

Second Language Acquisition and Grammar Instruction

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Abstract

Grammar instruction is a contentious issue in the field of second language acquisition. There are arguments about whether or not grammar instruction helps L2 learning. The paper reviews literature on second language acquisition research and theories to present different perspectives on the teaching of grammar. Research suggests that although grammar instruction impacts L2 learning positively it is imperative to take a cautious approach while incorporating grammar teaching in the curriculum.

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O'Grady, Archibald, Aronoff and Rees-Miller (2005, pp. 425-426) maintain that form-focused instruction refers to two practices in the L2 classroom: instruction about the target language and overt correction. This view entails the debate about whether or not the teaching of grammar is helpful for L2 learners, and if at all, how grammar teaching helps second language acquisition. Furthermore, if grammar instruction helps L2 learning, which grammar items should be taught and what would be the role of error correction, one of the by-products of grammar teaching? Although there has been ample evidence in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) that L2 learners learn the grammatical structures they are taught, there is room for caution based on some theoretical grounds (R. Ellis, 2006). In sum, current research and theories in SLA warrant an investigation of the role of the teaching of grammar in L2 learning. With a view to examining the effectiveness of grammar instruction within the purview of current research and

theories in SLA, this paper surveys the literature on the issue. More specifically, this paper seeks to ascertain whether grammar teaching is helpful for second language learning. It intends to determine which grammar items should be taught and what the role of error correction is.

Research shows that grammar teaching does have a positive impact on learners' "interlanguage" (Selinker, 1972) development, although some SLA theorists would refute this claim. Current literature maintains that selection of grammar items should be in line with various SLA theories such as Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1964) and Markedness Differential Hypothesis (Eckman, 1977). However, some scholars are for using frequency test for choosing the most useful grammar items for second language learners (Biber & Reppen, 2002). Current literature on the topic also indicates that error correction does help L2 learners positively and help solve their problems in the target language (R. Ellis, 1997, 1998, 2006).

Historical Background

To examine the relationship between grammar instruction and L2 learning, we must look at the historical background regarding how SLA theories have shaped various language teaching methodologies. Since teaching methodologies have an impact on the way the content is presented in the actual classroom context, it is relevant to see how the teaching of grammar in FL/SL classrooms has evolved over time.

Celce-Murcia (1991) has surveyed the historical background of major methodological approaches in language teaching in the last several years. In her survey Celce-Murcia recaps four major approaches to language teaching. She maintains that the audio-lingual approach (e.g., Fries, 1945; Lado, 1964) to language teaching was a direct offshoot of behaviorism. Behaviorists believed that language learning was a consequence of habit formation. Likewise, proponents of the audio-lingual approach maintained that language learning was the consequence of "habit formation" and "overlearning." Mimicry of forms and certain patterns of sentences received constant emphasis and the teachers were told to correct all errors of learners. Errors were seen as interference from the L1 (Celce-Murcia, 1991, p. 460). Behaviorism, however, failed to explain all aspects of language learning and eventually lost popularity. In fact, the audio-lingual approach to language teaching would rarely go beyond sentence-level drills and would fail to account for other aspects of language skills such as correct pronunciation, development of pragmatic knowledge, improving writing skills

and so on.

The cognitive-code approach was influenced by the work of linguist such as Chomsky (1959) and a psychologist like Miller (e.g., Miller & Buckhout, 1973; cited in Celce-Murcia, 1991). This approach views language learning as hypothesis formation and rule acquisition and not merely habit formation (Celce-Murcia, 1991, p. 461). Grammar was considered important for the sake of learning the "rules" of the language, either deductively or inductively. Errors were considered normal byproducts of language learning and correction of errors constituted an important part of the language teaching-learning process. The sources of errors were seen not only as L1 transfer but also developmental. It was maintained that errors were natural in L2 learning and were the result of the internal complexities of the target language.

The comprehension approach (e.g., Winitz, 1981) sees comprehension to be the primary focus in language learning. Proponents of this approach believe that the development of comprehension skills must precede the development of production skills. Some practitioners of the comprehension approach carefully select the grammatical items in their syllabus and teach grammar inductively. Others, however, argue that grammar should be excluded from the syllabus because grammar does not necessarily facilitate language learning, for at best it may help learners become aware of various language forms. They believe that error correction is unnecessary since learners will self-correct their errors when they are exposed to "more complex," "rich" and "meaningful input" in the L2 (Celce-Murcia, 1991, p. 461).

Lately, the communicative approach to language teaching has been the prevalent language teaching methodology. This approach originated in the work of linguists such as Hymes (1972) and Halliday (1973). The proponents of this approach claim that the main goal of SL/FL learning is communication and accordingly, the FL/SL syllabus should address this goal by incorporating more content-based, meaningful, and contextualized tasks in the curriculum. There is a great deal of dispute among linguists and teaching methodologists with regard to the extent and type of grammatical instruction teachers should provide to learners in the communicative approach. Since communication is the main objective of language learning, according to the communicative approach errors and error feedback should be of secondary importance for language teachers.

Does Grammar Instruction Help L2 Learning?

The brief historical description presented above shows how various SLA theories helped evolve second language teaching methodologies over time. The account also shows why it is difficult to come up with consistent, all-encompassing, and uniform teaching practices for L2 classrooms. Since language learning is a complex phenomenon, no single theory can address all aspects of the language learning process. Over the years linguists and teaching methodologists have attempted to come up with effective means of language teaching and have provided insights into the complex language learning process.

Whether or not the teaching of grammar helps L2 learners in learning the target language and whether grammar teaching should be incorporated in the L2 syllabus has generated much debate in SLA circles. There are theorists both for and against explicit grammar instruction in L2 classroom. Before moving on to examine studies relating to the effectiveness of the teaching of grammar it is necessary at this point to be familiar with a dichotomy used in the discussions of grammar instruction in communicative approach, namely, "focus on forms" and "focus on form".

Common terminologies used for dealing with grammar in a communicative setting are "focus on forms" and "focus on form". These were proposed by Long (1991; cited in Gass & Selinker, 2001). "Focus on forms" is the "structure-of-the-day" approach whereby focus is on the *form* and activities are directed towards a single grammatical form (e.g., subject-verb agreement). On the other hand, in "focus on form" approach, the focus is more on *meaning*; and attention to the forms arises out of communicative activities. Focused tasks are required to elicit occasions for using predetermined grammatical structures.

It has been argued that there is evidence that focus on form in L2 instruction facilitates SL learning (R. Ellis, 2002, p. 223). N. C. Ellis (2002) thus maintains that form-focused instruction is "facilitative" or "even necessary" for adult L2 learning. However, other theorists believe that FFI does not have as much impact on L2 acquisition. Krashen (1993) for example, continues to argue that focus on form has very little impact on L2 learning and he describes its effects as "peripheral."

In his survey of studies on form-focused instruction, R. Ellis (2002, p. 232) found that the key factors in FFI were the nature of the target structure and the length of treatment. He maintained that FFI instruction was likely to have a better chance of success if it was used for simple morphological features such as

verb forms, articles, etc. as opposed to more complex structures such as passive sentence, or Spanish clitic pronouns. Further, N. C. Ellis (2002) argues that extended treatment involving FFI is likely to achieve more success than limited treatment. In other words, frequency of treatment is a major factor in determining successful L2 acquisition. Finally, R. Ellis (2002) points out that the variables that determine the success of the instruction are "the complexity of the target structure, the extent of the instruction, and the availability of the target structure in non-instructional input" (p. 234).

Which Grammar Items Should Be Taught?

Although the discussions above may indicate that form-focused instruction indeed helps L2 learning, a few obvious questions are in order: How should teachers incorporate grammar instruction in L2 curricula? Should grammar be taught communicatively? Should production skills override reception? Should grammar be taught through practice drills? Exactly, which grammatical items should be taught? Should teachers teach grammar explicitly, or is it better to teach implicitly so learners acquire grammatical knowledge in a more natural way? Should teachers correct grammatical errors? There are countless questions such as these that keep L2 researchers and theorists engaged and they constitute some of the most intriguing research agenda in the field.

Research shows that the answers to the above questions are divisive rather than decisive. One main reason behind the division of opinions is various diverging SLA theories on the issue. For example, while SLA theorists like Krashen (1982) believe in "natural" order and "meaningful input" for the acquisition of a second language, more recent theorists like N. C. Ellis (2002) opine that L2 learners' efforts can be facilitated by providing them with as much exposure as possible. In other words, for Krashen, grammar teaching may prove ineffective unless learners are ready to acquire the structures that they are taught. The opposing views suggest that when L2 learners are exposed to different grammatical structures, even those that are unfamiliar to them, it is likely that the exposure would help them better understand the target language. Overall, in spite of these differences the popular belief remains that grammar instruction does help/facilitate L2 learners' development of the interlanguage and that "there is ample evidence to demonstrate that teaching grammar works" (R. Ellis, 2006, p. 102).

Having surveyed the literature on the topic of grammar teaching in SLA we may sum up the status of the issue as follows. Recent SLA theories suggest that grammatical rules taught should emphasize not only the forms but also the

meanings of the structures (R. Ellis, 2006, p.102). Which is to say, while learners should be exposed to grammatical structures communicatively, they should also be made aware of the use of these structures. In this connection, Celce-Murcia (1991) argues that grammar should be taught through meaning. For example, the teaching of prepositions in English can be presented so that learners can "view" grammatical rules in "service." Instructors can use "fully-illustrated" and "well-demonstrated" (Celce-Murcia, 1991, p. 467) examples to show various spatial meanings of prepositions:

- 1
 - a. Bob put the book *in* the box./The book is *in* the box.
 - b. Bob put the book *on* the table./The book is *on* the table.
- 2
 - a. Ann threw the ball *in* the basket./ The ball is *in* the basket.
 - b. Ann threw the ball *on* the floor./The ball is *on* the floor. (Celce-Murcia, 1991, p. 467)

Subsequently, L2 learners can be asked to describe similar situations to practice the use of other prepositions. Examples 1 & 2 above are meant for teaching English prepositions. One salient feature of these examples is that for each pair of examples (e.g., Bob put the book *in* the box./The book is *in* the box) instructors can have learners "view" the functions of English prepositions rather than have them memorize their usage. For example, the meaning of "in" can be clearer to learners when they actually "see" the book "inside" the box.

Although it is generally believed that both "focus on form" and "focus on forms" can be effective for grammar teaching, their success largely depend on how teachers implement these practices in actual classroom settings. Arguing in line with one of the principal tenets of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) (see Lado, 1964), R. Ellis (2006) maintains that there might be an advantage in teaching grammatical rules that are different from learners' L1. Eckman's (1977) Markedness Differential Hypothesis provides valuable insights into the selection of grammatical rules or topics. According to Eckman, teaching the grammatical rules that are more "marked," or rarer and less frequently used can be of more help for L2 learners regardless of their L1. For example, a structure such as

- 3
 - a. He made me *follow* him. (R. Ellis, 2006, p. 89)
 - b. We let him *call*.

may be more useful to L2 learners considering the relatively "rare" or more "marked" construction of this type of sentences (e.g., example 3) in which an

infinitive without "to" is followed by the verb *make* (and *let*). More specifically, example 3 is not a common construction in that generally English infinitives are preceded by "to", such as

- 4 a. He wanted me *to go* there.
- b. We asked him *to run*.

The main difference between examples 3 and 4 then is that after the main verbs *make* and *let* we do not use the infinitive with a *to* (e.g., *follow*, *call* in example 3); but after verbs such as *want*, *ask*, when they are used as main verbs, we use "to" with infinitives (e.g., *to go*, *to run* in example 4).

A Few More Relevant Issues About Grammar Instruction

One of the inevitable byproducts of any kind of grammar instruction is learners' errors. In spite of a long-drawn debate on the issue (e.g., Ferris, 1999, 2004; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Truscott, 1996, 1999, 2007; and Truscott & Hsu, 2008), it is widely accepted that feedback on errors does help learners' interlanguage development (R. Ellis, 1997). Since global errors could be a cause for miscommunication, it is likely that error feedback on this kind of errors is more important than local errors (Celce-Murcia, 1991, p. 469). Some of the options of error feedback proposed by R. Ellis (1998, p. 52) are explicit correction, clarification requests, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, and repetition. R. Ellis (2006) maintains that corrective feedback is as important as the teaching of grammar itself. Further, the best feedback could be given "using a mixture of implicit and explicit feedback types that are both input based and output based" (p. 102). One obvious question relating to the error feedback involves what type of feedback is most effective. One way researchers attempt to understand the effectiveness of error feedback is by analyzing learners' *uptake* (R. Ellis, 1998). That is to say, they want to ascertain to what extent learners are able to internalize the feedback and are subsequently successful in repairing the incorrect forms.

As far as selecting materials for grammar instruction is concerned, given the enormous amount of language data around it is difficult for teachers to choose the right kinds of materials for an appropriate context or an appropriate group of learners. It is also difficult to select the appropriate topic for grammar instruction. In their research, Biber and Reppen (2002) find that "information based on actual frequency and context of use" can help teachers and materials developers alike in determining the grammar topics that need to be taught. This can, in turn, help teachers provide "meaningful input," one of the main tenets of

Krashen's (1983) "input hypothesis," to L2 learners. Biber and Reppen (2002, p. 207) also suggest that with the rise of corpus-based analysis, it is now more practical to include grammatical items in the curriculum after conducting frequency studies. Although this may not provide the ultimate solution to the problem regarding which grammatical items should be taught, frequency studies do provide interesting insights into the grammar teaching in L2 classes.

Another relevant issue about the teaching of grammar is adopting an appropriate teaching method so that learners' "uptake" could be maximized. R. Ellis (1998) notes that explicit grammar teaching explains grammatical rules and takes the form of written or oral presentations of these rules. In a separate account, Fotos and Ellis (1991) maintain that instructors could also adopt the options of direct and indirect explicit as well as direct and indirect consciousness-raising grammar instruction, although both have certain advantages and disadvantages. Further, R. Ellis (1998) talks about the deductive and inductive modes of grammar instruction which are direct offshoots of the language teaching methodologies such as grammar-translation and audio-lingual method in vogue in the 1960's. In grammar-translation method learning grammatical rules of the target language was most important. Also, the focus always was on the translation of the L1 into the target structures. One problem with this method, however, is that communication is not considered a primary focus in instruction. As a result, learners with good knowledge in grammar would fail in communicative tasks in the target language. The audio-lingual method, as discussed earlier, promotes language learning as habit formation, which by no means explains all aspects of acquiring target language structures.

While it is important to follow the appropriate teaching methods, it is equally important to find how instruction can help learners practice grammar skills. Conceding the crucial role of grammar teaching in SLA, Zhonggang Gao (2001) declares that grammar instruction can be used to increase adult L2 learners' analytical abilities which may eventually help their chances of more efficient second language acquisition. He argues that in order to help L2 learners effectively, grammar should not be taught in an isolated context but rather should be contextualized. He argues that "grammar is not an end; it is a means." (p. 333)

Another way learners can develop their grammar skills is by practicing production drills. Although language learning involves both receptive (i.e., listening, reading) and production skills (i.e., speaking, writing), it is commonplace that learners practice production skills more. Although linguists such as Corder (1967; cited in R. Ellis, 1998, p. 51) believe that L2 learners have

their own built-in syllabus and will follow a specific order of acquisition no matter what they are taught, Schmidt (1994) disagrees. He argues that although learners may not be able to learn entirely new grammar forms, production practice involving new forms helps them become more fluent and conscious about the accurate usage of the partially acquired forms in their interlanguage. Further room for uncertainty, however, remains regarding what type of production practice, whether text manipulation or text creating, helps learners best in acquiring target structures (Castagnaro, 1991).

Discussions

The accounts above problematize the issue of grammar teaching without providing any concrete solutions. In fact, this typifies the very nature of the literature available on the topic. While SLA theorists and researchers come up with interesting hypotheses and fresh set of research findings it is always difficult to provide generalizable principles for language instruction that meet various individualistic and contextual variables. It must be conceded, however, that the ongoing conversations regarding grammar instruction in the field of SLA and TESOL provide us with new insights into the topic and help us become aware about nuanced facets of L2 learning.

Having reviewed the literature on the role of grammar teaching in SLA, this paper concludes with the following observations, which though note based on any empirical data will surely add to the already existing body of knowledge about grammar instruction in SLA:

1. Even though some SLA researchers (e.g., Krashen, 1982) do not agree that grammar teaching helps develop L2 learners' interlanguage system, it seems plausible that some degree of grammar instruction helps learners understand and apply the knowledge about the target language they have acquired thus.
2. Although there is dispute surrounding "focus on form" and "focus on forms" it seems more logical for instructors to use both approaches interchangeably, providing them the option to choose between the two depending on all contextual needs and circumstances.
3. Error feedback should be incorporated into the curriculum, because unless learners are shown the incorrect forms it is likely that they may not be able to identify problems on their own. In spite of disagreement about error

correction (e.g., Ferris, 1999; Truscott, 1996) it seems more reasonable in L2 learning to adopt different correction modes such as elicitation and explicit correction interchangeably, depending on various contextual factors such as learners' proficiency level, the nature and level of language instruction, and so on. Instructors may inform learners what mode of error correction they should follow for a particular lesson or course. This would help learners become aware about what is expected from them and teach them to become more engaged and responsible about the entire language learning process. Additionally, if learners are informed about various error correction modes instructors should follow in the lesson, it would remove any confusion learners may have about instructor's teaching practices.

4. While some theorists maintain that grammar should be taught communicatively, it may not be a plausible idea when one considers various contextual constraints within which L2 learning takes place. More specifically, grammar instruction through communicative approach may prove ineffective in large classes. Considering the amount of work instructors would already have to invest for *planning* a lesson so that "focus on form" and "focus on meaning" are appropriately integrated, it is difficult to imagine how they can accomplish grammar instruction communicatively while doing well in it and retaining the interest for the challenge for long.
5. Most current research focus on the effectiveness of grammar instruction, identifying the grammar rules that need to be taught, specifying grammar structures that learners have difficulty with, and underscoring materials that need to be incorporated for grammar instruction. In literature it is customary to relate effectiveness to the short-term "effects" of grammar instruction. Considering that a great body of SLA research (see Major, 1992; Taura, 2008; Oxford, 1982) has looked into the retention and attrition of various linguistic skills at various levels (e.g., phonology, syntax), it would be worth exploring learners' retention abilities of grammar instruction. This line of SLA research may be useful in eliciting understanding regarding what aspects of grammar instruction help learners retain the *obtained* linguistic/grammar knowledge over time.

Conclusion

This paper has surveyed literature relating to SLA and the teaching of grammar. It has shown how grammar instruction is embedded in current SLA research and theories. Research shows that there are contrasting theories in the field regarding whether or not grammar teaching helps L2 development. In spite of disagreement it seems that the majority of researchers believe that grammar teaching has positive impact on L2 learning. Related research sheds light on which grammar items are most helpful for L2 learners' interlanguage development and the role of error correction in it. While looking at various aspects of grammar instruction in SLA, this paper argues that materials developers can consider Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1964) and Markedness Differential Hypothesis (Eckman, 1977) in choosing grammatical items for a particular group of L2 learners. Finally, it seems that an exploration of learners' retention abilities of grammar instruction could provide L2 educators with a better idea about aspects of grammar instruction help learners obtain "long-term" linguistic knowledge.

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