

MINDING OUR Ps

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1. THE AIM OF THE ARTICLE

In this article I will take a critical look at the content and format of the 'grammar lesson' as currently favoured by teachers and materials designers alike in the field of TEFL; namely the *Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP)* structure. In the discussion of the merits and shortcomings/limitations of this structure I will draw on (a) current views on TEFL methodology, (b) relevant theoretical assumptions and empirical findings in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), and (c) two theoretical models in cognitive psychology relevant to SLA.¹

2. 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 (Harmer, 1987: 9-11 & 17; Littlewood, 1984: 1; Widdowson, 1990: 95, 97 & 166).² Studies have also shown that a combination of formal instruction and meaning-focused treatment is more effective than mere "formal presentation of grammatical rules" (e.g. Doughty, 1991 - in Fotos, 1994: 324) [see also 5.1].

3. TEFL METHODOLOGY

Current TEFL methodology seems to advocate essentially a two-stage grammar lesson: *presentation* and *practice* (Byrne, 1986: 2, Celce-Murcia & Hilles, 1988: 27-28; Ellis, 1992: 101).³

The content of the *presentation* stage is not clearly defined and views on it are not consistent. For example, Harmer (1987: 24-27 & 29) presents "awareness tasks" as an alternative to presentation and incorporates controlled practice (drills) in it; Ellis (1992: 235) states that presentation "may involve an inductive [i.e. 'consciousness-raising'] or deductive treatment of the structure"; Celce-Murcia & Hilles (1988:30) incorporate both in the presentation stage; Ur (1988:7) treats "isolation and explanation" as a distinct stage following presentation.

The *practice* stage comprises a sequence of activities which can be seen as progressing on a 'control cline' [see also 5.3]. At the 'controlled' end the focus is solely on form; at the 'free' end (the so called *production* stage) the focus is only on meaning (Harmer, 1987: 18-30; Littlewood, 1981: 8-15; Spratt, 1985: 6-16; Ur, 1988: 6-9). Ellis (1992: 102) makes a finer distinction between "free practice" (when learners are "concerned with *learning*") and "communicative use" (when learners are "concerned with conveying a real message"). Nevertheless, he goes on to admit that learners can be engaged in both simultaneously, and coins the term "unfocused

performance" to include both [but see 5.3 for a different view regarding 'focus']. The *production* stage is also seen as providing the teacher with essential *feedback* regarding the outcome of instruction (Littlewood, 1981: 19; Spratt, 1985: 12-13) [but see 5.4 for a caveat].

4. RELEVANT THEORY AND RESEARCH IN SLA

4.1 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". What is meant by 'potentially processible' and 'comprehensible' is that learners should be able to interpret the input either "directly by means of [their] existing IL [interlanguage] knowledge", or "by means of inferencing procedures" (Haastrop, 1991: 25). Sharwood Smith (1986: 242 & 253) argues for a "rich communicative environment, i.e. one which permits linguistic input to be analysed together with many other kinds of information", but also recognises that input can be "selectively manipulated to facilitate acquisition". He makes the distinction between "natural occurring salience", and "salience that has been deliberately engineered" for pedagogical purposes (Sharwood-Smith, 1991: 121). The above are of great relevance to the nature and content of the *presentation* stage [see 5.1].

4.2 Practice, consciousness-raising and the role of meaning

The instructional procedures helping 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 (i.e. *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; Swain, 1985 - in Fotos & Ellis, 1991: 609-610). Also, Faerch & Kasper (1986: 270) present "occasions for rehearsal" as one of the factors promoting learning. Ellis (1992: 120) adds the caveat that "practice may only facilitate acquisition directly if it is communicative, i.e. meaning-focused in nature".

The effectiveness of *practice* has been challenged, and procedures have been proposed which do not require any immediate learner L2 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. Sharwood-Smith (1991: 121) adds that simply noticing the form is not enough, but "what is desired is ... acting on it, that is, learning something from it". Fotos (1993: 387), Sharwood-Smith (1986: 242), Van Patten (1985, 1987 - in Schmidt, 1990: 144), and Van Patten & Cadierno (1993: 227) suggest that noticing the form is facilitated when the input is meaningful to the learner. Still, tasks directing the learners' attention to the form are needed since "they may have processed the utterance simply for meaning and not noticed and stored the ... structure manifest in the input

(Sharwood-Smith, 1993: 168).

Schmidt (1990: 143-144) argues that learners are constrained regarding 'what' and 'when' they notice. Relevant determinants are the frequency in which an item appears in the input [*but see 5.1 for a caveat*], task demands [*see 5.3 for implications*], and the perceptual salience of the grammatical form (e.g. contracted forms are not easily perceived by children).

Regarding practice focusing only on meaning (i.e. *production*) Faerch & Rasper (1986: 270) state that it is unlikely that learners are 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", a view shared by Van Patten (1989, 1990 -in Tomlin & Villa, 1994: 186). Lightbown & Spada (1994: 573) report research evidence that in "mostly meaning-based instructional environments [learners] seem to reach a plateau in the formal accuracy of their language use while their communicative effectiveness continues to grow". That is, when focus on form is of secondary consideration the learners' development to more advanced levels may be impeded (also Lightbown & Spada, 1993: 91-92).

4.3 Combining practice and consciousness-raising

Since evidence for/against practice and consciousness-raising is inconclusive and contradictory (e.g. Ellis, 1992: 107-116 & 235-237; Fotos & Ellis, 1991; Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993; Van Patten & Cadierno, 1993; White et. al., 1991) TEFL methodology would be wise to cater for both. Van Patten & Cadierno (1993: 239), and Fotos & Ellis (1991: 609) concluded that both consciousness-raising and communicative practice are essential to grammar teaching.

There are also two theoretical frameworks which seem to call for their combination:

4.3.1 Anderson: ACT* model

According to this model "language generation is similar in character to other cognitive activities and its structure is basically a problem-solving one" (Anderson, 1983: 267). ACT* distinguishes between "declarative" ('what') and "procedural" (how) knowledge (op.cit.: 19-23).

Declarative knowledge is available to consciousness and can be used "as a set of instructions" to "guide behaviour" through "interpretative", "problem-solving", or "analogy-forming" procedures (op.cit.: 216-218).

Procedural knowledge is not conscious and only comes about by repeated use of declarative knowledge in "productions". According to ACT* knowledge starts as declarative (in our case, rule-formation following exposure to a language sample) (op.cit.: 275-276), and gradually becomes procedural through "strengthening" and "tuning" processes while using combined units of declarative knowledge in "productions" (op.cit.: 215-217).

It can be argued that noticing/consciousness-raising will bring about declarative knowledge, whereas practice will lead to/enhance procedural knowledge.

4.3.2 Bialystok: Analysis-Control model

According to this model (Bialystok, 1990: 118), there are two aspects of language processing: "analysis of linguistic knowledge" and "control of linguistic processing". They are independent ("specialised for a different aspect of processing"), and interdependent. Furthermore, their development is "responsive to different kinds of experience".

At the level of **analysis**, the model distinguishes between "implicit" and "explicit" knowledge (lower and higher

levels of analysis respectively) (op.cit." 119). Implicit knowledge can guide performance, but cannot be inspected; it also identifies the limits of such performance (op.cit.: 120). On the other hand, explicit (or "symbolic representation" of) knowledge "is independent of meaning and accessible to inspection" (op.cit.: 121). One aspect of the development of language proficiency is making the implicit knowledge which governs performance explicit (i.e. analysing it). Analysed representation of knowledge "permit[s] the relationships between the forms and the meanings and among the language forms themselves to be examined separately and manipulated for various purposes" (Bialystok & Bouchard Ryan, 1985:211).

Control refers to the ability to intentionally direct "attention to relevant and appropriate information and to integrate these forms in real time" (Bialystok, 1990: 125). Its development proceeds separately and responds to different experiences from the development of analysis (Bialystok & Bouchard Ryan, 1985: 216). Control applies to both explicit and implicit knowledge (loc.cit.).

Consciousness-raising tasks are expected to facilitate the development of explicit knowledge at the level of analysis, whereas practice tasks are expected to lead learners to higher levels of control.

5. A FRAMEWORK FOR THE GRAMMAR LESSON

The framework proposed here consists of the following stages, not necessarily in that order: *presentation*, *consciousness-raising*, and (controlled to free) *practice*. I will now briefly outline the nature and content of each stage.

5.1 Presentation

In this stage the learners receive input concerning a certain language phenomenon. Through various presentation techniques the teacher leads the learners to notice the language form in focus. Given the multi-dimensional relation between form, concept and function, as well as the time constraints, and the limitations of human memory, processing capacity and attention span (see Tomlin & Villa, 1994: 188) the aim of a 'grammar lesson' should be limited to dealing with a single form-concept-function combination (Harmer, 1987: 9-11 & 17), or, if appropriate, tackle contextually related functions. This combination should be demonstrated clearly through an appropriate context (Garrod, 1986: 236; Sharwood-Smith, 1993: 167; Widdowson, 1990: 95). 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". As I see it, 'unnecessary' should be understood as relating more to the level of difficulty of the language used, and less to the amount of it. The issue is not only to help learners notice the target structure, but also to do so within a rich, realistic context. To that purpose, I would suggest that when a reading/listening text is used as a vehicle for the presentation of the target structure, a skills development stage can precede *presentation* per se.⁴ Focusing learner attention on meaning before shifting their attention to form achieves three goals: First, the concept becomes clear; second, noticing is facilitated as learners have familiarised themselves with the co-text; third, noticing is achieved within a "rich communicative environment" (Sharwood-smith, 1986"242 & 251) [*see also 4.1*]. Nevertheless, Spratt's second point advises for the use of non-linguistic clues to context (e.g. pictures, drawings etc.) even for

more advanced learners.

The arguments for 'selective manipulation' and 'engineered salience' [see 4.1] can be regarded as advising against the use of specially created 'presentation texts' in which the target structure occurs in unnatural frequency (compared to corresponding authentic texts). Issues of authenticity aside, what is needed, it is argued, is not quantity but quality (salience), that is, appropriate teaching techniques which will help learners to notice (i.e. focus their attention on) a particular language item [see also 5.2].

Care should be taken on the part of the teacher to tackle alternative concepts/functions related to the same form, or alternative forms related to the same concept/function, in subsequent lessons. This is because "a learner assumes each meaning to be encoded by a single morphological form or structure, unless the language provides evidence to the contrary" (Pinker, 1984 - in Yip, 1994: 132). The teacher should, therefore, make certain to provide such 'language evidence'. Furthermore, such treatment of structural elements will help learners "to see a particular feature ... not merely as an isolated item but as part of an evolving system of interrelationships which should become increasingly differentiated as it grows" (Stern, 1992: 145).

5.2 Consciousness-raising

We will be concerned here with what Ellis (1992: 239) terms "inductive" awareness-raising tasks.⁵ Learners carry out tasks which guide them to focus on the form (as opposed to meaning). Such tasks enable learners to formulate a rule regarding the concept-form combination within the restrictions of the particular context, through "hypothesis testing and inferencing" (Rutherford & Sharwood-Smith, 1988 - in Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993: 123). Such restrictions are necessary since devising a comprehensive pedagogical generalisation (i.e. one that incorporates all possible concept-form combinations in different contexts) is a demanding enterprise even for grammarians, let alone learners (Westney, 1994: 76-83).

Learners are not expected to produce the target structure at this stage (Ellis, 1992: 235; Fotos, 1994: 326). Since the aim is primarily "to call learner attention to grammatical features, raising their consciousness of them" (Fotos, loc.cit.) non-linguistic responses, or use of L1 (particularly for lower levels) are acceptable. Higher-level learners can be presented with "grammatical problems to solve interactively" (Fotos, 1994: 325); that is, they focus on form, while at the same time "they are also engaged in meaning-focused use of the target language" (loc.cit.). Poor performance in such tasks 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. Guidance and feedback on the part of the teacher regarding salient features of the form will facilitate the effectiveness of consciousness-raising tasks.

Consciousness-raising tasks are at an advantage compared to practice ones in the case of beginners, as such tasks require either L1, or non-verbal responses, or minimal L2 responses. Teachers who feel that their learners' low level of language ability or training would make free practice a risky enterprise (as failure and long silences are probable, and may lead to frustration) can focus more on awareness-raising tasks.⁶ They can use their learners' performance during less controlled activities as an indicator for the success of the lesson, and as feedback on which to base the planning of subsequent lessons [but, see 5.4 for reservations].

5.3 From controlled to free practice

At the 'controlled' end the focus is only on form. The teacher has full control over which structure(s) will be used by the learners in oral drills and exercises.⁷

Activities situated around the middle of the 'practice cline' retain focus on correct production, but also ensure that learner production "sounds more communicatively authentic" (Littlewood, 1981: 10-11). Here learners are led to "recognise the communicative function" of the linguistic form (op.cit.). Harmer (1987: 17) adds that such tasks should be personalised (i.e. relevant to the learners' experience). Here again the teacher exercises considerable control, that is he/she leads learners "along a predetermined path and towards a predetermined goal" (Kumaravadivelu, 1993: 80). Nevertheless, there is some (albeit limited) room for learner improvisation.

At the 'production' end of the cline learners are expected to communicate; that is, the focus is (or rather appears to be) only on meaning.⁸ The teacher has no direct control over the language used. 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. That is learners are led "along an open-ended path, but towards a predetermined goal" (Kumaravadivelu, 1993: 80). Byrne (1986: 2) offers a further merit of this stage, namely student motivation through awareness "that they have learned something *useful to them personally*".

5.4 Learner and teacher feedback

During controlled practice, on-the-spot correction is advisable. Although the facilitative effect of corrective feedback on the development of language proficiency has not been positively substantiated (e.g. Ellis, 1994: 583-586 & 639-641; Lightbown & Ranta, 1994: 573; Schwartz, 1993: 160; White, 1991: 158; White, Spada, Lightbown & Ranta, 1991: 418) there is a psychological reason for its employment, namely promotion of learner confidence. That is, learners will feel that they receive helpful guidance and support, provided, of course, that non-threatening correction techniques are employed, and the teacher restricts correction to the structure in focus. For less-controlled activities and production tasks, corrective feedback should be delayed, so as not to impede communication between learners. It can either be given in the form of consciousness-raising tasks (i.e. learners are presented with their own inaccurate utterances and asked to comment and improve on them), or be the focus of remedial lessons.

As regards teacher feedback, learner output does not constitute concrete evidence of the learners' (un)successful internalisation of a particular linguistic phenomenon (Sharwood Smith, 1986: 249). What is more, expecting learners to internalise the new form within a single lesson, or even a series of lessons, seems rather too optimistic (to say the least). I would not go so far as to suggest that teachers do not take learner output into consideration when planning subsequent lessons. What I would suggest is for teachers to be aware of the fact that language learning does not follow a straight line of development. As a result, learner output may not show evidence of learning, or may even suggest regression of some sort. It cannot be stressed too emphatically that EFL teachers should afford time for gradual development to take place.

NOTES

1. 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 grammar instruction will not be discussed.
2. Matters of pronunciation are, of course, 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 article.
3. Altering the sequence of stages, as in a "deep end" type of lesson (i.e. production - identification of weak areas - presentation - practice) (Byrne, 1986: 3; Johnson, 1981: 192-193) has no relevance to our discussion since the only difference between a 'rigid' and 'flexible' sequencing lies on the procedures for determining the structure(s) to be presented. What is more, in both sequences presentation precedes practice.
4. Such staging is, in fact, preferable when the time available is longer than the usual 50-60 minutes. It is particularly advisable for grammar 'consolidation and extension' lessons at intermediate and advanced levels.
5. Good examples of consciousness-raising tasks can be found in Bolitho & Tomlinson (1980), and Bowers et. al. (1987). Although these books are intended for language development of EFL teachers and advanced students, the tasks they offer can be adapted for learners of all levels.
6. Teachers should, of course, at the same time proceed with gradually familiarising their students with production tasks.
7. I will adopt the classification of classroom procedures presented in Kumaravadivelou (1993: 80), namely "structural exercises", "communicative activities" and "pedagogical tasks". These procedures correspond to the activities employed in the controlled, semi-controlled and free practice stages respectively.
8. The teacher will be monitoring both for correctness of form, and for other aspects of (un)successful communication. Feedback will (ideally) be on both aspects, as well.

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