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Teaching Grammar

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KEY QUESTIONS

- What is grammar?
- How is grammar learned?
- How is it taught?

EXPERIENCE

The following brief example is an episode from an imagined classroom, where English is being taught as a foreign language (EFL) to elementary school students, who are beginning their study of English. The teacher has introduced the grammatical topic of question formation. She explains that *yes-no* questions are made in English by inverting the subject of a sentence with the operator in the sentence. In this initial lesson, she defines the operator as some form of the verb *be*, here *are*. She has provided the class with some examples, and she now gives them practice in forming *yes-no* questions. She makes a statement and tells the students to transform it into a question.

Teacher: We are studying English. Class?

Students: Are we studying English?

Teacher: Yes, we are. We are using a new book.

Students: Are we using a new book?

Teacher: No, we aren't. We are making questions.

Students: Are we making questions?

This drill goes on for a few more turns. Later in the morning, a girl turns to the teacher and asks:

We are going outside for recess?

The teacher silently takes note of the student's failure to invert the subject with the operator and vows to drill the students more the next class.

In this brief example, we can find answers to all three key questions posed at the beginning of the chapter. For this teacher, and for many others, grammar is about the form of the language—here, the form being the word sequence in statements and questions. Learning is expected to take place as a result of sufficient practice, but as we see, what has just been practiced immediately is rarely taken up by students. The lesson plan consisted of two phases. During the presentation phase of the grammar lesson, the formation of *yes-no* questions was introduced, and during the practice phase, question formation was practiced in a drill.

I return to this example several times in this chapter as we more fully examine answers to the three questions.

WHAT IS GRAMMAR?

Some semblance of the lesson I have just described has been widely used in language classrooms for many years. Teaching grammar in this way is indeed a time-honored practice. However, in this chapter, I invite readers to entertain a richer and, I think, more accurate conception of grammar.

In the example lesson, grammar was regarded as form. Grammar *is* about the form of the language, but it is also used to make meaning. Significantly, skilled users of grammar not only express themselves accurately and meaningfully but also use their knowledge of grammar to present themselves to others in the way that they

wish to be seen. Of course, there are conventional patterns in language, and they need to be learned, but there is a great deal of choice to be made in the way that language users adapt and deploy the patterns. Moreover, if teachers learn to see grammar for the rich system that it is, their attitude gets conveyed to their students; and in turn, the students come to see that grammar matters and that knowledge of it can be empowering. Using language grammatically is not about conforming to some arbitrary standard.

Another point of departure from the view of grammar depicted in the lesson is that grammar is not a static system of rules; grammar is a dynamic system. To realize it as a dynamic system, students have to experience lessons in which grammar is used in meaningful and psychologically authentic ways. Drills have a function, but mechanical drills rob students of the experience of using the system to negotiate their own identities and to express what they want to say. If all they have is a steady diet of mechanical drills, then they are often at a loss when they are in a situation that calls for them to communicate. They cannot activate the forms that are appropriate for the context.

It is also important to recognize that we are teaching students as we are teaching grammar. And, for this reason, we want to create conditions of use in the classroom in which the affordances for learning are there for all students—where all students have an opportunity to learn. We want them to be free to explore the language for their own purposes, but it is also our job to guide our students to focus their attention on the learning challenge and to help them to move beyond it.

One of the reasons that grammar is misunderstood is that the term *grammar* is ambiguous. Indeed, definitions of grammar abound—and therefore contribute to a great deal of misunderstanding. Many people associate grammar with what linguists call prescriptive grammar, the way that a language “ought to” be used. Prescriptive grammars contribute to a general unease—even proficient users of a language fear making mistakes, such as using *me* instead of *I* or choosing *who* when they should have chosen *whom*. Prescriptive grammar has a role in language teaching, especially for those who need to use academic language, but prescriptive grammar is not the central focus of this chapter. Instead, I concentrate here more on descriptive grammar, a description of

how speakers of a language actually use the language, even when it does not conform to what prescriptive grammars prescribe and proscribe. For instance, speakers might say either *It is I* or *It is me*. Prescriptive grammarians would frown on the use of *me*, but its use seems natural to many English speakers. The truth is that there is always variation in language usage.

Even if we restrict our treatment of grammar to descriptive grammar, the term grammar still requires further definition. As I have just written, most linguists would agree it has to do with the form of the language, with using and understanding the language accurately. However, what exactly constitutes a form is not entirely clear. For instance, most grammarians would lay claim to inflectional morphemes, such as verb tense markers (e.g., *-ed* on verbs for past tense in English) and plural markers (*-s* for the plural of many nouns). In addition, they would include common syntactic structures, such as negatives and questions.

However, what the morphosyntax (i.e., the morphology and syntax) of traditional grammar overlooks are the thousands on thousands of patterns that make up a speaker’s knowledge of a language, such as *Can I come in? Did you have a good time? Have some more. I’m simply amazed* (Pawley & Syder, 1983). With the increased access to large corpora of language data that computers afford, it has become clear that grammatical structures and lexical items occur in a large number of regularly occurring patterns (Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 1998; Sinclair & Fox, 1990). These sequences are sometimes rather fixed, as in the phrase *by the way*. At other times, the sequences are more open, allowing some substitutions. For example, I can say *My house needs painting* or *Our washer needs fixing*, but there are really few other verbs besides *need* that fit the pattern [*need* VERB-*ing*]. To give another example, if the verb *insist* is used, either *on* or *that* is very likely to follow. The question to be answered is, should such sequences be considered part of grammar or are they more like complex lexical items? The answer is that they are somewhere in between (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). It is theorized that such language patterns emerge from language use (Bybee, 2006; Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2009). Through repeated use, they become “sedimented” as fixed or semi-fixed patterns (Hopper, 1998). Thus, one implication of corpus-based research is that teachers of

grammar should pay more attention to conventionalized lexicogrammatical constructions (word-based structures and patterns) while not ignoring traditional morphosyntactic structures (Lewis, 1997). These days, many linguists use the term *constructions* to encompass all lexicogrammatical forms, ranging from morphemes and syntactic structures to meaningful phrasal and clausal sequences or patterns (Tomasello, 2003). Thus, the answer to the question “What is grammar?” is that grammar is a system of lexicogrammatical patterns that are used to make meaning in appropriate ways.

CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS

A three-dimensional grammar framework

Since our goal is to help our students use the language accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately, it will be helpful to have a frame of reference. The framework takes the form of a pie chart (see Figure 1). The pie chart implicitly claims that all constructions can be characterized to different degrees by the three dimensions of: (1) structure or form; (2) semantics or meaning; and (3) use or the pragmatic conditions governing appropriate usage. In the wedge of the pie having to do with form, we have those overt lexicogrammatical patterns and morphosyntactic forms that tell us how a particular construction is put together and how it is sequenced with other constructions in a sentence or text. With certain constructions, it is also important to note the sound (phonemic) and writing (graphemic) patterns (see the discussion of possessives and phrasal verbs next for examples). In the semantic wedge, we deal with what a grammar construction means. Note that the meaning can be lexical (a dictionary definition for a preposition like *down*, for instance) or it can be grammatical (e.g., the conditional states both a condition and an outcome or result).

Pragmatics in the use wedge means “the use of language in context.” The context can be social (i.e., a context created by speakers, their relationship to one another, or the setting), or it can be a linguistic discourse co-text (i.e., the language that precedes or follows a particular structure in the discourse, or how a particular genre or register affects the use of a construction). The influence

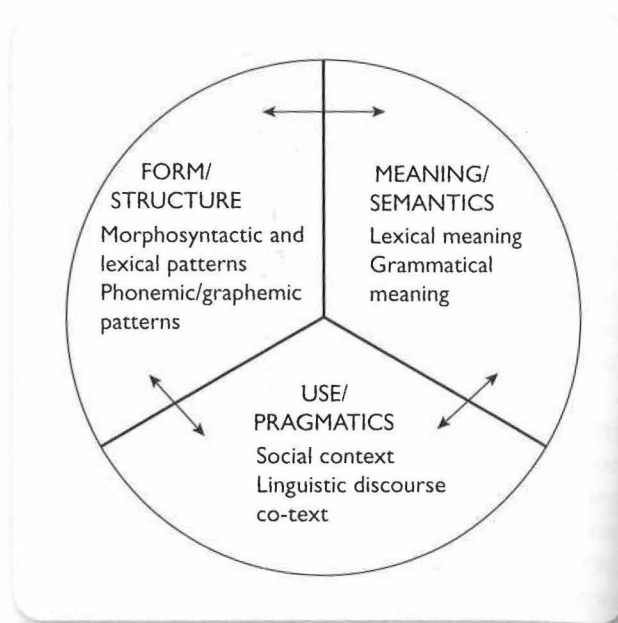


Figure 1. A three-dimensional grammar framework.

of pragmatics may be ascertained by asking two questions:

1. When or why does a speaker/writer choose a particular grammar construction over another that could express the same meaning or accomplish the same purpose? For example, what factors in the social context might explain a paradigmatic choice such as a speaker choosing a *yes-no* question rather than an imperative to serve as a request for information (e.g., *Do you have the time?* versus *Please tell me the time*).
2. When or why does a speaker/writer vary the form of a particular linguistic construction? For instance, what linguistic discourse factors will result in a syntagmatic or word sequence choice such as the indirect object being placed before the direct object (e.g., *Jenny gave Hank a brand-new comb* versus *Jenny gave a brand-new comb to Hank*)?

Despite the permeable boundaries between the dimensions, which is indicated by the bidirectional arrows, it can be very useful to view grammar from these three perspectives, and I trust that the usefulness of this approach will become clearer as we proceed. A teacher of grammar might begin by asking the questions posed in the three wedges of the pie (see Figure 2). For the sake of simplicity, these wedges are labeled form, meaning, and use for any given grammar point.¹

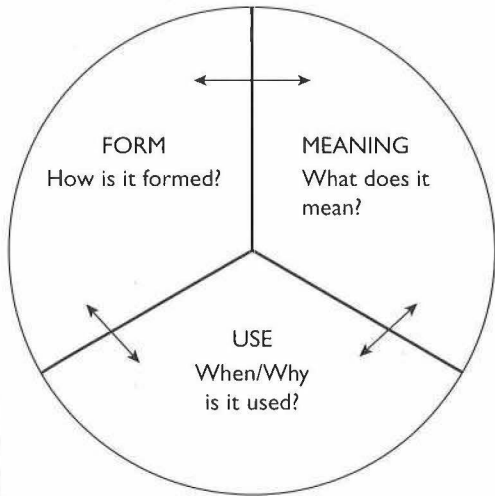


Figure 2. Questions when applying the pie chart.

Let us consider an example. A common construction to be taught at a high-beginning level of English proficiency is the 's possessive form (which has the written forms 's and s'). If we analyze the possessive using our questions, we will fill in the wedges as in Figure 3.

Form of the possessive. This way to form possessives in English is to add 's to regular singular nouns and noncount nouns and irregular plural nouns not ending in s or to add an apostrophe after the s

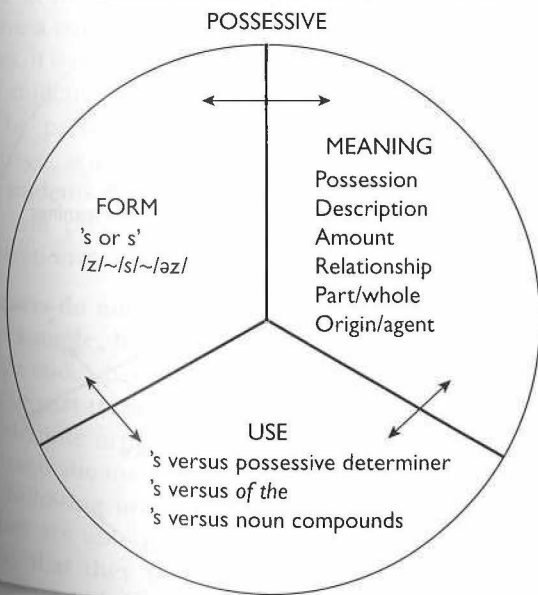


Figure 3. Pie chart describing the grammar of the possessive.

ending of regular plural nouns and after singular/noncount nouns ending in the sound /s/ to form s'. This form of the possessive has three allomorphs (or variations of the plural morpheme /-s/): [z], [s], and [əz], which are phonetically conditioned, as in *birds* [z], *bats* [s], and *bridges* [əz].

Meaning of the possessive. In addition to possession, the possessive or genitive form can indicate description (*a debtor's prison, the water's edge*), amount (*two weeks' holiday*), relationship (*Jack's wife*), part to whole (*the woman's hand*), and origin/agent (*Shakespeare's tragedies*). Also, although all languages have a way of signaling possession, they do not all regard the same items as possessable. For example, Spanish speakers refer to a body part using the definite article instead of a possessive form, producing a sentence such as *He broke the arm* (if directly translated). English as a second language (ESL) and EFL students will have to learn the scope of the possessive form in English.

Use of the possessive. Filling in this wedge requires that we ask when the 's is used to express possession as opposed to other constructions that can be used to convey this same meaning. For example, possession in English can be expressed in other ways—with a possessive determiner (e.g., *his, her, and their*) or with the periphrastic *of the* form (e.g., *the legs of the table*). Possessive determiners are presumably used when the referent of the possessor is clear from the context. While ESL/EFL books will often say that the *of the* possessive is used with nonhuman head nouns and 's with human head nouns, there are certain conditions where this generalization does not apply. For example, English speakers often prefer to use the 's even with inanimate head nouns if the head nouns are performing some action (e.g., *The train's arrival was delayed*). Finally, students will have to learn to distinguish contexts in which a noun compound (*table leg*) is more appropriate than either the 's form or the *of the* form.

Thus, by using a ternary scheme, we can classify the facts that affect the form, meaning, and use of the possessive. Compiling the answers to the questions is only the first step. Teachers would not necessarily present all these facts to students, recognizing that students can and do learn some of them on their own. And certainly no teacher would choose to present all these facts in a single lesson. Nevertheless, distributing the features of the target

grammatical construction among the three wedges of the pie can give teachers an understanding of its scope and multidimensionality. In turn, this understanding will guide teachers in making decisions about which facts concerning the possessive will be taught and when and how to do so. Of course, if teachers are not able to fill in all the wedges of the pie on their own, that tells them something, too. When they cannot fill in all the wedges in the pie chart for a given construction, they can consult reference grammars. The pie chart can also be used to spur teachers to do research because many of our grammatical descriptions are incomplete. By exploring the three dimensions of grammar and how to teach them, teachers will continue to develop their professional knowledge base, which will, in turn, benefit their students.

At this point, it might be worthwhile to apply the approach to another construction. This time, let us turn our attention to a pattern—the two- or three-word sequences of phrasal verbs. Phrasal verbs are limited in their constituency but are not as fixed as possessives. By considering the three questions posed earlier, we can compile the following facts about phrasal verbs.

Form of phrasal verbs. Most phrasal verbs are two-part verbs comprising a verb and a particle (e.g., *look up*). Sometimes, they can be constructed with three parts, with a preposition following the particle (e.g., *keep up with*). A distinctive feature of phrasal verbs is that for many of them the particle can be separated from its verb by an intervening object (e.g., *Alicia looked the word up in the dictionary*). Phrasal verbs also have distinctive stress and juncture patterns, which distinguish them from verb plus preposition combinations:

Alicia looked up#the word.
Alicia walked#up the street.

Meaning of phrasal verbs. There are literal phrasal verbs, such as *hang up*, where it is not difficult to figure out the meaning of the verb-particle combination in a sentence such as *He hung the picture up on the wall*. Unfortunately for the ESL/EFL student, there are far more instances of figurative phrasal verbs (e.g., *run into*, meaning “meet by chance”) where a knowledge of the meaning of the verb and of the particle is of little help in figuring out the meaning of the phrasal verb. Moreover, as with single-word verbs, phrasal verbs can have more than one meaning, for example,

come across, meaning “to discover by chance,” as in *I came across this old book in the library*, or when used intransitively “to make an impression,” as in *Richard’s presentation came across well at the convention*.

Use of phrasal verbs. When is a phrasal verb preferred to a single-word verb that conveys the same meaning (e.g., *put out a fire* versus *extinguish a fire*)? For the most part, phrasal verbs seem to be more common in informal speech than in more formal speech or written discourse.

When is one form of a separable phrasal verb preferred to the other; that is, when should the particle be separated from its verb (e.g., *put out a fire* versus *put a fire out*)? Erteschik-Shir’s (1979) principle of dominance seems to work well to define the circumstances favoring particle movement: if a noun phrase (NP) object is dominant (i.e., is a long, elaborate NP representing new information), it is likely to occur after the particle; if the direct object is short and is given information (e.g., a pronoun), it naturally occurs before the particle.

Again, I underscore here that it would not be reasonable for the ESL/EFL teacher to present all this information to students at once. The framework does, however, help to organize the facts (see Figure 4). Furthermore, by doing this, teachers

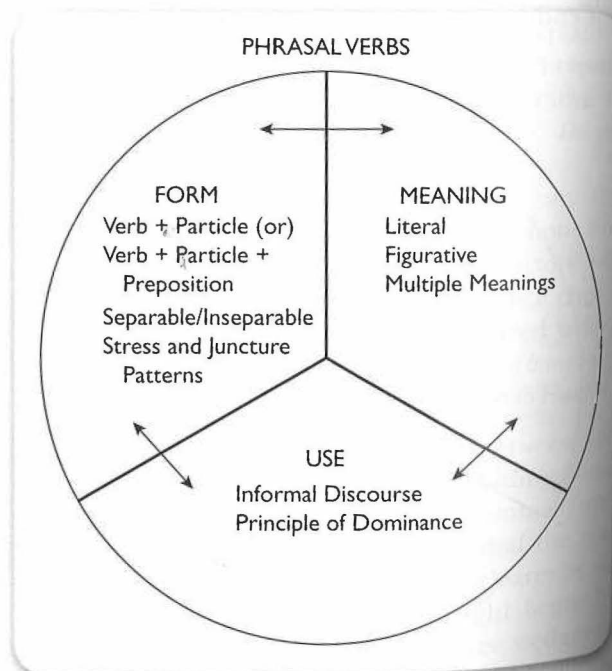


Figure 4. Pie chart describing the three dimensions of phrasal verbs.

can more easily identify where the learning challenge(s) lie for their students, based either on teachers' past experience or on their diagnosis of students' performance. Identifying the challenging dimension(s) is a key step that should be undertaken when planning lessons.²

All three dimensions of form, meaning, and use need to be mastered by the learner (although not necessarily consciously). For phrasal verbs, it is the meaning dimension that ESL/EFL students struggle with most. It is often the fact that there is no systematic way of learning to associate the verb and the particle. In this way, they are like lexical items. Adding to the students' woes, new phrasal verbs are constantly being coined. Recognizing where students will likely struggle tells the teacher where to focus work on phrasal verbs. We will amplify this point later. For now, however, it is worth noting that, although we are dealing with grammatical constructions, it is not always the form of the construction that creates the most significant learning challenge. Now that we have a clearer idea of what is meant by *grammar* (constructions in a language, structures and patterns, that have meanings and uses), we can turn to how grammar is learned.

The learning process

However important and necessary it is for teachers to have a comprehensive knowledge of their subject matter, it is equally important for them to understand their students' learning process. This understanding can be partly informed by insights from second language acquisition (SLA) research concerning how students naturally develop their ability to interpret and produce grammatical utterances. Three observations are germane to our topic:

Learners do not learn constructions one at a time.

For example, learners do not master the definite article and, when that is mastered, move on to the simple past tense. From their first encounter with the definite article, learners might master one of its pragmatic uses (e.g., to signal the uniqueness of the following noun in a given context). But even if they are able to do this appropriately, it is not likely that they will always produce the definite article when it is needed because learners typically take a long time before they are able to do this consistently. Thus, learning is a gradual process

involving the mapping of form, meaning, and use; constructions do not spring forth in learners' production fully developed and error-free. We saw this phenomenon in our chapter-initial example lesson, where the student who asked the teacher a question did not immediately apply the lesson on inversion in question formation.

Even when learners appear to have mastered a particular construction, it is not uncommon to find new errors being made. For example, the learner who has finally mastered the third-person singular marker on present tense verbs may overgeneralize the rule and apply it to newly emerging modal verbs, thus producing errors such as *She cans speak Spanish*. The point is that learning grammar is not simply adding new knowledge to an unchanging system—it involves changing the system. At some point, the learner's grammatical knowledge will be restructured and well-formedness will be restored. Of course, some students do not aim to adopt target-language norms because their reasons for studying English have more to do with learning English as a lingua franca for international communication than they do with conforming to native speaker norms.

Not surprisingly, language learners rely on the knowledge and the experience they already have. If they are beginners, they rely on their first language (L1) or other languages they know to hypothesize about how the new language works; when they are more advanced, they rely increasingly on the second language (L2). In understanding this, the teacher realizes that there is no need to teach everything about a construction to a group of students; rather, the teacher can build on what the students already know, a step that is facilitated when the students speak a common language.

Successful teaching involves identifying the relevant challenge for a particular group of students, recognizing that the challenge will not necessarily be the same for all students. Successful teachers also recognize that grammar learning is an iterative process; hence they need to return to the same territory again and again. To these three observations, we can add a fourth one that is not to our knowledge treated in the SLA research literature but, rather, is based on our observations and supported by learning theorists (e.g., Gagné & Medsker, 1996).

Different learning processes such as pattern recognition, association, and discrimination are responsible for different aspects of language. Indeed, given that language is as complicated as it is, we would not expect the learning process to be any simpler. It is clearly an oversimplification to treat all grammar learning as resulting from one process. Being aware that different learning processes contribute to SLA suggests a need for the teaching process to respect the differences.

How the nature of the language challenge and the learning process affect teaching decisions is the issue to which I turn next.

CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

The teaching process

Some educators have questioned whether grammar needs to be taught. For example, Krashen (1982) believes that if the input is understood and there is enough of it, the necessary grammar will unconsciously be acquired, much as young children learn the grammar of their native language. After all, they say, L2 learners often pick up a language from exposure to it. They have also observed that there seems to be little connection between formal knowledge of grammar rules and the ability to deploy them in communication. Moreover, R. Ellis (1993) pointed to the “learnability problem”: the fact that grammar is not naturally learned in a linear and atomistic fashion, despite its being taught this way. Often the forms learners use to communicate bear no resemblance to what has been presented to them or what has been practiced. (See Ellis, this volume, for further discussion of instructed SLA.) We saw this in our example lesson with the student’s use of an uninverted question.

However, while some learners may be capable of learning a language completely on their own, this is not true of many learners, especially if their time or exposure is limited to the classroom, as is the case when English is taught as a foreign language. Besides, we should not expect our students to learn their L2 as they did their L1. Whereas children learn their language implicitly over a long period of time, focused and explicit attention seems to be desirable in learning/teaching an L2, especially when

learners are a bit older. Indeed, experience with French-immersion programs in Canada shows that, when there is no explicit attention paid to grammatical form, non-native forms often become stabilized (Harley & Swain, 1984), even fossilized (Han, 2004). Giving learners explicit guidance can, but need not, involve using grammatical terminology. It does mean, though, pointing out how the grammar works.

Furthermore, White (1987) made the point that the positive evidence (the input to language learners) is not always sufficient for learners to analyze complex grammatical features. In other words, “while positive evidence contains information about what is possible in the target language, it does not contain information about what is *not* possible” (Spada, 1997, pp. 80–81). Thus, learners are helped by the “negative evidence” that they get from instruction (e.g., corrective feedback) to help them sort out L1 versus L2 differences.

Finally, it is not the case that grammar instruction should emulate natural exposure. We know that learners can indeed generate their own negative evidence (e.g., see Spivey, 2007), but the right kind of grammar instruction should accelerate natural acquisition, not merely imitate it (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). So let us now take up different approaches to grammar instruction that have been proposed as “the right kind.”

Present, practice, produce

Traditional grammar teaching has employed a structural syllabus and lessons composed of three phases—presentation, practice, and production (or communication)—often referred to as the PPP approach. (See also Purgason, this volume.) In the first phase, an understanding of the grammar point is provided, sometimes by pointing out the differences between the L1 and L2. In the second phase, students practice the grammar construction using oral drills and written exercises. In the third phase, students are given “frequent opportunities for communicative use of the grammar to promote automatic and accurate use” (R. Sheen, 2003, p. 226). We saw the first two of these phases implemented in the example lesson at the beginning of this chapter.

DeKeyser (1998, 2007) offers J. R. Anderson’s (1990) skill-based approach to explain how grammar practice may work in the second phase. Once

students are given a rule (declarative knowledge) in the first phase, output practice aids students to proceduralize their knowledge. Continued practice automatizes the use of the rule so that students do not have to think consciously about the rule any longer. As Doughty and Williams (1998a) put it, “proceduralization is achieved by engaging in the target behavior—or procedure—while temporarily leaning on declarative crutches . . .” (p. 49). Countless generations of students have been taught grammar in this way, and many have succeeded with this form of instruction. In support of this, following their meta-analysis of research on the effectiveness of instruction, Norris and Ortega (2000) concluded that “L2 instruction of particular language forms induces substantial target-oriented change . . .” (p. 500).

Focus on form

A different approach to grammar teaching has been proposed by Long (1991), who called for a focus on form within a communicative or meaning-based approach to language teaching, such as task-based or content-based language teaching. Instead of teaching a long list of grammatical constructions in a preemptive PPP way, Long (2007) proposed an essentially reactive approach, whereby learners are primarily engaged in communication with only a brief digression to grammar when necessary (e.g., when learners commit errors). Since there is a limit to what learners can pay attention to, focusing on form may help learners notice constructions (Schmidt, 1990) that would otherwise escape their attention when they are engaged in communication or studying content. Long (1991) hypothesized that “a systematic, non-interfering focus on form produces a faster rate of learning and (probably) higher levels of ultimate second language attainment than instruction with no focus on form” (p. 47). In addition to unobtrusive error correction, various means of focusing on form have been proposed and studied:

Enhancing the input. By highlighting (e.g., making boldface) certain nonsalient grammatical forms in a reading passage, students’ attention will be drawn to them (Sharwood Smith, 1993). The oral equivalent is when a teacher stresses certain forms when speaking with students.

Input flooding. Choosing texts in which a particular construction or structural contrast is especially

frequent will enhance its saliency and thus might promote noticing. One possible function of input flooding, in addition to making certain features in the input more frequent and thus more salient, is that it might prime the production of a particular structure. “Syntactic priming is a speaker’s tendency to produce a previously spoken or heard structure” (Mackey & Gass, 2006, p. 173).

Input processing. Another technique for directing students’ attention to form is called *input processing* (VanPatten, 1996). Rather than working on rule learning and rule application, input processing activities push learners to attend to properties of language during activities where the structure is being used meaningfully. The examples the students focus on have been carefully chosen to make salient the differences between the L1 and the L2. For instance, the point that Spanish speakers must pay attention to word order in English might be made by showing students two pictures and asking them to imagine that they are in the picture.³ Next, they listen to two sentences in English, and they need to point to the picture that corresponds to one of the two sentences.

*The man is looking for you.
You are looking for the man.*

Since this same distinction is not made using word order in Spanish, this activity is intended to guide the learners to process the input differently.

*Te busca el señor.
Tú buscas al señor.*

Not everyone is convinced by an input-processing or focus-on-form approach, however. While acknowledging the “carry-over” problem (i.e., the difficulty of achieving simultaneous fluent and accurate spontaneous production), Swan (2005) disputes the claim that the traditional PPP has failed. Further, he admonishes that it does not follow that the issue will be solved by eliminating the first two Ps.

Grammaring

To address the “carry-over” or “inert knowledge problem,” whereby students know the rules but do not necessarily apply them when they are

communicating, Larsen-Freeman (2003) suggests that grammar instruction needs not only to promote awareness in students but also to engage them in meaningful production (Toth, 2006). Output production pushes students to move beyond semantic processing of the input to syntactic processing (Swain, 1985). Then, too, when students attempt to produce constructions, they have an opportunity to test their hypotheses on how the construction is formed or what it means or when it is used (Shehadeh, 2003). Following these attempts, they can receive feedback on their hypotheses and modify them as necessary. Therefore, Larsen-Freeman maintains that the proper goal of grammar instruction should be *grammaring*, the ability to use grammar constructions accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately. The addition of *-ing* to *grammar* is meant to suggest a dynamic process of grammar using. To realize this goal, it is not sufficient for students to notice or comprehend grammatical constructions or to repeat or transform them, as in the example lesson at the beginning of this chapter. Students must also practice the meaningful use of grammar in a way that takes into account “transfer appropriate” processing (Roediger & Guynn, 1996). This means that, for students to overcome the inert knowledge problem, they must practice using constructions to make meaning under psychologically authentic conditions, where the conditions of learning and the conditions of use are aligned (Segalowitz, 2003).

One way to do this, Gatbonton and Segalowitz (1988) suggest, is “creative automatization,” practice that automates control of patterned sequences, ones that would naturally occur in given communicative contexts. Recall the example used earlier in this chapter: *My washer needs fixing*. As part of lesson planning, teachers can design a skit where students get to use such a pattern frequently.

Of course, sometimes a communicative task itself requires that students attend to relevant grammar constructions (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993; Samuda, 2001; R. Ellis, 2009b), such as when using a particular grammatical construction is essential to completing the task. An example of this is when students have to use particular prepositions accurately to give each other directions using a map. When it comes to content-based instruction, lessons should have clear language learning objectives in addition to

content objectives. A grammar example might be teaching students to produce stative passives (*X is located between Y and Z*) in geography lessons. Which dimension of a grammar construction is practiced and the way it is practiced will depend on the nature of the learning challenge.

Form. For instance, if the learning challenge is form, a great deal of meaningful iteration⁴ will be required. Students will have to be restricted to using just the particular target form; in other words, structural diversity will not be permitted. Finally, for proceduralization to occur, it is important to concentrate on only one or two forms at a time, although, of course, the target form could be introduced in contrast to forms that the student already controls. An example of an activity that works on form is a language game, such as the one described in Kealey and Inness (1997). Students have to complete a family portrait in which the child’s face is missing. To complete the task, they are given clues (e.g., *She has her mother’s eyes* or *She has her father’s nose*) containing instances of the ’s possessive.

Meaning. If the teacher has decided that the challenge of a particular construction lies in the semantic dimension, then a different sort of practice activity should be planned. Meaning seems to call for some sort of associative learning (N. Ellis, 1998), where students are given opportunities to associate the form and the meaning of the particular target construction. It has been my experience that iteration is not needed here to the same extent as it is when teaching form. Sometimes a single pairing of form and meaning suffices, a process known as “fast mapping.” Due to memory constraints, it seems prudent to restrict the number of new items being practiced at any one time to between three and six (Asher, 1996). An example of a meaning-based activity is one asking students to mime a series of actions, called “an operation” (Nelson, Winters, & Clark, 2004), such as making a telephone call (using, e.g., *look up, call up, pick up, hang up*). By practicing this operation several times, while they name the action, the students can learn to associate the form and meaning of the phrasal verbs.

Use. When use is the challenge, it is because students have shown that they are having a hard time selecting the right construction for a particular context. Thus, relevant practice activities will provide students with an opportunity to choose from two or

more forms that are roughly semantically equivalent the one best suited for the context and how they wish to position themselves (e.g., in a cooperative way, a polite way, or an assertive way). In some cases, their choice may involve selecting between two options (e.g., when to use a phrasal verb versus a single-word verb with the equivalent meaning). Other times, their choice will be from among an array of options (e.g., which modal verb, *should* or *might*, to use when giving advice to a boss); hence, the number of forms being worked on at one time will be at least two but may involve many more.

Role plays work well when dealing with use because the teacher can systematically manipulate social variables (e.g., increase or decrease the social distance between interlocutors) to have students practice how changes in the social variables affect the choice of form. Then, too, having students work with the same construction in writing and in speaking activities can highlight differences between written and spoken grammars (Carter & McCarthy, 1995).

As was mentioned earlier, the social context is not all that is involved in the choice of which forms to use; often the linguistic discourse co-text also makes a difference, especially in discipline-based writing. Thus, it is very important to consider teaching discourse grammar (Celce-Murcia, 1991; Hughes & McCarthy, 1998). Such is the case with the passive voice. Its use is not particularly sensitive to social factors; nevertheless, students struggle with when to use it versus the active voice. Challenges of this nature call for text-generation or text-manipulation exercises. Students might be given a short text that they have to complete using the appropriate voice. Because some sentences will be better in the passive voice and others in the active voice, students will be making choices, in keeping with a characteristic of practice activities designed to work on the use dimension.

Before leaving our discussion of the passive voice, let me illustrate why I feel that identifying the challenging dimension is a worthwhile step to take before teaching any grammar construction. As I stated earlier, it has been my experience that the greatest long-term challenge for students concerning the passive voice is to figure out when to use it. Keeping this in mind will help us avoid a common practice of ESL/EFL teachers, which is to introduce the passive form as a transformed

version of the active (e.g., "Switch the subject with the direct object . . ."). Presenting the passive in this way is misleading because it gives students the impression that the passive is simply a form variant of the active. Moreover, it suggests that most passive sentences contain agents. What we know, in fact, to be the case is that one voice is not a variant of the other; they have different foci. We also know that relatively few passive sentences contain explicit agents. Thus, from the first introduction, the passive should be taught as a distinct construction that occurs in a different context from the active. For example, the teacher can introduce the contexts by asking students where Spanish, or another language, is spoken and students can list and discuss the countries where Spanish is spoken.

Note that many of the activities recommended here are currently being used. What I am advocating is a principled means for dealing with grammar. Choosing a particular dimension of grammar to focus on will enable teachers to adopt or adapt a teaching activity so that students' attention is focused where it will do the most good. Of course, where students choose to put *their* attention is another matter. The point is that teachers should not assume that, just because a textbook activity deals with the target construction, it necessarily addresses the particular learning challenge that their students are experiencing.

Explicit grammar instruction

Consciousness-raising. I said earlier that L2 learners, particularly older ones, might benefit from the explicit teaching of grammatical rules and patterns. One option for explicit rule instruction is to use a consciousness-raising task, in which it is the students' job to induce a grammatical generalization from the data they have been given. For example, Fotos and Ellis (1991) asked students to work out the rule for indirect object alternation in English (e.g., *They gave a gold watch to him* versus *They gave him a gold watch*) by giving the students example sentences where indirect object alternation can and cannot be successfully applied. Indirect object alternation is difficult in English and therefore is an ideal candidate for this sort of explicit rule articulation. Indeed, Carroll

and Swain (1993) suggest that when the rules are not that clear-cut, detailed instruction with explicit grammatical feedback may be the most helpful response to student errors.

Garden path. Another option for promoting students' awareness is to use the garden path strategy (Tomasello & Herron, 1988, 1989). As applied to grammar teaching, this means giving students information about a construction without giving them the full picture, thus making it seem easier than it is or, in other words, "leading them down the garden path." If ESL/EFL students were told that the English past tense is formed with *-ed*, for example, this would be leading students down the garden path because there are many irregular verbs in English where this rule will not work. The reason for giving students only a partial explanation is that they are more likely to learn the exceptions to the rule if they are corrected at the moment the overgeneralization error is made than if they are given a long list of "exceptions to the rule" to memorize in advance.

Corpus-informed. Some teachers these days have their students consult online corpora to determine what patterns exist and which of them occur more frequently. Through induction in such a data-driven approach, students can be taught to create their own knowledge of patterned sequences, particularly collocations or words that go together (T. Johns, 1994; Liu & Jiang, 2009). They can do so for both informal and formal language usage, written and spoken.

When using corpora, such as the British National Corpus, the Corpus of Contemporary American English, or specialized corpora, such as the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English, students are exposed to genuine examples instead of invented ones. They also shift their focus from individual words, or empty grammatical structures, to phraseological items (Simpson-Vlach & N. Ellis, 2010; Römer, 2011).

Collaborative dialogues. Donato (1994) has shown that students' participation in collaborative dialogue, through which learners can provide support for each other or scaffold each other's learning by discussing the use of language, has spurred their language development. Other research (Swain & Lapkin, 1998) corroborates the value of language-related episodes that arise

during a dialogue where students explicitly discuss grammatical points. Such dialogues serve both as a cognitive tool and as a means of communication that can promote grammatical development.

Other benefits of grammar instruction have been proposed (R. Ellis, 1998, 2006). For instance, grammar instruction can also help students generalize their knowledge to new structures (Gass, 1982). It also helps students "notice the gap" between new features in a construction and how they differ from the learners' own production (Schmidt & Frota, 1986). This last point introduces a very important function of grammar instruction, which is giving students feedback.

Providing feedback

Providing learners with feedback, which they can use to correct their misapprehensions about some aspect of the target language, is an essential function of language teaching. Even such indirect feedback as asking a learner to clarify something he or she has said may be helpful (Schachter, 1986). It has always been a controversial function, however (Larsen-Freeman, 1991). There are, for instance, those who would proscribe it, believing that a teacher's intervention will inhibit students from freely expressing themselves or that there is little evidence demonstrating that learners make use of the feedback they have been given—that is, there is little immediate "uptake" of the correct form. While there are clearly times when such intervention can be intrusive and therefore unwarranted (e.g., in the middle of a small-group communicative activity), at other times focused feedback is highly desirable. Further, immediate uptake cannot be the sole criterion of its usefulness. Negative evidence gives students the feedback they need to reject or modify their hypotheses about how the target language is formed or functions. Students understand this, which explains why they often deliberately seek corrective feedback.

The same pie chart that I used when identifying the learning challenge and creating practice activities can also be a useful aid in diagnosing errors. If the diagnosis is accurate, the remedy may be more effective. More than once I have observed a teacher give an explanation of linguistic form to a student when consulting the pie chart would have suggested that the student's confusion lay with the area of use instead.

As for how the feedback should be provided, there are a number of options available to the teacher. One is recasting, reformulating correctly what a student has said incorrectly. This is a natural thing for most teachers to do in any case, and it is an example of what Long means by unobtrusive focusing on form. In addition, many educators see considerable merit in getting students to self-correct. They might do so by repeating what the student has just said up to the point of the error, in this way signaling to the student that something needs to be changed at the place the teacher has stopped (see Lyster, 2007; Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Giving students an explicit rule is a third way of providing feedback. Some teachers like to collect their students' errors, identify the prototypical ones, and then deal with them collectively in class in an anonymous fashion. Which option is exercised will depend on the teacher's style, the teacher's view of the capacity of the student, the nature of the error, and in which part of the lesson the error has been committed. Giving corrective feedback is complicated, and it should not be studied simply by "extracting behavioral instances of error correction, out of their context in order to classify them into discrete categories . . ." (Ortega, 2012, p. 33).

None of these feedback strategies has to be used exclusively, of course. For instance, Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) offer a graduated 12-point scale ranging from implicit to explicit strategies, beginning with students' identifying errors in their own writing, moving to the teacher's isolating the error area and inquiring if there is anything wrong in a particular sentence, and then moving to the teacher's providing examples of the correct pattern when other forms of help fail to lead to a self-correction on the part of the student. (For reviews of research on error correction, see Li, 2010; Y. Sheen, 2010.)

Related pedagogical issues

Sequencing. Earlier we noted that grammar constructions are not acquired one at a time through an additive process (Rutherford, 1987). Rather, different aspects of the form, meaning, and use of a given construction may be acquired at different stages of L2 development. This observation confirms the need for recycling, working on one dimension of a construction and then returning to the construction from time to time as the need arises. To some extent this will occur naturally because the

same constructions are likely to be encountered in different communicative tasks and content areas.

However, it is also the case that not all linguistic constructions that students need to learn will be available in the language that occurs in the classroom. Therefore, it is necessary for the teacher to "fill in the gaps" and introduce constructions that do not naturally arise in classroom discourse (Spada & Lightbown, 1993). For this reason, teachers might think in terms of a grammar checklist instead of a grammatical sequence. Rather than adhering to a linear progression, the choice of sequence would be left up to the teacher and would depend on the teacher's assessment of the students' developmental readiness to learn.

Many teachers, of course, have little control over the content or sequence of the material they work on. They must adhere to prescribed syllabi or textbooks, although even in such a situation, it may be possible for teachers not to follow a sequence rigidly. For those teachers who have more flexibility, the research on acquisition orders is germane. Some SLA research has shown that learners progress through a series of predictable stages in their acquisition of particular linguistic forms. One explanation for the order rests on the complexity of the speech-processing strategies required. Thus, all structures processable by a particular strategy or cluster of strategies should be acquired at roughly the same developmental stage. This approach has been shown to account for certain acquisition orders in ESL (Pienemann & Johnston, 1987).

Despite these findings and their potential implications for grammatical construction sequencing, there has been no definitive acquisition order established, and thus teachers are still left to their own judgment on how to proceed. Of course, students chart their own unique learning paths. I should also note that, even if an acquisition order were to be fully specified for English, there might be justification for preempting the acquisition order when students' communicative needs were not being met and when, therefore, certain constructions needed to be taught, at least formulaically. Furthermore, Lightbown (1998) has suggested that even if students are asked to work on structures before they are ready to acquire them, such effort may not be in vain because such instruction might prime subsequent noticing on

the part of the students, thereby accelerating acquisition when they are indeed ready.

Inductive versus deductive presentation. An additional choice that teachers face is whether to teach inductively or deductively. An inductive activity is one in which students infer the rule or generalization from a set of examples. In a deductive activity, the students are given the rule, and they apply it to examples. If a teacher has chosen an inductive approach in a given lesson, a further option exists—whether or not to give or have students articulate an explicit rule. While what we are trying to bring about in the learner is accurate performance, not knowledge of the rules themselves, there is no reason to avoid giving explicit rules as a means to this end, except perhaps if the teacher is working with young children. Moreover, stating a rule explicitly can often bring about linguistic insights in a more efficacious manner, as long as the rule is not oversimplified or so obtuse that students must struggle harder to understand the rule than to apply it implicitly (Robinson, 1996).

There are many times when an inductive approach, such as using a consciousness-raising task, is desirable because by using such an approach we are nurturing within the students a way of thinking, through which they can arrive at their own generalizations. In addition, an inductive approach allows teachers to assess what the students already know about a particular construction and to make any necessary adjustments in their lesson plan.

Other times, when students have a particular cognitive style that is not well suited for language analysis or when a particular linguistic rule is rather convoluted, it may make more sense to present a grammar construction deductively. Indeed, Corder's (1973) sensible observations still offer comfort:

What little we know about . . . second language learning . . . suggests that a combination of induction and deduction produces the best result. . . . The old controversy about whether one should provide the rule first and then the examples, or vice versa, is now seen to be merely a matter of tactics to which no categorical answer can be given. (as cited in Rutherford & Sharwood Smith, 1988, p. 133)

Reasons, not only rules. I have suggested (Larsen-Freeman, 2000) that teachers concentrate on

teaching “reasons, not only rules.” Many rules appear arbitrary because they are form based, ignoring the meaning and use dimensions. Learning rules puts an additional rote-learning burden on students. Why not tap their cognitive powers instead? For instance, rather than telling students they must use an indefinite noun phrase after the verb in a sentence beginning with existential *there*, such as *There is a snowstorm coming*, help them understand the reason. The function of *there* is to introduce new information. The indefinite article *a* is used in English to mark new information. This is why *a* is used before *snowstorm*. This reason has broader scope and explains a number of English word-order phenomena. Of course, the reason has to be presented in a comprehensible manner. While rules provide some security for learners, reasons give them a deeper understanding of the logic of English and help them make it their own. Besides, reasons are meaning- and use-based and are in keeping with the more robust view of grammar I have been promoting in this chapter.

FUTURE TRENDS

Varieties

A big question in many teachers' minds these days is which grammar they should be teaching. This has always been true to some extent, of course, in the choice between, for example, the grammar of North American English and British English. However, the choices have multiplied with the increasing number of evolving World Englishes such as Singapore English, Nigerian English, and Indian English. These, too, are native Englishes, although they are not always taught as such. Perhaps they should be. Another question these days has been presented by the English as a lingua franca (ELF) scholars (e.g., Seidlhofer, 2001). They point to characteristics of ELF that differ from native speaker varieties. For example, many users of English as an international language drop the third-person singular present tense *-s* marker on verbs. While features of ELF should not necessarily be taught, the question is, should such omissions be considered errors? Even in native speaker grammars, there is more choice than is sometimes perceived (Larsen-Freeman, 2002). For instance, in the example lesson with which I began this

chapter, the student who asks about recess uses an uninverted question. Uninverted questions were not the object of this grammar lesson, of course, but native speakers do commonly use uninverted questions in certain situations. Such observations as these have left teachers asking which form of English they should be teaching. Of course, the answer to this question is often more of a socio-political question having to do with attitudes than a linguistic one. The best answer to the question lies in determining what the students' purpose in learning English is and to what ends they will be using their English proficiency in the future.

A complex adaptive system

Another current trend with implications for the future lies in the way we have come to understand the dynamics of language use (Larsen-Freeman, 1997). As Gleick (1987) puts it, "the act of playing the game has a way of changing the rules" (p. 24). Although Gleick was not writing about linguistic rules, this statement captures the facts that language changes all the time and that it does so due to the cumulative innovations that language users make at the local level as they adapt their language resources to new communicative contexts (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). The point is that language learners should not be seen as learning to conform to grammatical uniformity. Instead, it is more accurate to say that they are developing the capacity to create and understand meaning by using language, adapting what they know to new situations.

Testing

If grammar is construed as forms that have meanings and uses, testing only grammatical accuracy, as many tests do, is severely limiting (see Larsen-Freeman, 2009; Purpura, 2004). Furthermore, if language is the dynamic system that we claim it to be, no one-time testing procedure will yield a complete picture of what a learner is capable of doing. Finally, language testers will have to wrestle with the vexing matter of which variety of language is to be assessed. All this means that much work needs to be accomplished to reduce dissonance between teaching and testing.

CONCLUSION

Over the centuries, second language educators have alternated between two types of approaches to

language teaching: those that focus on analyzing the language and those that focus on using the language. The former teach students the elements of language, including grammar constructions, building students' capacity to use the elements to communicate. The latter encourage students to use the language from the start, however falteringly, to acquire it communicatively. It is not a question of one or the other, however. Educators agree that speaking and writing accurately are important for many students, just as is being able to get one's meaning across in an appropriate manner. Further, it has been observed that, although some learners can "pick up" grammar constructions from exposure to the target language, few learners are capable of doing so efficiently, especially if they are post-pubescent or if their exposure is limited to the classroom, as is the case when English is taught as a foreign language.

However, equating grammar with meaningless forms, decontextualized from use, and equating the teaching of grammar with the teaching of explicit linguistic rules are unduly limiting. I have called them myths (Larsen-Freeman, 1995) that serve only to perpetuate the methodological pendulum swing between language analysis and language use. Opting for the middle ground in this chapter, I have maintained that grammar *is* about form and that one way to teach form is to give students rules; however, grammar is about much more than form, and its teaching is ill-served if students are simply given rules. This is very important to understand, and doing so will make teachers appreciate grammar more than perhaps they have in the past. Their appreciation can help their students see what a powerful tool grammar is in helping them to express their desired meaning accurately and appropriately.

SUMMARY

- The term grammar is ambiguous.
- Grammar includes both morphosyntactic structures and patterned sequences, which are together called constructions.
- Grammar is about form, but more than form, it is about what forms mean and when and why they are used.
- It is important for teachers to anticipate the learning challenge for a given grammar point because their doing so has implications for how they allocate time and what activities they use.

- There are some educators who feel that teaching grammar is unnecessary. However, most believe that some combination of awareness raising (devoted to form, meaning, and use), with practice that is meaningful and psychologically authentic and provides for appropriate corrective feedback, is powerful.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the definition of *grammar* proposed in this chapter compare with others with which you may be familiar?
2. In explaining the pragmatics of phrasal verbs, the principle of dominance was invoked. Explain why the principle of dominance falls in the pragmatic dimension. Then, explain why meaning is claimed to be the greatest long-term challenge for students learning phrasal verbs.
3. The effect of the native language on second language learning has traditionally been seen to be one of interference. How does the observation on p. 261 regarding learners' reliance on their prior knowledge and experience differ in its perception of L1 influence?
4. Why should iteration in a practice activity for learning the form of a construction be meaningful?
5. Why is it important for the teacher to identify the challenge in a particular grammar construction for a particular group of students?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Think of a language teaching approach that tends to favor language use over language form. How could the approach incorporate more language form? Now think of an approach that favors language form over language use. How could a focus on language use be integrated?
2. Analyze restrictive relative clauses in terms of the three dimensions of the pie chart. Which has been the most challenging dimension for the students with whom you have worked?
3. Design practice activities for dealing with the pragmatics of indirect object alternation and presence or absence of existential *there*.

FURTHER READING

Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1999). *The grammar book: An ESL/EFL teacher's course* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Heinle/Cengage.

The book seeks to guide teachers to an understanding of the grammar of those constructions they will have to teach (their form, meaning, and use in context) and offers teaching suggestions for each.

Doughty, C., & Williams, J. (Eds.). (1998). *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

The book provides an overview of second language acquisition research that has investigated "focus on form."

Hinkel, E., & Fotos, S. (Eds.). (2002). *New perspectives on grammar teaching in second language classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

The book features a variety of approaches to understanding and teaching grammar.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2003). *Teaching language: From grammar to grammaring*. Boston, MA: Heinle/Cengage.

In this book, Larsen-Freeman argues for a reconceptualization of grammar and the way it is taught, featuring grammar as a dynamic system.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (Series Director). (2007). *Grammar dimensions: Form, meaning, and use*. (4th ed.) Boston, MA: Heinle/Cengage.

This is a communicative grammar textbook series that presents grammar in three dimensions with matching practice exercises and communicative activities.

Willis, D. (2003). *Rules, patterns and words*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

This book demonstrates how patterned sequences provide a link between grammar and vocabulary.

ENDNOTES

¹ Because all three dimensions are present, sometimes it is difficult to distinguish meaning from use. Answering the question "When or why is a grammar structure used?" by saying "when it means such and such" is *not* making the distinction between meaning and use clear. Using the *wh*-questions—asking *what* (meaning) versus *when* or *why* (use)—should help.

² Of course, all teachers can do is to anticipate the learning challenge. They need to be prepared to alter their lesson if the anticipated challenge turns out not to be a problem. It is also certainly possible that not all the students in the class will manifest the same learning challenge.

³ This is based on an example discussed in Doughty and Williams (1998).

⁴ *Iteration* means repetition that changes the learner's grammatical resources (Larsen-Freeman, in press).

KEY QUESTIONS

- ▶ Is there a distinct spoken grammar separate from written grammar, and, if so, precisely how do they differ? Are there, for example, special rules and forms for speaking that simply do not exist in writing?
- ▶ Are the meanings of grammatical structures different in speech from their meanings in writing, and why should such differences in meaning exist?
- ▶ What sorts of communicative functions does spoken grammar perform and how do these contribute to successful spoken interaction?

EXPERIENCE

The following classroom conversation takes place between a male student (a non-native learner of English) and his teacher. The students in this class are all trainees who will work in the international hospitality industry when they complete their training. A good command of spoken English will be very important for their future work.¹

<student 1> I wanted to experience the different cultures within the hospitality industry as uh, **you know**, you have different people from different backgrounds working within the hotel **like** we have for placement, **I had different, like, around nineteen different** nationalities working within the restaurant itself. So I wanted to **experience . . .**, and, **plus** giving the service to the guest, making them feel important really makes me feel nice about providing good service to a customer **and everything like that**. So that was one key aspect that uh drove me into the hospitality industry, **plus, my father, he planned** to open a hotel in the later stages so he said it's better if you also do something within the hospitality industry so that you can take it forward **and everything**.

So I chose hospitality industry.

[intervening turns]

<teacher> You had mentioned teaching at some stage. **Do you see+**

<student 1> Yeah.

<teacher> **+you teaching** in your future?

<student 1> I had I thought about it but um it's so confusing right now that's **it's not . . .** But I would love to teach as **like** it's a **total different** experience **I guess** so **you should be knowing** it better.

<teacher> [laughs]

<student 1> [laughs] So I wanted to teach in between because I have been helping my fellow students as well so they are **like**, oh you should try and teach, and and so that's why I wanted to teach in between but if I want to teach I'll be in the finance side as well if ever I plan to teach I have, **so . . .** (Cambridge, Limerick and Shannon Corpus)²

This student is asked by the teacher why he chose the hospitality industry as his profession. The teacher (a female native speaker) is also a participant in the conversation. How should she evaluate the student's performance as she listens? Should she focus on accuracy in grammar, or