Methods of Teaching Grammar and Strategies of Learning Grammar

Narcisa Schwarz [+]

Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad, Romania

Abstract. The aim of this paper is to present and also introduce a new educational challenge to the readers, namely teaching and learning grammar in an educational environment where the aim is the desire to make students enjoy this discipline for the way teaching takes place, for the manner of delivering pieces of information and for the passion for this subject transmitted during classes. We hope that our attempt at offering an overview of possible approaches to grammar teaching and learning will prove worthy of meaningful and engaging practice which accelerates the acquisition process of English in this case and will also cause a different reaction on both instructors and learners alike when grammar is under scrutiny.

Keywords: Teacher, Learner, Grammar, Method, Strategy, Knowledge.

1. Introduction

Grammar is partly the study of what forms or structures are possible in a language. Traditionally, grammar has been concerned almost exclusively with the analysis at the level of the sentence. As a result grammar is a description of rules that govern how a language's sentences are formed. [1]

Grammar teaching should be done as efficiently as possible given the time constraints and the fact that grammar is only a part of a teacher's activities. Prolonged attention to grammar is difficult to justify. If a grammar activity requires a great deal of time to set up or a lot of materials, is it the most efficient deployment of the teacher's limited time, energy and resources? When considering an activity for the presentation or practice of grammar the first question to ask, is: How efficient is it? Efficiency can be divided into three factors: economy, ease, and efficacy.

2. Methods of Teaching Grammar

There is a general consensus regarding the three traditional methods of teaching grammar, namely the deductive method, the inductive method and the eclectic way.

The deductive method – or rule-driven learning – is the academic and scholarly one which was devised in order to teach Latin and Greek. The approach is very simple (from rules to examples). First, the teacher writes an example on the board or draws attention to example in the textbook. The underlying rule is explained, nearly always in the mother tongue and using the meta language of grammar. Finally, the students practise applying the rule, orally and in writing. Special attention is paid to areas of conflict between the grammar of the mother tongue and that of the target language. The whole approach is cognitive, with learners considering the rules and weighing their words before they speak or write. Little attention is paid to the value of the message.

Those steps are used by teachers who follow a grammar translation method and by those who are working with a textbook which has a traditional grammar syllabus rather than a structural one. Many teachers make increasing use of the deductive approach as language examinations (mainly written, with accuracy as criterion of success) loom closer.

To sum up, the disadvantages of such a method are: it can be off-putting for some students, especially the younger ones who may not have sufficient meta language; it encourages a teacher-fronted, transmission-style classroom; explanation is not memorable. On the other hand there are some advantages: it can be time-saving; it respects the intelligence and maturity of many (adult) learners: it confirms many students' expectations about classroom learning (for analytical learners).

[+] Corresponding author. Tel.: +40745324524; fax: +40257250599.
  E-mail address: narcisa_schwarz@yahoo.com.

Supporters of grammar-focused teaching have never claimed that their methods lead to oral fluency. But their way of presenting grammar should not be rejected by those with more communicative or humanistic goals in mind. This method is useful at times, especially when we deal with a complex grammar rule included in the syllabus.

The inductive method – or rule-discovery learning – 'to induce' means 'to bring about, to cause to happen'. The teachers who follow this inductive approach induce the learners to realize grammar rules without any form of prior explanation (from examples to rules). Induction, or learning through experience, is seen as the 'natural' route to learning. These teachers believe that the rules will become evident if learners are given or exposed to enough appropriate examples. When teaching a grammar point, their first step is to demonstrate the meaning to the class. For example, they will hold up an apple, saying this is an apple. Then they will hold up several apples and say These are apples. After giving several examples of the plural form they will contrast the two forms.

The following step is to get the students to produce the two grammatical forms, working with the same set of objects. The teacher keeps silent through this stage except to correct if necessary.

The grammar point is shown on the board only after extensive practice. Explanations are not always made, though they may be elicited from the students themselves. In such cases, the mother tongue might well be used. The model is copied and the class may be required to write sample sentences from the model.

The eclectic way – as in all choices of pedagogy, a middle path is probably best for the average teacher when it comes to teaching grammar. Both methods offer advantages. The deductive method is quick and easy for the teacher. Where a difficult grammar point has to be presented and explained because the concept is not the one that is in the mother tongue, this is probably the better way. Where time is short, it is useful even for a simple grammar point. This approach is preferred especially by older learners because they want to know how the language works.

The inductive method requires the students to identify the rule for themselves. It has the advantage of involving the students much more. The belief is that such learning will be more effective. This is probably the better approach for grammatical regularities which are easily perceived, understood, and applied.

There is also the option of not teaching grammar at all. Students can pick up the usage over time. A compromise is to simply draw the attention of the class to certain grammar points as they occur in a text but not to deliberately practice them. Eclectic teachers will use all three of these strategies at various times. This will make it easier to fit the lesson into the time available, as well as enabling them to suit the differing needs and learning styles of the students.

3. Learning Grammar – Strategies

Before planning the organization of our teaching, we need to have clear in our minds exactly what out subject-matter is: What sorts of things are included under the heading *grammar,* and what is involved in 'knowing' a structure?

The sheer variety of all the different structures that may be labeled 'grammatical' is enormous. Some have exact parallels in the native language and are easily mastered; others have no such parallels but are fairly simple in themselves; while yet others are totally alien and very difficult to grasp. Some have fairly simple forms, but it may be difficult to learn where to use them and where not (the definite article, for example); others have relatively easy meanings, but very varied or difficult forms (the simple paste tense). Some involve single-word choices (a/an, some), others entire sentences (conditionals).

When we teach any one of these types of structures, we are – or should be – getting our students to learn quite a large number of different, though related, bits of knowledge and skills: how to recognize the examples of the structure when spoken, how to identify its written form, how to produce both its spoken and written form, how to understand its meaning in context, and produce meaningful sentences using it themselves. All these 'bits' may be presented in the form of a table below [2].

Table 1: Aspects of the Teaching/Learning of Structures

	Form	*Meaning*
Listening	Perception and recognition of the spoken form of the structure	Comprehension of what the spoken structure means in the context

Speaking	Production of well-formed examples in speech	Use of the structure to convey meanings in speech
Reading	Perception and recognition of the written form	Comprehension of what the written structure means in context
Writing	Production of well-formed examples in writing	Use of the structure to convey meanings in writing

Some teachers, and/or the course books they use, have a tendency to concentrate on some of these and neglect others: they may spend a lot of time getting the forms right and neglect to give practice in using the structure to convey meanings; or they may focus on written exercises and fail to cover the oral aspects satisfactorily. It is important to keep a balance, taking into account, of course, the needs of the particular class being taught. [3]

Language teachers and language learners are often frustrated by the disconnect between knowing the rules of grammar and being able to apply those rules automatically in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This disconnect reflects a separation between declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge.

- Declarative knowledge is *knowledge* about *something*. Declarative knowledge enables a student to describe a rule of grammar and apply it in pattern practice drills.
- Procedural knowledge is *knowledge of how to do something*. Procedural knowledge enables a student to apply a rule of grammar in communication.

For example, declarative knowledge is what you have when you read and understand the instructions for programming the DVD player. Procedural knowledge is what you demonstrate when you program the DVD player.

Procedural knowledge does not translate automatically into declarative knowledge; many native speakers can use their language clearly and correctly without being able to state the rules of its grammar. Likewise, declarative knowledge does not translate automatically into procedural knowledge; students may be able to state a grammar rule, but consistently fail to apply the rule when speaking or writing.

To address the declarative knowledge/procedural knowledge dichotomy, teachers and students can apply several strategies.

3.1. Relate knowledge needs to learning goals

Identify the relationship of declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge to student goals for learning the language. Students who plan to use the language exclusively for reading journal articles need to focus more on the declarative knowledge of grammar and discourse structures that will help them understand those texts. Students who plan to live in-country need to focus more on the procedural knowledge that will help them manage day to day oral and written interactions.

3.2. Apply higher order thinking skills

Recognize that development of declarative knowledge can accelerate development of procedural knowledge. Teaching students how the language works and giving them opportunities to compare it with other languages they know allows them to draw on critical thinking and analytical skills. These processes can support the development of the innate understanding that characterizes procedural knowledge.

3.3. Provide plentiful, appropriate language input

Understand that students develop both procedural and declarative knowledge on the basis of the input they receive. This input includes both finely tuned input that requires students to pay attention to the relationships among form, meaning, and use for a specific grammar rule, and roughly tuned input that allows students to encounter the grammar rule in a variety of contexts.

3.4. Use predicting skills

Different communication types can be characterized by the clusters of linguistic features that are common to those types. Verb tense and aspect, sentence length and structure, and larger discourse patterns all may contribute to the distinctive profile of a given communication type. For example, a history textbook

and a newspaper article in English both use past tense verbs almost exclusively. However, the newspaper article will use short sentences and a discourse pattern that alternates between subjects or perspectives. The history textbook will use complex sentences and will follow a timeline in its discourse structure. Awareness of these features allows students to anticipate the forms and structures they will encounter in a given communication task.

3.5. Limit expectations for drills

Mechanical drills in which students substitute pronouns for nouns or alternate the person, number, or tense of verbs can help students memorize irregular forms and challenging structures. However, students do not develop the ability to use grammar correctly in oral and written interactions by doing mechanical drills, because these drills separate form from meaning and use. The content of the prompt and the response is set in advance; the student only has to supply the correct grammatical form, and can do that without really needing to understand or communicate anything. The main lesson that students learn from doing these drills is: Grammar is boring.

Communicative drills encourage students to connect form, meaning, and use because multiple correct responses are possible. In communicative drills, students respond to a prompt using the grammar point under consideration, but providing their own content. For example, to practice questions and answers in the past tense in English, teacher and students can ask and answer questions about activities the previous evening. The drill is communicative because none of the content is set in advance:

Teacher: Did you go to the library last night?
Student 1: No, I didn't. I went to the movies. (to Student 2): Did you read chapter 3?
Student 2: Yes, I read chapter 3, but I didn't understand it. (to Student 3): Did you understand chapter 3?
Student 3: I didn't read chapter 3. I went to the movies with Student 1.

4. Conclusion

Learning seems to result if the teacher uses techniques that direct the learner's attention to form and if the teacher provides activities that promote awareness of grammar. Grammar is different type of communication, "we are living in a world of endless communicational possibilities." [4] The arguments for a focus on form and for consciousness-raising are added to the pro-grammar position. Together they comprise the paying-attention-to-form argument. In other words, learning seems to be enhanced when the learner's attention is directed to getting the forms right, and when the learner's attention is directed to features of the grammatical system.

We see grammar as a starting point and a little help along the way that will always stay with a learner. That is why, we believe, the teaching and learning of grammar should be made as memorable as possible.

5. References

[1]   S. Thornbury. How to Teach Grammar, Pearson Education Limited. 2007.

[3]   P. Ur. Grammar Practice Activities – A Practical Guide for Teachers, Cambridge University Press. 1993.

[4]   H. D. Brown. Principles of Language Learning and Teaching, Pearson Education Limited. 2000.

[5]   M.-M. Ciocoi-Pop. *Reader Reception Theory and Petru Popescu's Novels*. 1st International Conference for PhD Students, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, 2013, pp. 398-403.