

Second Language Acquisition Research and the Teaching of Grammar: A Case for an Inductive Approach



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One of the most common ways to present grammar is that in which the instructor announces the grammar structure to be presented, e.g., the imperfect tense, informs students how to spell imperfect forms in various regular and irregular verbs, and lists the rules of when this tense is to be used. This typifies deductive learning, which David Nunan describes as, "the process of learning in which one begins with rules and principles and then applies the rules to particular examples and instances" (1999, p. 305). The examples that then follow are not always in context, and students may or may not be asked to elicit any meaning from the structures being presented. Long (1991) has labeled this approach "focus on forms" (p. 44). By presenting the spelling, rules, and meaning, the teacher has limited the students' ability to discover this new structure on their own. In an inductive approach to presenting grammar, students would be asked to ascertain the function and use of the grammatical structures being presented as they decode them in order to understand the meaning of the text first. Nunan describes inductive learning as "the process by which the learner arrives at rules and principles by studying examples and instances" (1999, p. 309).

This paper examines the current research on teaching grammar and then revisits inductive teaching techniques that bridge some of the gaps between the more traditional approaches and the newer approaches espoused by second language acquisition (SLA) research. The intended audience is those teachers using traditional deductive grammar presentations.

Review of Literature

Research has indicated that in order for learners to acquire grammatical competence they must "have exposure to instances or exemplars of that particular language" (Schwartz, 1993, p. 148). They also need to "mak[e] sense of input data, and... com[e] up with a system which will account for that data and which will allow them to understand and produce structures of the L2" (White, 1989, p. 37). VanPatten (1996) calls this "meaning-

bearing input," that is, "language that the learner hears or sees that is used to communicate a message" (p. 5). He states, "without meaning-bearing input learners cannot build a mental representation of the grammar that must eventually underlie their use of language... meaning-bearing input is essential to second language acquisition" (p. 5). Yet he warns that "the definition of input is limited to meaning-bearing input," it "does not include instructors' explanations about how the second language works" (p. 6).

VanPatten's comments support the notion that comprehensible input increases students' ability to learn and speak the language. This is in keeping with Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982), which has been a major influence in language teaching. The main feature of that hypothesis is that the "acquirer [should be] focussed on the meaning and not the form of the message" (p. 21). Shrum and Glisan (2000) summarize the Input Hypothesis: "Acquisition occurs only when the learners receive optimal comprehensible input that is interesting [and] a little beyond their current level of competence ($i + 1$),... but understandable through their background knowledge, their use of context, and other extralinguistic cues such as gestures and intonation" (p.3). Krashen (1994) continues to promote his original hypothesis, using current research to back up his claims. He states: "Comprehensible input-based methods have been shown to be superior in beginning second language acquisition when tests are communicative and at least as effective as traditional methods when tests are form-based. [. . .] Beginning foreign and second language students in classes containing more comprehensible input outperformed comparison students in more grammar-oriented classes" (p. 54). This assertion is backed up by Herron and Tomasello (1992), whose research shows that a "guided induction" oral presentation of a grammar concept "is superior to a deductive one for the teaching of certain grammatical structures to beginning foreign language students" (p. 713).

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input can be used. Long (1991) has suggested that teachers use a "focus on form" approach instead of the aforementioned "focus on forms" approach. "Focus on form" can occur in two different settings: either the teacher "overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (pp. 45-46) or the teacher shifts the learners' attention to

"linguistic code features... [because of] perceived problems with comprehension or production" (Long and Robinson, 1998, p. 23). In order to comply with the pure definition of Long's "Focus on form," the texts would already be in use for other purposes; grammar would not be the focus of the activity, but would need to be addressed in order to communicate. In classrooms where interaction and activities are primarily communicative in nature, this would be easy to do. However, in many of the more traditional classes, grammar is a stated focus, with its communicative purpose supporting its use. In classes where grammar is the stated focus of an activity, there are more inductive, contextualized presentations in the form of comprehensible input that the teacher can incorporate that are better than deductive grammar explanations.

Comprehensible input can be in both written and spoken forms when used as a means of presenting and teaching grammar. However, the comprehensible input must be comprehensible; and the teacher must be aware that some listening comprehension texts used to teach grammar can be too difficult. VanPatten (1990) has researched the role of listening in the teaching of grammar and concludes that "only when input is easily understood can learners attend to form as part of the intake process" (p. 296). When an authentic text of any kind is used for "reading for the gist," it does not need to be adapted,

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because the teacher can adapt the tasks for the students, depending on their level. But if a written text is used for the purpose of presenting a particular grammar structure, the teacher may need to adapt it appropriately. Studies have been conducted in which reading texts are altered so that students' attention is focused on a particular grammar structure. This technique is called "typographical input enhancement" (White, 1998, p. 85). In these studies, a target structure was altered using italics, boldface, underlining, and/or enlargement. Students were expected to notice these structures and learn the rule implicitly, i.e., the teacher did not point out the altered words or ask them what they meant or why they were highlighted. These research studies show that "implicit noticing" is not as effective as "explicit instruction" and that, "clearly, learners needed more help than the input provided" (White, 1998, p. 102). In another study, participants read a text with a targeted grammar structure enhanced. The text was the story of Little Red Riding Hood. The preterit and imperfect verbs were underlined and printed in a different font than the rest of the text; the preterit verbs were shadowed and the imperfect verbs were bolded. After reading the story, the students were given a series of pictures about two people and asked to "narrate the sequence of pictures that you have been given, describing what happened to María and José" (Jourdenais et al., 1995, p. 194). The results of this study showed that the students who received the enhanced text produced more examples of the target structure, but that it could not be determined "whether most participants were aware of the enhancement" (Jourdenais et al., 1995, p. 206). The researchers conclude that the students had "been primed for the use" of the structure, and that "typographical modification can be used as an effective technique for enhancing salience of language features" (Jourdenais et al., 1995, p. 208).

Ellis (1997) describes the use of such techniques: "It is... perfectly possible to design grammar tasks that... focus [learners'] attention on specific structures and help them to understand the meaning(s) which these structures realize — to induce them to undertake a kind of form-function analysis of the structure, as this is exemplified in input that has been specially contrived to illustrate it" (p. 87). This approach, called intake facilitation, is

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supported by current theories of second language acquisition, which "suggest that it may be more effective to teach grammatical structures through carefully organizing the input than through trying to manipulate learners' output so that they produce the target structure" (1997, p. 88). Intake is defined as "the part of input that learners process;" that is, learners "possess internal processors that act on input and only part of the input makes its way into the developing system at any given time" (VanPatten, 1996, p. 7).

In order to implement intake facilitation, the teacher focuses the learners' attention on "a targeted structure in the input... and uses interpretation tasks [such as] asking questions that will lead the learners to pay careful attention to the structure" (Ellis, 1997, p. 88). Other types of interpretation tasks become evident when using an authentic document such as a train schedule, a menu, a brochure, or other information-bearing texts that occur naturally in the language and cultures being studied. The teacher can give tasks that require the student to understand the meaning of the words in order to successfully complete them, such as using a train schedule with a person's itinerary; the students need to understand the small print in the legend of the schedule to choose the correct train. Doughty (1991) has also found that "the meaning-oriented instruction directed at making sentences containing the target structure comprehensible seemed to work best because it led to both acquisition of the target structure and to better overall comprehension" (p. 451).

By asking questions of the class, and/or necessitating proof of comprehension through completion of tasks, the teacher requires the students to think aloud as they figure out the grammar rules. Ellis (1997) calls these questioning methods "consciousness-raising tasks" and states that both intake facilitation and consciousness-raising "complement each other and can be used together" (p. 162). Immediate feedback is important during a consciousness-raising task. If a student overgeneralizes or suggests an inaccurate rule, the teacher points to the other examples and allows students to work as a group to reanalyze their original assumptions. Encouraging over-generalization and providing immediate feedback have shown to produce superior performance from learners at the beginning level on certain grammar tasks in several different studies (Leeman et al., 1995, p. 220). By encouraging students to talk about the language, the teacher is facilitating their intake. The usefulness of these consciousness-raising tasks has been proven by other studies as well.

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Schmidt's (1995) noticing hypothesis states that "What learners notice in input is what becomes intake for learning" (p. 20). Basing his study on Schmidt's noticing hypothesis, Leow (1999) concluded that when students are asked to be aware of and analyze language structure it leads to hypothesis testing and morphological rule formation, more awareness contributes to more recognition and accurate production of the forms and that awareness does facilitate foreign language learning (p. 84). Swain (1998) has studied students' use of "metatalk," that is, when they use their first language to help decode and produce their L2. She states that metatalk, when used to "make meaning... may well serve the function of deepening the students' awareness of forms and rules... in a highly context-sensitive situation" (p. 69). Furthermore, "by encouraging metatalk among second and foreign language students, we may be helping students to make use of second language acquisition processes" (p. 69). Getys (2003) confirms the need to allow students to use their L1 in classes if necessary. She uses the National Standards Comparisons Goal (1996) as her basis, stating that Standard 4.1 "challenges conventional views on L1" because it "unambiguously point[s] to the significant role of L1 in L2 education" (p. 188). Using L1 to analyze and compare the two languages allows students to "gain awareness of the nature of language" (p. 196). This awareness helps them understand and use the L2 more efficiently. Ellis (1997) also allows the grammar-acquisition process to be performed in the learners' L1 if necessary (p. 162). It is pedagogically sound, therefore, to allow the use of English metatalk during this brief stage of the learning process for beginning language learners if the students do not have the necessary proficiency in the target language to analyze language structure and rules.

Research Conclusions

In summary, research in SLA suggests that the following four tenets should be applied to the teaching of grammar: (1) Learners acquire language better if they receive input that is comprehensible to

them. (2) Learners must pay attention to, or detect, grammatical features in order to begin to understand and use them. (3) The highlighted structure must be enhanced, with attention explicitly drawn to the enhanced structure. (4) Learners should be encouraged to verbalize their thinking process as they ascertain rules and functions of the targeted grammar structure.

Pedagogical Application

One means of incorporating second language acquisition theory and the research findings into language teaching involves the use of written texts in introducing grammatical concepts. Multiple readings of a given text yield new information designed to lead students to an understanding of a new grammatical concept. In all examples of this type of grammar presentation, the teacher and students work through the text, the teacher asks the students to state what the targeted form does, how it is spelled or how it works, and then to ascertain the rule, which the teacher then writes. The targeted form has been identified, explicitly taught, and the rule given. Instead of passively receiving this information, however, students have been involved in the entire process. They have used their critical thinking skills to discover the meaning and rule. All four tenets of maximizing grammar learning have been addressed. The text is contextualized and the students have to understand the meaning in order to decode the grammar structure. They notice the structure as the teacher leads them from what they understood to asking them how they understood it. They must find the word(s) that gave them the meaning and pay attention to how that word communicated that meaning. As the students identify the word/form and the teacher underlines or circles it, the structure is enhanced. The learners are aware of their thinking process by thinking aloud and negotiating possible rules with the teacher. All aspects of this approach fit Ellis' (1997) "intake facilitation" and "consciousness-raising task" methods for teaching grammar. It fits the intake facilitation method in that the target structure is used in a meaning-bearing context, students need to comprehend the meaning in order to access the grammar structure, and, as the students themselves identify the target structure, those words are then enhanced. It fits the consciousness-raising task protocols in that students are asked to "identify incidences of a specific feature in the data" and "provide the rule" (Ellis, 1997, p. 162).

For the first reading, no words are highlighted or enhanced. The text is presented in a context that fits with the unit or themes in the book, such as a continuing story with the same characters, a conversation/dialogue that is from the chapter being studied, an advertisement that fits the cul-

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tural theme of the unit, a menu, a train schedule, or an authentic passage from newspapers or brochures from the target culture that contains information or examples of topics from the book. The text should not be separate from the context of the course. The teacher reads the text aloud, then either assigns tasks for the students to complete, or asks them general comprehension questions, such as "What is this text about?" Students volunteer what parts of the main idea and/or other information they have understood. Either the teacher confirms that they are correct, or, if they have misunderstood, points to an explicit part of the text to show a misreading, merely asking, "Are you sure? What about this?" If the students are not using the targeted structure to ascertain the main idea, the teacher can guide them to notice it by asking specific questions such as, "What does this mean?" As students prove comprehension of the main idea of the context, which provides an initial focus on meaning, the teacher asks how they determined the meaning. The students state the word, verb, or phrase that gave them the information. As they work through the important ideas and their supporting structures, the teacher underlines or circles the forms of the targeted grammar structure that were mentioned by students. Once the general meaning has been established, the teacher then points to the target structure and asks the students to identify what it means again. The class as a whole, with the teacher as guide, works through the use of the structure and any different forms, depending on the structure (e.g., adjective agreement, conjugations, antecedent agreement, etc.). Authentic texts are best for this type of grammar presentation, but textbook-generated or teacher-created texts are better than nothing at all.

The two sample texts below are not authentic. They would be used by a teacher to introduce or continue a storyline of characters. These texts are stilted and overly simplistic; however, for teachers who have been explicitly explaining grammar struc-

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tures in English, this is an easy way to begin incorporating more meaning-based, contextualized examples of the target structure being presented. Teachers can quickly move on to authentic texts once they have become familiar with the procedure. In an effort to avoid copyright complications and show teachers that this is not an overwhelming, time-consuming way to present grammar, the following teacher-created conversations are shown below. They are in Spanish and French respectively, and provide examples of the types of texts a teacher could use without having to search for authentic documents that would be appropriate for this type of presentation.

Example 1

José y Ana se hablan de sus gustos

José and Ana are talking about things they like.

J: Me gustan las películas. ¿Y tú?

I like movies. And you?

A: Me gustan las películas de aventura.

¿Te gusta el arte?

I like adventure movies. Do you like art?

J: Sí, me gusta el arte. ¿Te gusta la música?

Yes, I like art. Do you like music?

A: Sí, me gusta la música rock.

Yes, I like rock music.

J: Me gusta la música rock, también.

I like rock music, too.

A: ¿Te gustan los grupos N'Sinc y Backstreet Boys?

Do you like the groups N'Sinc and Backstreet Boys?

Example 2

Pierre parle avec Christophe

Pierre is talking with Christophe

P: Je suis sûr que Marie sort avec un autre homme.

I'm sure that Marie is going out with another man.

C: Je ne suis pas sûr que Marie sorte avec un autre homme.

I'm not sure that Marie is going out with another man

P: Est-ce que tu crois qu'elle puisse m'aimer encore?

Do you believe that she can still love me?

C: Non. Je ne crois pas qu'elle puisse t'aimer encore.

No, I don't believe that she can still love you.

- P: Je crois qu'elle peut m'aimer encore.
I believe that she can still love me.
- C: Il est certain que tu es fou!
It is certain that you are crazy!
- P: Non. Il n'est pas certain que je sois fou!
No, it is not certain that I am crazy!

In Example 1, the only unfamiliar words are the structures for *gustar*. The cognates and the context will enable the students to understand quite easily what is going on, especially when the chapter's previously-established theme is talking about one's likes and dislikes. When a student says that Jose likes movies, the teacher then asks where in the text he/she saw that, and the student responds with the *gustar* expression. The teacher then works through all the uses, coaching students to state that the spelling changes go with the plural/singular of the nouns, not the subject of the sentence. This is proven by the contrasting use of *te gusta* and *me gusta*; the difference is in the noun, since both *me* and *te* can call for either *gusta* or *gustan*. In example 2, students already know the indicative form of the verbs; what is new is the subjunctive mood. By contrasting the use of subjunctive and indicative, the teacher requires students to find out why (and when) each mood is used.

Questions about this type of Inductive Approach

There are several potential controversial aspects of this type of an inductive approach. One is that there may be some English, or L1, use for the first few minutes. The think-aloud protocol is not always conducted in the target language, with the exception of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. The use of L1 may be necessary, however, because students need to learn how to analyze language, and in the lower levels they may not have the necessary proficiency to do this in the target language.

Another possibly controversial aspect of this approach is the choice of texts. The input used to present grammar must be easily understood, with most words familiar to the students except the new grammar structure. They use the context and meaning of the rest of the text to decipher the

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meaning and then the rules of the structure. Most authentic texts, however, contain words not familiar to students; thus, they would have to decode more than just the targeted structure and could become frustrated. Assuming that a teacher finds an appropriate authentic text, he/she may need to adapt it for the purposes of the guided inductive presentation, and it would therefore no longer be completely authentic. While adapted texts, textbook-generated texts, and teacher-created texts are not authentic and contain unnatural discourse, the purpose of the text at this point in the lesson is to use the meaning of the words and sentences to understand the function and use of the grammar concept. Once the grammar concept has been identified, understood, and decoded by the students, authentic texts and natural discourse can be provided for the remainder of the lesson. To avoid non-native like readings that occur with very simple texts such as those above, teachers can use texts from their textbook, a test bank, or other published instructional materials. It is easier to use texts already published, and it lessens the chance of inaccuracies or inauthentic language use. If there is a continuing storyline with characters in the textbook, the advantage in using these texts is that students are familiar with the content, and they can easily attend to the meaning of the structure. These texts, when used as part of the chapter theme or on-going storyline with known characters, can serve as the source of information in the story, and can then lead to the next set of practice activities, i.e. students must understand the content of the text in order to successfully complete other activities. The content of the texts adds to the overall knowledge, or “text-based reality” of the class. This enables the teacher to use them as meaning-bearing as well as comprehensible input, which fits Long's definition of focus on form: “[it] entails a prerequisite engagement in meaning before attention to linguistic features can be expected to be effective” (Doughty and Williams, 1998, p. 3).

Conclusion

Students in all language classes at all levels need to have grammar presented to them in context, where meaning and communication of information are the primary purposes for reading the text. Those students who are in classes that are primarily communicative in nature will need to have authentic texts used for this type of inductive grammar presentation; they are better prepared for the extra, unknown elements found in natural discourse. Students who are accustomed to deductive, non-contextualized grammar presentations, however, will need the adapted texts or teacher-created texts as a way to begin moving toward more meaning-based, inductive grammar presentations and

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eventually the authentic, natural discourse that will showcase the grammar being presented. The technique for presenting grammar described here is one suggestion that can be readily used in most lower-level language classes. For teachers who wish to incorporate recent research findings in second language acquisition, yet are not sure how to start, the examples and technique presented here may prove useful. Any fears of inauthenticity and/or non-native discourse can be overcome by increasing the amount of target-language input and authentic materials in the other activities and exercises in class. While the examples and technique above do not fit every idea presented in every research study, they do offer a beginning approach, a manageable time-commitment, and an easily adaptive, student-centered tool for incorporating theory and practice. This particular inductive approach also incorporates research findings, implements the Comparison standard (National Standards, 1996), promotes critical thinking, and allows the teacher to provide a solid foundation in the structures, rules, and use of the language.

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