

## ***Teaching Issues***

The *TESOL Quarterly* publishes brief commentaries on aspects of English language teaching. For this issue, we asked two educators to address the following question: Under what circumstances, if any, should formal grammar instruction take place?

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### ***Formal Grammar Instruction***

#### ***An Educator Comments. . .***

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To frame this discussion, two clarifications are in order. First, I will be addressing grammar instruction only with the ESL context in mind. For the EFL context, a somewhat different answer is needed. Second, I would highlight my underlying assumption that working towards grammatical accuracy does not mean sacrificing fluency; grammatical competence is one component of communicative competence—the others being sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence (Canale, 1981).

What do we mean by “formal grammar instruction”? For some this means the teacher lecturing about grammar or preparing the students for a test like the TOEFL (Test of English as a Second Language); for others perhaps it evokes an image of the teacher answering learners’ questions about grammar or carrying out a correction activity. Such perspectives entail too narrow a view of “formal grammar instruction.” For me, any learning activity that focuses the learner’s attention on the *form* of a message (ideally, in the context of the meaning and function of the message) constitutes formal grammar instruction. Such attention focusing can, of course, be done both deductively and inductively. It can be done by a teacher or a tutor; it can be part of an initial presentation, a practice activity, or a follow-up error-correction session. Any such instruction is more effective if it is discourse-based and context-based than if it is sentence-based and context-free.

Given this broad view of formal grammar instruction, one must still consider the learner’s age, proficiency level, and ultimate objectives in studying a second language in order to answer the question of when to teach grammar formally in a satisfactory manner.

Research in second language acquisition (for a summary, see Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1990) indicates that generally only young, prepubescent learners, and then only those with good access to native-speaking peers

and sufficiently rich and varied native speaker input, can—in the absence of formal grammar instruction—learn a foreign or second language with nativelike proficiency and accuracy. Postpubescent adolescents and adults need to pay some attention to the form of the target language. If they do not, they ultimately develop an incomplete and imperfect interlanguage that reflects learning problems such as negative transfer from the native language, simplification, overgeneralization, erroneous rule formation, and so forth (see Richards, 1974). Indeed, Higgs and Clifford (1982) argue from their years of experience at the Foreign Service Institute that adults who learn a foreign language without any formal grammar instruction during the basic language learning stage can never achieve high proficiency in the target language. Such learners may become fluent, but in terms of their grammatical development, they plateau at an intermediate or low-intermediate level and are unable to progress even if they are provided with formal grammar instruction at a later time.

The research of Cummins (1979), among others, tells us that immigrant school-age children can learn basic interpersonal oral communication skills in a second language -within a few years. However, it takes them up to 7 years (and sometimes even up to 10 when additional factors are considered; cf. Collier, 1989) to acquire the second language literacy skills needed to achieve academic parity with native speakers. This suggests that in optimal second language learning, the spoken language and the written language are different: it is easier to learn to understand and speak a second language for basic oral communication than it is to learn to read and write in this language for academic purposes. Grammar, likewise, seems to be more crucial if advanced proficiency is desired and a high level of literacy is required.

McGirt's (1984) study supports this distinction between spoken and written language by showing that nonnative ESL students at the University of California, Los Angeles, many with 7 or more years of residence in the U.S. and virtually no accent in their speech, still tend to make significantly more morphosyntactic errors in their academic writing than do native speakers (i.e., 7 errors per 100 words vs. 1 error per 100 words). Sixty percent of the ESL students McGirt studied had acceptable writing from the point of view of organization and logic. However, only 20% were rated as overall acceptable writers; faulty grammar made the writing of the other 40% unacceptable to the composition faculty.

When a similar population of ESL students at the University of California, Davis (i.e., students who had a high rate of faulty grammar and other problems in their writing) was surveyed and interviewed by Schwabe (1989), she found that most had never received any grammar instruction (i.e., they were not provided with the rules of English grammar) or grammar correction on their written work while in middle school or senior high school. Thus even under optimal environmental conditions (i. e., when the learners are using the second language to learn content and to interact with native speakers), the grammar needed for acceptable academic writing is not well acquired in the total absence of

any feedback or formal grammar instruction. Fortunately, Frodesen (1991), and others offer ESL teachers suggestions on how to effectively provide contextualized instruction in grammar as one component of a writing course for nonnative speakers.

Before concluding, I must point out that grammar instruction carried out for its own sake, totally divorced from activities that involve using it as a resource to convey meaning is as irresponsible and counterproductive as not teaching grammar at all. The challenge for language teachers is to develop effective ways of focusing learner attention on form at critical moments while learners are using the second language for purposeful communication, especially written communication. This is not easy, but it is necessary if one is teaching postpubescent learners who need to achieve a high level of proficiency for professional or academic purposes, especially if the learners need to become reasonably effective and accurate writers in their second language. Grammatical accuracy is important because it marks a second language learner as competent; it helps open academic, social, and economic doors for them.

Yes, there are definitely circumstances where formal grammar instruction is necessary. And there are also circumstances where it is not, for example, with learners who want to acquire only basic, rudimentary oral communication such as older immigrants, or preliterate immigrants who want a hands-on job, or young children who are learning the second language in an optimal environment with lots of native-speaking peers around them. Obviously, the question of when to teach grammar formally has no simple answer.

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### ***Another Educator Comments. . .***

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It is significant that this question should be asked. Not long ago, it was thought that formal grammar instruction was the only means of developing second language competence. Current research, however, shows that second language competence is developed in another way.

My interpretation of the research is that we acquire language by understanding messages, by obtaining comprehensible input. Direct evidence supporting the input hypothesis includes studies showing that when acquirers obtain more comprehensible input, they acquire more of the target language. This is the case both outside of school (exposure and length of residence studies) and inside of school (method comparison studies) and holds for both second language acquisition and the development of literacy (Krashen, 1991).

There are also several serious problems with the hypothesis that direct instruction plays a major role in developing language competence. It has been argued that language is too complex to be deliberately taught and learned, and there is evidence that people develop high levels of second language competence without formal instruction (Krashen, 1991).

Does grammar study have any effect? My interpretation of the research is that grammar learning does have an effect, but this effect is peripheral and fragile. I have argued (Krashen, 1982) that conscious knowledge of grammar is available only as a monitor, or editor, and that there are three necessary conditions for monitor use: Performers need to know the rule, have enough time to apply the rule, and need to be focused on form. When these conditions are met, application of grammar rules can indeed result in increased accuracy, but the performer pays a price in decreased information conveyed, and a slower, more hesitant speech style. There are other risks, such as editing one's next sentence while the other person is talking, which results in grammatically improved but sometimes

inappropriate speech, and, when rules are complex, diminished instead of increased accuracy.

Current research confirms that the effect of grammar is peripheral and fragile; this research shows that direct instruction on specific rules has a measurable impact on tests that focus the performer on form, but the effect is short-lived (e.g., Harley, 1989; White, 1991).<sup>1</sup>

Optimal use of the monitor occurs when application of conscious rules does not interfere with communication. For most people, this means using the monitor in writing, but delaying its use until all of their ideas are on the page. Because of the fragility of conscious grammatical knowledge, optimal users may also refer to handbooks occasionally. There may be a few mental gymnasts who can remember many rules and monitor while they speak, but I suspect that even these virtuosi rely mostly on acquired knowledge and consciously monitor only a few aspects of grammar.<sup>2</sup> Of course, a significant number of students will not use the monitor at all, such as young children, unschooled adults, and those who simply have no interest in grammar.

If this view is correct, it implies that formal grammar teaching can be done when students know the limits of conscious grammatical knowledge: When they know it is not the major source of second language competence, when they understand that they will learn only a subset of the rules of a language, when they understand the restricted function of grammar, and when they understand when to use conscious knowledge of language.

<sup>1</sup> It has been claimed that direct instruction, when timed so that it is exactly at the acquirer's level of development, has positive effects (Pienemann, 1984, 1989). From the research available to me, this so-called success is based on very little data. Pienemann rests much of his case on the performance of one student (Giovanni) acquiring German as a second language. Moreover, only one rule was taught (inversion), and Pienemann only provides Giovanni's percentage correct in using inversion just before and just after instruction; we are not told how many times inversion was attempted. Another student "learned inversion in a similar manner as Giovanni" (Pienemann, 1984, p. 197), but no details are provided other than this assertion. Also, Pienemann claims that Giovanni generalized his learning of the principles underlying inversion to another structure, but his mastery of this structure was "in its very beginnings" (p. 205) and the "number of such instances is rather small" (p. 205). Once again, no data is provided. Pienemann (1989) claims that instruction improved accuracy in the use of the copula in three acquirers, but once again only percentages are provided, and the effects appeared to be short-term.

White, Spada, Lightbown, & Ranta (1991) maintain that knowledge gained through direct instruction in their study was not peripheral but was integrated into their subjects' acquired systems because, after instruction, gains were found on an oral test as well as on written tests. It is quite plausible, however, that conditions for monitor use were met on the oral test. The oral test focused the subjects on rules they had just studied and subjects probably suspected they were being tested on grammatical form (all other tests used obviously focused the student on the target rules). In addition, White et al. do not indicate that there was any time pressure on the test.

<sup>2</sup> French-speaking children in an intensive ESL class in Lightbown (1991) showed remarkably high accuracy in the English *there is* construction, compared to other classes, and maintained their high level of performance when tested one year later. Lightbown's interview with their teacher revealed that she had placed special emphasis on this structure ("I drummed it into their little heads" [p. 207]). I suspect that these children, after so much drill, simply specialized in this rule, monitoring it all the time. Interestingly, this class was not significantly better than comparisons in overall reading and listening (Lightbown & Spada, 1990).

Although there is a role for grammar, research and theory show that the best way of increasing grammatical accuracy is comprehensible input. Studies also suggest that the most effective kind of comprehensible input for advanced grammatical development is reading (Elley, 1991; Krashen, 1991). Getting students interested in books will insure continued grammatical development (as well as improvement in vocabulary, spelling, and writing style) long after the language course ends.

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