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Teaching Grammar Trough Grammar Consciousness-Raising Tasks

Teaching Grammar

Through Grammar Consciousness-Raising Tasks

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During my first nine years of teaching, I was a teacher in an English conversation school and a high school in Japan. I never taught grammar. Every once in a while a teacher would ask me an obscure grammar question and occasionally I would get a question from a student, but I never taught grammar directly. The goal of my classes was production. Produce, produce, produce. If my students were using the language, I considered it a successful class. When I left Japan, I went to graduate school at the School for International Training (SIT). While I was there I had an internship with the University of Connecticut's Intensive English Program. I taught an advanced grammar class to a group of about 20 students who were mostly from Asia. My foundation in teaching was in the communicative method, and I wondered if this method had a place in grammar teaching.

For the particular lesson that I will soon discuss, I was motivated to do something unique because my advisor from SIT was making the long drive down to Connecticut and I wanted to show her an interesting lesson to give feedback on. The objective of the lesson was to review the tense/aspect system of verbs. As my students were mostly Asian, I knew that they had been "taught" this system many times in junior high and high school. From the number of "verb" errors in their papers, I also understood that, while they had been exposed to the rules of this system, they definitely had not mastered or acquired them. Previously, the students had had the rules and uses of each verb tense explained to them in their L1. I wondered how I could explain it or teach it in their L2 in a way that would have more impact and that would lead them closer to competency.

One possible reason the students hadn't mastered this grammatical point was because while they had been exposed to the rules, they had never actually learned them. They had not gone

through the active process of learning for themselves when and why to use the different tenses. Therefore, I designed a lesson in which they would have to discover for themselves how the tense aspect system works.

A Grammar Awareness-raising Activity

Step 1

Elicit the 12 different tenses from the students.

Simple Past	Simple Present	Simple Future
Past Progressive	Present Progressive	Future Progressive
Past Perfect	Present Perfect	Future Perfect
Past Perfect Progressive	Present Perfect Progressive	Future Perfect Progressive

For example, write the sentence, *I go to the store every day*. Then ask...

T — What is the verb?

S — Go

T — What kind of verb is it?

S — present tense

T — What kind of present?

S — Simple present

Then write "Simple Present" on the board. Go through the same process with the other eleven tenses. Of course some verb tenses are easier to elicit than others and I help them as much as necessary until we have all 12 written on the board.

Step 2

Divide the students into groups of three or four. Give each group an envelope that has 12 small squares of paper in it. On each piece of paper is written one of the different tenses. Ask the students to arrange the papers on the desk in some order. Emphasize that they should do it together. This can be confusing for them but tell them that they can be arranged any way they want as long as they have a reason that they can explain. Usually students arrange them in a square shape based on time and tense but occasionally there will be some unique arrangements. The point of this step is to help the students to think about the relationship these verbs have to each other, and that the tenses are not independent with no connection to each other.

Step 3

Give the students 12 more pieces of paper in an envelope. Each of the pieces of paper has a time-line on it that corresponds to one of the 12 different kinds of verbs. Under the timeline is an example sentence. Have the students put the timelines on the piece of paper from the previous activity that it corresponds with. For example, the timeline that corresponds with past progressive should be put on the piece of paper that says past progressive. It is important that they decide as a group where the paper goes.

Step 4

The students then receive an envelope full of sentences on small pieces of paper. (I usually make four sentences for each verb tense. So there are 48 sentences in the envelope). The objective is to put the sentences from the envelope onto the correct pile of papers, identifying the kind of verb that is in the sentence. Emphasize to the students that it should be done as a group. One person takes a card out of the envelope, reads it out loud and together they decide what kind of verb it is and then put it in the correct pile. Then the next student in the group does the same thing, and they keep taking turns until all the cards are on the correct pile. When they are finished, I look at their piles and see if any of the cards are out of place.

Step 5

Next, the students receive a piece of paper divided into twelve sections for each of the verb tenses. Their task is to write the rule for each verb tense and an original example sentence. I remind them that this is a group effort; I want to see the same answers on each of their papers and they must find the answer together. I also encourage them to use the timelines and examples they have in front of them to determine the rule.

Step 6

Give the students a list of sentences with common verb errors. The students must determine what the error is and why it is incorrect. This also must be done with the group.

I have done this activity many times over the past few years and it has consistently been a successful activity. The reason it is successful is because it engages the students. It involves tasks that they must accomplish as a group and they need to draw from previous knowledge to accomplish the tasks successfully. Also, there is a lot of communication involved because they must

talk to each other to complete the tasks. Most importantly this activity raises their awareness of the differences between the different verb forms.

After observing the success of this activity I became curious about why it was successful and if other people had tried this type of activity. In my research I discovered that this activity was made up of "grammar consciousness raising tasks". I saw this method as a way to teach grammar in a communicative way.

Why we teach grammar

However, to backtrack a little, we have to ask if we should actually teach grammar. The "zero" position on this question claims that the teaching of grammar has a minimal effect on the acquisition of an L2. Krashen (1985) states that acquisition only occurs when learners are exposed to roughly tuned input which they comprehend, and when learning is limited to a few rules. Research shows that students have a built-in syllabus that governs how and when they will learn structures, and that learners only acquire structures that they are ready to learn. Teaching doesn't change that process. If students aren't ready to learn that structure, if they are not at the right stage, they won't learn it. Krashen believes that teaching grammar should be altogether abandoned. Learners should be allowed to develop their interlanguages naturally by engaging in communication. So, that is a big vote for "No"

Teaching grammar is only effective if you are teaching to the exact point in the students' internal syllabus that they happen to be at.

On the other hand, White (1987) says that some grammatical structures cannot be acquired just through input and may require some direct instruction. He doesn't believe that Krashen's simplified input is sufficient to eventually lead to acquisition. Ellis (1995) believes that through formal instruction students become aware of certain grammatical structures. Once consciousness of that feature has been raised through formal instruction, learners continue to remain aware of it and notice it in subsequent input, which eventually prepares the way for acquisition. Celce-Murcia (1992) also believes that the students' age, proficiency level and objectives in studying a foreign language must be considered in deciding when to teach grammar formally. He also states that adults who learn a foreign language without any formal grammatical instruction during the beginning stages can never achieve high level competency in the target language. They plateau at the intermediate or low-intermediate level and are unable to progress. Another factor in deciding when to teach formal grammar is educational background. The

stronger the students' educational background the more important it is to focus on form.

Therefore, Krashen believes that only if you teach to where the student is +1, will grammar instruction be effective. Others believe that consciousness-raising tasks lead to acquisition and that without formal grammar instruction in the beginning stages of teaching a second language, high level achievement is impossible. So it seems that grammar instruction is necessary and useful if done in the right way.

So one way to teach grammar is to determine where the student is in their development and then to teach at that level. The problem with this is that it is often difficult to determine an individual student's interlanguage and it is impractical to teach to all the different levels in one class. Another solution is to avoid the problem by teaching to the students' explicit knowledge rather than implicit knowledge (Ellis,1999).

Implicit and Explicit Knowledge
Bialstock (1981) believes there are two types of knowledge: explicit and implicit. Implicit knowledge is intuitive; it is not consciously available. It is knowledge that we have but are unable to explain. For example native speakers are able to speak using grammatically correct structures but usually have trouble explaining why they use them. Implicit knowledge is knowing the rules that allow you to produce the grammar accurately in a conversational situation, but not necessarily being able to explain them. This knowledge is acquired gradually and is connected to the students' internal syllabus.

Explicit knowledge is knowledge that is explainable. If they need to, learners are able to explain what they know. Having explicit knowledge of grammar is knowing about grammar and being able to explain the rules. Because implicit knowledge is acquired much more slowly and is tied to a students' internal syllabus, explicit knowledge is much easier to teach and should be the target (Ellis,1999).

What is the connection between explicit and implicit knowledge? Are they distinct or does one change into the other? Ellis and Fotos (1991) believe in a relationship somewhere between these two perspectives. Their position is based on studies that have investigated the role of formal instruction on the acquisition of grammatical knowledge. There are psycholinguistic constraints that determine whether attempts to teach certain grammar rules result in implicit knowledge. If the students are in the appropriate stage in development where they are ready to process the structure it will be successful. It will not succeed if they are not at the right stage. Also, practice will not overcome the students' internal syllabus. There is no research that shows

having students practice the target structure results in implicit knowledge and, formal instruction aimed at difficult grammatical structures does not change performance in spontaneous language use. However, Ellis and Fotos (1991) do believe formal instruction helps to promote L 2 acquisition and ultimately promotes higher levels of L2 achievement. They have found formal instruction works best in promoting acquisition when accompanied by opportunities to use the language, and that it is effective in developing explicit knowledge of grammatical structures. Also, it is possible that direct instruction targeted at simple structures will be successful in developing implicit knowledge because simple structures do not require the mastery of complex processing operations. In support of this, Ellis (1990) says that the way formal instruction works, is by developing explicit knowledge of a grammatical structure, which helps the learner acquire implicit knowledge.

Explicit knowledge leads to acquisition in two ways. The first one is that knowing about a structure helps the learner notice the feature during input and therefore to acquire it as implicit knowledge. However, it doesn't become implicit knowledge until the students are ready to integrate it into their interlanguage system, which is determined by their syllabus. Secondly, explicit knowledge can be used to construct planned utterances; for example, when a student has time to think about what they are going to say. Formal instructions can increase knowledge while not contributing directly to implicit knowledge of specific structures.

These conclusions suggest that formal instruction should be targeted at explicit rather than implicit knowledge because, while formal instruction may affect the acquisition of simple grammatical structures and structures that the student is developmentally ready for, it is difficult to determine when the student is ready to learn that structure. Instruction should also be aimed at making the students aware of the structure so they are able to monitor it and correct their own errors, they do not necessarily have to be able to use the structure in conversation. The most effective approach to grammar teaching is to focus on awareness raising rather than practice (Fotos and Ellis, 1991).

The Communicative Approach

One of the main goals of communicative language teaching is to give the learners opportunities to use the language, first in controlled production and then in freer or more communicative practice (Urr, 1988). The aim is to help the students use the language in situations where the goal is to exchange information rather than to learn the language. Traditional language teaching gives students opportunities to produce the language in pair work, information gap activities, etc.

with the assumption that, if the students produce the language correctly, they will learn it. If we consider the constraints of the students' internal syllabus, we realize that production does not necessarily produce implicit knowledge/acquisition unless the student happens to be at the appropriate stage in development. So where is the value in communicative language teaching? One reason and maybe the most important is, it improves fluency. The more practice students have producing, the more fluently they are able to communicate. They won't necessarily be accurate but they will be able to have meaningful communication. We have all seen students who have been in the target culture for many years that can have conversations with native speakers and say basically what they want to say but are grammatically quite inaccurate. They are fluent because they have had many chances to produce and lots of input but they are not grammatically accurate because they haven't acquired the structures.

Another benefit of the communicative approach is interaction. The interaction hypothesis, states that the comprehensible input that results from attempts to clarify communication difficulties leads to acquisition (Long, 1983). For example, when someone says something to the student that they don't understand and they ask for clarification, or when the student says something that the listener doesn't understand and the student has to clarify. This is called negotiated interaction (Long, 1983). This interaction has been shown to improve learner comprehension and it also results in modification of language output.

The comprehensible output theory says that learners need the opportunity for "pushed output" (output that is precise, coherent and situationally appropriate), to develop advanced levels of grammatical competence (Swain,1985). Swain says that the comprehensible output is as critical to the language acquisition process as comprehension. Allen, Swain, Harley and Cummins (1990) discuss how classrooms with extensive comprehensible input like immersion classrooms, don't necessarily lead to high levels of grammatical competence because of the lack of pushed output.

An Alternative Approach

The above discussion shows that both the communicative approach and grammar awareness raising approach have value. These two approaches can be combined through the use of grammar tasks designed to promote communication about grammar. These grammar tasks have two goals: to develop explicit knowledge of the grammatical structure being studied and to provide opportunities for communication focused on an exchange of information. Grammar consciousness raising tasks are communicative and they have an L2 problem as their content. In these ac-

tivities the learners not only focus on the form of the grammatical structure but are also engaged in meaning focused use of the target language as they solve the grammar problem. They develop grammatical knowledge while communicating (Fotos,1994). The grammar tasks should raise students' awareness of grammatical structures of the L2. They are not designed to provide opportunities for production but to help the students learn about the structure explicitly so that in the future when they are exposed to the structure they will notice it. (Fotos and Ellis, 1991).

What is an Effective Task?

Long (1989) makes four points about the effectiveness of tasks. The first is that two-way tasks produce more negotiation than one-way tasks because the exchange of information is necessary; negotiation can lead to acquisition. Secondly, planned tasks, where students must prepare some final output require more negotiation than unplanned ones. Also, closed tasks, where there is a definite goal, produce more negotiation than open ones. Lastly, convergent tasks where students must come to some agreement produce more negotiation than tasks where different views are permitted.

How to Choose Target Structures

1. Problematicity - By examining the students output we look for grammatical structures that are not being used because they have not been acquired yet. We also have to look at structures that are being used incorrectly because the target structure has not been acquired.

2. Learnability - This concerns whether the student will be able to take the grammatical knowledge and integrate it into their interlanguage system. In general the best candidates for consciousness raising tasks are structures where the form is known but all the functions of it are not known. For example most students know that present progressive is used to talk about things that are happening at the present, *-I am watching TV now-*, but don't use the form to talk about the future. *- I am going to the game tonight-* (Ellis, 1995).

Principles for the Design of Tasks

1. Students should be required to process the structure, not produce it.

2. Tasks consist of stimuli which students must respond to.

3. Stimuli can be written or spoken.

4. The response can take many forms but will be minimally verbal.

5. The activities should progress from first drawing attention to meaning, then noticing the form and function of the structure and finally identifying errors.

6. As a result of completing the task students should arrive at an understanding of how the structure is used to perform a function in communication.

7. Learners can benefit from having to negotiate in the process of becoming aware of this grammar point.

8. As a result of completing the task, students should become more aware of common learner errors in this target structure as well as the correct usage (Ellis, 1995).

For grammar consciousness raising tasks to be seen as pedagogically valuable substitutes for grammar lessons in communicative classrooms and as a method of studying grammar while providing communicative opportunities to use the language in traditional teacher centered classrooms, two things are necessary. It must be demonstrated that task performance is as effective in promoting gains in knowledge as traditional teacher fronted lessons. It also needs to be shown that the performance of the tasks produces comparable amounts of L2 to that produced by meaning focused communicative tasks because it is through comprehensible input and negotiated output that acquisition takes place (Doughty and Pica, 1986; Long, 1983; Pica, 1987).

One study on the design and implementation of consciousness raising tasks suggests that task performance resulted in knowledge gains comparable to that in groups which had a teacher fronted lesson on the same structure (Fotos and Ellis, 1991). Performance of the task also produced similar amounts of input and negotiation as information gap activities in which participants were required to exchange information (Doughty and Pica, 1986). In another study Fotos (1994) concluded that the grammar tasks she used were comparable to formal grammar lessons in terms of promoting significant proficiency gains in the target structure and the gains achieved through task performance were durable even after two weeks had passed. Performance of the grammar consciousness raising tasks produced quantities of L2 negotiations comparable to the number produced by communicative tasks matched for task features but lacking grammatical content, and the length of negotiations was longer than those produced by communicative tasks. The amount of negotiations produced in accomplishing the tasks suggests that consciousness raising tasks are of benefit in L2 acquisition in accordance with Long's inter-

action hypothesis (1983). It was also discovered that the greatest amount of negotiations were produced by a combination of information gap activities and a requirement for a single agreed-upon task solution (Fotos, 1994).

In the beginning of this paper, I described a successful grammar activity. It is successful because it raises students' awareness of a grammatical structure and it also has the students communicating about grammar. It is also a successful activity because the students have to work together to solve a problem. There is the excitement of self-discovery through solving the problem instead of just being told the grammar rule. It is easy for a teacher to tell when an activity is working. There is a lot of communication, the students are interested, and the results of the activities demonstrate a deeper understanding of the target than when they started. On the other hand, it is useful to know theoretically, not just instinctually, why an activity is working. Grammar awareness raising tasks are valuable for two major reasons. The first is they target students' explicit knowledge, which indirectly leads to implicit knowledge/acquisition. The second reason is they provide opportunities for the kind of communication that is believed to promote the acquisition of implicit knowledge. Grammar consciousness raising activities are a valuable bridge between formal grammar instruction and the communicative classroom.

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Abstract

It is often difficult for teachers to take the principles of the communicative approach and apply them to
the teaching of grammar. One possible way to do this is by using Grammar Consciousness-raising activ-
ities. These activities provide students with the opportunity to interactively solve grammar tasks in a
communicative way. They have been shown to be effective in increasing students' knowledge and in
providing authentic opportunities for communication. In this paper I describe the activities I use and
the reasons why they are effective. I also discuss what constitutes an effective task and how to design
them. Grammar consciousness raising tasks are excellent way to take the valuable elements of the com-
municative approach and apply them to teaching grammar.

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