

Supplementing the Teaching of Grammar

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Nothing is to be gained by imposing any teaching approach upon people who are deeply opposed to it (Cook, 2010, p. 134)

Grammar teaching has long been a contentious issue between Japanese and L1 (native) teachers of English. Many Japanese teachers of English argue that grammar-based teaching is the only way to give students an in-depth understanding of the language, whereas L1 teachers complain that an over-emphasis on grammar fails to foster the development of communicative English skills. In this paper we will compare the two emphases in order to explore improved outcomes for the English proficiency of students.

The Case for a Focus on Grammar

Underestimation of the Complexity of Grammar

L1 English speaking teachers may sometimes underestimate the complexity of English grammar because of the unconscious nature of L1 acquisition. Sacks (2000), referring to sign language, remarked, “it may take an outside view to show the native users of a language that their own utterances, which appear so simple and transparent to themselves, are, in fact, enormously complex and contain and conceal the vast apparatus of a true language” (p. 115). The English language may appear “simple and transparent” to L1 speakers, but nevertheless contains a complexity that they underestimate. Many L1 teachers of English will have had the experience of being posed a question by Japanese learners about English grammar, which has escaped the attention of those who take the language for granted.

Ensuring a Thorough Understanding

Attention to details, as exemplified by translation activities, has the advantage of ensuring that learners cannot skip over difficulties, but are rather forced to confront the details and complexities of the new

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language (Cook, 2010). A university teacher interviewed by Hawley Nagatomo (2012) justified her traditional, grammar-based mode of teaching, with painstaking attention to detail, by claiming she provided students with a thorough foundation in the language. Furthermore, this teacher considered her meticulous bottom up approach “which entails in-depth understanding of language through hard self-study” to be a better style of teaching because “classes taught by ... native English-speaking instructors, such as ‘how to write an essay’ [give] the appearance of fluency but, at the same time, [are] superficial and lack substance” (p. 178).

The Limits of Naturalistic Acquisition

Grammar instruction may be necessary to fill in the gaps of naturalistic L2 acquisition. Naturalistic acquisition means, “focusing primarily on what we want to say (i.e. meaning) rather than on how we say it” (Ellis, 2008, para. 5). Summarizing research from the end of the 1980s to the beginning of the 90s, Hinkel (2006) claimed, “without explicit and form-focused instruction, extensive exposure to meaning-based input does not lead to the development of syntactic and lexical accuracy in an L2” (p. 111). Block (2003) outlined the limitations of naturalistic L2 acquisition, arguing that there may be limits to both quality and quantity of exposure. Schmidt (1981) conducted a longitudinal study of an adult Japanese learner of English who as a result of his outgoing personality, interacted with many L1 speakers and became competent at communicating in English. This social, or naturalistic exposure to English however, did not result in grammatical competence, his grammar mistakes fossilized and no improvement was seen despite extensive opportunities to use English. He did make some improvements in pragmatic competence though. This is in contrast with the Japanese university teachers in Hawley Nagatomo’s (2012) study who achieved a high standard of grammatical accuracy even though they did not live in an English speaking environment.

Ellis (2008) wrote that research studies “showed that, by and large, the order and sequence of acquisition were the same for instructed and naturalistic learners [and] that instructed learners generally achieved higher levels of grammatical competence than naturalistic learners” (para. 17). At least for some learners, in an environment where there is little exposure to English, attention to grammar can result in a higher degree of grammatical accuracy than simply being in an environment which provides a high level of exposure to English. For these learners, attention to grammatical detail is beneficial.

Limitations of Grammar-based Teaching

One of the traps of learning a language in isolation from the natural context in which it is used is that the study of the grammar assumes a disproportionate part of the course content. Sacks (2000) reminded us: “Language is not just a formal device (though it is, indeed, the most marvelous of formal devices), but the most exact expression of our thoughts, our aspirations, our view of the world” (p. 95). Learners need to be reminded that grammar is simply a means of attaining effective communication, but they tend to lose sight of this when preparing for exams and tests.

The Transition from Grammar to Internal Representations of the Language

For many learners unfortunately, their language learning does not develop beyond the study of grammatical rules. Describing ineffective learners, Gillette (1994) lamented: “such learners often behave as if they had no internal representation of the target language at all and were forced constantly to start over, with their L1 as their only point of reference. Thus, after almost three semesters of French at the university level, J. notes “Je suis = I am.” (p. 209); the only phrase the student could use

was ‘Je suis.’ This phenomenon is surely familiar to teachers of L2 English as well. Too much focus on grammatical form appears to hinder the development of internal representations of the L2. Mikan (2013) similarly acknowledged: “The persistent problem with grammar teaching was the need for students to reconstitute grammatical components or parts of language for communication” (p. 18). Mikan explained that students’ failure to transfer knowledge to practice was a result of the disconnection of grammatical structures from their social context.

Alternative Pedagogies to the Traditional Grammar-based Approach

In this section we will summarize four alternative pedagogies:

- Higher Level Thinking Skills
- Sociocultural Approaches
- The Comprehension Hypothesis
- Language as a Social Semiotic

Grammar Exercises and Higher Level Thinking

In the mid-twentieth century Benjamin Bloom classified thinking skills into six levels of ascending complexity. These levels are referred to as Bloom’s taxonomy. Referring to Anderson and Krathwohl (2001, p. 67-68), the levels are:

- Remembering (can students remember information?)
- Understanding (can students explain the concepts they are studying?)
- Applying (can students use the information in a new way?)
- Analyzing (can students distinguish between the different parts and determine how the parts relate to one another?)
- Evaluating (can students make judgements based on criteria?)
- Creating (can students create a new product or point of view?)

Bloom’s aim was to remind educators not to confine their pedagogy to the lower levels of thinking. Remembering and Understanding are easy to test, but it is important not to overlook the higher levels of thinking (Davidson & Decker, 2006). Perusal of English textbooks used in Japan reveals a range of places on Bloom’s spectrum. For example a grammar textbook for senior high school students presented grammar points according to the criteria presented in the ‘Remembering’ and ‘Understanding’ domains.

It is not uncommon for textbooks to contain lists of vocabulary which are a) defined in Japanese, b) presented in an example sentence which is then, c) translated into Japanese. The new vocabulary is then used in the context of a story. In one high school textbook the story had the new vocabulary highlighted in red. Learners had a transparent red cover, which concealed the red letters when placed over the text and they had to recall the vocabulary which were concealed by the cover sheet. This is clearly a recall exercise and can therefore be classified as part of the ‘Remembering’ level of thinking. The workbook accompanying the textbook consisted of exercises requiring learners to use the vocabulary to fill in blanks which were grouped according to themes, to translate groups of words, and finally, listen to a recording of a text, and fill in the blanks, all of which have an emphasis on ‘Remembering’ strategies, that is, the lower level of Bloom’s taxonomy of thinking.

However, there were other textbooks that did require the use of higher order thinking skills. For example, an Oral Communication textbook encompassed a range of lower to higher thinking skills.

Lower skills include answering comprehension questions and filling in the blanks. Higher-order skills included classifying information, personalizing the information, and finally, a discussion.

Sociocultural Approaches

Language is imbedded in social context, and is best taught through interpersonal interaction. According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978, 1986, cited in Gillette, 1994), a student's motive for learning influences the nature and outcome of an activity. Gillette's study contrasted effective and ineffective learners. One difference was that effective learners aimed to learn by active participation, whereas the ineffective ones preferred grammatical analysis, rote memorization and translation.

De Guerrero (1994) highlighted the importance of inner speech as the basis of verbal thought, and linked it to all four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. De Guerrero identified a connection between L2 English proficiency and her subjects' experience of having internal representations of English in their mind. Her subjects indicated that "L2 inner speech has some kind of phonological representation in the mind that makes it predominantly sonorous" (p. 97). Hence the interpersonal associations of L2 English form the auditory memories of the L2, which can be drawn on for L2 production.

The Comprehension Hypothesis

Krashen (2004) distinguished between the Comprehension Hypothesis and the Skill Building Hypothesis. According to the Comprehension Hypothesis, language skills such as grammar and vocabulary derive from listening and reading. Krashen criticized the alternative Skill Building hypothesis saying: "The effects of deliberate, direct skill-based instruction are very weak and fragile ... [and] ... the systems involved (grammar, spelling, vocabulary, etc) are too complex to be consciously learned" (p. 4). He also denounced the Skill Building Approach: "Presenting and reinforcing a false view of how language is acquired will only make language acquisition unlikely (or extremely inefficient) when input is available" (p. 6). Unfortunately most grammar and vocabulary textbooks used in Japan tend to conform to the Skill Building Hypothesis; lists of vocabulary and grammar items precede their usage in meaningful contexts.

Language as a Social Semiotic

Mickan (2013) presented a curriculum designed in terms of the way language functions as a tool of socialisation. He criticized traditional teaching methodologies where language items are treated separately from their function as a system of meaning making: "Making meaning with language is not part of doing transformational exercises. Learning language use is not translating lists of sentences or doing grammatical insertion exercises which make no sense" (p. 5). Mickan argued for socialisation to have a central role in the language learning process, saying this can be accomplished through study of authentic texts which "give purpose and focus for classroom activities, eliminating the need to ask vacuous questions or carry on meaningless talk about pretend travel encounters" (p. 38). Grammar and vocabulary are analysed in terms of how they construct the meaning of the social practices reflected in the text. Textbooks used in reading classes in Japan could of course be used following these principles because they feature language in meaningful contexts in the form of stories, however each story in these textbooks tends to be followed by comprehension tasks, which belong to the category of "grammatical insertion exercises" which were criticized by Mickan.

Conclusion

Cook (2010) reminded us that despite changing fashions in language teaching a superior teaching method has yet to be identified: “people have learnt languages successfully or unsuccessfully, using *all* methods and approaches (grammar translation, audiolingualism, graded structures, Suggestopaedia, Silent Way, communicative language teaching, task-based instruction, etc)” (p. 102). Accordingly, in this paper we are not suggesting that grammar-based teaching be eliminated from the curriculum. However, the insights from the four fields above should be incorporated more widely. Firstly, Bloom’s taxonomy of the order of thinking skills should be applied to new textbooks and more higher order thinking skills should be featured. Secondly, insights from the sociocultural approach deserve more attention, students need to develop internal representations of L2 English, that is, the beginnings of inner speech in the L2. Thirdly, as Krashen (2004) has explained, no learner has ever developed L2 competence without comprehensible input, meaning the amount of comprehensible input needs to be hugely increased in the classroom. Finally, as Mickan (2013) has argued, authentic texts with topics which are of interest to students need to be introduced.

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