



# What's the Future for Grammar in the Classroom?



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## This talk

1. Grammar approaches and methodologies in the past
2. More recent approaches and methodologies
3. Conclusions and hopes for the future
4. P.S. A practical tip



## 1. Grammar approaches and methodologies in the past



## Grammar-translation

Language is a framework of grammar, with words inserted to make meanings

If we teach the grammatical structures and the words, our students will learn the language.

An emphasis on the written language; use of translation.



## My own experience in school: learning French

French through grammar-translation

What happened when I went to France?

At first: couldn't understand

Later ...



## Audio-lingualism

'Language is a set of habits'

Based on behaviorism: stimulus leading to automatic response

So lots of: mimicry, learning by heart, drills, repetition



## Drills

Teacher : I go to school. He?  
Students : He goes to school.  
Teacher : They?  
Students : They go to school.



## Audio-lingualism

Emphasis on the spoken language  
But still: the basis is grammar (grammatical  
'patterns')  
An emphasis on getting it right ✓

## My own experience as a novice teacher

All textbooks based on drills,  
dialogues etc.  
A bit boring?  
Little attention to vocabulary  
No L1



## The communicative approach

'Language is (for) communication'  
Widdowson (1978) *Teaching language as  
communication*  
So: teach learners to understand and make  
meanings  
Grammar much less important

## My own experience as a mature teacher, teacher trainer

Excitement, the classroom became much more fun.  
But implementation sometimes difficult for teachers, learners  
and materials writers.  
Testing?

## My own experience as a writer

1981 Discussions that work:  
task-centred fluency practice

1984 Teaching listening  
comprehension

1988 Grammar practice  
activities



## 2. More recent approaches and methodologies



## Task-based language teaching (TBLT)

Syllabus based on communicative tasks (Ellis et al., 2020)

No grammatical syllabus

A lot of collaborative work

Learning from exposure and interaction, rather than explicit teaching.

Emphasis on student autonomy, the teacher as facilitator.

## So where does grammar come in?

Just 'picked up' through plenty of comprehensible input?

Krashen: Yes.

Recent research indicates this may not always work so well.

## The research: negative evidence

Those who learned English as a second language without instruction tend to retain grammatical errors.

e.g. 'Wes' study (Schmidt, 1983); Canadian immersion studies (Swain, 2000)

## The research: positive evidence

Learners who have some explicit grammar teaching tend to learn the grammar better. (Norris & Ortega, 2001; Akakura (2012)

## Focus on Form

Integrating some explicit grammar work into a predominantly communicative process

Reactive 'Focus on Form' contrasted with pro-active 'Focus on Forms' (Long & Robinson, 1998)

## Focus on form means...

... temporarily focusing on a grammatical feature that has come up during the communicative task

e.g.

- a learner error
- a learner question
- a salient, or repeated, grammatical feature in a text

## Focus on FormS

Pro-active teaching of grammatical features

Based on a grammatical syllabus systematically covered

Often identified with traditional 'PPP'

(presentation-practice-production)

## Which is better?

Research gives no clear answer: (Valeo & Spada, 2016; Spada et al., 2014)

Probably a place for both.

## Practice

Should we be doing grammar practice exercises/drills?

Some say they don't help very much (Krashen, 1982, Ellis, 2001)

Some say they help substantially (Suzuki et al., 2019)

## Trends

Last decade of last century, first decade of this:

Against PPP, in favor of task-based + focus on form.

Some evidence that there's a swing back (Criado, R., 2013, Anderson, 2017).

## Criado, 2013

'... what seems to be an eclectic and fair approach towards PPP is to regard it as one out of the many pedagogical techniques that teachers can draw on in their teaching kits to teach language.' (p.112)



### 3. Conclusions and hopes for the future

## 'Mix and match': but principled

## Principles

Effective learning, based on

- Research insights (inform, but do not determine, methodology) +
- My/your own classroom experience +
- Modifications to fit a specific context

## Application 1: TBLT

- The research literature: on the whole in favor
  - My experience: EAP ✓✓; School teaching ??
  - Context: local culture of learning
  - Pedagogical factors: group work?
- **A task-based component, but not TBLT alone**

## Application 2: Focus on form/Focus on FormS

- Research: Allows for both
  - Experience: Mostly traditional focus on formS
  - Materials: A pro-active grammatical syllabus in most textbooks
- **Good grammar teaching requires both.**

## Application 3: Practice exercises

- **Research:** Practice exercises contribute to learning
- **Experience:** Practice helps. But problem of transference.
- **Pedagogical factors:** Interest and motivation
- So need for **interesting, meaningful** grammar practice activities.



## P.S. A practical tip Adapting textbook grammar exercises

## Conventional grammar exercises

*Insert the correct past form*

She \_\_\_\_\_ early. (leave)

He \_\_\_\_\_ the cake. (make)

I \_\_\_\_\_ there for six hours. (sit)

The man \_\_\_\_\_ the book. (read)

## Adding meaning and interest 1

She \_\_\_\_\_ early. (leave)

He \_\_\_\_\_ the cake. (make)

I \_\_\_\_\_ there for six hours. (sit)

The man \_\_\_\_\_ the book. (read)

She left \_\_\_\_\_

He made \_\_\_\_\_

I sat there \_\_\_\_\_

The man read \_\_\_\_\_

## Adding meaning and interest 2

Gateway to the World B1+

She \_\_\_\_\_ early. (leave)

He \_\_\_\_\_ the cake. (make)

I \_\_\_\_\_ there for six hours. (sit)

The man \_\_\_\_\_ the book. (read)

*Adverbs of frequency*

*Are these sentences correct? If not, correct them!*

1. I'm not usually going to school by bus
2. You're always interrupting me. I don't like it.
3. My friends and I play sometimes football after school.
4. Adam often is late
5. Mia always does her homework before dinner
6. My friend is a vegetarian. Never he eats meat

## First time: conventionally

1. I ~~am not usually going~~ don't usually go to school by bus
2. You're always ~~interrupting me~~. I don't like it.
3. My friends and I ~~play sometimes~~ sometimes play football after school.
4. Adam ~~often is~~ is often late
5. Mia always does her homework before dinner
6. My friend is a vegetarian. ~~Never he~~ He never eats meat

1. I don't usually go to school by bus
2. You're always interrupting me. I don't like it.
3. My friends and I sometimes play football after school.
4. Adam is often late
5. Mia always does her homework before dinner
6. My friend is a vegetarian. He never eats meat

## Adding meaning and interest

1. I don't usually ~~go to school by bus~~
2. You're always ~~interrupting me~~. I don't like it.
3. My friends and I sometimes ~~play football after school~~.
4. Adam is often ~~late~~
5. Mia always ~~does her homework before dinner~~
6. My friend is ~~a vegetarian~~. He never ~~eats meat~~

1. I don't usually ...
2. You're always ...
3. My friends and I sometimes ...
4. Adam is often ...
5. Mia always ...
6. My friend is ... He never ...



Thank you for your  
attention!

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