

Stephen van Vlack
Sookmyung Women's University
Graduate School of TESOL
Approaches to Teaching Grammar
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Week 2 – Answers

Ur, Penny. (1996). *A Course in Language Teaching: Module 6: Teaching Grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 75-89.

1. According to Ur, what is grammar? Do you agree or disagree with her? Explain.

For Ur, grammar is basically equated with the order of linguistic elements in a given sequence and the inclusion of bits which tie the order together smoothly provided they come in the 'correct' form for the grammatical context. She basically sees grammar as being not only syntax but also morphology and morpho-phonemics. This is a rather traditional view of grammar, but is the one that most language teachers and non-experts tend to employ.

2. What is a structure? Think of some structures that Korean has which English does not and visa versa? Do the two languages have any structures in common?

Ur believes that structure is the bits that are used to hold the order together or preserve some sort of linguistic acceptability to utterances. Exactly how knowledge of structure itself might be useful is not at all clear. Schmidt and Frota (1986) makes an important case for the internalization of structure, but only under limited conditions and not generally ones we find in Korea. For the most part structure is, in and of itself, a kind of circular, vacuous endeavor. It is only useful when linked to other linguistic elements, such as lexical units as in the lexical approach and/or functions and purpose which drive particular meaning structures.

3. How does grammar relate to meaning?

Here Ur makes a good and valid point by claiming strongly and critically that grammar and meaning are not able to be divorced from each other. They are partners and meaning cannot be avoided when looking at grammar. The two go hand in hand. Exactly how this intrinsic connection is to be handled is a whole different question and one we will spend the entire semester grappling with.

4. What are the two polar views on teaching grammar? What are your thoughts on this issue?

The two polar views of teaching grammar are that grammar is either the

most important thing in teaching a language or the very least important thing in teaching a language. The former view is probably the result of the fact that grammar is easiest element of language to teach in a classroom. The former view is obviously a violent reaction to the `grammar is primary` view. The reality as currently seen by years of contrastive research indicates that the truth lies somewhere in the middle (Hmmm-Is this a grammatical sentence?). Obviously grammar is important but how do we treat it as foreign language teachers? Various I would hope!

5. What does a good presentation of grammar entail?

A good grammar presentation entails variety and accuracy. It should be very efficient so no time is wasted. This means that all the parts must fit together into one progressive movement towards enhancing the students' competence and communicative competence for the most part. There is no way to present all aspects of any grammatical structure in one sitting. There should be different parts or stages, each reliant on the one before in which the roles of what the students and the teacher are doing change along with their knowledge and use of a specific grammatical point or points. Based on this it might be helpful if teachers were to take a prototype approach to grammar explanations. Explain prototypical elements and uses first and then expand out from the prototypes.

The biggest thing teachers need to worry about when teaching grammar is finding a balance between being simple and not wasting the students' time and being accurate. This is a hard thing to do. Tricky as well is dealing with the differences between spoken and written forms of language, for recent research indicates strongly that the two follow quite different patterns and as a result need to be thought of as being rather different. Pragmatics, as well as limitations in language processing, play an important role in this distinction and as such awards credence to aspects of Yule's approach to grammar.

6. How should grammar practice activities be used? Briefly describe their type and purpose?

The goal of any kind of grammar practice activities should be to get the students to the point where they can PRODUCE the target form spontaneously and acceptably based on the context of the situation, both linguistic and extra-linguistic. In order to achieve this rather difficult goal, teachers need to have their students move through a series of stages. Generally such stages are arranged in a hierarchy based on the degree of creativity (on the part of the students) required to satisfactorily complete the communicative task of the activity. In training for the MATE I have incorporated a series of 4 basic stages that students seem to pass through relating to structures.

Full-control

Partial-control

Some-partial-control Awareness

7. How should grammar mistakes be treated? What are some of the different viewpoints? Which view do you hold on mistakes?

There are many different views on how grammar mistakes are to be treated. They range from the strict view, wherein all mistakes are potential fossilizations and must be stamped out with great haste and vengeance, to the soft view wherein mistakes are not seen as a terrible problem most of the time and should be ignored unless they interfere with comprehension and even then they need to be `corrected` in a more covert way.

No matter the relative strength of your view on mistakes they need to be acknowledged as being extremely useful to the language teacher. They can provide a road map of the students learning history and present level. They tell us where (at what level) the students currently are and what we need to do as teachers to propel them forward.

Here is a more in-depth discussion of some of the issues presented in Ur (1996) with more of my own opinion inserted.

Structure -vs- Meaning

The simplest way of looking at grammar is to look at it as a set of rules about structure. When we do this we focus on structural elements, such as subject-verb agreement, plural marking, tense and aspect marking, and articles to name just a few of the common structural elements of English. This is the way that Ur looks at grammar. It is a very traditional view and one that we have to be leery of. Teaching the structural rules, however, is only one side of the language coin.

It does not help students very much to give them sets of rules which must be memorized. Rather the teacher has to focus on how the rules of structure are used to change the meaning of the utterance. This will help the students more. If you are talking to students about plurals and the idea of non-count nouns pops up, how are you going to have to deal with it? It is not possible to give the students a list of all the count and non-count nouns in English and have them memorize it. Our brains do not function like computers. It is better to explain the differences along the lines of meaning. This is quite hard sometimes, but is certainly worth a try.

Grammar or no Grammar?

Whether or not to even to teach grammar has become one of the most important questions a language teacher can ask themselves. It has been a very hot topic since the middle 1970s. There are extreme viewpoints on either side. These basic contentions arise from how people look at second language acquisition in relation to first language acquisition. Those who think the two are close, if not synonymous, believe that grammar need not be taught ever. Those who believe the two are totally different generally

follow the heavy grammar teaching model.

Recent research has shown that though first and second language acquisition share some similarities, there are still fundamental differences in the two. These differences become sharper as the language learner becomes older. We, therefore, cannot expect people learning a second language to function the same way babies do when they learn their first language. Things must be done differently. We can, however, make good use of what we know about how children learn their first language to help them learn more effectively in the second language classroom. What this means is that teachers have to find some sort of happy medium which works for them and which both they and their students feel comfortable with.

One of the goals of the classroom should be to make grammar automatic and ingrained in the lessons. Native speakers of a language have intuitions about the correctness of the forms in their language. Once more, they can make these judgments without consciously thinking about grammar rules. We call this ability to make grammatical judgments native speaker intuition. Provided they are given the right kind of language input it seems that non-native speakers of a language, too, can develop intuitions about that language. The intuitions of non-native speakers might not, however, match those of native speakers.

How to Present Grammar

Presenting a grammatical or structural point to a class is difficult. If we only present the bare bones of the structure, the students will probably only recognize the structural point when they see it. They will not be able to use it with any consistency in their production. A full explanation, complete with meaning differences, exceptions, and the like takes a long time and is probably very boring. Examples are good, but giving a list of decontextualized sentences is not very interesting for the students and ultimately not very effective.

An important question we need to ask ourselves here is the order of our teaching. Should I explain the grammar first and give some examples and then have the students work on it? On the other hand, I can give them carefully gauged exercises and see how they do on them before trying to explain any grammar problems that the students might have. The former approach is called the bottom-up approach. The latter is the top-down approach.

Following the top-down approach makes it easier for the teacher to link their explanations of grammar to real language or real problems the students are having. One must, however, be careful of this. The exercises one chooses must fit what the students can do. Do not over or underestimate what your students can do. Remember the input hypothesis; $i+1$. Use that to help you decide what level of material you will give your students.

When presenting grammar there are still some criteria we should

probably follow.

1. Make sure you use a lot of meaningful examples. Try to keep them as authentic as possible.
2. Use examples from both spoken and written language.
3. In your examples, try to link structure and meaning
4. Keep your explanations as simple as possible.

You need not mention every instance of how a certain structure is used. Think about the way your students are going to have to use that structure for the time being. Take it in steps. It's impossible to be comprehensive all at once.

5. Use rules only if you have to.

Again, keep it simple.

Grammar Practice

Whether to practice the grammar point before or after you have taught the structure overtly, or whether to teach the structure overtly is totally up to you and how you do things. What is obvious is that students need practice and usually a lot of it. As teachers, we need to be careful to give them the right kind of practice.

The ultimate goal of teaching grammar is to get the students to the point where they can use the grammar rule themselves and with some degree of accuracy. Now, this is not an easy thing. The only way we can do this is take them through a progression of materials and exercises, all of which serve to build on the students' ability. The seven types of grammar practice given by Ur, 1998 are quite good as a start, but might need to be fine-tuned as you think about your particular goals for your class.

Korean mainstream education has not yet fully shifted to the communicate approach to language teaching. You might then find it difficult to work on speaking or productive skills much in your classes. If this is the case, that is if you are a high school teacher and do not have time to work on speaking, you have your work really cut out for you. It will be hard to realize what the students can really do with grammar.

Mistakes

How you deal with the mistakes your students make is of course very important. Whether we are focusing on writing or speaking as the students main productive skill, we still expect them to make errors as their proficiency increases. In fact, errors are good. They give us an indication of what we need to work on more with the students. Things are not that easy and cut and dry.

Realizing the mistakes a student makes can be difficult. Generally we perceive mistakes according to the way we ourselves were taught. As English teachers, the guardians of right and wrong in the students' English world, we need to be careful. A balance must be found between what is acceptable and what is not. We do not want to be too restrictive or limiting, nor do we

want to encourage, through passive acceptance, the use of forms which do not fit the level of language the students want to learn.

When looking at what we think are mistakes we want to identify them in patterns. One instance, or a few isolated instances, of a certain mistake is not something to be concerned about. We do, however, need to be worried when a student systematically makes mistakes in the same area of structure. If you encounter this in your class, and you will, try to make your correction of the mistakes as constructive and non-threatening as possible.

The bottom line here is don't get too excited about mistakes. You should expect them and use them to your advantage. Use the students' mistakes to gauge what exercises you will have them do, or what kind of explanation you will have to give them.

You are already experts, via teaching experience or study experience or both. You know the most typical mistakes that your students will make in English grammar. Experience has shown you where the difficulties lie. Thinking a bit about it, you might also be able to figure out where a lot of the mistakes come from. What is the cause of the most common mistakes that Koreans make in English, both in speaking and writing? I think you know what they are even if the answers are sometimes painful. The mistakes come from inaccuracies in the textbooks and also from the teachers themselves, who have become fossilized without realizing it. These are things we have to think about in the Korean context of language teaching.

Lewis (1997) Chapter 1 - What is the Lexical Approach?

1. What are lexical chunks and how are they important?

Lewis claims that lexis consists of 4 different types (and sizes) of expressions.

Words

Collocations

Fixed expressions

Semi-fixed expressions

Such claims are quite recent, the lexical approach was first suggested only as recently as 1990 by Jane Willis, although her work was undoubtedly affected by earlier work by Fillmore on what is called Construction Grammar. This view contrasts strongly with traditional views of grammar and generative grammar which are solidly word-based. In the lexical view, grammar itself is not some sort of separate entity which must be learned or for which there is a separate bioprogram, but is part of our store of words (lexis or the mental lexicon; see Singleton (2000) chapter 1 for a clear and concise definition of the two).

Grammar is encoded incidentally on the way words are patterned together and is learned based on instances of exposure and usage of such lexical patterns. This view is supported by research in first language acquisition as well as recent and coincidentally parallel models of the brain and the mental lexicon. In this view, then, grammar is encoded in different types of combinations of lexical items. Important is that these prefabricated patterns, no matter what their size, are treated the same as

regular words would be in more traditional types of grammar. This means that the production of language is not always a bottom-up, word by word process. When speakers go to create an utterance they don't first have to decide what the form will be and then based on information contained in the lexical entries of her then decide what types of objects possible subjects the verb can take and then insert them into a structure piece by piece. The lexical approach chunks can be brought down and inserted directly into structures in their entirety. This is a more efficient system and allows learners to develop fluency at a much faster rate.

2. What are some of the implications of the lexical approach?

There are some very important implications of the lexical approach not only in how we manage foreign language classrooms but also in the study of language acquisition and language in general. In reality while the lexical poses a major challenge to current linguistic thought, it does not necessarily require a major change in classroom behavior. As teachers, the minimum that would be required for us in adopting a lexical approach would be to try to organize some of the lexical items would expose our students to in a way which is meaningful both the language and the student's brains.