APPROACHES TO TEACHING GRAMMAR

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I. Introduction

The importance placed on grammar instruction varies under different pedagogical approaches to ESL instruction. On the one hand is the "focus on formS" camp, which emphasises the teaching of explicit grammar in distinct lessons. On the other hand is the "focus on form" camp, which addresses issues of grammar as they arise during the breakdown of communication.

It cannot be denied that grammar is a necessary part of effective communication in any language, and communicative competence relies on a thorough understanding of its rules and functions. For this reason, it will be necessary to teach some grammar in the ESL classroom, irrespective of the methodology of English instruction the teacher employs. This paper will review several of the different approaches to grammar instruction found in the literature.

II. Typical Approaches to Grammar Instruction

Many influential ESL teaching methodologies such as the Grammar-Translation Method, the Situational Language Teaching Method, the Audiolingual Method and the Communicative Language Teaching Method, consider grammar to be a key part of language teaching. In many ways, grammar is the glue that holds vocabulary together, thus creating a comprehensible language. Much time is devoted to ESL grammar instruction at the junior high school and high school level in Japan, often in the form of rote translations and explanations in the L1. It is also commonly delivered following a lesson plan similar to the extract in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Extract of a Typical Lesson Plan Introducing a Grammar Point
  Plan:
  1. Students read a short text, describing a person's past habits.
  2. The teacher asks the students to underline the phrases that refer to the past.
  3. The teacher asks the students to talk in small groups about the patterns they have underlined and the meanings they convey.
  4. The students report back the patterns and the teacher summarizes them on the board.
  5. The students talk in groups about their own childhoods.

The example lesson plan in Figure 1 intends to teach a grammar point, most likely "used to" plus a verb to describe past events, using a methodology known as PPP (Presentation, Practice, and Production). The teacher first introduces and contextualizes the grammar, then

provides opportunity for controlled practice, before learners incorporate it in free production. PPP is a 'focus on formS' approach, as it teaches discrete points of grammar in separate lessons (Doughty and Williams, 1998, cited in Borg and Burns, 2008, p.479). This contrasts with 'focus on form' lessons where "students attention [is drawn] to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (Long, 1991, pp.45-46, cited in Sheen, 2002, p.303).

III. *Rationale for the PPP Lesson Plan*

PPP is an 'examples-first' approach to teaching grammar. Learners are first presented with the target structure in a short text, they then locate the phrases that refer to the target structure, work out patterns and meanings in small groups, then apply the rules in free language production of their own. The lesson plan in Figure 1 has 5 steps, comprising the 3 stages of instruction.

Stage 1: Present
Engaging with a short text activates student schemata. Deriving grammar from texts (text-driven) and presenting grammar through texts (form-driven) both place the grammar in context (Borg and Burns, 2008, p.470). Underlining phrases that refer to the past primes the learners for the language point, and enables the teacher to see how competent they already are with the grammar point. This is an inductive approach, where learners try to understand grammar rules from explicit contextualized examples.

Stage 2: Practice
Small group work creates comfortable learning environments providing "more opportunities for learners to initiate and control the interaction, to produce a much larger variety of speech acts and to engage in the negotiation of meaning" (Carter and Nunan, 2001, p.122). Students attempt to create hypotheses about the grammar, test them with fellow learners, before clarifying with the teacher. Borg and Burns (2008) discovered that the number of teachers favoring discovery learning of this type was almost three times greater than the number who favored explaining rules (p.477). By making the effort to work out patterns themselves, cognitive learning theory suggests "learning will be more complete and thorough because they have had to invest effort in working out the problem" (Craik and Lockhart, 1972). Texts provide a useful way of presenting new grammar in context, which can be studied in detail and deconstructed by the learners.

Stage 3: Produce
Students talk about personal experiences in their own childhoods in order to activate, practice and internalize the grammar through communicative use of the target language.

IV. *Alternative Approaches and Considerations*

PPP has been criticized for its teacher-centeredness, assumptions of linear learning (Harmer, 2003, p.82), and narrow focus, what has been called "McNuggets of language"

(Thornbury, 2010) that break "language down into small pieces to learn them ... cheating the students of language which, in Tessa Woodward's phrase, is full of 'interlocking variables and systems'" (Harmer, 2003, p.82). Despite these criticisms, PPP remains popular among teachers and textbook publishers because of its predictability, and because many students are accustomed to this method and expect it (Ellis, 2002, p.20). Exposure to something, followed by practice, leads to mastery of other skills such as swimming or driving, therefore it seems reasonable that language learning should also operate that way, but unfortunately it does not.

PPP can be effective for lower level and beginner students but for more advanced and older learners, it can become formulaic and negatively affect motivation. Many undergraduate students in Japan come from traditional classroom settings that were teacher-led, sentence-driven, grammar-translation preparations for the university entrance exams, containing a high amount of metalinguistic instruction provided in the L1, and few opportunities for communicative output. I agree with Doughty and Williams (2002, p.197) that the fundamental goal of the classroom is to teach the target language for communicative competence, and favor a 'focus on form' approach over this more traditional 'focus on formS' style of instruction. I avoid teaching grammar in isolation, and prefer to integrate it into other class activities, embedding the grammar into meaning-oriented tasks. This 'fluency-first' approach includes an implicit focus on form during primarily communicative tasks (Doughty and Varela, 2002, p.114).

An example of a 'fluency-first' approach would be to first set up a communicative task and monitor output for good and bad uses of language on which to conduct feedback. I rely on a reactive focus on grammar, as conceptualized by Long (1991, pp.45-46, cited in Doughty and Williams, 2002, p.204), and draw "students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication". Responding to errors, questions and difficulties as they arise during tasks and skills work requires flexibility and it may not be possible to anticipate how the lesson will unfold. However, it is always possible to return to a particular form in a subsequent lesson if necessary. This incidental focus on form approach, with unplanned attention to grammar in the context of communicative work, is very different to the sample PPP lesson plan.

Scrivener (1994, cited in Harmer, 2003, p.83) proposed a modification to PPP termed ARC, for Authentic use, Restricted use, and Clarification and focus. A typical PPP lesson can be described as CRA: the teacher presents a situation and clarifies the language point; initiates restricted practice through elicited dialogue, drills, guided writing, or other consciousness raising activities; before encouraging students to use the language point in 'authentic' use. Harmer (2003, p.83) describes Lewis' OHE model in which students first Observe the language through reading or listening, in order to Hypothesize about how the language works, so they are better able to Experiment with the language point based on their hypothesis during free practice. This approach is also called the III model (Illustration, Interaction, and Induction) by McCarthy and Carter (1995, cited in Harmer, 2003, p.83). Finally, Harmer (1998, cited in Harmer, 2003, p.84) proposed the ESA approach: Engage (emotionally for most effect), Study, and Activate through communicative activities. 'Classic' PPP lessons (focus on formS) would be described as ESA and more task-based (focus on form) approaches as EAS. The acronyms are different, but they are all essentially PPP models (Table 1). The lesson plan in Figure 1 mirrors Lewis' OHE method.

As well as explicit methods (focus on formS), alternative approaches to grammar

TABLE 1.   VARIOUS METHODS OF TEACHING GRAMMAR

	PPP Method	OHE Method (Lewis, 1993)*	III Method (McCarthy & Carter, 1995)	ARC Method (Scrivener, 1994)	ESA Method (Harmer, 1998)*
Stage 1	Present	Observe	Illustration	Clarification	Engage
Stage 2	Practice	Hypothesize	Interaction	Restricted Use	Study
Stage 3	Produce	Experiment	Induction	Authentic Use	Activate

Note: * Cited in Harmer (2003).

instruction include implicit methods, which assume that exposure alone is sufficient for learning. In deductive methods a rule is given first and learners then try to apply it in their own utterances. Inductive approaches are where learners try to work out rules from examples of language use (as in stage 1 of the lesson plan in Figure 1). 'Focus on form' approaches can be planned, where a focused task is required to elicit occasions for using a predetermined grammatical structure. They can also be incidental, when unplanned attention to form is given in the context of communicative work. A comparison of the different methods of instruction possible in explicit and implicit grammar teaching methods is given in Table 2.

TABLE 2.   METHODS OF EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION

Method	Focus on FormS	Focus on Form
PPP	PPP	
OHE	OHE	
III	III	
ARC	CRA	ARC
ESA	ESA	EAS

V.   *Conclusion*

A student that doesn't know grammar is "like a surgeon who doesn't know the parts of the body" (Wang, 2010). The importance of a solid understanding of grammar cannot be denied, but the pendulum of grammar instruction continues to swing between explicit and implicit instruction methodologies. There are a number of techniques available to the language instructor and there is surely a method to match all teaching styles and situations. Learner age, ability, learning preferences, class size, and the expectations of all concerned parties (teachers, learners, guardians, institutions, local and national regulators) should be considered when choosing between the alternative methods.

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