Developing materials for the teaching of grammar

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Introduction

Traditionally, materials used in the teaching of grammar have been for the specific purpose of providing grammar practice. Language drills used by the audiolingual method, for example, were structured in such a way so as to encourage automatic learning. Materials were used to pattern student language behaviour through carefully planned drill and practice. In the communicative approach, grammar activities tend to focus on interaction and reflect a social dimension. Materials used in this approach contain conversations and contextualised situations which focus on the message rather than the grammatical form. The kind of materials used in the teaching and learning of grammar has much to do with how one believes language is learnt. For the language teacher, it is important to consider the pedagogical relevance of some of these language learning and acquisition theories. The development of effective materials for teaching and learning grammar require a careful analysis of these theories. This article begins by discussing the relevance of theories to language learning in the classroom. A second section of the article briefly surveys some of the more cohesive approaches in teaching grammar. Finally, several general guidelines are provided on developing appropriate materials for the teaching of grammar in the English language classroom.

Pedagogical strength of language learning theories

Many language learning and language acquisition theories have been suggested. These have generally been categorized into either innatist, interactionist or environmentalist theories. For the language teacher, however, not all these theories have direct relevance to the language classroom. Some, despite their logical basis, may be limited to specific situations. Others may be too abstract that they do not provide clear enough steps for classroom application. In this context, therefore, it may be possible to assess the effectiveness of language learning theories not only on the basis of their theoretical strength, but also on their pedagogical strength.

I will refer to theoretical strength as the plausibility of the explanation of language learning suggested by the theory. In other words, theoretical strength involves the explanatory power of the theory with respect to language learning. Pedagogical strength, on the other hand, can be considered as the extent to which the theory has clear and immediate applications in the classroom. For many language teachers, language learning theories are only relevant in so far as they are able to help them teach. In other words, in a practical sense, theories are useful only to the extent to which they are able to affect the choices and decisions made in teaching and learning the language in the classroom. It is this ability of a theory to influence teaching that is referred to as its pedagogical strength.
It is important to assess what contributes to the pedagogical strength of a language learning theory. Perhaps, we can start by examining whether the theory contains concepts that are concrete and operationalisable. The bane of many theories is the vagueness of the concepts that form the theory. Vague and generalized concepts are not testable and any claims to effectiveness may be difficult to substantiate. Innatist theories of language learning are especially vulnerable to this criticism because of their mentalist bias. Concepts that have been used by innatist theories may all be involved in language learning in some conceivable way. However, these concepts are difficult to operationalise and as such, their use and relevance to the language teacher may not be immediately applicable. Even some theories which have been quite readily adopted by teachers and educators, remain problematic due to the abstract concepts involved. Krashen’s input hypothesis and his corresponding i + 1 model, for example, may sound theoretically as well as intuitively appealing but in actual fact, are abstract and intangible. It may not be so easy to determine the slightly more difficult level of input represented by i + 1 that the model requires.

Secondly, a pedagogically strong theory of language learning should also be able to describe the process of language learning as well as provide an access point for teachers to intervene and assist in the learning process. A clear description of what processes are involved as well as how they lead to learning is required. Krashen’s comprehensible input hypothesis posits that acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to language input that is slightly beyond their proficiency level. The processes or mechanisms involved, however, remain unclear.

In addition to being descriptive, a language learning theory must also be interventionist if it is to be considered pedagogically strong. It should support teacher intervention and indicate how the teacher can affect the language learning process. Chomskyian Universal Grammar and its corresponding notions of principles and parameters, for example, is not interventionist in nature as it does not indicate a clear manner of teacher involvement. Although one may argue that Universal Grammar comes with the provision of an input flood that triggers the language acquisition system, increased input can already be considered a given in language classrooms rather than a specific technique for teachers to utilize. For pedagogical purposes, the theory should specify a more detailed procedure related to input such as how it should be presented rather than merely indicating that input should be provided in large quantities.

With respect to grammar teaching, Krashen’s non-interface theory of acquisition and learning as well as Prabhu’s suggested communicational language teaching (1987) seem to discourage attempts to emphasise grammar in the classroom and favour a more communication based teaching approach. Both theorists believe that explicit grammar teaching is ineffective. Others have disagreed with this view. Ellis (1995), for example, posits that while “acquisition occurs when learners participate in interaction that affords comprehensible input and output, … higher levels of grammatical competence require direct intervention in interlanguage development” (p. 87). A pedagogically strong language learning theory must address this issue of the appropriate manner of presenting grammar.
Finally, the pedagogical strength of a language learning theory is also affected by its situational relevance. Is the theory relevant in specific contexts but impractical in other situations? Interactionist theories that focus on oral production and interaction, for example, have a strong logical basis and are supported by many empirical studies. Gass and Varonis (1994), among many others, point out that negotiation of meaning “increases the possibility that the language used in the negotiation will be of benefit to the learner in the development of the second language” (p. 285). However, despite the many positive aspects of interactionist theories, teaching efforts based on such theories may face a somewhat unique problem in many Asian classrooms where students tend to remain quiet, passive and dependent on the teacher. In such a situation, interaction may have to take a secondary role to teacher led instruction at least in a significant portion of the initial stages of the teaching-learning process.

**Grammar teaching models**

The discussion on pedagogical strength of language theories in the previous section leads quite naturally to a discussion of language teaching models. Of special interest is the question of grammar teaching and how grammatical structures should be presented, if at all, in the language classroom. Several models have been suggested which range from general approaches to more specific use of particular techniques.

Perhaps the most general grammar teaching approach and the broadest in terms of possible techniques used is input enhancement and grammar consciousness raising. Input enhancement involves input modification such as colour coding or boldfacing of the target language structure. They have been described as an “unelaborated form of salience since they give no appeal to metalinguistic knowledge” (Sharwood-Smith, 1987; p. 15). Grammar consciousness raising, a predecessor to input enhancement, is a cognitive approach to grammatical instruction developed by Sharwood Smith (1981) and Rutherford (1987). C-R focuses on aspects of grammar without necessarily using explicit rules or technical jargon and may involve enhancement of input as well.

Batstone (1994) discusses grammar teaching within the context of three general teaching approaches: grammar as product, as process, and as skill. Teaching grammar as product refers to a teaching approach that helps learners to notice and to structure their knowledge of the language system. The approach involves a careful specification of language forms intended to promote a targeted language focus during a lesson. Activities in a teaching grammar as product approach include “opportunities to manipulate forms, changing them or reconstructing them in order to discover more about how grammar works” (p. 51). This approach helps in noticing grammatical structure and in allowing students to structure and restructure their developing language systems.

The process approach to teaching grammar “engages learners in language use”, allowing the learners to “formulate their own meanings in contexts over which they have considerable control, and in so doing, drawing on grammar as an ongoing resource” (p. 51). A major aim to teaching grammar as process is so that learners can “proceduralise
their knowledge, learning to deploy grammar while for the most part concentrating their attention or meaning” (p. 51). Both approaches are contrasted as follows: In product teaching we must avoid doing everything for the learner because language learning requires the learners’ active engagement and involvement. In process teaching the situation is reversed as we need to constrain and regulate the learners’ involvement, fashioning contexts which promote not just active participation, but the activation of grammar” (p. 52).

Batstone describes the third approach, the teaching grammar as skills approach, as one that fills a critical gap between a product and a process approach (p. 52). The aim of this approach is to help learners “leap from the careful control of grammar as product to the effective use of grammar as process” (p. 52).

Another method of instruction involving a specific emphasis on grammatical structure is processing instruction (Van Patten, 1996). Cadierno (1995) illustrates this model as the use of heuristic devices to mediate language input and the intake or integration of the language structure. Processing instruction involves teaching and learning situations which emphasise form-meaning mappings. It consists of three key components: (1) explanation of the relationship between a given form and the meaning it can convey; (2) information about processing strategies, showing learners how natural processing strategies may not work to their benefit; and (3) ‘structured input’ activities in which learners are given the opportunity to process form in the input a ‘controlled’ situation so that better form meaning connections might happen compared to what might happen in less controlled situations (p. 60).

Concern regarding the pedagogical treatment of grammatical structures has also given rise to increased emphasis on specific techniques. Among the techniques that have been suggested are interpretation tasks (Ellis, 1995) and reconstruction tasks (Izumi and Bigelow, 2000). Interpretation is discussed by Ellis (1995) as “the process by which learners endeavor to comprehend input and in so doing pay attention to specific linguistic features and their meanings. It involves noticing and cognitive comparison and results in intake.” (p. 90). Cognitive comparison serves as a mechanism for confirming or disconfirming hypotheses in implicit knowledge. Similarly, reconstruction tasks suggested by Izumi and Bigelow (2000) require students to make comparisons between their language output and the target language model. The reconstruction task is intended to promote noticing of the gap and to maximize the similarities between the learners’ production and the target language model.

**Generalized techniques for teaching grammar**

The different models of language teaching provide useful insights into how best to present grammar in language teaching. It is very likely that the teaching of grammar often requires an eclectic approach employing different techniques derived from various teaching models rather than the use of a single fixed method. For this reason, it may be useful to provide some general suggestions for the teaching of grammar in second language classrooms.
Comprehension focus. Teachers must try to focus learners’ attention on noticing and understanding specific grammatical features in the input rather than emphasising student production of the target language through tasks such as drills. Ellis (1995) considers comprehension activities as the means by which the acquisition of new features begins (p. 91). Studies indicate that students involved in comprehension oriented learning outperform those who are involved in production based grammar tasks (VanPatten and Cadierno, 1993; Doughty, 1991).

Undoubtedly, learner production of the target language serves various important purposes. Production assists in developing accuracy through hypothesis testing and cognitive comparison. It can also benefit the language acquisition process by extending interaction and increasing the amount of input. Language processing through negotiation of meaning can only be achieved through language production and interaction. In the teaching context, assessment of learners’ progress and development can only be done by examining their language output. Nevertheless, it is still target language input that should be the primary focus of language educators because input remains a fundamental requirement as acknowledged by nearly all language learning and acquisition theories.

Materials used in the teaching of grammar, therefore, should not have either an undue or singular emphasis on production. In the past, learning grammar was equated with continuous practice and hence language production was an important component in classroom language teaching. Grammar teaching materials should now provide greater focus on allowing students to comprehend the message as well as emphasise understanding the structural form used to convey the message.

Enhanced input. While a focus on comprehension can provide a generalized framework in teaching grammar, the students need to also notice targeted grammatical structures. A common remedy used in many language classrooms is to increase the amount of target language input the students are exposed to. Increased input is a valuable element in language learning but incidental learning of grammatical structures through exposure to input alone may take too much time and is therefore impractical in formal learning programmes. Teachers should not only seek to provide an input flood but also strive for a more careful and concerted presentation of target language input that would encourage learner processing of grammatical structures.

Perhaps the simplest and most obvious manner of encouraging learner processing with the target structure is by enhancing the structure in the input. This can be achieved by physically highlighting the grammatical structure in the input. Hulstijn (1995) suggests several possibilities such as highlighting the structure and presenting the structure in bold letters.

It is important for students to notice the structures in the input before any learning or acquisition can be achieved. The explicit teaching of grammatical structures has been discouraged because of the highly didactic nature of this technique. Furthermore, studies have failed to show any conclusive benefits of explicit and didactic teaching. It is also
thought to distract from the major purpose of language learning which is to be able to use the language in natural situations. Input enhancement can be viewed as a plausible and less controversial alternative in helping students notice grammatical structures. Input enhancement also allows structures to be emphasized without having to disrupt the connected discourse of texts presented in the classroom.

Materials that are used to teach grammar should therefore contain targeted structures which have been intentionally enhanced. Video materials involving conversations, for example, can have the targeted structures appearing on the screen whenever they are used in a sentence in the conversation. Text materials such as reading passages may have either brief explanations or exemplary sentences on the sidebar or simply the targeted structures enhanced.

**Meaningful input.** It is important for learners to engage the structure cognitively. While enhanced input may ensure noticing, it may not be sufficient for acquisition to take place. Enhancement assumes noticing but cannot guarantee processing and should therefore be considered as only part of pedagogical treatment. It is important to consider other aspects of the input presented in the classroom in order for processing to take place. One way to do so is to ensure meaningfulness of the input.

Meaningfulness of the input relates to its relevance to the learner. Input can be relevant to the learner in various ways. Input that is necessary for the completion of a task that the learner has to perform, for example, is relevant and therefore meaningful. Similarly, input that is relevant to the learner’s life in some way – either to his educational, occupational or cultural aims, for example – can also be considered meaningful. Perhaps another aspect of meaningfulness is that it is not nonsensical but carries some comprehensible content or message. In a previous study (Arshad, 1999), I also observed that there is a strong indication that understanding the input is a major requisite to processing target language structure and that instructional treatment focusing on the structure is not effective when the overall message content is not comprehended. These different nuances of meaningfulness discussed here indicate that it is important to understand the learner in terms of his or her general characteristics, background experience and schemata and to subsequently provide input that is in line with these characteristics.

**Contextualised input.** Many teachers are quite familiar with contextualisation via the use of connected discourse and reading texts. However, there is a tendency to assume that the job of contextualising the structure is completed when it is used in some form of context such as reading passage or dialogue. Teachers may need to provide contextualisation at an additional level by drawing the student’s attention to the context. For example, if a reading comprehension passage is used, teachers need to discuss the setting of the passage first before the students are required to respond to it. Language structures used can be easily affected by the context or genre of the passage used. A story, for example, could be told in many different tenses. Teachers, should prepare the students for the kind of tense that the students would encounter by first discussing the general context of the story.
Contextualisation is also important from another perspective. By contextualising the targeted structure, students are more likely to be able to see how the structure is used in natural situations outside the classroom. Transfer from the classroom context to natural situations is an important goal in language teaching and can only be encouraged through proper contextualisation.

Require student processing of target structure. In teaching grammar in ESL classrooms, it is important that the focus is on grammar comprehension instead of or in addition to message comprehension (Ellis, 1995, p. 94). Teachers must attempt to ensure that the targeted grammatical structure is processed and not lost in the student understanding the message content. There are various methods of ensuring that students are actively processing the grammar. One such method is to engage students in problem solving activities which require the processing of the grammatical structure as a prerequisite to solving the problem. A second can be error identification activities with additional task of providing reasons for a grammatical choice. Similarly, communication gap activities can also be manipulated so that the grammatical structure becomes central to the message that needs to be conveyed.

In addition to ensuring that students process the targeted grammatical structure, it is also important for teachers to be aware of the kind of cognitive demand required by the activity. The following is a common filling in the blanks activity found in many textbooks.

1. You _____ do as you are told
2. You ______ try to be punctual at all times
3. I _____ to go to the library to do some work
4. I do not think I _____ to answer this question
5. He _____ not pay tax as this item is duty-free
6. You _____ to apply for a visa to enter that country

The processing involved in completing this task may not require the students to focus on the target structure and understand how it should be used. Rather, the task can be completed by simply filling every blank that precedes a to with the word need and every other blank with the word should.

Teachers must also be aware that students also have certain tendencies when processing language input in order to develop effective classroom teaching materials. Whether these tendencies are innate or the result of years of social interaction is irrelevant in this discussion. Instead, what is important is for materials developers to consider all research findings that indicate how learners process the language. It has been suggested, for
example, that students will tend to gloss over inflections that carry meaning when they are redundant and when the same meaning is conveyed by a free morpheme. For example, the past tense *–ed* form will not be so quickly acquired when other indicators of past time such as *just now* or *yesterday* is present in the input. In such a situation, the *–ed* inflection would lack salience and the tendency would be for most learners to overlook the inflection in favour of the more obvious free morpheme that conveys the bears the meaning content. Many teachers will be familiar with incorrect student utterances such as *I walk to school just now*. By understanding processing strategies, it may be possible to develop materials that would be able to provide greater salience to targeted structures.

**Reflection.** Knowledge about grammar should be seen as a means toward successful communication rather than an ends in itself. In this respect, Rea Dickins and Woods (1988) believe that grammar tasks should promote “an awareness of grammatical choice” as well as “the capacity to make appropriate choices according to given contextual constraints” (p. 636). Gass (1991) stresses that grammar instruction should in fact be approached from a rather different perspective than merely just achieving accuracy. She argues that instruction should be a means of “alerting learners of the mismatch between their learner-language form and the target language form by focusing attention on those specific forms” (p. 140). She goes on to say that grammar instruction should act as a means by which change is triggered; it is not the end” (p. 140). Student personal reflection is an effective technique that can be used for this purpose.

The following activity taken from an internet web site teaches the difference between *borrow* and *lend*.

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**Borrow or Lend**

Click on the answer button to see the right answer.

When you need money, you can *[________]* from a bank, but be prepared to pay high interest. Banks don’t *[________]* money as a favor. They charge for the loan. Only friends may *[________]* money as a favor. If you *[________]* money from a friend, be prepared to return the favor one day. Your friend may also ask you to *[________]* him some money when he doesn’t want to *[________]* from a bank. On that occasion, you either *[________]* him money or you lose a friend.

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This quiz is part of the HTML-Only Self-Study Quizzes which is part of Activities for ESL Students, a project by The Internet TESL Journal.

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This activity is a simple and straightforward activity that can help learners understand the difference between the use of *borrow* and *lend*. However, the addition of a self reflection
element that prompts the learner to try to state when they would use *borrow* and *lend* could make the activity even more effective.

**Variety and eclecticism.** When we teach grammatical structure, we need to take the processing demand of the structure into account. Grammatical structures, however, differ one from the other in terms of the kind of processing required. Prepositions, for example, may require comprehending space in relation to three dimensional objects. Relative pronouns, on the other hand, require sensitivity to pronoun referents within the sentence. As such, different techniques in teaching may be especially effective for different structures. Some early research have indicated that learners may benefit from explicit rule teaching when the grammatical structure concerned is fairly simple and straightforward. Similarly, the age of the learner may also determine the type of approach that should be taken.

**Conclusion**

The teaching of the grammatical system cannot rely on incidental learning but must be a concerted effort on the part of both the teacher and the students. It requires that the teacher be aware of all potentially relevant factors including how students may react to a task. The various language learning and language acquisition theories are useful as a guide in teaching the language in the classroom. However, teachers are the ones who translate theory into practice. While some theories may have a more immediate pedagogical application, others require more careful implementation. There is unlikely to be one single methodology in teaching grammar. Materials used in the teaching of grammar have followed a traditional format including an emphasis on drill and practice. This paper has argued for materials to be imbued with several specific characteristics that can assist students in acquiring grammatical structure. Additionally, it should be noted that the effective use of materials in the teaching of grammar will depend on a close interaction between teacher and materials so that the learning potential of teaching materials can be maximized.

**References**


