Making Informed Decisions About the Role of Grammar in Language Teaching

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There are currently two extreme positions in ESL concerning the teaching of English grammar. At one extreme, the proponents of audio-lingualism (Lado, 7) and methodologists such as Gattegno (3, 4) argue that we must make grammar the core of our language instruction and that we must correct all student errors. At the other extreme, methodologists such as Krashen and Terrell (6) tell us not to teach grammar explicitly and not to correct any learner errors.

Given such conflicting professional advice, many ESL teachers are understandably confused and frustrated. What should they do? Who should they believe?

When ESL teachers ask me which of the two extreme positions I prefer, I like to begin by reminding them of the tale about the four blind men of Hindustan. As you will recall, when the four blind men came upon an elephant, each one touched a different part. The first one felt the tail and concluded, “It’s a rope.” The second felt the side and said, “It’s a wall.” The third, after touching the ear, announced, “It’s a fan.” Finally, the fourth one felt the trunk and decided, “It’s a tree.”

Like the four blind men many of us in ESL have very limited “feeling” for the role of grammar in language teaching because we have dealt primarily with a certain type of learner and with specific and limited instructional objectives. Yet we are surprised when other ESL teachers express a completely different “feeling” regarding the role of grammar in language teaching. In other words, we have not appreciated the fact that other teachers might be working with a different type of learner and focusing on other instructional objectives.

In reality there are many different types of language learners and many different purposes for learning ESL (Strevens, 9). Each teaching-learning context deserves its own answer to the question of whether or not grammar should be emphasized. There is no single right or wrong position to take. Also, rather than two extreme choices, there is a continuum along which grammar becomes increasingly more important or less important depending upon a number of learner variables and instructional variables that each ESL teacher must carefully consider.

It is perhaps somewhat misleading to state the issue as one of deciding whether or not to teach grammar. The issue is whether accuracy of form is more important or less important for the learner. In those cases where accuracy of form is required, it is important for the ESL teacher to know how to focus on form and to know how to correct errors. Effective ways of focusing on form and of correcting errors will thus be discussed later in this paper.

Learner Variables

An observant ESL teacher does not need to be told that students learn in different ways. Research in educational psychology (Cronbach and Snow, 2, and Witkin et al., 10) suggests that there are at least two

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distinct ways in which people can learn anything—including second or foreign languages. Some learners, consciously or unconsciously, have an analytic style and learn best by formulating and testing hypotheses or “rules.” Other learners have a holistic style and learn best by experiencing relevant data and doing little or no analysis. Young children, for example, tend to be more holistic in their approach to learning than adults. Also, when one is beginning to learn something completely new and different, one tends to initially approach the new “object” holistically for a time before feeling ready to do any meaningful analysis.

This suggests that learner variables such as age can be very important in helping the ESL teacher decide whether or not it will be of any use to focus on form. If your ESL students are young children, the most likely answer is “No.” If your students are adolescents or adults, the answer is “Maybe.” Proficiency level is also a factor. If your ESL students are beginners, there is little point in focusing on form regardless of their age. However, if your students are at the intermediate or advanced level, it may well be necessary for you to do some correction.

The educational background of your ESL students is another noteworthy factor. If they are pre-literate with little formal education, then it is a waste of time and effort to focus on form. On the other hand, if your students are literate and well educated, they may become frustrated and annoyed if you do not provide adequate opportunity for them to focus on the formal aspects of English.

### Instructional Variables

The need to focus on form also changes according to the objectives that the ESL teacher must address. If one is teaching a receptive skill, i.e., listening or reading, then it is distracting and irrelevant to emphasize grammar since these receptive skills require competence primarily in the area of semantic processing. However, if you are teaching the productive skills (i.e. speaking and, in particular, writing), then formal accuracy can become an important concern. Furthermore, for the productive skills, register and medium are additional factors. If you are teaching a conversation class, then accuracy of form is much less an issue than it is if you are teaching a class in formal expository writing.

The final factor to consider is the learner’s need: what will the learner have to be able to do in English? If the learner’s immediate goal is survival communication, formal accuracy is of negligible value; on the other hand, if the learner wants to function as an academic, a diplomat, or a business executive, then a high degree of formal accuracy is essential.

### Learner and Instructional Variables

Given all of the learner variables and instructional variables we have discussed, I would like to suggest that it is a bit complicated but certainly not impossible for ESL instructors to decide whether or not it is appropriate for them to focus on form with a given group of students. I have found that a grid such as the following is useful in helping me come to a sound decision: the more factors I identify on the left side of the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learner Variables</th>
<th>Less Important</th>
<th>Focus on Form</th>
<th>More Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Age</td>
<td>children</td>
<td>adolescents</td>
<td>adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Proficiency Level</td>
<td>beginning</td>
<td>intermediate</td>
<td>advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Educational</td>
<td>pre-literate; no formal education</td>
<td>semi-literate; some formal education</td>
<td>literate; well educated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Variables</td>
<td>listening, reading</td>
<td>speaking</td>
<td>writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Skill</td>
<td>informal</td>
<td>consultative¹</td>
<td>formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Register</td>
<td>survival</td>
<td>vocational</td>
<td>professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Need/Use</td>
<td>communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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grid, the less important it is for me to focus on form; the more factors I identify on the right, the more essential it is that I focus on form.

This grid helps you to decide, for example, when you are teaching beginning level adults who are pre-literate and are in need of survival communication skills, that focus on form is not important. On the other hand, when you are teaching literate young adults in college who are at the high intermediate level, then the grid tells you that focus on form is essential if you want to help them successfully complete their composition requirement.

Effective Ways to Focus on Form

By drawing on recent improvements in language teaching methodology, we can isolate at least six different dimensions that can guide preparation of activities that will effectively focus our students’ attention on form when this is necessary: It is not easy to be consistently on the right side of this grid when teaching grammar; however, the more we can follow the suggestions on the right, the more successful we will be in getting our students to focus on form while at the same time experiencing language in context.

One example of an activity primarily on the right side is the use of a pet store as the context for focusing the attention of adolescent students on the form of yes-no questions. Using pictures or small figures of 10 or 12 animals that are possible pets (e.g. a dog, a cat, a pony, a goldfish, a turtle, a canary, a parrot, a hamster, a monkey, a snake), the teacher has one student come to the front of the class and secretly “buy” one of the pets. Then the classmates must guess which pet the student has purchased by asking yes-no questions until someone guesses the correct pet. (Note that different question forms are possible):

Classmate 1: Did you buy the monkey?/Is it the monkey?
Student: No.
Classmate 2: Did you buy the dog?/Is it the dog?
Student: No.
Classmate 7: Did you buy the pony?/Is it the pony?
Student: Yes.

The classmate who guesses the right pet can then go to the front and make the next secret purchase. This can continue as long as such practice is useful. The activity can be made more demanding by also requiring the class to guess the price of the pet.

Effective Ways to Correct Errors

From classroom research we know that there are more effective and less effective ways of correcting ESL students when formal accuracy is desirable. At least five dimensions should be kept in mind when you are doing correction. (Such activities can be planned in advance or occur spontaneously as the need arises.)

Again one should attempt to stay to the right of this grid as much as possible.

For example, if an ESL teacher wants to focus on the fact that several students in an intermediate college-level writing class are using infinitives where gerunds are required, the teacher might start by putting some of the students’ errors on the board:

• I enjoy to see French movies.
• I stopped to smoke because it’s bad for my health.

The teacher then asks for corrections, and in the unlikely event that the class cannot make the corrections, the teacher can write the correct form next to the incorrect form and say “That’s how I write these sentences. What’s the difference?” Once the class decides that the student sentence uses infinitives rather

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Less Effective</th>
<th>Ways to Focus on Form</th>
<th>More Effective</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>communicative activities</td>
<td>context-embedded practice</td>
<td>text-based exercises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cognitively demanding activities</td>
<td>text-based exercises</td>
<td>authentic materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interesting and motivating content</td>
<td>dull or neutral content</td>
<td>cognitively undemanding activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Less Effective | Teacher Correction Strategies | More Effective
---|---|---
teacher lectures, gives rule, or explains | teacher elicits information from class
teacher corrects directly | teacher elicits peer or self-correction
teacher gives indirect, diffuse cues on type and location of correction needed | teacher gives focused, specific cues as to what correction is needed and where
teacher conducts mechanical drill of problematic form | teacher conducts meaningful practice of problematic form
teacher corrects everything | teacher corrects selectively

than gerunds (or to forms rather than -ing forms), the teacher can elicit partial lists from the class, showing which verbs take only infinitives, which take only gerunds, and which take both forms. If they cannot do this from experience, they should be given some authentic texts rich in examples of all three possibilities and asked to develop the lists as a group activity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Infinitive</th>
<th>Gerund</th>
<th>Infinitive/Gerund</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>only</td>
<td>only</td>
<td>only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>want</td>
<td>enjoy</td>
<td>try</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>expect</td>
<td>avoid</td>
<td>like</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hope</td>
<td>finish</td>
<td>remember</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>plan</td>
<td>admit</td>
<td>forget</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The teacher can then ask questions about lists 1 and 2:

T: Which verbs refer more to past or current facts?
Ss: Those in list 2.

T: Which refer more to future or hypothetical events or states?
Ss: List 1.

The teacher can then ask the students to use what they know about the differences between List 1 and List 2 verbs to explain the difference in meaning in pairs of sentences like these:

(1) a. I tried to open the window.
   b. I tried opening the window.

(2) a. I remembered to lock the door.
   b. I remembered locking the door.

After some discussion, students generally agree that in (1) the first sentence can imply an unsuccessful attempt, while the second sentence signals a successful one. In (2) they see that in the first sentence remember occurs before lock in the sequence of events, while in the second sentence remember occurs after lock, which is a past fact.

The students can then be asked to work in pairs and do a role play involving a university student and his/her advisor. Their role play should draw on a list of verbs supplied by the teacher:

admit, advise, anticipate, encourage, enjoy, expect, force, forget, induce, justify, like, motivate, permit, plan, postpone, remember, try, urge, want

In the course of doing the role plays, there can be discussion, if necessary, as to whether a given verb takes an infinitive or a gerund and why. Following the oral role-playing, there might be one or two volunteer performances. Then, for homework each pair writes a dialog or short composition based on the role play. The teacher will follow up on the written assignment if any further errors are made in the use of infinitives and gerunds. In any event, there should be recycling of this point several weeks later in another context to check for retention.

Conclusion

Whatever your methodological preference may be with respect to teaching ESL, I would argue that you need to know the rules of English grammar to carry out the following responsibilities adequately:

1. Integrate form, meaning, and content in syllabus design and lesson planning;
2. Selectively identify student production errors in need of correction (consider learner variables and instructional variables);
3. Prepare appropriate activities for getting students to focus on form when needed;
4. Develop effective strategies that raise students’ awareness of their own errors and enhance their ability to self-correct;
5. Answer students’ questions about English grammar.

As a caveat, it should be noted that ESL learners never truly attend to form unless they want to and are
able to do so. One of the best times for them to attend to form is after comprehension has been achieved and in conjunction with their production of meaningful discourse (perhaps spoken but more particularly written discourse).

It must be recognized that grammar is but one of many important aspects of language teaching. To be optimally effective an ESL teacher also must be able to use the target language (English) well, must have methodological expertise and classroom management skills—not to mention reasonable teaching materials, proper facilities and motivated students.

To conclude, let me return briefly to the moral of the tale of the four blind men of Hindustan. I do not recommend that any ESL teacher take an extreme inflexible position (i.e. always teach grammar, never teach grammar) based on limited experience with one small part of the total ESL teaching-learning spectrum. I recommend that the ESL teacher consider all the relevant variables, and then arrive at an informed decision for each distinct teaching situation he or she faces. The teacher must, of course, also have acquired or be willing to develop the necessary knowledge of English grammar along with the pedagogical skills to apply that knowledge effectively.⁶

NOTES

¹I am referring specifically to the morphology and syntax of English when I use the term “grammar.”

²In fact, when evaluating the formal writing of ESL students, trained judges are so put off by minor but frequent errors in surface grammar that the judges can no longer properly evaluate the writers’ organization or ideas and simply rate such compositions as unacceptable/not passing. In an interesting experiment at UCLA, 40% of the so-called failing ESL compositions received a rating of pass/acceptable once the surface errors had been corrected (McGirt, 1984).

³Joos (1962) in The Five Clocks defines the consultative register as the language we use with people we deal with frequently—perhaps every day—but with whom we are not close on a personal level. This register is between formal (the language for public lectures and sermons) and informal (the language used between friends who know each other very well). For purposes of this paper I have ignored the other two of Joos’ five registers: intimate and frozen.

⁴One cannot in fact correct every error that each ESL student makes. Teachers who try to do this are inconsistent in what they correct—not to mention that they typically stifle any spontaneity or creativity that their students might have in using English. Thus if one corrects, the only logical choice one has is to correct selectively, i.e. to correct all errors that hinder communication and those errors that do not but which represent areas of grammar that have been covered and practiced in class.

⁵Part of this explanation and some of the exercises are adapted from Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983: 433-46).

⁶Our desire to help the ESL teacher develop this needed knowledge of English grammar as well as an ability to apply this knowledge effectively was what motivated Diane Larsen-Freeman and me to write The Grammar Book.

REFERENCES


