term *grammar* has been interpreted in different ways, oftentimes causing confusion in the language-teaching field. These misconceptions lie mostly in the view that grammar is regularly seen just as a set of arbitrary rules about fixed structures in the language such as verb paradigms and rules about linguistic forms. Grammar is unmistakably much more than this. As Batstone (1994) claims, grammar is an immensely broad and diverse phenomenon which embodies three interdependent dimensions: form, meaning and use. This perspective on grammar, where forms are presented in direct association with meaning, views grammar as an integral part of the language. Grammar is a device for constructing and conveying meaning without which, effective communication would be impossible. On



looking at this definition, then, the question remains how teachers can teach their students to put grammar into effective use.

Grammar teaching has been subject to as many changes as any other aspect of language. It seems that the emphasis has moved from the teachers' task in teaching grammar to the learner's task in learning it and putting it into use, shifting the debate from what *grammar is* to *how it can best be taught* to help students achieve this goal. This paper explores two different approaches to the teaching of grammar in the EFL classroom. Some problematized areas regarding the role of grammar in relation to these two approaches will be discussed here. Secondly, a progression of *consciousness-raising* tasks (CRTs) will be described. Next, some examples of these tasks will be examined. Finally, some pedagogical recommendations will be given.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For the last 40 decades, the teaching of grammar in the EFL classroom has been focus of heated debate, and has experienced several drastic changes. One of the biggest challenges to the teaching of grammar comes primarily from Krashen (1981). He suggests that teaching grammar results in learned (conscious) knowledge, which is only available for monitoring utterances that learners produce using their acquired (unconscious) knowledge, and as such, it is of very limited value. He candidly recommends that teachers should abandon grammar teaching, and concentrate instead on providing lots of comprehensible input so that learners can acquire a second language naturally, in much the same way they have acquired their mother tongue.

Other researchers do not appear to agree with the notion that learners seem to master the grammar of a second language simply by being exposed to plenty of comprehensible input (Ellis, 1984; Lightbown, 1985; Long & Robinson, 1998; Skehan, 1989, 1998, 2003; Swain, 1993; Swain & Deters, 2007; Gass, 2000, 2001, 2003; Gass, Mackey & McDonough, 2000; Smidth, 1990, 1995; Ranta, 1998, among others). Krashen's theoretical claims also seem to be contrary to the personal experiences and beliefs of numerous language teachers who find that this theory does not include those students who plan and perform slowly and consciously in a way that develops into automatic behaviour (Sharwood Smith, 1981). Corder (1967) claims that learners possess a built-in syllabus that determine when they are ready to acquire a new grammatical structure independently of how much practice they may have



been exposed to. This *learnability* problem has been the focus of debate for many years and might partly explain why not all learners are able to learn what they are taught. This suggests, therefore, that a way should be found of teaching grammar that is compatible with how learners learn it.

In the traditional language classrooms, learners receive formal instruction in the grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation of the target language, together with tightly controlled opportunities for practising them systematically. With the advent of more communicative approaches, the PPP approach (*Presentation-Practice-Production*), is introduced; and materials, organised around a grammatical syllabus, allow for more meaningful practice in communicative situations. But the problem is that oftentimes, learners complete activities without having a clear understanding of the form-meaning relationship.

Batstone (1994) claims that there are three approaches to teaching grammar: as *product*; as *process*; and as *skill*. Product teaching is concerned with grammatical forms and with the learners' noticing of them in the input. In order to be noticeable, a grammar item has to be significant to the learner; and teachers should do their best to design activities that aim at making it as salient as possible. *Noticing* the new items of language is just the first phase in learning. After the new item has been noticed, learners are prepared for the second one, during which, they make their own *hypotheses* on how language works and then, they *structure* their knowledge of the language system. These processes are facilitated by consciousness raising tasks (CRTs), which involve active manipulation of the language under focus and provide good conditions for noticing and sustained emphasis on re-noticing (Batstone, 1994; Schmidt, 1990, 1995, Doughty & Williams, 1998; Venkatagiri & Levis, 2007, Spada, 1997; Samuda, 2001; Swain, 1993; among others). These mental processes of *noticing*, *structuring* and *restructuring* allow learners to organise language flexibly, combining elements from grammar and lexis productively. In process teaching, teachers not only want learners to achieve the self-discovery of grammar rules encouraged by CRTs, but also the self-expression of them in communication.

Teachers should aim at designing and implementing tasks in the classroom which encourage learners to focus on form and language use, to give them flexibility to solve any problem they might encounter and to raise their awareness of processes of language use. In this proposal, CRTs are meant exclusively for the teaching and learning of grammar. But tasks of this type may also be used to teach



other linguistic aspects such as pronunciation. Since 2002, Luchini has been using and evaluating CRTs in his pronunciation classes. He claims that considerable exposure to meaningful samples of language and plenty of opportunities for practicing it freely are not as much as necessary to guarantee native-like output. A carefully contrived focus on the meaningful forms of the target language helps to develop the quality of learners' language performance. Output practice combined with a focus on form (FoF) enables learners to integrate successfully language knowledge into productive use (see Isaac, 2009; Luchini & Ferreiro, 2009; Luchini & Roselló, 2007, Luchini, 2007, 2006, 2005, 2004).

SLA research suggests that new grammatical features are more likely to be acquired when learners notice and comprehend them through input. However, some attention to form is also necessary (Ellis, 1994; Spada, 1997; Ranta, 1998; Gas, Mackey & McDonough, 2000; Long & Robinson, 2000). Ellis (1993) sustains that formal instruction is central in second language learning only if it is given as part of meaning-based activities. He distinguishes two kinds of knowledge: *explicit* and *implicit*. Explicit grammar instruction refers to those instructional strategies used to raise learners' conscious awareness of the form or structure of the target language. Through explicit instruction learners are able to notice features in the input data. Implicit knowledge, on the other hand, is a non-conscious and automatic abstraction of the structural nature of the material arrived at from experience of instances (Ellis, 1994).

A PROPOSAL FOR TEACHING GRAMMAR USING CRTs

One way to help learners develop awareness of a certain grammatical forms is by simply telling them how it works. An alternative and much more promising way is through the use of CRTs¹. Learners are provided with data about how a particular grammatical structure works in context, and are then prompted to work out the rule by themselves. CRTs will guide the learner to self- discover or *notice* features of grammar, which they will then *structure* and *restructure* as many times as needed through the constant exposure to varied sources of input, testing their hypotheses about how language operates and linking the new elements to what they already know.

¹ The term consciousness-raising (CR), as used by Rutherford and Sharwood Smith (1985), refers to the deliberate attempt to draw the learners' attention particularly to the formal properties of the target language.



Rutherford (1987) explains that the matter of raising the learners' grammatical consciousness is multifaceted and can be divided into activities that ask the learner for a judgement and those that pose a task to be performed or a problem to be solved. CRTs aim at *noticing the gap* between a learner's interlanguage system and the native speaker's norms of the target language. Learners are able to hypothesise about how language works and structure their interlanguage system. Further exposure leads successively to further noticing and restructuring. In the process of self-discovery learners bring to the task different prior knowledge and overgeneralized rules from their previous learning.

There are different taxonomies of CRTs. Willis and Willis (1996) produce one which fits into their particular approach to language learning: the *task-based approach*. This method, which follows a meaning-form-meaning progression, combines the best insights from Communicative Language Teaching with an organised focus on form. Task-based-learning (TBL) framework is divided in three phases: the *pre-task phase*, in which students are introduced to the topic, the *task cycle*, during which the task itself takes place; and the last one, the *language focus phase*, where attention to form is highlighted. These tasks are classified into different categories. Through *identification* or *consolidation* tasks, for example, students are asked to search a set of data to identify a particular pattern or usage and the language forms associated with it. Through *classification* tasks (*semantic or structural*), students are required to work with a set of data and sort it according to similarities or differences based on formal or semantic criteria. When dealing with *hypothesis building/checking* tasks, students are given a generalisation about language and asked to check this against more language data. By using *cross-language exploration* tasks, students are encouraged to look for similarities and differences between patterns in their own language and in English. When involved in *reconstruction - deconstruction* tasks, students are required to manipulate language in ways that reveal underlying patterns. *Recalling* tasks require learners to recall and reconstruct elements of a text. Significant features of a given text are highlighted. Through *reference training* tasks, learners are pushed to know how to use reference works such as dictionaries or study guides (ibid: 69).

Participants



Sixteen young adults, with ages ranging from 19 to 31 participated in this teaching experience. Their English language proficiency level was equivalent to that of a low-intermediate level. Students were arranged in 4 small groups of 4 students each. Their classes met twice a week for 2hs.

The Tasks

Three different types of CRTs will be shown here where students are first required to process a text for meaning and then, they will be pushed to attend to how a particular grammatical form is used. The three tasks have been organized around the contrast between the *past continuous* and *simple past* tenses. The first task, called *The Dinner Party*, used a set of pictures adapted from *Storylines* (Viney, 1986). The other two were adapted from *The Anti-Grammar Grammar Book* (Hall & Shephard, 1991). The first of these two tasks is *Who was Jack the Ripper?* and the second is *Sea Saga*.

Task 1: *The Dinner Party*

The class was divided into 4 groups of 4 students each. Each group received a copy of the task sheet. The teacher told students that the *Dinner Party* had taken place some time ago. They had to report what they saw in the pictures verbally. They were free to include any information they considered relevant to make the story appealing. They were advised to craft an outline of the story and use it to give support to their oral recount. They were given 3 minutes to complete this phase. The task performance was divided into three macro-phases: *Pre-Language Focus*, *Language Focus*, and *Post-Language Focus*. Its framework underpinned a meaning-form-meaning progression (Samuda, 2001). In the first phase, the teacher held a stand-by role. The aim was to highlight an area of meaning and maximise opportunities for noticing holes in their current interlanguage systems and, in so doing, create the need in them to use a new feature of the language to which they had not been introduced yet. Even though they did not know the existence of the past continuous and how it was constructed, they would probably be able to take it in rapidly, considering that in both languages (L1: Spanish, L2: English) it is used similarly.

Once the planning time was over, the oral work began. The students tried to fill their linguistic gaps by means of language mined from the task input data and language mobilised from their current interlanguage repertoire, which was precisely the main aim of the task set. It aimed to shape language



development by mobilising, stretching and refining current interlanguage resources (Samuda, 2001). Thus, students were pushed to stretch their interlanguage systems without necessarily implying any immediate production typical of the more traditional PPP instruction.

When all the groups had finished, the teacher played a recording of the narration. Students listened to and compared their version with the original one. During that phase, students had the possibility of testing their hypotheses about how language works. Likewise, given the aim of the task, they were pushed to systematise their knowledge through structuring. In this language focus phase, the teacher started a gradual shift from meaning to form. Then, students commented their findings and, little by little, the teacher precast the introduction of the new form by means of proactive moves highlighting form-meaning connections. Only when necessary, the teacher continued with a more explicit language focus in which she explicitly explained the rules of the target feature. This overt FoF is possible because it follows an active work on meaning. Finally, in the post language focus phase, each group was asked to write up the story. This gave them another opportunity to reflect on the task done. In this phase, the teacher went back to her role of leading from behind. According to Willis and Willis' taxonomy of CRTs, this would fit into the category of *Identify/Consolidate*, in which students are asked to listen to or read the story, and underline or take notes of all the instances, in this case, of the past continuous tense.

Task 2: *Who was Jack the Ripper*

This activity aims at highlighting the form of the past continuous introduced in “*The Dinner Party*”. The students were also arranged in small groups and each received a copy of the task sheet. This activity was divided into three parts. In the first, the teacher introduced the topic to the students. The whole class was involved in a discussion about the character. The teacher elicited from the students what they knew about “*Jack the Ripper*” to predict what the text was about. The purpose of this was to motivate the students and to raise their interest in the topic under discussion. In this elicitation stage, they were deliberately introduced to new lexical items that they would later on probably need to complete the task set. After that, the teacher asked them to read the text on their own to confirm their expectations. At that stage, further comments on the content of the passage were made.



In the second part, the students were given the chance to notice the target feature, but this time they were asked to find six errors of form in the text. They were encouraged to work collaboratively to spot those mistakes. To raise their motivation, they were engaged in a sort of competition in which each group received a credit for each error they were able to spot and another if they were able to come up with the modified edition of each mistake. Then they were given time to complete a substitution table in which they were prompted to reflect on the target feature by filling in a gapped text. To avoid confusion, they were told not to complete the last line of the table as it dealt with a new grammatical structure (passive voice) they had not been introduced to yet.

According to Willis and Willis' taxonomy this task fits the *hypothesis building checking* type, in which students are asked to check the generalisation made about language they were given in the previous activity, and are pushed to identify mistakes and correct them.

Task 3: *Sea Saga*

The students were asked to manipulate language structures from a text which revealed the patterns under focus. Following Willis and Willis' taxonomy of CRTs, this illustrates the *Reconstruction/Deconstruction* stage. The aim of this activity is to have students identify six different uses of the past continuous tense in contrast with the Simple Past. The task is organised in three parts: (i) *pre-teaching*, (ii) *grouping the class and setting reading tasks*, and (iii) *story comparison*. In the first, a glossary with some key words was given to the students to help them understand the text without having to turn away from the focus of attention of the task set. Only after learners had understood the story and the sequence of events presented in it, they were guided to focus on form. In the second part, the whole class was divided into two groups: A and B. Each student in group A received part A of the task, while those in group B got part B.

Each student then had to read the story in silence and order the pictures following the sequence in which the events were described in their copies. Next, they were asked to compare their results with those from another member of the same group. Later, they were asked to answer some *True/False* questions. They were again asked to compare their results with those coming from another partner. This comparison stage provided them with further opportunities to notice linguistic gaps and to engage in additional restructuring. In the third part, students were paired off. In each new pair there was one



member from group A and one from B. They were required to compare their answers with the ones given in the *True/False* exercise previously done. They were also challenged to find six differences in the two versions of the story. Finally, a whole class discussion followed whereby the students and teacher tried to agree on common responses.

This activity provided the students with multiple opportunities for collaborative work. Group work implies interaction among learners that eventually leads to further noticing and restructuring of the target feature to be taught. This task engaged these learners in the process of noticing, noticing the gap, structuring and restructuring. All these important aspects are consistent with an organic process-oriented view of interlanguage development (Rutherford, 1987; Luchini, 2007). It also provided plenty of chances for the learners to check their hypotheses through recurring exposure and manipulation of the target feature (Batstone, 1994).

In this context, CRTs are meant to facilitate the acquisition of grammatical competence in English. It is then important to bear this notion in mind when designing and implementing tasks of this type. Learning is essentially an inductive process. Adding a sensitive and self-discovering treatment of grammar changes students' preconceptions and fairly negative attitudes about traditional ways of learning it. Only after overcoming these presumptions, students become better skilled in recognising, analysing and mastering the target language.

CONCLUSION

Classes whereby teachers feel they can provide instruction just at the right time for the right students with the right amount of elaboration should undergo change. An effective grammar teaching model should be compatible with a communicative framework that emphasises learners' understanding of classroom input through meaningful, negotiated interactions. Such a model should integrate explicit grammar instruction with communicative language teaching. If it has been proved that learners can acquire a new grammatical structure only very gradually and slowly, grammar instruction should not aim at achieving immediate production. On the contrary, it should aim at helping students become aware of how grammatical features work. This awareness can facilitate and trigger learning and help students in the process of becoming active participants and less dependent on teachers. Learning a language, and hence its grammar, is a lifetime commitment and the contact teacher-learner



is just a short phase in this undertaking. Therefore, it is essential to give learners the means and motivation to take part in their own learning processes.

The suggestions offered in this proposal are modest and limited in the narrowest of their scope. The pedagogical implications discussed here need to be empirically investigated across a broader range of contexts in order to build a robust picture of how both teachers and learners interact and how this may affect and shape acquisition over time. Before claims for effectiveness can be made, a logical next step then would be to conduct comparable studies in different contexts and with different populations to evaluate and contrast results. Similar tasks to the ones employed in this proposal, focused on the same grammatical structures or others, could be implemented with similar groups of learners but using CRTs and the *PPP approach* to compare and measure results. The pre/post-test technique could also be used to allow researchers to obtain quantifiable data about the state of these students' grammatical competence before and after the implementation of tasks. Comparable mixed-data source triangulation could then provide more varied information which could be used to generate stronger justifications.

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