

Formal grammar instruction - help or hindrance? The role of traditional grammar books in the ESL/EFL classroom

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1. Introduction

The ESL/EFL teaching environment seems to be at the beginning of another pendulum swing back towards a stronger focus on grammar. It is how grammar is learned and taught that is currently under investigation. Some theories cast doubt on the teachability of grammar, arguing that learning does not become acquisition, or that the learner's syllabus imposes constraints on what can be taught and learned at a given time. Regardless of this, books that explicitly teach grammar continue to be popular.

Research, while giving teachers a lot to consider, is still not conclusive as to the best method for presenting grammar. There is strong support to minimalise any form of traditional grammar teaching in favor of new methods. This, of course, implies reducing the role of traditional grammar books which aim at explicit grammar teaching. This paper will argue that traditional grammar books still have a role in the EFL/ESL classroom but the depth of their role should be determined by the type of program offered in a particular institution.

2. What is a 'Traditional Grammar Book' (TGB)?

A plethora of grammar books exist for language learners. Chalker (1994), for example, surveyed twenty-five books intended for ESL/EFL learners at secondary or adult level to see how grammar is presented pedagogically. Two main categories in her survey therein were reference books and grammar-practice books. The former do not have exercises for practice while the latter

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does. Petrovitz (1997) points out that the traditional grammar textbooks in the ESL/EFL classroom are thought of as the latter kind where every grammar rule is presented by a general explanation followed by exercises consisting of a series of non-contextualised sentences. The following is an example of a TGB presentation:

Present continuous (I am doing)

I am doing something = I'm in the middle of doing something; I've started doing it and I haven't finished yet.

Often the action is happening at the time of speaking:

- *Please don't make so much noise. I'm working. (not 'I work')
- *'Where's Margaret?' 'She's having a bath. (not 'she has a bath')
- *Let's go out now. It isn't raining any more. (not 'it doesn't rain')
- *(at a party) Hello, Jane. Are you enjoying the party? (not do you enjoy)
- *I'm tired. I'm going to bed now. Goodnight!

Exercises

1.1 Complete the sentences with one of the following verbs in the correct forms
come - get - happen - look - make - start - stay - try - work

1. You're **working** hard today.' 'Yes, I have a lot to do.'
2. I _____ for Christine. Do you know where she is?
3. It _____ dark. Shall I turn on the light?
4. They haven't got anywhere to live at the moment? They _____ with friends until they find somewhere.
5. 'Are you ready, Ann?' 'Yes, I _____.'
6. Have you got an umbrella? It _____ to rain.
7. You _____ a lot of noise. Could you be quieter? I _____ to concentrate

*adapted from Murphy, 1994, pages 2-3

Traditional grammar books (TGBs), then, will be referred to as such throughout this paper.

3. Arguments against TGBs

Chomsky's universal grammar (UG), also known as principles and parameters theory or government/binding theory, and Krashen's monitor theory have been an impetus for methodological change (Cook, 1994, Freeman & Long, 1991).

While the intricacies of their theories are beyond the scope of this paper some of the methodologies that have been inspired by them will be discussed in this section. Such theories engender strong support for the elimination of TGBs. The following subsections, then, include brief summaries of these methodologies.

3.1 Consciousness raising (CR)

Consciousness-raising (CR) is a method of teaching grammar which focuses on aspects of grammar without using explicit rules or technical jargon. Instead of imparting rules and principles directly, as in the traditional grammar lesson, it aims to help learners discover such for themselves by highlighting aspects of the target structures. It differs from pure communicative approaches by telling learners which structures are ungrammatical and providing the grammatical counterparts (Ellis, 1994, Odlin, 1994, Rutherford, 1997).

Rutherford (1997), an adherent of CR, sees the traditional grammatical syllabus as being static in nature with its concern of presenting and manipulating grammatical constructs. He is also critical of the functional syllabus which relates a hierarchy of communicative and semantic constituents to salient grammatical points, arguing that attempts to relate an inventory of forms to that of an inventory of functions is necessarily simplistic. The grammatical syllabus, he says, is usually a linear and sequential display of language items for learner input. Rutherford, however, states that learning is not a linear process but rather an organic metamorphic process. Nunan (1998) uses the metaphor of building a wall one brick at a time to illustrate the linear view compared with the organic metaphor of growing a garden; numerous things growing simultaneously and imperfectly.

Rutherford is, therefore, fundamentally against an approach emphasising the 'brick-building' TGBs where learners are focussed on decontextualised grammatical structures followed by exercises. He is also in disagreement with the 'accumulated entities' view of learning which states that:

a person begins his task of learning a second language from point zero and, through the steady accumulation of the mastered entities of the target language (e.g. sounds, morphemes, vocabulary, grammatical constructions, discourse units, etc.), eventually amasses them in quantities sufficient to

constitute a particular level of proficiency. Rutherford 1997:4

This, according to Rutherford, falsely assumes that language is a set of hierarchically-arranged constructs and that teaching/learning involves the direct imparting of such by teacher to learner. Language is, therefore, presented to the learner in a way which is unproductive because it prevents them from working out rules by themselves.

Related to this, Ellis states that 'what is learned is controlled by the learner and not the teacher, not the textbooks, not the syllabus' (Ellis & Hedge, 1993:4). Learners, he says, have their own ways of processing input and what is taught is not necessarily learned. An important point when emphasizing grammatical features is for learners to understand what they need to master in the future and not to expect them to master the features immediately. Ellis suggests that learners would acquire grammar naturally if given the opportunity to communicate.

3.2 Incomplete grammar rules

In line with Rutherford, Johns (1991) claims that the task of the teacher is to provide a context in which learners can attempt to figure out the language for themselves. He says the role of learners should be to identify and formulate grammatical rules implied in authentic language data rather than processing explicit grammatical guidelines given by the teacher.

Johns' criticism of traditional grammar teaching is based on his view of how grammar is learned and what is to be learned. According to him, most grammatical rules are usually incomplete, partial, and misleading partly because they originate from grammarians and not from an examination of real language data. His approach encourages the learner to discover grammar from authentic language use. He claims that learners equipped with language data concordances can make discoveries which extend both the learners' and teacher's perception of words and their uses. He says that method would be helpful for most learners.

3.3 Can teaching grammar inhibit second language acquisition?

Prabhu (1997) holds an extreme view stating that focusing on form, as TGBs do, is more likely to inhibit acquisition. This, he says, is because the learner's

developing internal grammar does not parallel the descriptive grammar of books. If this is so, the descriptive grammar may inhibit such by encouraging the learner to operate consciously with a description which is incompatible with the developing interlanguage grammar. He says, there can be no guarantee that the planned progression built into the language syllabus has any real counterpart in the developmental sequence of the learner's system.

This extreme view may have been inspired by Krashen's monitor theory (Krashen, 1982). This theory states that the learner has two language systems, one the result of conscious learning and the other a process of natural and unconscious acquisition. His claim is controversial because he says that the two systems are impermeable; that is, language systems are separately stored in the mind and that what is learned does not filter into the acquired system. Most teaching proceeds on the assumption that what is learned under controlled conditions in the classroom becomes, in time, part of the learner's communicative repertoire. Krashen, however, says this is not the case.

The Monitor Hypothesis defines the function of the learned system in second language performance. All second language utterances are initiated by the acquired system. The learned system may then come into play in monitoring the learner's output. The monitoring process cannot apply under normal conditions of spoken interaction because it's too slow. It requires the speaker's attention to be focused on form rather than on meaning and it requires that learners are able to operate with an explicit system of rules describing the relevant elements of the target language.

3.4 'Data Driven Learning' over teacher-centered methodology

Willis (1993) also disagrees with traditional grammar teaching and argues the case for a lexical syllabus claiming that if words are first addressed, then understanding grammatical structures will follow. He argues that meaning becomes secondary when learners focus on abstract grammatical systems. According to Willis, learners are better equipped to explore the language on their own if they are able to focus on tangible words.

He suggests presenting learners with real language through data-driven learning with the teachers not knowing in advance exactly what rules or

patterns the learners will discover. Allowing learners to investigate the commonly occurring lexical patterns, he says, should be a major component in a learner-centered methodology. Willis claims such a methodology is more likely to arouse and harness the learner's curiosity than the presentational, teacher-centered methodology advocated in TGBs.

4. The case for TGBs

Willis' claim that a lexical approach is more likely to arouse learners' curiosity depends, I think, on the type of learner one is. Skehan (1994) distinguishes between memory driven learners and analytical learners. Memory driven learners, as their name implies, treat language as a memory issue. Analytical learners look for and impose structure on less structured situations and make up for lack of guidance from the learning situation. The latter type would be better suited to Willis' lexical approach. Memory driven learners, however, would have a difficult time with data driven learning. Skehan says these learners need to be balanced by a methodology emphasizing the structural organisation of language; possibly provided by a TGB.

Although Johns (1991) claims that partial grammars may mislead learners, Swan (1994) argues that they can still bring learners closer to a fuller understanding of the language mechanics. A certain amount of 'tolerance of ambiguity' is needed when approaching grammar study in that learners need to know rules are not one-hundred percent accurate. Partial grammar rules, then, do not necessarily lead to confusion but, rather, provide a framework for a deeper understanding. Based on this, TGBs still have some merit.

Moreover, contrary to Johns' claim that learners should activate schema language for themselves, Fotos (1998) provides evidence that learners benefit from some type of explicit instruction before a class activity. She says it helps them activate their background knowledge of the target structures or, if none exist, to facilitate awareness of the forms they will encounter. TGBs, then, provide explicit instruction which can enhance acquisition.

Petrovitz (1997) also gives support for a TGB role in the classroom. Recognizing the advantages of CR techniques, he suggests TGBs can help correct errors for rules that are dependent on structure. Rules such as

subject-auxiliary inversion in questions are structure dependent. Uninverted questions, he says, are not crucial for communication which is why they often become fossilized and a difficult error to eradicate. The statement, 'He is tired.', for example, can be made into a question by simply raising the intonation on 'tired'. Learners often receive positive feedback using uninverted questions which can lead to fossilization. He says grammar books, with their focussed exercises, could solve this problem.

4.1 Can teaching grammar rules enhance acquisition?

Although Prabhu says that focussing on form is likely to inhibit acquisition, Sharwood-Smith (1981) provide an alternative view. He distinguishes between explicit and implicit knowledge, the former being a conscious analytic awareness of the formal properties of a language and the latter an intuitive feeling for what is correct and acceptable. He says we should consider degrees of explicitness and that articulating the complex metalanguage of explicit knowledge should not be a learning goal.

Sharwood-Smith offers an alternative to Krashen's view of learning and acquisition. He refers to Mclaughlin (1978), for example, who states that making a conscious repeated effort to apply explicit knowledge in communicating can lead to automatic behaviour. Sharwood-Smith's conclusion is that explicit knowledge may contribute to acquisition through practice thus giving support for the role of TGBs.

4.2 Reproducing in adults the language acquisition of children

Cook (1997) points out that almost all twentieth century methodologies have assumed that the language acquisition of children should be reproduced in adults. He adds that while this is true, no approach has substantially questioned whether children learning a first language are the best models for adults learning a foreign language, despite the fact that there is a case for saying that children's first language acquisition is neither fast nor efficient.

Small children lack the adult capacity to organize and conceptualize consciously, to think metalinguistically about what they are doing, and to

master rules deliberately. It is precisely these adult skills, it might be argued, which should be exploited in the (less natural but perhaps more efficient) business of learning a foreign language. Cook 1997:225

We should proceed with caution, then, when considering the backlash against formal grammar instruction.

5. The roles of TGBs

Despite all the recent negativity towards explicit grammar teaching, there is certainly enough evidence to provide its value and, therefore, the value of TGBs. As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, the role of the TGBs should be determined by the context one is working in. By role I am speaking of whether the TGB should be used as the main textbook to teach a class or as a reference book, aside from the main textbook. As a reference book, students would refer to the TGB when they have difficulty with a particular grammar point. Students would use it, therefore, on their own initiative. This role would help reinforce structures and give students confidence in previously taught items.

5.1 TGB as textbook or reference book

TGBs should be used as textbooks in courses that operate within programs that have a focus on language learning. Overseas English immersion programs are appropriate for such courses where students are immersed in a wide spectrum of English courses such as writing, conversation, and grammar. Here, among these courses, students can have the opportunity to focus on both form and function while being surrounded by an English environment. English programs within Korean universities can also fit into this category. While students may not be immersed in an English environment, they are usually presented with a wide spectrum of English related courses

General conversation courses offered in programs without a language focus should have TGBs as reference books. Freshmen conversation at Korean universities are such courses. These courses usually involve three teaching hours a week for a sixteen-week semester for students who are usually not

language majors. Also, freshmen students come from grammar-centered teaching background from their high school and middle school years. Given the few hours of language instruction and the English background of these students, TGBs should not be used as the main textbook. Teachers should, however, encourage students who have a minimum of formal instruction to consult TGBs as they try to improve their English.

6. Conclusion

This paper investigated current views on second language acquisition and their application to teaching grammar. While there is a strong pull away from formal grammar instruction and thus TGBs, there is enough evidence to suggest that TGBs have value and can play a significant role in any language program. It was suggested that in courses where TGBs are not used as the main textbook, teachers should encourage students to use them as reference books. As reference books, TGBs could fill in any gaps that are not filled in by classroom instruction and place the insecure language learner on more solid ground.

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■ **Abstract**

**Formal grammar instruction - help or hindrance? The role of
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The paper explores the validity of the current backlash against formal grammar instruction in the ESL/EFL classroom. While there is strong momentum against formal grammar instruction, evidence still exists for a productive role for traditional grammar teaching. This study will discuss current grammar methodologies as they relate to second language acquisition and suggest different roles for traditional grammar books in the ESL/EFL classroom.



