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Teaching grammar to adults



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Introduction

This paper on grammar draws from research on second language acquisition (SLA) and, specifically, the explicit and implicit teaching and learning of grammar. Explicit teaching, e.g. of grammar rules, provides learners with knowledge that can be applied consciously, e.g. in tests of grammar, while oral fluency, on the other hand, is contingent on having implicit, i.e. intuitive, knowledge. Unlike explicit knowledge, implicit knowledge requires considerable time and exposure to acquire. However, there are multiple caveats when we consider which of the two we should be addressing. For example, we know that adults, in particular, have lost much of their ability to learn implicitly, and it is still a matter of debate as to whether explicit knowledge can become implicit over time. In fact, at best, explicit knowledge may have indirect effects on the development of proficiency, such as 'priming' for future noticing.

Considerations of explicit and implicit teaching of grammar force us to review the traditional grammar syllabus which may serve as a checklist for teaching explicit knowledge but which does not correspond exactly to the order in which grammar structures are supposedly acquired. Reasonably, a twin-track approach – targeting both explicit knowledge (through consciousness-raising) and opportunities for real language use – is recommended. Such an approach would juxtapose a traditional grammar syllabus with a communicative one. The grammar syllabus should also include items, such as high-frequency 'chunks', that can be learned as unanalysed 'wholes' and which may 'release' their grammar over time. In the end, though, teachers' interactions – especially in providing *a focus-on-form* during communicative language use – may impact more on grammar development than the choice of syllabus.

Overall, from the insights just mentioned in this brief introduction, it is clear that a great deal of SLA research focuses on – and has always focused on – the acquisition of a target-like grammar, using, for example, learners' output, including their errors, as evidence for theorizing developmental orders and cognitive processes. Much of this research has either been laboratory-based, and/or derived from studies of naturalistic (i.e. non-classroom-based) learning contexts. More recently, the sub-discipline of Instructed SLA (ISLA) has narrowed this focus to (primarily) classroom-based learning, addressing these questions in particular:

- Is there any value in teaching grammar explicitly?
- Is there an optimal order in which to teach grammatical structures?
- What teacher interventions support the learning of grammar?
- How should grammar be integrated into the curriculum?

This paper addresses each question in turn in the following sections.

A quick review of terms and acronyms

- **explicit knowledge:** knowledge, such as of grammar rules, that is conscious and can be verbalized, e.g. 'the past is formed by adding *–ed* to regular verbs'; also known as *declarative knowledge*.
- **explicit instruction:** the teaching of explicit knowledge, e.g. through the presentation and practice of rules, as in the PPP (present-practice-produce) instructional model.
- **declarative knowledge:** also known as 'knowledge-that' – knowledge that is stored and retrieved as facts, e.g. grammar rules.
- **procedural knowledge:** also known as 'knowledge-how' – knowledge that has become proceduralized so that it is available for automatic use.
- **deductive teaching:** a form of explicit instruction in which learners are presented with rules and then apply them.
- **inductive teaching:** a form of explicit teaching in which learners are given data, e.g. in the form of example sentences, and have to infer and articulate the rules, before applying them.
- **implicit knowledge:** intuitive knowledge, or a 'feel' for what is grammatically correct, enabling rapid automatic (because not conscious) processing, and hence a prerequisite for fluency; similar to *procedural knowledge*.
- **implicit instruction:** instruction that aims to instill an intuitive 'feel' for the language by, for instance, having learners participate in communicative activities without any prior instruction.
- **consciousness-raising:** attempts to focus learners' attention on the formal properties of a language and how these forms encode specific meanings.
- **incidental learning:** learning of language features that occur apart from the primary focus of a lesson or activity, as when learners 'pick up' new words when reading extensively.
- **focus on form:** any teacher (or peer) intervention that draws conscious attention to a feature of the language system in the course of a communicative activity, e.g. through a correction or recast.
- **priming:** an effect of instruction that sensitizes learners to notice language features in real language use.
- **item-learning:** the learning of individual language items, e.g. words, formulaic expressions ('chunks'), or grammatical 'exemplars', without conscious awareness of any rules that underpin them; also known as *instance-learning*; contrasts with *rule-learning*.
- **usage-based learning:** the theory that argues that language is acquired through exposure to language in use, and internalized as 'a huge warehouse of constructions that vary in complexity and abstraction' (Wulff 2019: 21).

Abbreviations

CIC: Classroom interactional competence
CLIL: Content and language integrated learning
CLT: Communicative language teaching
ISLA: Instructed Second Language Acquisition
PPP: present – practice - produce
SLA: Second language acquisition
TBLT: Task-based language teaching

Thoughts on teaching grammar

Is there any value in teaching grammar explicitly?

Ever since Stephen Krashen (1982) made the distinction between language *acquisition* (i.e. the way that languages are 'picked up' naturally and unconsciously) and language *learning* (i.e. the way that languages – traditionally, at least – are learned in classrooms, by means of the formal study of grammar rules and the explicit correction of errors), the debate has raged as to the relative value – and possible balance – between implicit and explicit learning. Krashen argued that, since language competence is internalized and deployed implicitly – as a 'feel' for language – and not as a set of memorized rules, it can be picked up only implicitly, i.e. it must be acquired. For Krashen, the only way to acquire a second language is the way that (according to him) we acquire our first language: through exposure to comprehensible input.

Contemporaneous with Krashen, proponents of what became known as the communicative approach or communicative language teaching (CLT) also proposed that pedagogy should be acquisition- and not learning-based. Hence, Allwright's much quoted dictum (1979: 166), that, 'If communication is THE aim, then it should be THE major element in the process.' Anything else, including giving explicit attention to rules, is a waste of time.

This is a view that is still (often fiercely) defended by many scholars, even those who might distance themselves a little from Krashen's somewhat uncompromising position, i.e. that formal instruction can never lead to acquisition. In a recent book that explores the implications of second language acquisition (SLA) research for classroom instruction, Henshaw & Hawkins (2022: 78) are adamant that

> **teaching the learners the rules does not speed up the acquisition process. If explicit grammar instruction takes time away from engaging in meaningful communication (i.e., understanding or conveying meaning,) then we might actually be slowing things down.**

'Teaching the learners the rules', of course, has a long history, and is the thinking that underpins the PPP (presentation-practice-production) model of classroom instruction – a model that has proved remarkably resilient, even if it was first formulated according to the principles of behaviourism. PPP now finds support from 'skill acquisition theory,' which argues that, as in the learning of other skills, such as learning to play the guitar or ride a horse, explicit knowledge (e.g. of rules) becomes 'proceduralized' through practice, to the point that it becomes automated, no longer requiring conscious attention.

Such a view does not deny that implicit learning, of the incidental kind, may also occur alongside formal instruction (as is the case for a lot of vocabulary learning), but it rejects the claim that explicit knowledge can eventually become implicit, as

opposed to simply more automated. However, opinion is divided on this issue, mainly because it is difficult, not to say impossible, to determine whether the accuracy of a learner's output is a product of explicit or implicit knowledge, and, if the latter, whether such knowledge was at any time explicit, i.e. consciously held, and, if so, by what processes did it become implicit.

Moreover, studies designed to compare the effects of implicit versus explicit instruction vary in terms of their findings, depending on how the effects of instruction are measured. For example, a meta-analysis of 49 different studies (Norris and Ortega 2000) showed an advantage for explicit instruction, but only when explicit knowledge itself was being tested, e.g. through sentence-completion tasks. When assessed in terms of ability for communicative use, explicit teaching showed only minimal effects (at least in the short term).

By contrast, a more recent meta-study (Kang et al 2019) sampled 59 studies published over a 35-year period, and found that implicit instruction had a longer lasting impact on learning than explicit instruction, especially when measured using learners' spontaneous spoken output. The verdict? Explicit teaching – of the PPP type – results in explicit learning; implicit teaching – of the immersive type – results in implicit learning.

Arguments in favour of implicit learning draw on brain-imaging research, which shows that implicit and explicit knowledge are stored separately, and that 'implicit, uninstructed immersion-like L2 training appears to be more effective than instructed classroom-like training in the attainment of L1-neurocognition of grammar' (Ullman 2015: 152). 'Uninstructed immersion-like L2 training' is typically the 'study-abroad' situation, when learners are partly or wholly immersed in the L2.

However, attempts to replicate acquisition-focused, immersive situations in classroom contexts, e.g. through a task-based approach, or through content-based instruction, such as CLIL, or Dogme ELT, or what is now called 'usage-based learning', have to be assessed in terms of their feasibility: not all learners have the time nor the aptitude to take advantage of them. As Loewen (2020: 115) notes, 'because adults may have lost much of the facility for implicit language learning that served them during their L1 acquisition process, they may be able to make better use of explicit L2 instruction.'

Dörnyei (2009: 168) adopts a similar position, and quotes DeKeyser and Juff (2005) to the effect that, 'for classroom learners... or for adults, implicit learning is very limited; in the former case because of grossly insufficient time/input, for the latter because of restrictions on their implicit learning capacities.' Dörnyei goes on to conclude: 'Thus, implicit learning poses a real enigma in SLA: we know that it is there somewhere, because we can see its outcomes, but it is elusive and it does not seem to work very well for most people' (169). Such a view concedes that native-like fluency – for most adult learners – may not be an achievable goal. 'Knowing the rules' – even if they are difficult to access and apply in real time – might be a more realistic goal. As Brown and Larson-Hall (2012: 104) somewhat soberly conclude:

> **Teaching has a more limited effect than teachers might think, but it is clear that *not* teaching leads to even worse outcomes. Instruction is useful, even as we realise that many things we intend to teach do not get learned.**

Nevertheless, by having a 'priming' effect, explicit grammar teaching might offer an indirect means of achieving the kind of language 'feel' that is attributed to implicit learning: 'Learners are more likely to notice exemplars of a grammatical structure in the input if they already have explicit knowledge of it' (Ellis 2016: 234). This may help explain the results of a study of advanced Polish learners (Scheffler & Cincała 2011), which showed that they were able to correctly verbalise the rules underpinning their fluent output, suggesting that at some point these rules had been learned explicitly and that 'explicit rules can, in an indirect way, contribute to SLA' (13).

If explicit instruction is the best option – especially for adult learners with little time – then there is still the question as to what form such instruction should take. Research into the relative effectiveness of different kinds of explicit instruction – specifically *deductive* vs *inductive* approaches – has also been inconclusive. In a study of highschool students learning French, for example (Erlam 2005), three different instructional methods were compared: deductive, inductive and a third that involved exposure to 'structured input'. Both in the short term and the long term, the deductive group performed best, overriding other factors such as language learning aptitude. On the other hand, Boers (2021) cites two studies in which grammar patterns (also in French) were taught deductively to some students and inductively to others. 'The immediate test results showed an advantage for guided induction' (107), but the effects were not long-lasting and 'interestingly, a debriefing questionnaire revealed that most of the students preferred a deductive approach to grammar lessons' (ibid.).

The mixed results from research have led Ellis (2006: 98) to conclude that 'it is likely that many variables affect which approach learners benefit most from, including the specific structure that is the target of the instruction and the learner's aptitude for grammatical analysis. Simple rules may best be taught deductively, while more complex rules may best be taught inductively.' And, as Hulstijn (1995: 375) observes, 'variation in teaching and learning procedures can be stimulating. Thus, there is no principled objection to providing the rule in some cases and having students to discover the rule in other cases.'

Summarizing the evidence, Loewen (2020: 122) concludes that 'the best type of L2 instruction may be that which integrates both implicit and explicit types of instruction,' a view shared by Dörnyei (op. cit), who argues that the two systems might function co-operatively, with explicit knowledge 'filling in the gaps' when implicit knowledge fails.

Is there an optimal order in which to teach grammatical structures?

One of the reasons often adduced for *not* teaching grammar explicitly is the claim that language learners have their own 'built-in' syllabus, and that any attempt to subvert this 'natural order' of language acquisition by – for example – teaching from a syllabus of pre-selected grammar items, is a waste of time. Better to let the system emerge naturally and implicitly.

This was the thinking behind Krashen's 'acquisition only' approach, although he has not the first to hypothesise a natural order: the idea that learners acquire grammar according to their built-in syllabus, independent of their first language and impervious to instruction, had been around since the early 1970s, and has become an article of faith for most SLA researchers. Summarizing the research, Ellis & Shintani (2014: 72) conclude:

> **Instruction does not appear to have much effect in preventing developmental errors, changing orders of acquisition or enabling learners to bypass stages in acquisition sequences.**

Therefore (they add), 'grammatical syllabuses cannot easily accommodate the essential nature of L2 acquisition' (80). And Loewen (2020: 107) relates this to the tension between trying to teach explicitly what seems to be learned implicitly:

> **Just because a grammatical structure is taught in the classroom does not mean that learners will be able to use it productively, unless they are developmentally ready, even though learners might be able to verbalise the rules for forming the structure. Again this issue highlights the problem of conflating explicit grammatical knowledge with implicit procedural knowledge. Teachers and learners may have false expectations about the results of explicit instruction.**

Nevertheless, a grammatical syllabus may have some legitimacy in that (a) it provides a program for teaching *explicit* knowledge about the language, which may, arguably, facilitate acquisition – indirectly if not directly, e.g. by priming learners to notice previously taught grammar items in the input they are exposed to; and (b) even if language *production* follows a predetermined order, language *reception* (through listening and reading) need not. Hence, the grammar syllabus might (initially, at least) be considered a syllabus for understanding.

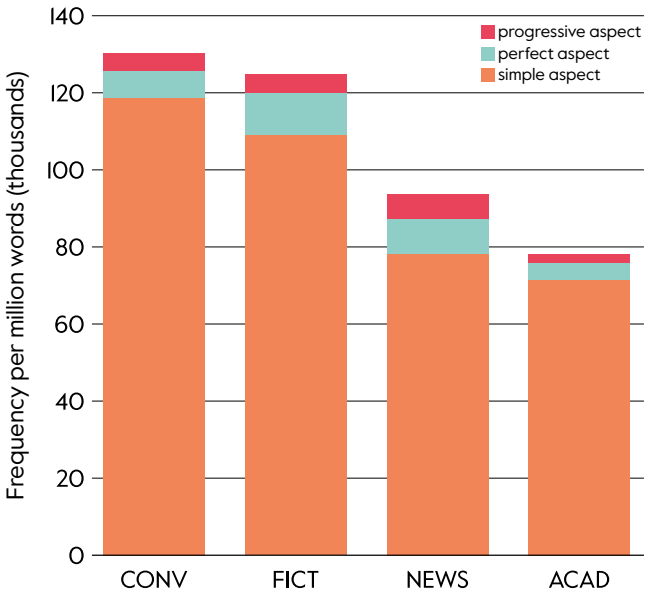
But the order in which items are introduced is probably of little consequence, in terms of their ultimate acquisition: traditional notions of formal complexity, frequency and utility might continue to be the best criteria for selection.

Traditionally, grammar syllabuses have been organised mainly according to the criterion of complexity – simple structures (like the present simple) preceding more complex ones (like the third conditional). The assumption was that the simpler the structure, the easier to learn, but there has never been any convincing research to confirm this. As Burton (2019: 72) observes, 'very little research has been carried out on the history and evolution of the pedagogical treatment of English grammar.' Despite the lack of evidence, the simple-to-complex grammar syllabus has had enduring appeal and has been replicated in more or less identical ways for at least 50 years – a situation that McCarthy (2021: 126) suggests 'would almost lead one to believe in a conspiracy theory.' Nevertheless, in reflecting the intuitions of generations of teachers as to what grammatical structures are more or less 'learnable', the canonical grammar syllabus is unlikely to be mothballed, at least in the short term.

With regard to frequency, corpus data now provide valuable information as to which grammatical structures are more frequent than others, and offer a useful corrective to the weighting that is given to certain grammar items on traditional syllabuses. This is not to suggest that syllabus designers ignored frequency, but simply that they lacked reliable in-formation about it. As Biber and Reppen (2002: 207) explain:

Actually, textbook authors and students have been interested in frequency information all along. For example, many books include lists of common phrasal verbs or provide other information about patterns that are common or typical. However, more often than not, this information is based on the author's intuitions rather than empirical research. As a result, these lists often include forms that are not in fact common, while overlooking other forms that do occur frequently. (Surprisingly, extremely frequent forms are also the ones that we are most likely to overlook).

For example, coursebook grammar syllabuses tend to give equal weight to the various forms of tense and aspect (present simple, present progressive, present perfect, etc.) but corpus analysis shows that their actual frequency of occurrence – across such different registers as conversation and academic writing – is skewed heavily towards simple forms, with progressive and perfect being relatively infrequent (see chart from Biber et al 2021: 459).



Frequency of simple, perfect and progressive aspect across registers

To take another example – relative clauses:

Defining Relative Clause: *The house that my brother lives in is tiny.*

Non-defining Relative Clause: *My brother, who lives in Paris, is a doctor.*

Traditionally, both types tended to be given equal weight in grammar syllabuses. However, the Cambridge English Corpus shows that non-defining relative clauses (as in the example above) are vanishingly rare and are far outnumbered by what are known as either sentence relatives or comment clauses, as in *'My brother lives in Paris, which is nice'*, but which rarely if ever appear in grammar syllabuses.

Nor is utility necessarily a clear guide, especially in the absence of concrete information as to the learners' needs. Learners anticipating academic study in English would do well to study defining relative clauses. Those who plan to function in more informal registers might be better off looking at sentence relatives.

Another factor that once influenced the choice of grammatical items and the relative importance attached to them was the likely influence of the learner's first language. The notion of crosslinguistic interference was famously expressed by Lado (1957: 2)

> **We assume that the student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his [sic] native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult.**

Subsequently, research into 'natural orders' of acquisition challenged this view, and ultimately discredited it. More recently, however, the claim that the developmental order is immune to influence from the learner's first language has been challenged. A recent study (Murakami 2016), using sophisticated statistical models, shows that a learner's L1 has a significant impact on the development of their second, a finding that most language teachers will find intuitive, and which suggests that there may be some value in syllabuses that are 'tweaked' for specific language groups. Such tweaking could involve using learner corpora, such as the Cambridge Learner Corpus, to identify the errors typically made by speakers of specific languages.

Finally, it is generally recognized that at least some grammar learning, especially at early stages, takes the form of *item-learning*, as when learners memorize and deploy formulaic sequences (or 'chunks'[1]). As Ellis and Shintani (2014: 71) argue, 'the prevailing view today is that learners unpack the parts that comprise a sequence and, in this way, discover the L2 grammar. In other words, formulaic sequences serve as a kind of starter pack from which grammar is generated.' Proponents of 'usage-based' theories of learning go further, rejecting the traditional division between grammar and vocabulary, and arguing that 'learning grammar involves abstracting regularities from the stock of known lexical sequences' (N. Ellis 1997: 126). Although proponents of this view insist that this is a largely implicit process, it does suggest that, at beginner and elementary stages at least, the syllabus should be weighted towards teaching, even memorizing (but not necessarily analysing), formulaic sequences.

1 For more on the role of 'chunks' in language acquisition, see the Cambridge Paper in ELT: Learning language in chunks

Grammar teaching: teachers and curricula

What teacher interventions support the learning of grammar?

So far, the discussion has centred on the choices involved in teaching grammar *proactively*, either *implicitly* (through engagement with texts or tasks, for example) or *explicitly* (through directing conscious attention to rules), and, if explicitly, either *deductively* (where students are given the rules) or *inductively* (where they are guided to discover the rules for themselves). Proactive teaching typically involves choosing a target item from a syllabus (e.g. as enshrined in a coursebook) and designing a lesson whose aim is the learning of the pre-selected item.

But a great deal of grammar teaching also happens reactively, typically in the form of the feedback that teachers provide on learners' output. Here, for example, is an extract of classroom interaction in which a teacher guides a learner (S4) to reconsider the best form of the modal verb in a task where learners have been making deductions based on information in a chart (from Samuda 2001: 133):

S4: We think just 50% so we think she must live in California

T: Mmm hang on a minute how certain are you?

S4: 50 (looks at chart) yes 50

T: 50%? So you're not very certain, but you think it's possible?

S4: Not very not *very* just 50 ahhh she might

T: Yeah she might live in California. With 'must', the grammar is good, but the meaning changes

S4: Ahh she might live in California yes

Notice that the teacher prompts the learner to select an alternative form and then supplies grammar information explicitly. This is known as a *focus on form*: although the learner's intended meaning is obvious, the form that she has selected can be improved. A *focus on form* typically occurs in response to learner output, either spoken or written, in which the focus is primarily on *meaning*: it can, of course, take the form of a direct correction (e.g. T: *'Not 'must', 'might'*) or in the form of what is called a *recast*, where the teacher reformulates what the learner intended: T: *She might live in California*.

A focus on form most often takes place 'at the point of need', i.e. as an immediate response to learner output. According to Lyster (2007: 47), 'research in support of reactive form-focused instruction suggests that it may be precisely at the moment when students have something to say that a focus on language can be most effective'. Ellis (2015: 198) endorses this kind of intervention (which he calls 'integrated explicit instruction') on the grounds that 'explicit information will be more effective if it is provided while learners are communicating as they are more likely to remember it and be able to access it in a subsequent communication.'

By the same token, explicit feedback (as in *Not 'must', 'might'*) is thought to be more effective than implicit feedback, such as a recast. Summarising the evidence, Ellis (2015: 203) writes, 'overall, explicit corrective feedback, such as explicit correction or metalinguistic explanation, has been shown to be more effective than implicit feedback, such as recasts or clarification requests.' Either way, correction works, and can complement – or even substitute for – the formal presentation of grammar. As Hulstijn (1995: 383) argues, 'it is perfectly well possible to focus learners' attention on grammatical correctness without explicitly teaching grammar.'

Moreover, research aimed at accounting for why learners in immersion contexts (i.e. those where the learning is largely implicit) fall short of acquiring a target-like grammar suggests that learning is compromised if there is an exclusive focus on content without any focus on form. Similar criticisms have been made of other methodologies whose aim is to instil implicit knowledge, such as task-based instruction, and CLIL (content and language integrated learning). Teachers' form-focused interventions have been shown to play a key role in redressing the potential weaknesses of such approaches.

Focus on form is just one of the ways that teachers' 'in-flight' classroom decisions can support learning, including the learning of grammar. Arguably, these kinds of interventions are as important, if not more so, than the decisions made in advance of teaching, such as the choice of grammar item, and the choice of teaching approach. According to Seedhouse & Walsh (2013: 141), they comprise what is called the teacher's *classroom interactional competence* (CIC), which

> **entails teachers being able to *shape* learner contributions by scaffolding, paraphrasing, re-iterating and so on. Essentially, through shaping the discourse, a teacher is helping learners to say what they mean by using the most appropriate language to do so.**

The importance of CIC reminds us of Earl Stevick's (1980: 4) much quoted adage, to the effect that 'success depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom.'

How should grammar be integrated into the curriculum?

The relative merits of a number of different curriculum design proposals – such as PPP, TBLT, and content-based teaching (as in CLIL) – have been hotly debated in recent years. Of course, the various claims in support of each one need to be evaluated in the light of the particular context factors they address, such as the age and proficiency level of the learners, their needs and goals, the time available, the skills and training of the teachers, the expectations of other stakeholders, not to mention the local educational culture.

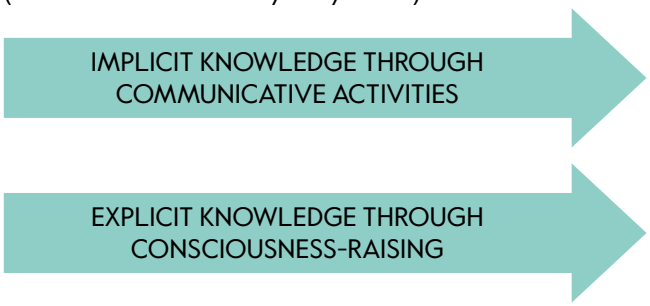
Very generally, though, and consistent with the arguments outlined above, current thinking suggests that

- where the instructional model focuses primarily on meaning (as in TBLT and CLIL) this should be counterbalanced with a rigorous focus on form (e.g. in the form of corrective feedback);
- where instruction is already largely form-focused (as in a PPP approach), instruction should be counterbalanced with plentiful opportunities for meaning-focused, communicative exposure and interaction.

The wisdom of combining both explicit and implicit approaches has already been noted. Some scholars would go further and argue for the need for an explicit 'jump start' so as to pre-empt the chances of arrested (linguistic) development. Dörnyei (2009: 302), for example, argues that: 'To provide jump starts for subsequent proceduralization and automatization, instructed SLA should contain explicit initial input components.'

Ellis (2006: 91) takes a different line, arguing that initially the goal should be 'a threshold communicative ability', with an emphasis on formulaic language (see above), achieved, for example, through comprehension-based activities and simple production tasks. He concedes, however, 'that such an approach can be usefully complemented with one that draws beginners' attention to some useful grammatical features (e.g. past tense-*ed* in English) that they might otherwise miss' (ibid.).

One way of accommodating the need for both explicit and implicit learning is to adopt a two-track, or parallel, syllabus design, where a syllabus of discrete-items, such as grammar structures (also known as a synthetic syllabus), runs in parallel with one in which the units are non-linguistic, such as tasks or topics (also known as an analytic syllabus).



A two-track approach to course design

Given that the relation between explicit and implicit knowledge is far from being resolved, and given that most learners in EFL contexts will have limited access to opportunities to use English in real communication, and hence to develop implicit knowledge, it would seem prudent to retain elements of explicit grammar teaching even if it is accepted that explicit learning alone is unlikely to translate into fluent language use. Such elements would include grammar presentations (i.e. 'explicit jump starts') based on a 'narrow channel' grammatical syllabus, intended to 'prime' learners for subsequent noticing. At lower levels especially, the grammar syllabus might also include high-frequency formulaic 'exemplars' to be memorized, but with no requirement that they should be analysed into their grammatical constituents.

This could function alongside – but would not necessarily be linked to – a broader, more communicative, skills-based syllabus, designed to activate implicit learning processes by maximising exposure and providing incentives for oral and written production, along with 'at the point of need' feedback. In this sense, a two-track curriculum juxtaposes (but does not blend) traditional form-focused instruction, enshrined in the structural syllabus, along with the kind of syllabus that was envisaged by proponents of CLT at its inception, such as Henry Widdowson (1990: 139), i.e. a syllabus that 'reverses the emphasis of the structural. It concentrates on getting learners to do things with language, to express concepts and to carry out communicative acts of various kinds.' Ellis (2002: 25) insists that 'there would be no attempt to create any links between the two components. The time allocated to the two components would vary according to the learners' general level of proficiency.' Indeed, Ellis (personal communication) has suggested that the two syllabus strands could be delivered in two different modes – digitally (in the case of the explicit syllabus), and through face-to-face classroom interaction (in the case of the implicit syllabus), in the format now known as 'flipped learning'.

Again, it should be stressed that the (explicit) grammar syllabus and the (implicit) skills/communication syllabus need not be linked but should work in parallel. However, if the skills-based syllabus is sufficiently broad in its grammatical and lexical reach, learners should be able to make connections across the two syllabus strands, prompted by 'noticing' tasks of the type 'How many [grammar items X, Y, Z] did you find in the text/did you use in your text?' Furthermore, a language-rich skills strand offers possibilities for *incidental learning*, mainly of vocabulary but also of grammatical exemplars.

In sum, and to cite Ellis (2015: 210) again, 'there is no need for teachers to make a choice between explicit and implicit forms of grammar instruction. Both are effective. A language curriculum that includes both explicit and implicit instructional components, not necessarily interlocked, is perhaps most likely to ensure that the instruction results in balanced L2 development'.

Designing activities to teach grammar

Designing learning materials

Whether or not a two-track curriculum is adopted, there are a number of recommendations, based on research evidence, as to how grammar should be incorporated into learning materials:

- Grammar should be presented in as efficient manner as possible (possibly in the L1) so as not to subtract from class time that might more profitably be spent on real language use. (In terms of design, the grammar presentations might reflect online 'pop up' or 'help' windows).
- As noted, a 'flipped' instructional model – in which grammar-based tasks are completed out of class and in advance of interactive task-based classroom activities – might reduce the need for time-consuming in-class grammar presentations.
- Furthermore, grammar presentations (or 'consciousness-raising tasks') need not aim for immediate uptake, e.g. through a succession of controlled to free practice activities, since attempts to re-direct or subvert the natural developmental order are (arguably) a waste of time. The point of such activities is simply to prime learners for subsequent acquisition when they are developmentally optimally disposed: 'Grammar teaching should aim at raising learners' consciousness in different ways but leave it to learners to make use of their explicit knowledge in their own way and in their own time' (Ellis 2016: 143).
- The materials should provide opportunities and incentives for learners to communicate among themselves, and to engage in the creative and collaborative use of real language. As Loewen (2020: 235) reminds us, 'communicative interaction is necessary for L2 learners to develop implicit L2 knowledge and proceduralise declarative L2 knowledge.'

Training teachers

A concern for methods and activities risks overlooking the key role played by teachers, through their interactions, in supporting learning. Ellis (1990: 79) quotes Mitchell (1988) to this effect:

> **No functional syllabus, 'authentic' materials, or microcomputer program can replace the capacity of the live, fluent speaker to hit upon the follow-up topics of interest to particular individuals, continually adjust his/her speech to an appropriate level of difficulty and solve unpredictable communication difficulties from moment to moment... In all this, the teacher and his/her interactive skills are decisive.**

Given the importance, then, of the teacher and their ability to 'scaffold' interactions by, through example, providing corrective feedback and 'at the point of need' explanations, training should target these skills from the outset, particularly those that function so as to focus on form in the context of real communication. A checklist of interactive pedagogical skills might include:

- giving corrective feedback in an unambiguous but supportive fashion
- intervening in, but not interrupting, fluency tasks
- recasting learners' output so as to maintain conversational flow
- eliciting grammar explanations, examples and translations (where appropriate)
- using visual prompts (time-lines, gesture, graphic organizers etc) to illustrate grammatical concepts clearly and economically and/or to prompt self- or peer-repair
- modelling and drilling example structures
- checking understanding by the use, for example, of concept checking questions
- maintaining a balance between display and referential (i.e. real) questions.



Conclusions, coda and caveats

It is worth noting that the bulk of the research cited above comes from within an 'information-processing' model of language acquisition, which views acquisition as a primarily *cognitive* process, involving input, interaction and output, and largely divorced from its social contexts of use.

More recently, there has been a so-called a 'social turn' (Block 2003) in SLA theorizing. This embraces a number of different learning theories, but all share the view that language learning 'is not only shaped by the social context in which it happens; it is bound inextricably to such context' (Ortega 2009: 217). Within this framework, it is generally accepted that grammar performs important social, discoursal and interpersonal functions, underscoring the view that it is best learned and practiced when it is 'situated' in its contexts of use. Given that the classroom provides only limited opportunities for the formation of an L2 'speech community', it may be necessary that course designers and teachers use digital technologies to extend the 'small culture' of the classroom into the wider world through, for example, social networks, blogging, online chat, the exchange of multimedia projects and so on – where, as Breen (1998: 55) neatly puts it, 'the classroom walls become its windows.' Through such means, it is argued, grammar's real effect on communication can be experienced.

Grammar is still a loaded term and the teaching of it is inevitably coloured by ideological issues (e.g. standards, tradition, personal experience, and so on). Researchers themselves are probably not immune to the influence of their own beliefs and values, choosing to investigate and endorse approaches that are consistent with these: Guy Cook (2010) makes the point, for example, that there is an almost complete absence of studies investigating the teaching of grammar through the use of translation. While recommendations based on research evidence will also be interpreted (or rejected) in the light of the beliefs and attitudes of stakeholders, nor should research be accepted uncritically: as Breen (1998: 55) insists, 'we should keep in mind that SLA theory and research can only provide proposals that can be tested and examined in language classrooms, not final solutions to teaching problems.'

Finally, we should take to heart the point made by Kelly (1969: 222) many years ago, in his monumental history of language teaching, when he observed, 'the place of grammar in the learning process has never been really clear, for even when the tide has been running in a certain direction, some teachers have always tried the opposite.'

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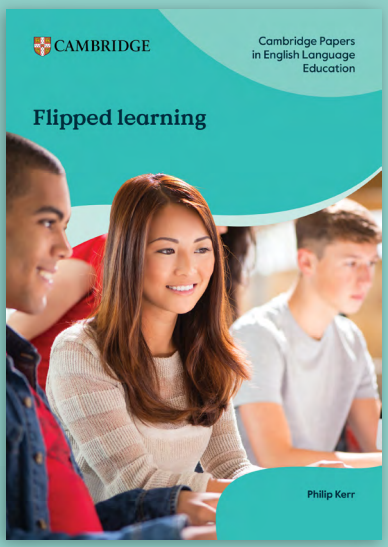


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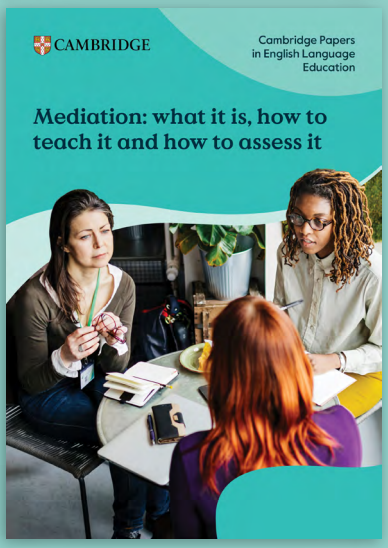
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