

Materials Evaluation and Adaptation: A case study of grammar teaching

The treatment of grammar in *WOW*, Book 1*

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of the essay

In this essay I evaluate a grammar lesson in the light of (a) relevant theoretical assumptions and empirical findings of the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), (b) current methodology in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), and (c) pedagogical requirements/ constraints of the particular teaching situation. We will be concerned here with the question of 'how' grammar can be taught more effectively. Therefore, SLA theories and TEFL methodologies which do not advocate explicit grammar instruction will not be discussed, since they fall outside the scope of the essay.

The content of the grammar lesson

While it is essential for learners to be able to manipulate grammatical form, this is not sufficient. Learners also need to understand the concept(s) expressed and the function(s) performed through a particular grammatical element (Widdowson, 1990: 95, 97 & 166; Harmer, 1987: 9-11 & 17). Matters of pronunciation are an integral part of a grammar lesson; nevertheless, pronunciation instruction relevant to grammatical forms will not be tackled since it falls outside the scope of this essay.

THE TEACHING SITUATION

Learner profile

Age: 10-12.

Level: False beginners. Learners have had one year of instruction during which very little grammar was taught explicitly.

L1: Greek (monolingual class)

Reason for learning: Mainly their parent's decision, whose long-term aim is for their children to receive a proficiency certificate.

Pedagogical considerations

The following two points will be taken into consideration (from Brewster, 1991: 6-8 & Williams, 1991: 207-210):

* This is a short essay I submitted during the MPhil in English & Applied Linguistics, University of Cambridge, in 1994. The title was: "Drawing on a theory/theories presented in one of the theoretical courses (phonology, semantics, syntax, discourse analysis, and psychological processes), select an exercise/a series of exercises in a course book (or equivalent material) and evaluate it/them against the theory and the needs/requirements/constraints of pedagogy. Show how the exercise(s) could be improved, and state your target student population." Here I have incorporated the footnotes in the text and made slight changes to the layout.

- Children need to be supported in their understanding of the propositional content of a message by moving from the concrete to the abstract.
- Children's attention span is limited. Therefore, tasks should be short, varied, motivating and interesting, and should offer "concrete, perceptual support".

The course-book

WOW 1 (Nolasco, 1990) comprises a 'student's book' (SB), a 'teacher's book' (TB) and a 'workbook' (WB). It is targeted at beginners or at "students who have done some primary English" (TB: i). The lesson to be evaluated and adapted is *Lesson 1 of Unit 4* (SB: 15-16). Since the TB offers step-by-step methodological advice and guidance, and the WB provides additional exercises, all three books are going to be referred to during the evaluation.

RELEVANT THEORETICAL ISSUES AND RESEARCH IN SLA

Input - Intake

A distinction has been made between *input* (i.e. "potentially processible language data which are made available to the language learner"), and *intake* (i.e. "that part of input that has actually been processed ... and turned to knowledge of some kind") (Sharwood Smith, 1993: 167). Sharwood Smith (1986: 242 & 253) suggests that input should be "meaningful, interesting, and largely comprehensible", and argues for a "rich communicative environment", but also recognises that input can "be selectively manipulated to facilitate acquisition".

Practice, awareness-raising and the role of meaning

The instructional procedures facilitating learners to turn input into intake have been the focus of much debate.

Proponents of instruction focusing on the production of the newly introduced linguistic form (*practice*) claim that through the learners' overcoming communication difficulties while producing "output that is precise, coherent, and situationally appropriate" the new grammatical features become salient and the learners' grammatical competence is advanced (Long, 1983 and Swain, 1985, in Fotos & Ellis, 1991: 609-610). Also, Faerch & Kasper (1986: 270) present "occasions for rehearsal" as one of the factors promoting learning.

The effectiveness of practice has been challenged, and procedures have been proposed which do not require any learner output, but direct "the learner's attention to specific aspects of the input" (Sharwood Smith, 1993: 175-176). Schmidt (1990: 139&149) argues that consciously *noticing* the form is critical for its subsequent processing. Similarly, Fotos (1993: 387) sees noticing as an "interface" between *explicit* and *implicit* knowledge. Regarding practice focusing only on meaning, Faerch & Kasper (1986: 270) state that it is unlikely for learners to be able to attend to their interlocutor's message while at the same time "consciously perceiving formal characteristics of the input and comparing them to current IL [interlanguage] rules".

Sharwood Smith (1986: 242), Van Patten (1985, 1987, in Schmidt, 1990: 144), Fotos (1993: 387), and Van Patten & Cadierno (1993: 227) suggest that noticing the form is facilitated when the input is meaningful to the learner. Similarly, Ellis (1992: 120) concludes that "practice may only facilitate acquisition directly if it is communicative, i.e. meaning-focused in nature".

Schmidt (1990: 143-144) argues that learners are constrained regarding 'what' and 'when' they notice. Relevant determinants are the level of skill (and automaticity of processing), task demands, and the perceptual salience of the grammatical form.

Combining practice and awareness-raising

Since evidence for/against practice and consciousness-raising is inconclusive and contradictory (Ellis, 1992: 107-116; Fotos & Ellis, 1991; Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993; Van Patten & Cadierno, 1993; White, Spada, Lightbown & Ranta, 1991) TEFL methodology would be wise to cater for both. There is also a theoretical framework which seems to call for their combination. Anderson's (1983) ACT* model distinguishes between *declarative* ('what') and *procedural* ('how') knowledge. Declarative knowledge can be used to "guide behaviour" through "interpretative procedures", that is, by providing "the data required by general problem-solving operators", or by using "analogy forming procedures" (op.cit.: 217-218). Procedural knowledge comes about by repeated use of declarative knowledge in "productions". It can be argued that awareness-raising/noticing will bring about declarative knowledge, whereas practice will lead to/enhance procedural knowledge. Van Patten & Cadierno (1993: 239) and Ellis (1992: 235) came to a similar conclusion.

TEFL METHODOLOGY

Current TEFL methodology seems to advocate a two-stage grammar lesson: *presentation* and *practice*. The practice stage comprises a sequence of activities/tasks ranging on a cline from controlled (focusing solely/mainly on form) to free (focusing only/mainly on meaning) (Littlewood, 1981: 8-15; Spratt, 1985: 6-16; Harmer, 1987: 18-30; Ur, 1988: 6-9). Presentation is less clearly defined. For example, Harmer (1987: 29) presents "awareness tasks" as an alternative to presentation and incorporates controlled practice (drills) (op.cit.: 24-27), whereas Ur (1988: 7) treats "isolation and explanation" as a distinct stage following presentation.

The framework which will be used in the evaluation will consist of presentation, awareness-raising, and (controlled to free) practice. I will now briefly outline the nature and content of each 'stage'.

Presentation

In this stage the learners receive input. Given the multi-dimensional relation between form, concept and function, the time constraints, and the limited attention span of children, the aim of a 'grammar lesson' should be limited to dealing with a single form-concept-function combination (Harmer, 1987: 9-11 & 17). This combination should be demonstrated clearly through an appropriate context (Widdowson, 1990: 95; Garrod, 1986: 236). Spratt (1985: 6-7) distinguishes between *situational* and *linguistic* context. She argues that the former should be relevant to the learners' experience, whereas the latter should be "free from unnecessary language items".

Awareness-raising

Here learners carry out tasks which guide them to focus on form, and will enable them to form generalisations. Learners are not expected to produce language at this stage. Poor performance will have to lead to more input, either as "further data" or as "description/explanation" (Ellis, 1992: 234). The latter will, of course, invalidate this stage.

From controlled to free practice

At the controlled end the focus is only on form. On-the-spot correction at that stage is essential, and learners are expected to repeat incorrect productions correctly (Ellis, 1992: 103, Ur, 1988: 7-8).

Tasks situated around the middle of the practice cline retain focus on correct production, but also ensure that it "sounds more communicatively authentic"; here learners are led to "recognise the communicative function" of the linguistic form (Littlewood, 1981: 10-11). Harmer (1987: 17) adds that such tasks should be personalised (i.e. relevant to the learners' experience). Usually corrective feedback is delayed, and is given in the form of awareness-raising tasks.

During the free-practice stage learners are expected to communicate, that is, the focus is (or rather appears to be) only on meaning. The teacher will be monitoring for correctness of form, as well as for other aspects of (un)successful communication. Feedback will (ideally) be on both aspects, as well. This is when learners are given the opportunity to 'experiment' with the new form and incorporate it in their own production (Cook, 1989: 82-83, Littlewood, 1981: 87-88). To ensure this, tasks have to provide a context-purpose 'environment' which will optimise the chances of the particular form arising 'naturally'. This stage also provides the teacher with useful feedback regarding the 'outcome' of instruction (Littlewood, 1981: 19; Spratt, 1985: 12-13). Seen from another point of view (given the unsubstantiated relation of meaning-focused interaction to learning), this is probably the most important function of this stage.

EVALUATION AND ADAPTATION

Lesson aims

The lesson in focus aims to introduce learners to the possessive with *-s*, the possessive adjectives, and the demonstrative pronouns *these/those* (*this/that* having already been introduced) (TB: 15). For the reasons outlined above, and given the suggested time-frame for each lesson (45-60 minutes) the aims are deemed too ambitious. Not only will presenting three different linguistic elements together potentially overburden the learners, but also the time constraints will not allow sufficient time for adequate focus on each separate element. A more realistic aim would be to introduce the *-s* possessive for the concept-form-function combination of "say[ing] who things belong to" (e.g. *it's X's book*) (loc.cit) and to add the (frequently used) short 'response' *it's X's* (not in the TB's aims). The TB justifiably limits the aim to only names of human 'possessors'.

Anticipated problems

Greek does not have a similar structure; the structure used to indicate the 'possessor' is: 'article-in-the-Genitive'+ 'possessor'-in-the-Genitive'. Following are potential (sources of) problems:

- a. My experience has shown that placing the *-s* after the 'possession' is a common error for children beginners.
- b. Word order: Greek allows both 'possessor-possession' and 'possession-possessor' sequences (when they are adjacent), whereas in the *-s* possessive English allows only the first.
- c. In Greek the 'possession' retains its article.
- d. In the case of persons' full names, Greek uses the genitive case for both first and last name, whereas English places *-s* only at the second element.

These problems have to be tackled during the awareness-raising stage. The TB does not address those issues as it is not targeted at learners of a particular L1.

Procedures

Awareness-raising

The SB does not offer any awareness-raising tasks. On the contrary, the TB (p. 6, #7) directs teachers to explicitly state in the L1 "that 's is used to indicate possession". I showed above that awareness tasks are essential in order to direct the learners to notice not only the new form, but also its behaviour (contrasting it with this of the L1). First, models can be provided, preferably accompanied by visuals clarifying the possession-possessor relation. Then learners can be asked to state or show where the *-s* should be placed (L1 use seems justified here), or asked to place pieces of paper with *-s* on them at the appropriate word in 'possession-possessor' pairs. Similar tasks requiring either L1 or non-verbal responses can be used for problems (b) to (d)

Presentation

The SB (p. 15) uses the context of a museum displaying items belonging to celebrities, a fact that rather complicates matters and does not help clarifying the concept. Furthermore the listening and reading exercises (TB, p. 16, #5 and #6) are quite irrelevant. The use of photographs/drawings of possessors *together with* their possessions and separate ones of the possessors and possessions will ensure that learners realise that the lesson is based on the concept of possession. The use of example sentences in which -'s is highlighted will provide learners with a model for reference.

Practice

WOW offers two practice exercises. The first (SB, p. 15) requires learners to match possessions with the correct sentence. This exercise is ineffective regarding the help it is supposed to provide in learning the new form-concept-function combination, and does not provide any helpful feedback for the teacher. Success/failure is determined by the learners' knowledge of the world; the learners have only to recognise the name of the 'possessor' and match it with the possession (the presence/absence of -'s is unrelated to the learners performance). Similar pitfalls of practice are reported in Ellis (1988: 140). Asking students to "tell each other their answers" after they have completed the exercise (TB, p. 16, #9) is a mechanical drill, which does not engage learners in any kind of meaningful communication, nor is it relevant to the learners' experience, interesting, or motivating in any way (which are some of the main arguments of the proponents of 'practice'). The second (WB: 10), essentially a meaningful drill, is presented as an exercise contrasting 'this' and 'these', but it also offers practice in the placement of -'s at the possessor.

Given the age range of the learners, practice through games seems to be a solution which incorporates most of the facilitating elements mentioned above and in 3.2 (also Rixon, 1991). For example, an adaptation of 'bingo' would require learners (in small groups) to call out possessions (cards drawn from a bag) in turns (e.g. X's car), until the winner has crossed out all the items on his/her board.

The learners' level makes free practice seem like a risky enterprise, since learners are not in a position to interact in the L2. Failure and long silences are very probable, and may well lead to frustration. It seems that awareness-raising exercises are mostly suited to beginners (as they require either L1 or non-verbal responses, or minimal L2 responses). The teacher can use the learners' performance on the 'controlled' exercises as an indicator for the success of the lesson, and as feedback on which to base the planning of subsequent lessons.

What is more, expecting learners to internalise the new form after just sixty minutes of instruction seems rather too optimistic (to say the least). EFL teachers are at an advantage compared to SLA researchers as they can afford more time for the learners' gradual development to take place.

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