

How Can We Apply Text-based Pedagogy and Functional Grammar to EFL Teaching in Japan?

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The workshop on the application of Functional Grammar to language teaching was a chance to revisit a theme that I had been out of touch with for fourteen years. In 1996 I had completed a unit called 'Grammar, Meaning and Discourse' as part of my Master in Applied Linguistics degree, but did not choose to follow up on it in my Dissertation. A fellow student, however, who was doing the Master's degree at the same time, found the subject so interesting that he chose to write his Dissertation on the application of Functional Grammar to a famous literary text. This workshop stimulated my thinking on this topic much more than completing the unit of coursework, so after a break of fourteen years I am again thinking seriously about the application of Functional Grammar to EFL teaching.

Why functional grammar?

Participation in this workshop prompted me to revisit the rationale for Functional Grammar. Traditional grammar is widely practiced in many countries, not just in the teaching of EFL. Does such a well-established methodology require refinement or supplementation? Joyce and Burns (2001) outline the differences between traditional grammar and functional grammar. They describe the role of traditional grammar as serving to classify "parts of speech such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions," and "constituent parts such as subject, verb and object" (p. 147). The limitation of traditional grammar is that attention is concentrated at the sentence level. In contrast, functional grammar "begins from a different perspective by looking at how language is used to create meaning in written and spoken texts. It focuses on how grammar works across stretches of text and why and how it contributes to the context and purpose for which it is being used. It has the advantage of showing how language users make choices in grammar according to the functions for which they are using language" (p. 147).

The following is a discussion of the issues which had the biggest impact on my thinking: the importance of lexical choice, teaching grammar through a text-based approach, and the choice of written or spoken mode.

"Each word is important.": "Each word in a text makes a difference."

One of the most striking impressions of Dr. Mickan's presentations was the notion of the importance of every lexical choice. Because L1 speakers' knowledge of the language tends to be

unconscious, we tend to underestimate the power of individual words. We urge students to express themselves, and they hesitate. Perhaps this is because the L2 learners are more conscious of the power of every individual word. Accordingly, as educators, we must reacquaint ourselves with this concept and provide students with the tools to achieve this ideal. Dr. Mickan's response to the question of how to equip students with the skill of making accurate lexical choices was not to provide them with long vocabulary lists to memorize, but rather to provide many examples of model texts. The fine differences between the meanings of synonyms do not necessarily become apparent in long explanations. Rather, students come to appreciate these differences by engaging with multiple texts.

Teaching grammar through texts

Dr. Mickan provided an example of how the past tense can be taught through exposure to meaningful texts such as the one below:

The Greedy Dog by Kamon and Chenchira

Once upon a time there was a dog. It was very hungry, so it went to the market and stole some beef and ran away. It walked over a bridge, and saw the reflection of the beef in the water. It looked bigger than the real beef. The dog said to itself 'The beef in the water is bigger than my beef!' So the dog dropped the beef in the river. Suddenly the beef disappeared. The dog was very sad. It sat on the bridge and cried because it was very hungry. It was a foolish dog.

Moral: The greedy lose all.

Dr. Mickan suggested that by reading twenty texts like the one above the students would have a lot of experience of the past tense. This seems to be a commonsense approach, but is in contrast to the way most of us were taught the past tense as learners, when it is likely that we were presented with a list of past tense forms to be memorized out of context. This technique of presenting grammar through meaningful texts is one which could be readily promoted in EFL classrooms in Japan. This principle leads me to question the value of textbooks which provide a page of explanation in Japanese to explain a few English sentences which are related grammatically but not semantically. This is not to suggest that the explanation in Japanese is unimportant, but rather that comprehension would be aided by exposure to multiple examples of meaningful texts. Grammatical explanations occupy a large part of classroom time, and textbooks provide lengthy and detailed explanations. Surely this could be supplemented with exposure to multiple spoken and written texts.

Do written texts provide adequate exposure?

Dr. Mickan argued that both written and spoken language can be considered to be texts, in contrast to the preconception that many learners have of *texts* referring to the written mode. When considering what kind of texts would benefit Japanese learners, I argue that exposure to spoken texts has been neglected, and therefore that we should apply text-based pedagogy in terms of increased opportunities to listen to text. The primary reason that written text is inadequate as a pedagogical resource is the decisive role of intonation in conveying a range of meanings: "An ability to predict intonation greatly facilitates an accurate interpretation of a text. Competent readers are armed with an understanding of intonation, but a learner without knowledge of intonation may find it harder to interpret the meaning of written texts" (Stephens, 2010, p.1). Arguably, in the case of languages which are linguistically distant from one another and therefore positive transfer is unlikely, exposure to text must necessarily include exposure to the spoken mode. Dr. Mickan acknowledges this when stating that reading and listening should be aligned.

Applications of text-based pedagogy and functional grammar

Students have been presented with too few texts over the course of their EFL education. Students have typically learnt vocabulary through memorization of lists, and grammar through long explanations, rather than encountering them multiple times in meaningful contexts. Clearly we need to provide students with increased opportunity to engage with a range of interesting and challenging texts.

Secondly, the introduction of the principles of functional grammar may help address some of the current weaknesses in EFL education. Attention has typically been devoted to explaining parts of speech in the context of the sentence. Students would benefit from an awareness of lexico-grammatical choices in longer stretches of discourse in context. The outcome of understanding grammar in context is a greater facility in communication, because it provides students with a more precise control of their meaning-making.

References

- Joyce, H., & Burns, A. (1999). *Focus on grammar*. Sydney: Macquarie University.
- Stephens, M. (2010). The primacy of extensive listening. *ELT Journal Advance Access*.
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