Learning and Teaching $L_1$ and $L_2$ Grammar: Many Differences But Also Some Similarities

Marianne Celce-Murcia
University of California, Los Angeles

In this article, it is first argued that while $L_1$ and $L_2$ learners' intuitions about grammar may overlap, they are essentially different. It is then proposed that discourse-level descriptions of grammar must complement existing sentence-level descriptions for grammar pedagogy to become more effective: the past perfect tense and wh-clauses serve as example structures for this proposal. Next, implications of the author's position for $L_1$ teacher training and $L_2$ grammar pedagogy are explored. A grammar problem common to both $L_1$ and $L_2$ learners—the dangling participle—is also discussed.

Tout d'abord j'argue que, bien que les intuitions grammaticales des apprenants de $L_1$ et $L_2$, se recoupent parfois, elles n'en sont pas moins essentiellement différentes. Deuxièmement, je propose que les descriptions grammaticales au niveau du discours doivent être complémentaires des description existantes au niveau de la phrase pour que la didactique de la grammaire devienne plus efficace. Les constructions telles que «past perfect tense» (le plus-que-parfait) et les «wh-clauses» serviront d'exemples à ma proposition. Enfin, j'explore les conséquences de ma position vis-à-vis de la formation des enseignants de $L_1$ et vis-à-vis de la didactique de la grammaire de $L_2$. Je présente aussi un problème de grammaire commun aux apprenants de $L_1$ et $L_2$: le participe présent «échoué».

WHEN ROBERT PAPEN AND I WERE CORRESPONDING concerning the nature of my participation at this round table, several of the questions he asked me to address concerned issues such as what the ideal grammar text should look like for teaching or learning an $L_1$ or $L_2$ grammar. Other questions included: What pedagogical approach should be taken? What role should example sentences play and where should these example sentences come from? To what extent should such materials appeal to teachers' or learners' intuitions?

First, let me say that ever since completing a Ph.D. in Linguistics with my subsequent appointment to what is now the Department of TESL and Applied Linguistics at UCLA, my experiences concerning grammatical analysis and pedagogy have focussed on two university-level populations: 1) non-native speakers taking ESL courses to improve their academic English; and 2) prospective ESL teachers—many of whom are native speakers of English and many of whom are not, but all of whom must take a course in pedagogical grammar as a requirement for their M.A. degree.

For my presentation to this round table, I will focus on the latter population (my prospective ESL teachers) because they consist of both native and non-
native speakers and because they need to learn English grammar quite explicitly if they are going to engage effectively in presenting grammar to learners, in doing error analysis and remediation, in responding to learners’ questions about grammar, in consulting reference grammars, in preparing teaching materials, and in understanding research in second language acquisition that pertains to the acquisition of grammar.

L₁/L₂ Differences in Grammatical Knowledge and Intuition

Most of the non-native speakers in my pedagogical grammar classes have studied English grammar for years and are consciously aware of many more explicit rules of grammar than most of the native speakers are. A number of them are experienced ESL/EFL teachers, and a few have even written textbooks. For some of my non-natives this conscious awareness of English grammatical structure does not result in accurate use of grammar when they are speaking or writing, yet a surprising number of them are both aware of grammatical rules and relatively fluent and accurate in their use of English. (Perhaps our admissions policy helps: we like to see TOEFL scores of 620 or higher from our non-native applicants.)

In terms of having intuitions about English grammar, I have found that most of my non-native speakers are too narrow in their judgments: those who are truly advanced can generally recognize ungrammatical sentences; however, they do not do this quite as well as native speakers. The main problem is that they also tend to label as ungrammatical many sentences that most native speakers find perfectly grammatical and acceptable. Another way to put this is to say that they have a fully functional but somewhat constricted grammar and anything that does not conform to this limited grammar will be rejected as ungrammatical.

For example, twenty years ago I had some linguistically sophisticated Russian teachers of English among my pedagogical grammar students and they insisted that the passive voice and the present perfect progressive tense were an ungrammatical combination. As a group, they categorically rejected sentences such as this one:

1) These data have been computerized for two years now.

The Russians were so confident of their “rule” that they would not accept my native speaker judgment nor my authority by virtue of having completed a Ph.D. in Linguistics. (Also, twenty years ago I was too young to have any credibility with the Russians since they were all many years my senior.) As a result, I had to get signatures from half a dozen senior professors in the English and Linguistics Departments at UCLA certifying the grammaticality of several sentences such as 1) before the Russians were willing to give up their rule and believe me!

One other unusual fact about many of my non-native speakers (especially those from Asia) is that they have studied English grammar primarily through the medium of their first language. Thus they are often completely unfamiliar with the English metalanguage for English grammar, having learned about English through terms and descriptors used in their native languages. In other words, they have many of the key grammatical concepts but now must learn to map them onto the English terminology for English grammar, i.e., they now need to learn the English metalanguage to function as true professionals.

The native speakers in my pedagogical grammar classes have their native grammatical intuitions going for them. Apart from minor disagreements they have with each other or with me over grammaticality judgments, they know when a sentence is grammatical or not. Some have had background in linguistics or experience in teaching ESL or EFL, and these native speakers are reasonably knowledgeable about the structure of English and the necessary metalanguage.

However, I have also had some native speakers who are barely aware of the parts of speech, and these are the students who find the pedagogical grammar course terribly difficult. They are at a real disadvantage since they have conscious awareness of neither the grammatical concepts nor the metalanguage for these concepts. Such students require some basic preliminary instruction that introduces them to the parts of speech, to basic sentence patterns, and to metalanguage so that they can participate successfully in the pedagogical grammar course. My colleague Diane Larsen-Freeman, who has more of these types of native speaker in her classes than I do in mine, has written a chapter addressed to the needs of this group for the forthcoming second edition of the grammar course for teachers that we have co-authored (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1983).

Levels of Grammatical Description

For both groups of prospective teachers, native and non-native, I favor a descriptive approach to grammar that also reveals how grammar functions as a resource for communication. Sentences are important for explicating and illustrating grammar, but they are just a small part of what must become a more complex view of grammar. Structures should be presented in ways that make their primary meanings, communicative functions, and discourse functions clear. Grammar has form, meaning and function, and it can function locally at the level of the sentence or globally at the level of discourse (or text). Sentence-level instruction can make learners and teachers aware of rules, but only discourse-level instruction can make them aware of how these rules are used to create the various types of discourse that result in true acts of communication.

Perhaps it would be useful to consider a specific grammatical example at this point: the past perfect tense in English. At the level of form we know that this tense consists of the past tense of the auxiliary verb HAVE plus the past participle of the main verb as in I had written the letter. It is an interesting tense in terms of meaning because it is uninterpretable out of context. It requires some expression of past time in some sort of grammatically related phrase or clause in order to satisfy its interpretation:
2a) At ten o'clock last night I had written the letter.
2b) When I saw you last night, I had written the letter.

The meaning of the past perfect tense in sentences such as these can be described as signalling a time prior to some other specified time in the past. Its use is most frequent in cases where the event in the clause with the past perfect does not occur in chronological order with reference to events in the clauses around it, i.e., those sentences that occur in the simple past tense. The example in 2b) above is a good illustration of this optimal environment for the use of the past perfect.

However, this does not account for all the sentence-level functions of the past perfect; in contexts that signal hypotheticality it is also used to express a range of past counterfactual conditions (or "subjunctive" meanings):

3a) I wish I had written the letter.
3b) If only I had written the letter!
3c) If I had written the letter, you would have known the facts.

And if that weren't complicated enough, we also need to examine how the past perfect functions at the level of discourse. I have collected several example texts such as the following one, where some past event is being described using simple past tense but then the past perfect is used not to express some prior past event but to function as a coda that evaluates and assigns major importance to the series of events just described in the simple past:

4) In the 1980s researchers at Stanford University were trying to teach American Sign Language to Koko, a gorilla. Koko was well cared for and was surrounded by interesting objects. Her caretakers continually exposed her to signs for the food items and toys in her environment. Koko particularly loved bananas and kittens. One day she was hungry but couldn't find any bananas. She went to her caretaker and made a good approximation of the sign for "banana." Koko was rewarded with a banana, but even more importantly, the research team knew that Koko had made the connection between a sign and the object it represented.

This text-based use of the past perfect cannot be predicted from sentence-level grammar, yet for ESL/EFL learners who read and write in English, it may be just as useful as, if not more useful than, the sentence-level uses.

For all learners, I feel that grammar can be better understood, processed and internalized if it is presented in a rich context. It is also important that the context be authentic; it can be modified or simplified depending on the level of the learner, but it should be essentially authentic, not something that the grammarian or textbook writer has created in a vacuum simply to provide an example or to elicit artificial practice.

5a) What this city needs most is a new courthouse.
5b) What John told me was that he's too busy to come.

However, without a close examination of actual tokens of this construction, the teacher and learner can gain little appreciation of its use. Fortunately, one of my Ph.D. students (Kim, 1992) looked at hundreds of tokens of wh-clefts occurring in conversations among native speakers, and he found that the general over-arching function of wh-clefts is to mark a disjunction from the preceding context and allow the speaker to address that context (or some detail in it). Within this general view of wh-clefts, Kim distinguished those wh-clefts that mark the gist of the talk (i.e., that establish, restate, or sum up the topic) from those that respond to a problem (e.g., a challenge from the interlocutor or a perceived misunderstanding or miscommunication). An authentic example of the second type of wh-cleft follows (the wh-cleft is italicized):

6) A: An' I was wondering if you'd let me use your gun.
   B: My gun?
   A: Yeah.
   B: What gun?
   A: Don't you have a BB gun?
B: Yeah.
A: Oh it’s—
B: Oh I have a lot of guns.
A: You do?
B: Yeah. What I meant was WHICH gun.

Here the wh-cleft in speaker B’s last turn refers to his second turn (the fourth line of the conversation). After speaker A’s next-to-last line (You do?), speaker B suddenly realizes that when he said What gun earlier in line 4, it was interpreted by speaker A as meaning “I don’t have a gun.” However, since speaker B had intended what gun to mean “which gun,” he uses the wh-cleft in the final turn of the above segment to repair the misunderstanding.

Implications for Teacher Training and Pedagogy

Ideally, every language teacher should be trained to analyse grammar in context and to carry out his/her analyses whenever the appropriate descriptions are lacking or inadequate. In the real world this is too ambitious an expectation. The alternative is to provide teachers with rich data-based descriptions of the grammatical structures they are expected to be able to teach.

The pedagogy teachers adopt will depend on a large extent on their students. Intermediate- and advanced-level university students can improve their second language skills through content-based instruction, and I believe that grammar can and should be an integral part of such instruction. The grammar comes out of the content materials and the speaking and writing tasks the learners are asked to do (sometimes in the form of correction or remediation exercises). Adult school learners can be very diverse depending on whether they are literate in their L₁ or not. Preliterate adult learners, like children, must learn most of their grammar inductively. This does not mean that there can never be focus on grammar or form. The clever teacher will find ways to structure games and tasks that will get learners to practise and internalize certain structures without ever engaging the learners in any explicit discussions of grammar. Educated and literate adult language learners, once they reach the low intermediate level, can be given a more informal version of what the university students experience. The content for their course may be citizenship materials or materials related to vocational training instead of the university student’s academic materials. Again, the grammar manifested in any such content should be brought to focus in the activities and tasks the learners engage in.

Beginners (both children and adults) need special attention with respect to grammar. Research has demonstrated that language teaching that focusses only on learners’ getting the meaning (e.g., some versions of immersion education, “natural” approaches, or the whole language approach) produces second language users who are fluent but highly inaccurate. Teachers of such learners need to be shown how to embed in their instruction inductive learning that builds in practice and meaningful focus on form via techniques such as repetition while the

Learning and Teaching L₁ and L₂ Grammar

learners engage in games, sing songs, tell stories, etc. Teachers can also engage such learners to focus on form deductively or to become aware of systematic errors by saying, “That’s the way you say it, and this is the way I say it. What’s the difference?”

Learning comes through cognitive engagement of the learners, not through endless lecturing by the teacher. The learner’s cognitive engagement must be reinforced and re-activated through socio-cultural learning experiences that apply communicatively what the learner has experienced cognitively. Teaching sentence-level grammar out of context (e.g., the usual workbook exercises) will not improve the performance of second language learners when they speak or write, but teaching sentence-level grammar in discourse contexts that are rich and authentic will ensure that usable information is presented (in the form of any “rules” stated or elicited) based on these contexts. If such language material can also be practised in communicatively meaningful ways, learners have a good chance of becoming accurate as well as fluent users of the target second language.

Summary and Conclusion

Moving to the final part of my talk, I would like to get back to a few of the questions that the organizers of this round table asked me to address. Do learner intuitions about grammar exist in both L₁ and L₂? If so, do they have anything in common? Figure 1 below represents an increasingly similar yet never identical grammar for L₁ and L₂ users of the target language, i.e., even the most advanced L₂ speakers never have the full range of intuitions that the native speaker has.

![Figure 1: Grammatical Intuitions of L₁ and L₂ Learners re: Target Language](image)

What about the role and place of metalanguage in L₁ and L₂ instruction? I think there is a hierarchy in that the L₁ context requires more metalanguage than the L₂ context and teachers need to know more than learners (see Figure 2).
arrive at this goal, communicative techniques combined with a discourse-based approach to grammar are needed (Celce-Murcia, 1991).

Bibliography


