



LANGUAGE LEARNING NOTES

Contributions in this section include articles that critically investigate existing sources on aspects of language learning (e.g. the implications of new educational policies), or contributions that offer well-argued and research-based advice to language teachers, or early reports on research in progress.

GRAMMATICAL SYLLABUS AND EFL TEXTBOOKS: THE NEED FOR CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING ACTIVITIES

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In this paper, the role of the grammatical syllabus in EFL settings is examined. To this end, the grammatical syllabus and its shortcomings are first explored. It is then argued that the grammatical syllabus is perhaps the best channel through which grammar instruction can take shape, and hence the importance of grammar instruction is discussed. Finally, the concept of consciousness-raising activities is introduced and it is suggested that the explicit presentation of grammar in traditional EFL textbooks still used in certain settings be replaced by consciousness-raising activities.

Keywords

grammar, grammatical syllabus, meaningful exercises, consciousness-raising

INTRODUCTION

The grammatical syllabus has been defined as one which consists of a list of grammatical items selected and graded in terms of simplicity and complexity (Nunan, 1988). The structures are generally presented one by one, usually, but not always, in contrasting pairs, for example, simple present versus simple past or singular nouns versus plural nouns (Long & Crookes, 1993). In his seminal work *Notional Syllabuses*, Wilkins (1976: 2) defined this kind of approach to syllabus design as *synthetic*.

A synthetic language teaching strategy is one in which the different parts of language are taught separately and step-by-step so that acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of the parts until the whole structure of the language has been built up.

The above definition provided by Wilkins suggests that in the grammatical syllabus, language is broken down into smaller units (e.g., grammatical items plus a word list) and then taught piece by piece. This approach, as Wilkins observed, exposes learners to limited samples of language in that each lesson in the syllabus centres on one particular grammatical feature. This

is based on the assumption that language rules are learned in a linear fashion and learners should demonstrate complete mastery of one rule before moving on to the next (Nunan, 2001). Thus, it is the learners' task to put these isolated and supposedly mastered items next to one another and re-synthesise the language that has been presented to them in a broken fashion (Wilkins, 1976). Once the learners manage to do this, they could be said to have *mastered* the target language.

The grammatical syllabus has been criticised for a number of reasons (see Baleghizadeh, 2010 for a comprehensive review). Perhaps the most important shortcoming of the grammatical syllabus lies in its ignorance of language functions. The grammatical syllabus is a powerful device for enabling language learners to master grammatical rules; however, it is not as powerful where sociolinguistic rules of appropriacy are concerned. In other words, it is capable of preparing learners who are grammatically competent but communicatively incompetent. A learner who in response to the question "Do you mind if I open the window?" says, "Yes, I do" is typical of someone whose knowledge of English grammar might be perfect yet who does not know how to give socially appropriate replies. Seen in another light, the grammatical syllabus, at its best, trains learners to produce instances of language *usage* rather than language *use* (Widdowson, 1978).

THE GRAMMATICAL SYLLABUS AND GRAMMAR TEACHING

In spite of the criticisms directed against the grammatical syllabus, it remains a useful channel through which formal grammar instruction can be implemented. A continuing controversy in second language pedagogy over the last two decades has been whether grammar should be taught or not. On the one hand, some scholars have adopted an anti-grammarians position and maintain that the teaching of grammar has only a minimal effect on the acquisition of linguistic competence (Krashen, 1982; Prabhu, 1987). On the other hand, other scholars have adopted a pro-grammarians position and contend that formal grammar instruction plays an important role in the development of L2 learners' interlanguage (Ellis, 1990, 2003, 2006).

In this part of the paper, the arguments in favour of formal grammar instruction will be presented. Ellis (1993, 2003) maintained that formal grammar instruction works by developing explicit knowledge of grammatical features. According to Ellis, explicit knowledge gained through grammar instruction helps learners in three ways. First, it helps them monitor their utterances before and after they are produced. As Terrell (1991:61) rightly observed, 'monitoring can apparently interact with acquisition, resulting in learners acquiring their own output'. Second, it helps learners notice certain features in the input: 'For example, if learners know that plural nouns have an *-s*, they are more likely to add the *-s* on the ends of nouns they hear or read in input and also more likely to associate the *-s* morpheme with the meaning more than one' (Ellis, 1993:98). Third, explicit knowledge helps learners notice the gaps in their output: 'If learners know about a particular feature they are better equipped to detect the difference between what they themselves are saying and how the feature is used in the input they are exposed to' (Ellis, 2003:149). For example, if they know that verbs like *enjoy*, *avoid*, *deny*, and so on are followed by the gerund, they are more likely to notice the difference between the presence of this feature in the input and its absence in their output. Therefore, becoming aware of this gap is likely to result in the production of more accurate utterances in their subsequent performance.

More recently, Cullen (2008) has referred to the liberating force of grammar. Cullen (2008:221) stated that 'without any grammar, the learner is forced to rely exclusively on lexis

and the other prosodic and non-verbal features, to communicate his/her intended meaning'. For example, the three lexical items *dog*, *eat*, and *meat* can be combined in a variety of ways to signal different meanings, such as,

- a) The dog is eating the meat.
- b) The dog ate the meat.
- c) The dog has eaten the meat.
- d) A dog must have eaten the meat.

It is grammar that helps the reader see the distinction in the above sentences through the use of articles, number, tense, and aspect: '[It] generally enables us to communicate with a degree of precision not available to the learner with only a minimal command of the system. In this sense, grammar is a liberating force' (Cullen, 2008: 222).

All the preceding arguments seem convincing enough to claim that grammar teaching should be an inseparable part of ESL/EFL classes. By assuming that grammar should not be abandoned in second/foreign language classes, educators are in a better position to support the grammatical syllabus. This, however, does not indicate a return to traditional methods of language teaching, such as audio-lingual and grammar-translation methods. The reason why these methods have fallen out of favour is not as a result of educators pursuing the grammatical syllabus but because, among many other reasons, they have overemphasised grammar teaching through a large number of boring drills. Therefore, it is not correct to say that grammar instruction and the grammatical syllabus should be abolished simply because of inadequacies of audio-lingual or grammar-translation methods. The grammatical syllabus can still be safely used, especially in EFL settings.

GRAMMAR TEACHING AND THE EFL CLASSROOM

Some fundamental differences distinguish English as a second language (ESL) from English as a foreign language (EFL). EFL and ESL students differ from each other in that they are in different learning conditions (Stern, 1983). For example, ESL students learn the target language in a supportive environment. In other words, they benefit more from exposure to the target language in its natural setting. This is a big advantage that EFL students are usually deprived of. Even the need and motivation for learning the target language is different in these two groups. ESL students are more pressed to communicate with foreigners than are EFL students, so their learning needs are definitely not one and the same thing. As Fotos (1998) observed, in many EFL environments, the educational system is controlled by a central agency which determines the general curriculum and the contents of courses.

The same is true in the EFL context of many countries globally. The majority of these students are expected to learn specific vocabulary and grammatical items without any attempt to use them communicatively. Some of these students – only those who wish to pursue higher education – try to master the contents of their textbooks to achieve a good score in the English sub-test of the target university entrance examinations. Taking these circumstances into consideration, we can cogently argue that grammar instruction should be an important component of the ELT curriculum in EFL settings, and this can be best achieved through the grammatical syllabus.

The strict grammatical syllabus observed in the English textbooks of EFL contexts requires students to master a number of lexical and grammatical items through practice activities which

often fall into three categories: mechanical, meaningful, and communicative (Paulston & Bruder, 1976). Many EFL textbooks (e.g., the ones used in Iranian schools) abound in the above practice activities, particularly meaningful exercises, and there is nothing wrong with this. However, if the grammatical syllabus were to be incorporated into these books, it could at least be accompanied by other innovative activities such as consciousness-raising tasks. This issue will be examined below.

CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING TASKS

The term *consciousness-raising* (CR) has been defined as ‘a deliberate attempt on the part of the teacher [and materials writers] to make the learners aware of specific features of L2’ (Ellis, 1993:109). According to Ellis, CR tasks are not designed to elicit learner production and are not expected to result in correct use of the target structure spontaneously. Instead, they are used to build a conscious representation of the target structure with a minimum production of it. A number of studies have shown the benefits of CR tasks. Mohamed (2001), for example, observed that CR tasks may work better with high-intermediate or advanced learners because they are more capable of engaging in the kind of sophisticated meta talk needed to accomplish the task than learners with a lower proficiency. However, this does not mean that CR tasks should be eliminated from low-intermediate classes simply because learners cannot use the L2 to do them. On the contrary, research has shown that the learners’ use of L1 plays a crucial role in regulating thinking and building up new knowledge. Brooks and Donato (1994:268), for example, argued that L1 use ‘is a normal psycholinguistic process that facilitates L2 production and allows the learners both to initiate and sustain verbal interaction with one another’. Therefore, it is quite possible to do CR tasks in low-intermediate classes using the learners’ L1.

The following activity, from Nettle and Hopkins (2003: 183), is a CR task intended to help intermediate learners discover some facts about the use of the definite article in English.

1. Read the advertisement for two holidays and answer the questions:

<p>MARRKAKESH - four nights by air from Gatwick Airport In Marrakesh the present-day traveller can see an old unchanged Africa. The High Atlas mountains supply water to the city, making Marrakesh an oasis on the main caravan routes from the Sahara. Our weekends in Morocco include a guided tour of Marrakesh, and a full-day trip to the High Atlas mountains. The five-star Hotel Imperial Borj has a café, restaurant and a swimming pool.</p>	<p>CAIRO - four nights by air from Heathrow Airport The Pharaohs believed that the goddess, Nut, gave birth daily to the sun as it travelled from east to west. So the Ancient Egyptians lived on the east bank of the Nile and died on the west. Our weekends in Egypt include a guided tour of the pyramids at Giza and a guided tour of Cairo including the Egyptian Museum. The Mena House Oberoi is an elegant, traditional, deluxe hotel, near the Great Pyramid.</p>
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2. Underline all the proper nouns (nouns starting with capital letters, such as Pharaohs) in the advertisement.

3. Do the types of proper nouns in the box need ‘the’ or not? Put them in the correct column in the chart and add an example from the advertisement.

airports	cities	continents	countries	deserts	hotels
mountain ranges	museums	nationalities	rivers		

Nouns with ‘the’	Example	Nouns without ‘the’	Example
		airports	Heathrow Airport

The activity first requires learners to see real-life uses of the definite article in two authentic texts, and then gets them to induce the rules related to the use of an article or no article before proper nouns. Activities of this sort have a deeper focus; they urge learners to spend more time on a task and lead to greater success.

CONCLUSION

English language teaching in many EFL settings is still characterised by textbooks that follow the major premise of the grammatical syllabus, that is, each lesson is organised by focusing attention on a particular grammatical rule. This rule is often first explicitly taught and then practiced through a number of meaningful activities. Meanwhile, the argument throughout this paper has favoured grammar teaching, particularly in EFL contexts. Thus, if grammar is a much-needed factor in our English classes, it should be taught in a way that is more consistent with recent research findings, which attach much importance to the role of CR activities. In this chapter, I have argued that CR activities are valuable for language learning in that they encourage learners to discover grammatical rules for themselves, with the teacher as a source of support rather than as the sole source of knowledge. I would therefore suggest that traditional explicit rule presentation be supplanted by CR activities and then be followed by the usual practice activities.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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