

Reflections on Grammar Instruction in the Preparation of TAs and Part-time Instructors

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Abstract

How to teach grammar remains a difficult issue not only in the L2 classroom but also in the preparation of future language educators. This paper examines the history of language teacher preparation as a starting point to frame a discussion of how to best educate novice and adjunct instructors about grammar instruction in the classroom. Recommendations include the use of input enhancement techniques, inductive grammar, and reflective teaching techniques, such as dialogue journals.

Need for Increased Preparation of TAs and Part-time Language Instructors

Huge increases in the numbers of undergraduate students without an accompanying increase in instructional resources, or in many cases with shrinking resources, have led to a dependence on teaching assistants (TAs) and increased use of part-time, adjunct, or temporary faculty to teach beginning and intermediate language classes (Klapper, 2000) at the post-secondary level. According to the U.S. Department of Education

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(2005), contingent faculty comprised 30.2% of the teaching faculty at U.S. degree-granting institutions in 1975, 36.4% in 1989, and 48% in 2005, while the full-time tenured faculty has shrunk from 36.5% to 33.1% to 21.8% in respective years.

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The use of part-time instructors and teaching assistants will likely increase as universities are currently looking to cut millions from their budgets. Moreover, according to David Shulenburg of the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Institutions (2008), universities are going to be reluctant to hire full-time faculty until they are reasonably certain they will have secure funding — something that is not likely in today’s economy. While TAs may be more prevalent at the larger Research I institutions, the use of part-time faculty is essential for the survival of many small or mid-sized universities with limited graduate programs or with no graduate programs.

Some larger Research I institutions may have extensive TA training programs purposely built into their graduate curriculum to enhance students’ professional development. This model, unfortunately, is not always the norm. Sadly, dependence on TAs and part-time or adjunct instructors in higher education, in general, and in foreign languages, in particular, is considered by many to be a problem. In fact, the Modern Language Association (MLA) regularly calls on departments of English and foreign languages to halt their exploitation of the underemployed and drastically reduce their reliance on contingent faculty for course coverage. Indeed, according to the MLA Commission on Professional Employment’s Final Report (2000), the poor working conditions of contingent faculty “can have a serious impact on the quality of classroom instruction and also on crucial institutional responsibilities like advising and mentoring students, committee work, and curriculum development” (p.3).

But why might a dependence on TAs and adjunct faculty for course coverage, especially for beginning and intermediate language courses, be a problem? First, the relatively short duration of TA and adjunct contracts often leads to high turnover, creating a corps of instructional staff that is in a perpetually novice state. Second, consider how decisions regarding the hiring of part-time faculty are generally made. They are often done at the last minute in order to fill unanticipated vacancies. Choices for both part-time faculty and TAs are often based on a curriculum vitae, transcripts, letters of recommendation, and perhaps an interview, but rarely are classroom demonstrations required, especially when decisions are made over the summer months (Robin, 2000). Third, parents and students alike often lament the fact that while they assume expensive university courses will be taught by experienced, well-published, full professors, students are instead often met by TAs with little or no real teaching experience. However, it is important to note that the contingent faculty members themselves are not necessarily the problem. According to the American Federation of Teachers (2008), the problem is that universities fail to provide adequate resources and support to them. For example, some universities with extensive TA training programs may have funding to pay graduate students to arrive on campus early so that they could participate in intensive 1-2 week training programs. Rarely, however, does this kind of funding also extend to adjunct or part-time instructors.¹ Sometimes part-

time instructors are encouraged to sit in on these training sessions with the new TAs, but because they do not have job security and typically also teach courses at other institutions, they may not have the time or the incentive to do so. Therefore, the lack of support may be viewed as twofold: (1) a lack of financial support and (2) an inability to provide incentives for part-time instructors to feel vested in the department's teaching mission.

A Brief History of TA Preparation

Let us look back and consider how TAs and part-time instructors have been prepared for the teaching experience (other than being professional students themselves). As early as 1955, an MLA Conference Report sounded the alarm concerning the minimal amount of teaching experience and training possessed by the majority of master's and doctoral-level candidates, and it recommended increased coursework in methodology, linguistics, and language. In 1963 the MLA polled PhD-granting departments in foreign languages and found that the average department offered no courses in language teaching, made no arrangements for class visitations, and provided no effective TA supervision (MLA, 1964). By 1970, an ADFL (Association of Departments of Foreign Languages) survey conducted by Hagiwara found that only 38% of departments offered pre-service orientations for TAs and a mere 25% required methods training. A 1979 survey by Nerenz, Herron, and Knop found that 91% of foreign language departments offered some form of TA training, which mainly consisted of course observations by a supervisor with follow-up discussions or course observations by a supervisor with follow-up written reports. In 1983, DiPietro, Lantoff, and LaBarca reported that the most commonly found examples of TA training were pre-service orientation, a college methods course, pre-service workshops, demonstration classes taught by a supervisor, weekly-group meetings, peer-teaching demonstrations, visits by a supervisor, supervisor conference with TA, and peer visitations. By 2000, Brandl found that a wide variety of individual and group training options had become common practice in American universities. Popular techniques included one or more of the following: classroom visitations by supervisors, end-of-course evaluations by students, self-evaluations, peer observations, videotapings, log reports, peer-teaching demonstrations, pre-service workshops, methods courses, and mentoring programs.

Current Trends toward a Commodification of Language Instruction

Clearly, great strides have been made, but are they enough? According to Siskin and Davis (2000), even with these advances the "overall impression is one of crisis" (9). Despite the progress made since the 1950s, many TA training programs are just that — training, rather than education. Freed and Bernhard (1992) argue that the training of TAs all too often proceeds in accordance with the "factory model" of education, treating TAs as technicians, rather than providing them with a theoretical grounding and encouraging them to become reflective practitioners.

The factory model characterization calls to mind what Guthrie (2000) refers to as the "commodification of foreign language instruction in the textbook industry, where publishers compete for the sale of integrated foreign language 'packages' that include

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grammar instruction, workbooks, instructor’s manuals, reading texts, writing exercises, culture modules, audio programs, CD-ROMs, websites, etc.” (21). Competition for the multi-section course market is fierce. Often textbook advertisements promote the fact that the program is so complete and well organized that it can be taught by an inexperienced TA (it practically teaches itself). Indeed, according to Tarone (2009), some teachers are proud to announce that they “teach the book,” as if “all you need to do is show up in class on time and do what the book says” (8). According to Guthrie (2000), it is clear that the “attractiveness of the multi-section market encourages the production of formulaic textbooks that, in turn, contribute to the difficulty of innovation at a fundamental level within language programs” (27). And short-term TA training techniques (one-week or even one-day pre-service workshops or the occasional observation or demonstration) make “the formulaic approach to teacher training that supplies TAs with a set repertoire of easily taught and easily applied teaching strategies” (Guthrie 2000, 28) almost necessary, thereby creating a vicious cycle.

A Need to Encourage Reflective Practice among TAs and Part-time Instructors

One way to combat the commodification of language teaching is to promote and encourage the practice of reflective teaching among TAs, part-time faculty, and even junior faculty members. According to Schön (1983) “when someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case” (68). These principles are consistent with constructivist models of TA preparation and teacher education that stress that teaching professionals should be reflective practitioners (Blythe, 1997; Jourdain, 2009; Kinginger, 1995). Reflective teaching practices provide “skills to examine [one’s] own teaching and to take responsibility for [one’s] own professional development, which needs to be based on a continual process of reflection, reassessment, and renewal” (Klapper, 2000, p. 149).

Promoting Reflection on Grammar

Regardless of the ways in which the various areas of language teaching are specified—reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills; interpersonal, interpretive, presentational modes; communication, cultures, comparisons, connections, and communities goals— each area merits greater attention in novice teacher preparation. However, we will focus our attention here solely on the methods for encouraging a reflective approach to the teaching of grammar. It is often the case in teaching grammar, perhaps more so than in teaching any other aspect of language, that novice teachers look first to their own experiences in learning grammar. Reference to past learning experiences is problematic in that, as Blythe notes, “Many foreign language teachers hold traditional beliefs about explicit grammar instruction that are no longer

supported by current research in linguistics and second language acquisition” (50). Wong and VanPatten (2003) present a clear example of how difficult it is to change grammar teaching practices by documenting the continued use in most textbooks of mechanical drills despite a large body of evidence that such drills are at best unnecessary and at worst an impediment to acquisition.

As part of their preparation and on-going professional development, TAs and adjunct faculty, indeed all language teachers, need to be challenged to examine their presuppositions about grammar teaching and grammar learning. Below we suggest three specific areas of focus to enhance the reflective practice of grammar instruction:

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input enhancement techniques, inductive grammar presentations, and student dialog journals. While these techniques may not be new to those who have gone through rigorous training programs, it is the authors’ experience that they remain unfamiliar to many part-time instructors and certainly to new TAs.

Reflecting on Input Enhancement Techniques

One indisputable point from second language acquisition (SLA) research is that input is crucial for language acquisition. While input may not be a sufficient condition for SLA in many contexts, there is no debate that it is necessary (Gass, 1997). In SLA circles, there is agreement that effective L2 instruction must minimally include the following components: (1) an abundance of L2 input, (2) the means to make form-meaning connections, and (3) opportunities to produce meaningful output (Wong, 2009).

A concept that many novice instructors grapple with is in fact the crucial role that input plays in SLA. Because many TAs’ own language learning experience probably involved a steady diet of rule learning followed by drill practice² (see Wong & VanPatten, 2003, for a detailed discussion on the inefficacy of drills), the idea that language acquisition begins with input is often a foreign and sometimes unsettling concept to the novice instructor. It is important that from the beginning of their training, TAs understand that input, defined as “language that L2 learners are exposed to in a communicative context” (VanPatten & Benati, 2009), is an essential ingredient of SLA and that acquisition will not happen if their students do not have opportunities to receive comprehensible input. (A discussion of the role of input in SLA written for the novice instructor can be found in Lee & VanPatten, 2003; VanPatten, 2003; and Wong, 2005). Furthermore, an appreciation of the importance of input in SLA also helps them understand why it is important that the target language be used as often as possible in the L2 classroom. When instructors understand the role that input plays in SLA, they will also see how even what may seem like trivial comments to students such as “Open your books to page 12” or “Please close the door” in the L2 are helping students along the path of acquisition. Therefore, helping instructors reflect on the role

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that input plays in SLA also helps them reflect on, critique, and make sense of different teaching practices.

Once novice instructors understand that acquisition begins with input, they also need to learn how to work with input and use it in L2 instruction. As pointed out by many, while input is a necessary ingredient of SLA, mere exposure to the target language may not be sufficient in many learning contexts (e.g., Polio, 2007). In some cases, something needs to be done with the input to help learners attend to it so that they can make the necessary form-meaning connections. This position sparked the creation of many techniques to encourage learners to pay attention to input. A term coined by Sharwood Smith (1981, 1991), *input enhancement*, as these techniques are often called, is grounded in the idea that work with formal properties of language for the purposes of acquisition is best done if learner attention is focused on both form and meaning, and the learner is actively processing input (Wong, 2009). Two examples of simple input enhancement techniques include textual enhancement and structured input activities.

Textual enhancement. One of the most basic types of input enhancement techniques that novice instructors can incorporate into their teaching and materials is textual enhancement. Textual enhancement involves manipulating the typographical features of meaningful written input with **bold facing**, underlining, *italicizing*, or color coding so that the perceptual salience of certain grammatical structures is increased. For example, White (1998) found that by typographically enhancing target grammatical structures (third-person possessives) for francophone learners of English, the saliency of the structures was increased “enough to attract attention to the target forms without distracting [learners] as they read” (103) and resulted in higher test scores. Leow (2001) found that the degree of salience and resulting depth of processing are important predictors of subsequent L2 performance, with more robust enhancements having the greatest impact. In many technologically enhanced textbook programs today, textual enhancement of target structures can be done with a few keystrokes, rather than with pens, markers, and photocopy machines. Furthermore, the choice of which grammatical structure to highlight, as well as when, and how, can still be left to the discretion of the instructor.

Structured input activities. A technique that has been documented to be effective in helping learners process grammatical form correctly is the use of *structured input* (SI) activities (Benati & Lee, 2008; VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993). Based on VanPatten’s model of input processing (VanPatten, 2004), which describes the strategies that L2 learners use to process input, SI activities require that learners attend to and process target grammatical structures in order to interpret the meaning of input. For example, because learners have a tendency to rely on lexical items to interpret meaning, if the goal is for ESL students to learn simple past tense forms, an SI activity would structure the input in such a way so that learners must rely solely on the verb forms to interpret temporal reference. Notice in the example below that adverbs of time have been separated from the verbs so that the learner must rely on the verbs to determine the temporal reference of each sentence.

Sample Structured Input Activity

You will hear sentences that describe activities that Claude did yesterday or activities that he will do tomorrow. Listen carefully to the verbs in order to determine whether the action happened yesterday or will happen tomorrow.

1. a. yesterday b. tomorrow
2. a. yesterday b. tomorrow
3. a. yesterday b. tomorrow

Teacher's Script:

Claude...

...*talked* to his mother.

...*walked* his dog in the park.

...*will call* his aunt Freida.

Because SI activities are not part of an approach or method, an instructor may incorporate these activities into any curriculum. If instructors want to enhance the quality and amount of input in the classroom or if they notice that their learners are having difficulty with a particular form (whether the class is a content-based class or one that follows a grammatical syllabus), they could drop SI activities into their lesson to help students process the form better and move on with their lesson. (For detailed information about the creation of SI activities, see Lee & VanPatten, 2003 and Wong, 2005).

Textual enhancement and SI activities are just two examples of input enhancement techniques, but they represent good starting points to show TAs how they can maximize the provision of input and help learners focus on form in their classrooms.³

Reflections on Inductive Grammar Presentations

Part of the difficulty in affecting change in grammar teaching practices stems from a lack of exposure to alternatives. Many of our new TAs, for example, have experienced only explicit, deductive grammar presentations as part of their own language learning experiences. With deductive presentations, the teacher begins first by providing explicit grammatical information, sometimes in the target language, but often in English. Neither language of presentation, however, provides meaningful, target language input.⁴ By contrast, inductive presentations are input rich. In an inductive presentation, learners first receive a flood of input and they then work with that input meaningfully to discover underlying patterns and grammatical rules. For instructors who have known only deductive grammar presentations, we are faced with the challenge of helping them see that a teacher-formulated explanation of rules followed by activities designed to practice the rules is but one way of presenting grammar. By most accounts, deductive presentations also happen to be the least effective method for promoting acquisition (Haight, Herron & Cole, 2007; Herron & Tomasello, 1992; Shaffer, 1989; VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993).

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Presenting grammar in a novel way — inductively — involves a leap of faith that many instructors find difficult to make. The trouble starts with the terminology itself.

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If we want to expose TAs to differing methods of grammar presentation by having them read some of the relevant research, they must understand the terms “inductive” and “deductive,” yet these terms are not intuitively explanatory. Shaffer (1989) defines the inductive approach as one in which student attention is focused first on the contextualized grammatical structure, often through the use of a story (Adair-Hauck & Donato, 2002) or authentic text (Paesani, 2005); then they are invited (guided) to draw conclusions about the rules that govern the examples. Instructors may subsequently recap and provide meaningful language practice activities using the new forms. “Inductive” is thus used in the sense of “employing logical reasoning skills” in which it is the *students* who must reason out the grammatical rule by examining the specific examples provided. The complication in the terminology is that “to deduce” also means “to determine by logical reasoning,” though in the case of a deductive grammar presentation, it is the *instructor* who is providing the reasoned explanation, first stating the general rule then giving specific examples.

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A further complication in the literature on inductive and deductive grammar instruction is added by the introduction of the notions of “implicit” and “explicit” grammar explanations, referring to whether or not the grammatical rules are explicitly articulated, typically in metalinguistic terminology. While all deductive grammar presentations are considered explicit (Norris & Ortega, 2000), some researchers equate “inductive” with “implicit” (see for example Erlam, 2003) while others posit that inductive may also be “explicit” (Haight, Herron & Cole, 2007; Herron & Tomasello, 1992). By an “inductive explicit” approach, we mean that learners are given an inductive presentation of grammar (see for example, Paesani, 2005), but at some point during the lesson the grammar explanation or rules are clearly verbalized by the students and reiterated by the instructor if necessary. Lightbown and Spada (2006) as well as others have pointed out that adults like to have information neatly organized and may expect to receive explicit instruction. In fact, they may be unsatisfied if they do not receive some sort of explanation of grammatical rules (Ellis, 1994). For these adults, an inductive implicit method in which they never see explanations articulated may be unsettling. Therefore, we recommend, for TA and adjunct faculty development purposes, focusing primarily on explicit, inductive presentations in which learners are given opportunities to verbalize grammar explanations after they have had the chance to work inductively with the input.

Several examples of explicit, inductive grammar presentations exist in the literature (Adair-Hauck & Donato, 2002; Paesani, 2005), and a classroom demonstration of the technique can be found in the on-line Annenberg Foundation *Teaching Foreign Languages K-12: A Library of Classroom Practices Series* (2003), segment #17 “Comparing Communities,” in which Ghislaine Tulou presents the French conditional tense inductively. These resources may be used by course supervisors to begin a discussion with TAs, adjuncts, lecturers, and other novice instructors on the nature of inductive presentations, how they are created and structured, and thus how they differ from deductive presentations. By initiating this discussion, we are putting into action

principles of constructivist pedagogy as outlined by Fosnot & Perry (2005). We are inviting our teaching colleagues and TAs to reflect on grammar teaching practices. This reflection may cause puzzlement or lead to a state of intellectual disequilibrium, for it requires unlearning, relearning, or reorganization of preconceived notions of grammar instruction.

Dialogue Journals: A Tool for Encouraging Reflective Practice with a Focus on Form

Student dialogue journals serve as another means of cultivating a reflective and flexible practice with a focus on form among TAs and part-time faculty who might otherwise be trapped in a formulaic textbook program. Dialogue journals can be a means to develop interpersonal communication; a way to provide individualized form-focused instruction; a way to assist students in becoming self-directed learners, and a tool for TAs, adjuncts, and novice teachers to engage in open, reflective, and flexible practice. Just as the TA should not be reduced to an automaton who relies blindly and exclusively on the textbook package, nor should the student be a passive recipient of knowledge. According to Bell (2009), by adapting a traditional meaning-focused dialogue journal to include a focus on form and focusing on one specific grammatical feature at a time while simultaneously attending to meaning, teachers can begin to involve learners in taking an active role in language learning as they provide grammar instruction (87-88).

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Dialogue journals have traditionally been used as a means of creating a continuous line of communication between teachers and students, all the while encouraging creative writing in the target language. Throughout a course, students dialogue back and forth with the teacher in writing in the target language. The topics of dialogue journals are not determined by the teacher, but rather are selected by the students on the basis of their own interests (Staton, 1988). The language teacher, however, can adjust the dialogue journal so that the open forum for meaningful communication can also be a way of focusing student attention on grammatical forms. For example, while students are composing dialogue journal entries on self-selected writing topics, they can be encouraged to go back over the entry and underline every instance in which a targeted grammatical feature was used, such as subject-verb agreement, a given tense, word order, or adjective agreement. According to Bell (2009), the target feature can be student-selected or suggested by the instructor. The instructor (TA or adjunct) can then provide both written feedback on content as an interested interlocutor as well as feedback on the target structure.

Dialogue journals likewise could be used as part of the TA preparation curriculum in order to provide an open and continuous avenue for communication between course supervisors and TAs. Course supervisors could encourage TAs to write about their teaching experiences on a daily or weekly basis as a further means of promoting reflection. These reflections might be guided by specific, thought-provoking questions such as “Should teachers use materials that expose students to only those language

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structures they have already been taught?" (Lightbown & Spada, 2006), which would prompt discussions on grammar instruction. Even in the case of unstructured reflections, however, the topic of grammar teaching frequently comes to the forefront and could be addressed in feedback to the instructors.

Conclusion

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Looking back at the history of teacher preparation, and the training of university TAs, we see that although progress has been made in the amount and quality of TA and adjunct faculty preparation, clearly much more is needed. Ideally, if we had greater resources and funding, TAs and adjuncts would be encouraged to attend conferences and workshops. It is regrettable that departments rarely have the funds to require or encourage adjunct and TA professional development. Therefore it is important that reflective practices be encouraged and that within departments discussions of teaching practices take place regularly. Some low- or no-cost avenues for facilitating continued pedagogical dialogue can include mentoring (faculty-TA, or senior TA- junior TA), regular brown bag conversation groups, and the use of teaching journals as a means of communication between course supervisors and adjuncts, lecturers, TAs. Because of the difficulties inherent in changing grammar teaching practices in particular, we are proposing a renewed focus on this specific area of teaching.

In this paper we have highlighted three avenues that can encourage the novice educator to reexamine traditional beliefs, or *idées reçues*, about presenting grammar to students: input enhancement techniques, inductive grammar presentations, and dialogue journals. It is our hope that these topics may serve as a point of departure not only for an examination of the treatment of grammar among novice language educators but also as a means of encouraging continued reflection and professional development for all language instructors.

Notes

1. The Ohio State University is such an example. The Foreign Language Center at OSU pays incoming TAs a small salary to participate in an intensive two week workshop before classes start to prepare them for teaching. Faculty members who teach this workshop are also paid an honorarium. Part-time faculty are encouraged to attend this workshop, but they are not paid to do so.
2. This assumption is based on the numerous foreign language textbooks on the market that begin grammar lessons with grammar explanations followed by drills. This finding was most recently echoed by Katz and Blythe (2007): "Equally problematic are the exercises following modern textbook grammar explanations [...]. Mechanical exercises, such as drills or fill-in-the-blank type activities, are not uncommon, despite a general consensus among researchers that such tasks are ineffective [...]" (13).
3. See Wong (2005) for discussion and examples of additional input enhancement techniques.
4. Even grammatical explanations given in the target language are not to be considered "comprehensible input" as it is commonly defined. In Lee and VanPatten (2003), we find the following definition of "input": "Input is *the language learners hear that is meant to convey a message*...input is not explanation about language" (p. 16).

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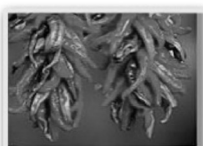
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