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2002

Just what is incidental, integrated and implicit about grammar instruction?

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This paper discusses popular notions of how grammar should be presented in the ESL classroom. Reference will especially be made to recent empirical and theoretical bases to grammar instruction which incorporate the role of various language sub-systems and acquisition processes. Drawing particularly on the findings of a study that examines the roles of meaning and structural aspects in processing language, this paper will make suggestions for grammar instruction in Malaysia.

I. Introduction: Grammar instruction yesterday and today

Numerous suggestions have been made regarding how grammar should be presented in the classroom. As a result, a whole new list of terms has emerged to describe these different suggestions. While some may consider that new terminology is a sign that the field is alive and vibrant, it is also interesting to note that terminology can lead to a sense of confusion amongst language teachers. This is especially so as some of the terms bring with them interesting connotations. The incidental teaching of grammar, for example, is perhaps meant to deemphasise the teaching of grammar but connotes a lack of intention and planning in its teaching. Similarly, the integrated teaching of grammar, which demands some form of contextualization of grammar, can be vague with respect to how such contextualization is achieved. It is possible to think of teaching grammar within some form of either functional or skills based context. In the former, grammar is taught within the context of expressing particular functions while in a skills based context, it is taught in the teaching of the different language skills.

Of late, more new terminology has emerged to describe the different ways of teaching grammar. Focus on formS is viewed as the incremental teaching of grammatical
items, whereas focus on form involves increasing the salience of structural items in order to be noticed by the learner (Doughty, 1991; Long, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998). Input enhancement and grammar consciousness raising (Rutherford, 1987; Sharwood-Smith, 1981, 1993), represent synonymous techniques of grammar instruction that attempt to enhance structures in the input in order to help learners notice them. Finally, processing instruction (VanPatten, 1990, 1996), a more recent development, is a specific technique which claims to help the process of noticing through the integration of form and meaning. It is not difficult to understand how all these different terms and approaches to grammar instruction can easily contribute to a general sense of confusion amongst teachers with respect to how best to present grammar in the classroom. In this respect, attempts to classify the many different options such as what has been done by Long and Robinson (1998) as illustrated in figure 1 below, is certainly most welcome and helpful.

![Figure 1. Options in language teaching (simplified from Long, M. & Robinson, P., 1998)](image-url)
In this summary of the different options of grammar instruction, two major poles of instruction are suggested. Grammar instruction is seen to have either an emphasis on form or an emphasis on meaning. This paper will attempt to address the importance of both form and meaning in presenting language structures in the ESL classroom.

II. Some issues that have affected grammar instruction

The different approaches to grammar instruction have been shaped by various issues concerning how grammar should be presented. One of these issues revolve around the effectiveness of explicitly teaching grammar. Several theorists (e.g. Krashen 1982, Krashen & Terrell, 1983) make a distinction between learning and acquisition. Language learning is seen to involve formal instruction and is considered inferior to language acquisition which occurs in naturalistic settings. Krashen suggests that learning and acquisition are separate and incompatible systems. This non-interface stance or hypothesis has clear implications on grammar instruction. A teacher who subscribes to this non-interface position would clearly strive to create naturalistic settings in the classroom at the expense of direct grammar instruction. The reader, however, is encouraged to read Ellis (1994) for a critique of this non-interface position and a review of alternative positions on the subject.

A second issue concerns the factors that affect the learning of grammar. These factors can either be learner related or language related. Learner related factors have been quite extensively researched and may include such things as age, gender, learning strategy, as well as cultural and linguistic upbringing. Language related factors, on the other hand, deal with such aspects as the salience of the grammatical structure, the
complexity of the linguistic structure and the meaning bearingness of the structure. If these language related factors influence language learning and the acquisition or learning of grammatical items, a major concern for teachers will certainly be regarding how they can affected so that learning/acquisition is expedited.

III. Why be concerned with grammar instruction?

It should be noted that there has recently been an upsurge of interest concerning grammar instruction. This increase in attention is largely due to a general sense of dissatisfaction with the results of a communicative approach to language teaching. It may be possible to attribute students’ lack of accuracy as well as teachers’ sense of loss of direction with respect to grammar instruction to the communicative focus in language instruction.

Student’s lack of accuracy in grammatical language use may be partly explained by the issue of fossilization. In a communicative approach to language learning, learners concentrate only on conveying a message with no or little concern for grammatical accuracy. As a result, inaccurate structures are tolerated as long as the message is understood. Theoretically, these inaccurate structures will eventually give way to more accurate and appropriate use of the language as the student becomes more involved in communication and interaction in the target language. However, there is no guarantee that this development occurs. There is also a clear reluctance to alter inaccurate structures. Second language learners may be reluctant to correct themselves as the message is already understood, or they may unaware of the mistakes they make as the signals they receive from their conversational partner indicate comprehension of the message.
A second concern is the assumption that grammar will take care of itself when students are involved in negotiating meaning during interaction. While there is clearly some basis to this assumption, and students’ language does develop through negotiation of meaning, there is still a major problem with this assumption when we consider most language teaching situations. There is little interaction in the classroom and students most often than not are just provided with language input. It is difficult to expect that students will be able to notice and learn the structures in the input if the structures are simply presented implicitly as part of the input.

Because of the reliance on the implicit learning of grammatical structure, there is also a lack of planning and direction in the teaching of grammar. This situation is especially reflected in the various language curricula in which the listing of grammatical structures is extensive. A long list of grammatical structures is presented with very little possibility for many of the structures to be taught. The sort of planning that is required is not merely at the administrative level involving the development of syllabuses and curricula, but more so the formulation of a method or technique of teaching grammar which is theoretically sound and which places equal stress on linguistic accuracy as well as functional or communicative needs.

IV. The Study

This study examined how grammatical or syntactic cues in the language input are used in relation to other cues, especially semantic or meaning cues. In relation to what had been discussed earlier in this paper, it was felt that a study of this nature would be able to shed some light on how best to present grammatical structures in the classroom.

A. Methodology
This study consisted of two phases. In the first phase, 108 students were examined with respect to their use of semantic and syntactic input cues. The second phase of the study examined the effect of two different types of instructional treatments on the use of cues. For both phases, taped stimuli consisting of four different types of sentences were used. These sentences contained relative clauses and were manipulated in terms of structure and meaning resulting in four sentence types as follows:

**T1 – Easy Syntax, Probable Semantics**  
The hunter caught the bear that ate the fish

**T2 – Easy Syntax, Improbable Semantics**  
The hunter shot the deer that caught the bear

**T3 – Difficult Syntax, Probable Semantics**  
The bear the hunter shot attacked the man

**T4 – Difficult Syntax, Improbable Semantics**  
The man the bear shot spoke to the hunter

Easy and difficult syntax were determined by the structural properties of the sentence such as the type of embedding, the word order, and the presence of relative pronouns as clausal markers. Probable and improbable semantics were determined according to the plausibility of the proposition in the relative clause as well as whether or not the subject in the relative clause had agency over its verb.

The students in this study were expected to identify the subject of the verb in the relative clause (italicized in the above sentences) by answering questions such as the following:

T1 sentence: Who or what did the eating?  
T3 sentence: Who or what did the shooting?
These questions were presented to them only after they had heard the test sentence. As such, there were no graphemic or visual clues to help the students process the sentences that they heard. This step was taken in order to ensure that the students were using their actual processing style in responding to and interpreting the input.

Scores on the test were used to determine whether students were using syntactic or semantic cues in processing the input. The students’ scores were interpreted individually according to each sentence type as well as in comparison to other sentence types. Table 1 illustrates how performance on the four sentence types were interpreted in this study.

Table 1

Interpretation of Scores According to Sentence Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Scores on individual sentence types</th>
<th>B. Comparative scores on two different sentence types</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High scores on T1</td>
<td>Semantic cue use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High scores on T2</td>
<td>Syntactic cue use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High scores on T3</td>
<td>Semantic &amp; syntactic cue use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High scores on T4</td>
<td>Syntactic cue use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T1 scores &gt; T2 scores</td>
<td>Semantic cue use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3 scores &gt; T4 scores</td>
<td>Semantic cue use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T1 scores &gt; T3 scores</td>
<td>Syntactic cue use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2 scores &gt; T4 scores</td>
<td>Syntactic cue use</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. Analysis of scores (T-tests)
Descriptive statistics of the students’ performance is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Scores on Sentence Types

Mean scores on the four sentence types were compared using the independent t-test statistical tool in order to determine the use of semantic and syntactic input cues. The results of these comparisons are presented in Tables 3 and 4 below.

Table 3
Use of Semantic Input Cues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Mean Scores</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T1 vs. T2</td>
<td>3.23 and 2.36</td>
<td>( t = 3.21; p &lt; .05 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3 vs. T4</td>
<td>3.63 and 2.75</td>
<td>( t = 2.76; p &lt; .05 )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4
Use of Syntactic Input Cues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Mean Scores</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T1 vs. T3</td>
<td>3.23 and 3.63</td>
<td>( t = 1.99; p &gt; .05, \text{n.s.} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2 vs. T4</td>
<td>2.36 and 2.75</td>
<td>( t = 2.36; p &gt; .05, \text{n.s.} )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tables 3 indicates that while semantic input cues are being used. However, according to the results in Table 4, there is little evidence that the same is true of syntactic input cues.

C. Instructional treatment
Two different types of instruction are used as treatment in the second phase of the study. Form oriented instruction (FOI) emphasises the formal aspects of the input through their enhancement. Meaning oriented instruction (MOI), on the other hand, places greater stress on the meaning elements of the input. Appendix A summarises the difference between the two computer mediated instructional treatments. A smaller group of students participated in this phase of the study (n = 26).

E. Analysis of scores (ANCOVA)

The analysis of the effect of MOI and FOI was performed using the Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) with the pretreatment scores used as the covariate. As such, the means of post treatment scores of both the MOI and FOI groups were compared after being adjusted according to the pre treatment scores. Table 5 reports on the significance of the differences found between the two groups according to the four sentence types.

Table 5
Results of ANCOVA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence Type</th>
<th>FOI</th>
<th>MOI</th>
<th>F_{obt}</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T1</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>14.74</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>.973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3</td>
<td>5.24</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>7.19</td>
<td>.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T4</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>.640</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

F_{crit} (1, 23) = 4.30

The results in Table 5 clearly indicate that the FOI group significantly outperformed the MOI group on the T1 and T3 sentence types while there is no significant difference in performance between the two groups on the T2 and T4 sentence types.
F. Findings/Discussion

Several points can be derived from the findings of this study. First, it is quite obvious that learners tend to process meaning before form. This is clear from the results of the first phase of the study in which performance on semantically probable T1 and T3 sentences were significantly higher than on semantically improbable T2 and T4 sentences. Secondly, results of the second phase of the study seems to indicate that Form oriented instruction leads to more accurate processing of sentences and that it is more effective than Meaning oriented instruction. This is quite apparent from the significantly higher scores obtained by the FOI group compared to the MOI group, especially on two of the four sentences. However, it is in this aspect that the results seem to become even more interesting. Form oriented instruction is more effective only on sentences that are semantically probable. It does not seem to affect the processing of semantically improbable sentences. Taken together with the results of the first phase of the study regarding the learner preference in using meaning elements in sentence interpretation, it would appear that even Form oriented instruction must take into consideration meaning elements to be most effective. This leads one to infer that the most effective type of grammar instruction is one that presents form together with meaning. In the concluding section of this paper, I will provide an example of doing this.

V. Conclusion: Teaching with form and meaning

The following exercise illustrates the difference in teaching with a relative emphasis on form alone, on meaning alone and on a combination of form and meaning. The intention of this section is to show how an exercise that combines form and meaning
is superior that one that provides only form alone or only meaning alone. This exercise is adapted from VanPatten, B. (1996).

A. Form alone

Read the following sentences and decide whether the sentence refers to Hillary or Bill Clinton. Put a check mark (/) in the box under the name of the person you think it refers to.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bill</th>
<th>Hillary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <em>Ella es dinámica</em></td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <em>El es agresivo</em></td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <em>El es egocéntrico</em></td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <em>Ella es honesta</em></td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <em>Ella es divorciada</em>; etc.</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. Meaning alone

Listen as your instructor reads a sentence about Hillary Clinton. Decide whether what you hear is true or not and put a check mark (/) in the appropriate box.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>si</th>
<th>no</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1...</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2...</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3...</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4...</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5... etc.</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


C. Form and meaning

Listen as your instructor reads a sentence. First, decide whether the sentence is about Bill Clinton or Hillary Clinton. Then, decide whether you agree with the statement or not. Put a check mark (/) in the appropriate boxes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>agree</th>
<th>disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1...</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2...</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3...</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above activities clearly illustrate the importance of integrating form with other aspects of language such as meaning or semantics. It is not sufficient to rely only on naturalistic language input as there needs to be a conscious effort to build grammar into the instruction. Rather than argue over whether to present grammar explicitly or implicitly, it seems more appropriate to think of grammar instruction to be implicitly explicit. Although the presentation of the grammatical item is implicit as it may be integrated with other language elements, there is a concerted and explicit effort to make the grammatical item obvious and noticeable to the students.
Selected Reading List


Appendix A.
Comparison of Tasks in Meaning and Form-oriented Instructional Treatments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form-oriented instruction</th>
<th>Meaning-oriented instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+ reading a passage with relative clauses underlined</td>
<td>+ reading a passage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ sentence completion involving relativized sentences in a</td>
<td>+ sentence completion (cloze-like) involving relativized sentences in a reading passage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reading passage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ description of relationship between clauses in relativized</td>
<td>+ providing personal responses to situations described in passage by relativized sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sentences (open-ended)</td>
<td>(open-ended)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ identification of antecedent of a relative clause (MCQ)</td>
<td>+ matching answers to situations relevant to the passage in which relative clauses are used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ tutorial demonstrating construction and deconstruction</td>
<td>+ reading passage and answering comprehension questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of relativized sentences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>