A Review of *Perspectives on Pedagogical Grammar*

and its Significance for TEFL/TESL Instructors

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Abstract

This paper reviews a variety of perspectives regarding different types of grammatical analysis and their ability to be implemented in the classroom. The paper begins with an explanation of the need for explicit grammar instruction in language acquisition (SLA) and continues with an examination of whether or not each article from the anthology is relevant to practical application by instructors in a second language acquisition situation.

*Keywords:* explicit, prescriptive, practical, theory
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The role of pedagogical grammar, or “the types of grammatical analysis and instruction designed for the needs of second language students” (Odlin, 1994, p. 1), is a controversial topic in second language acquisition research. Which linguistic theories and pedagogical grammars are the most applicable and efficient in the classroom setting? Furthermore, what are the psycholinguistic constraints on the learnability of grammars, and the roles of implicit and explicit learning, memory, and knowledge? These are some of the issues examined in this anthology.

As many linguists see prescriptive grammar as “an exercise in incompetence, oppression, or both” (Odlin, 1994, p. 2), instructors often disagree about the most appropriate and efficient methods of grammar instruction. However, having a target language “codified” simplifies the teaching and learning of second languages, and this anthology assumes that language teachers have acknowledged that they must incorporate effective grammar-teaching strategies into their language classroom if they wish to help their students improve (Odlin, 1994, p. 2). However, not all approaches produce equal results. All of the articles in this anthology address theoretical questions, and most also address practical questions. I intend to analyze which articles are the most relevant to practical application in the second language acquisition (SLA) in the classroom and examine why this is so.

instruction may influence learning the English article system, the role of intuition in SLA, and data-
driven learning with grammar and vocabulary.

**Section I: What Sort of Grammar?**


Cook (1985) examines Noam Chomsky's model of Universal Grammar (UG). This model basically asserts that language is knowledge which consists of “principles that do not vary from one person to another;” but also has parameters whose values are fixed to the language being learned (Cook, 1985, p. 25). In other words, if human beings consistently develop a language with a certain property (e.g. a difference between nouns and verbs), then that property falls into Universal Grammar. Although this article makes note of several arguments attempting to discredit this theory (Bley-Vroman, 1988; Felix & Ioup, 1988; Schachter, 1988), if we are to assume that UG does in fact exist, there are several implications for language teaching.

Models of language acquisition have been developed with UG in mind on the basis of certain relationships. Some settings seem to be less marked (i.e. more typical); for instance, children tend to omit the subject when first learning to speak English (e.g. *want more bubbles*), making the tendency to include the subject in a sentence more marked than omitting it (Cook, 1985, p. 31). Cook suggests that learners from a language which embraces an unmarked structure may have more trouble learning a marked structure than a learner going from marked to unmarked (1985, p. 38).

Although UG suggests the capability of speakers of any language to acquire an additional language, the differences between these languages still must be taught; the role of the teacher as a source of input is also extremely important in the acquisition of vocabulary according to this model. One way teachers may communicate the general parameters of English to their students is through
concentrated examples showing the effects of a particular limitation. For example, students who were shown ten sentences with *easy/eager to please* every three months easily learned the difference between these constructions (Cook, 1985, p. 43). Teachers may also want to “bracket” to facilitate acquisition of some structures; for example, learners who are not aware of syntactic patterns such as subject-object-verb and object-subject-verb may have difficulty determining the pattern his/her language follows, given a phrase like *the woman the man likes* (Cook, 1985, p. 43). The input given to a student must contain clear clues to its phrase structure. Finally, because UG suggests that syntactic structures contain similar patterns across all languages, vocabulary teaching must be of the utmost importance if one is to assume universal grammar does indeed exist.


Although many teachers seem to resist familiarization with theories of grammar, seeing them as impractical and not relevant to teaching in actuality, Hubbard (1994) asserts that their examination is essential. He claims that by learning pedagogical theories, teachers can highlight regularities within a language that might not be noticed by students otherwise, be informed about how language works according to the most efficient models, “identify cross-linguistic generalizations which might help predict areas of greater or lesser difficulty for learners,” facilitate the learning of complex phenomena, and help learners make accurate rule formations (p. 51).

Hubbard then briefly examines the theories of relational grammar, lexical-functional grammar, generalized phrase structure grammar, cognitive grammar, and head-driven phrase structure grammar. Some trends among these theories are: 1) that grammatical relations such as subject, direct object, etc. are linguistically significant notions within a language and among languages, 2) that the verb is the
central component of a clause and determines a large amount of the sentence structure, and 3) that syntax and semantics are closely interrelated (Hubbard, 1994, p. 69).

Hubbard ends by stating that the many alternative theories that do exist should be seen as beneficial to teachers rather than harmful; instructors must constantly be aware of the most current empirical research so they may adjust the theories underlying their practice accordingly. Although I agree with Hubbard that it is critical for teachers to constantly be updated on the most supported theories of grammar so they may avoid techniques based on theories which have been disproved, I believe he should outline in his article which of the theories he presents is the most viable instead of merely stating that many alternatives exist. Perhaps he should give reasons to favor one theory or another, or provide guidelines for teachers on how to determine which theory is the most appropriate in their particular context. Therefore, excluding the idea that teachers must constantly be researching and adopting the most efficient techniques, the practicality of this article is somewhat limited.


In discussions of pedagogical grammar, Westney (1994) believes that the formation of rules and the statement of “language regularities” cannot be avoided (p. 72). Rules are typically thought of as most helpful when they are “concrete, simple, nontechnical, cumulative, close to popular/traditional notions,” clear, and relevant (p. 72). Teachers have to act as the intermediary, coding linguistic rules in terms that learners can understand. However, the criteria for creating effective rules are somewhat vague. How can teachers ensure that they reach these standards? Westney attempts to answer these questions in his article.

He divides rules into two categories: those of formation, regarding mechanical regularities in language, and those of use, concerning personal meaning and choice (Westney, 1994, p. 74-75). Rules
can also be divided into low-level—those that are appropriate for the principles of phonology, inflectional morphology, and the basic principles of sentence structure, in addition to rote learning—and higher-level—those that concern complex syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and discourse, and are therefore more suitable for conscious, cognitive learning (p. 75). Rules are rarely generalizable, however, so teachers must not be careful not to suggest the existence of consistently clear-cut rules.

From a learner's perspective, success partially depends on “attention to linguistic form, and readiness to guess/inference” (Westney 1994, p. 93). Once again, the role of the teacher is extremely influential: he/she is a model, organizer, and assessor, simultaneously. The teacher must be able to provide examples of linguistic patterns, model these patterns effectively, and monitor the production of his/her learners.

These three articles stress the importance of the role of the teacher in the classroom. If teachers wish their students to achieve the greatest amount of success, they must be aware of the most current theories and how to formulate and present rules.

**Section II: Grammar, Lexicon, and Discourse**


In his article, Little expresses his belief that teachers should take a lexical approach to grammar-teaching, as explicit knowledge of grammatical rules is useless “unless we know some of the words whose behavior the rules describe” (1994, p. 106). Furthermore, implicit knowledge of grammatical rules can be developed as a result of the enrichment of the mental lexicon. One may see this argument as a complement to Chomsky’s claim that vocabulary is of utmost importance in the classroom, and to Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar and Lexical Functional Grammar, as structure can be predictable from word meanings (Little, 1994, p. 106). In fact, children's first utterances tend to be
lexically and thematically appropriate rather than syntactically accurate. Little therefore suggests that the internalization of grammatical properties and rules will follow logically with vocabulary learning (p. 106).

Therefore, teacher must prioritize words over structures in language acquisition and language use. By analyzing and synthesizing the lexicon from three points of view (that of the learner, that of the teacher, and that of the native speaker), teachers can present their students with the most useful vocabulary. In exploring the students' perspective, they can also predict what questions may arise and can be ready to propose ways of solving any problems the learners may have.

In the classroom, Little says a communicative approach is more than sufficient for both vocabulary and grammar teaching. In a lexical approach, grammar learning will be inevitable and the “indispensable centre of [any] purposeful learning activity” (p. 120). The teacher can also enhance this multileveled learning in numerous ways: he/she can assign working groups in a way that contains the widest variety of backgrounds so as to elicit the greatest number of grammatical questions, have his/her students create their own concordances, arrange words in clusters according to meaning rather than alphabetically or randomly, or have his/her students create semantic maps and list the various properties of each word in a grid (Little, 1994, p. 120).


Yip seeks to answer the perpetual question in language teaching: is grammar really is a necessary component of any language classroom? She believes that grammar teaching is most appropriate for “certain learners at certain levels” who are attempting to master “certain aspects of grammar” (Yip, 1990, p. 123). The question remains, however, which aspects of grammar call for instruction, and why?
Noticing (i.e. consciousness-raising), a cognitive approach to grammatical instruction, is one method Yip believes can aid in the acquisition of certain structures. Noticing entails focusing on aspects of grammar without using technical jargon or explicit rules; it aims to help students discover structures independently, by focusing on aspects of the target structure. It is different from the communicative approaches, because it explicitly tells learners which structures are not syntactically correct and provides the grammatical corrections (Yip, 1990, p. 124). Despite Krashen's belief that comprehensible input alone is conducive to a language's “learnability,” Yip asserts that input alone is insufficient; a learner needs “negative evidence” to tell him/her that a structure is ungrammatical and/or inappropriate in a certain situation (Yip, 1990, 125). In this article, she demonstrates that consciousness-raising is in fact a useful approach for grammar instruction with the example of teaching ergative verbs, which typically pose a problem in SLA, as evidence.

However, noticing is dependent on certain variables, such as individual differences. Additionally, the learner must be interested in grammar, concerned about form and accuracy, and willing to pay attention; the more one is interested and concerned about the form in question, the more easily the knowledge can be internalized. Furthermore, noticing may only be effective in the teaching of certain structures.

Though noticing may be a powerful way to increase a learner's focus on grammatical structures and I do not doubt its potential, the study presented in this article was of a small size, and was shown to be only relatively effective (Yip, 1990, p. 136). She did not describe noticing activities in depth, which could lead to confusion on the part of teachers on how exactly they raise the consciousness of their learners. Moreover, Yip fails to describe the pattern regarding which structures are most suited to the noticing approach, making incorporation into a teacher's repertoire of methods very unlikely.

This article seeks to answers several questions regarding pedagogical grammar. First, what kind of instruction can a teacher provide to correct or improve writing? Secondly, what source provides the knowledge required for that instruction? Lastly, on what theoretical principle is this knowledge based? (1994, p. 141). He believes that communicative language teaching theory is the solution and that development of L2 grammar arises from successful use of the target language in discourse. In addition, he states that a pedagogical grammar must address how syntactic constructions are employed in speaking (1994, p. 141).

Tomlin argues in favor of functional grammars, which “code or signal linguistic function” that has arisen from communicative interactions (1994, 144). As such, functional grammars embrace communicative language teaching, as acquisition of structures is a result of frequent use. Students are to pay attention to both functional (how grammatically correct and well-formed sentences are composed) and structural (how syntax is actually used in speaking) aspects of language; they must both understand and convey information (Tomlin, 1994, p. 142). Classroom work is based on the contextualized use of language, using authentic situations as a foundation. Both teaching and learning are completely transparent, as content is “made real to the learner” through pictures, drawings, diagrams, and other visual aids (p. 142).

Although some teachers may be able rely on intuition when choosing among alternatives, L2 learners cannot. Because of this discrepancy, teachers need to have explicit knowledge of when certain structures are used so they can communicate these to their learners.

As Hasan and Perrett's “Learning to Function with the Other Tongue: A Systemic Functional Perspective on Second Language Teaching” basically reinforces the emphasis on learning syntax through authentic materials and social interaction, I will exclude it from this review. Furthermore, I
believe it focuses too much about theory and not enough on practical application.

Section 3: Putting Grammar to Work


Master, like the other authors in this anthology, agrees that grammar teaching is indeed crucial. Although some assert that certain structures cannot be taught (Dulay; Burt; Krashen, 1982), Master seems to disagree, and uses English articles, often listed of as one of the most unteachable aspects of the English language, as an example.

He argues that using a systematic approach, virtually any structure can be taught to learners. In this approach, the material is “presented in a hierarchy of manageable segments with continuous building on what has been taught before” (Master, 1994, p. 245). For example, in this study, learners were taught six rules regarding article use over the course of nine weeks: articles may be distinguished by countable-uncountable/singular-plural, by indefinite or definite, by pre-modified or postmodified; by specific or generic; by common noun or proper noun; by idiomatic or non-idiomatic. The first three rules were considered the most salient and therefore received the most attention (p. 238); a foundation was built, which increased the students' self confidence in their ability to move on to the next distinction and rule (Master, 1994, p. 241). Instruction in this way focuses on form either deductively or inductively rather than simply providing comprehensible input. The ultimate goal of this method was to “engage the subjects' cognitive skills in understanding and applying the rules of article usage in a systematic manner” (p. 238).

Students who received systematic instruction in this study showed significant improvement from the pretest to the posttest. Master believes that because many aspects of a system may operate simultaneously, students need an approach which teaches the entire system rather than just pieces of
information about it (p. 245). Once again, he disputes Krashen's idea that comprehensible input is sufficient for acquisition.


In his article, Numan seeks to determine which aspects of language may be introduced at a certain time during the course of acquisition, and which methods are the most conducive to acquisition of these aspects (Numan, 1994, p. 253).

Six developmental stages of L2 learners are typically recognized. In the first stage, learners can produce single words and phrases, learned as chunks. In the second stage, students can produce simple sentences or “strings” of words that follow regular word-order rules. At stage three, learners are able to identify the beginning and ends of strings of elements, and can move elements around in the sentence. At stage 4, learners develop the ability to manipulate elements within the string. Stage five sees learners who can shift elements around in an ordered way within the string. Finally, at stage six, learners can break the elements of the strings into substrings and attach elements of these substrings to other elements. It has been argued that some learners are not at a stage of development in their language learning that will allow them to learn certain items; the “interlanguage [must be] close to the point when the structure to be taught is acquired in the natural setting” (Numan, 1994, p. 257).

In this article, Numan attempts to show that this developmental order can be overridden through correct instruction. Using examples of real-life classroom lessons, he shows that students who are supposedly not at a developmental stage that is conducive to learning “do-insertion” can indeed recognize and produce the correct form if taught in a certain way that is compatible with their developmental stage; for example, learners at the beginning stage may acquire a structure if it is taught as a formula.
This study implies that the recommendations derived research contexts must be separated from genuine classroom contexts. In a real classroom, real-life variables will determine what is “pedagogically feasible and desirable” (Numan, 1994, p. 268). The teacher's overall educational ideology, the learners' expectations and preferences will also affect the curriculum. Once again, the role of classroom teachers is highlighted; they must collect and analyze data from their own classroom contexts and situations to evaluate what may or may not be taught (p. 268). A single pedagogical solution that can be applied to all classrooms simply does not exist.

In his article “The Introspective Hierarchy: A Comparison of Intuitions of Linguists, Teachers, and Learners,” Odlin, like many of the other contributors to this anthology, also tries to present an alternative way of thinking about language teaching. Intuition plays an important role in production of any language; often, we come to conclusions about how to speak “without explicit or conscious processes of reasoned thinking” (Odlin, 1994, p. 271). Although the intuitions of linguists and teachers are often called upon to determine the grammaticality of an utterance, limitations on the abilities of these resources do exist; their judgment is not always reliable (p. 271). For example, due to the large range of dialects that exist (and a teacher's lack of familiarity with these dialects), native speakers and teachers will never agree 100% about what is grammatical or what is acceptable (p. 277). Students are also taught to avoid the passive voice; however, science lectures use this construction heavily (p. 283).

Grammaticality and acceptability are not mutually exclusive or inclusive; an utterance may be grammatical and acceptable, only acceptable, or only grammatical. Context often plays a large role. For example, “The computer is down by 10:00 tomorrow” was judged to be impossible by several linguists. However, “So we agree: the computer is down by 10:00 tomorrow” does not seem ungrammatical to native speakers (p. 285).

This article attempts to raise teacher awareness about the dangers of relying on one's intuition; in doing so, teachers run the risk of having their theories mislead them about “what actually happens in
a language” (Odlin, 1994, p. 277). Although intuitions often underlie explicit knowledge, intuition does not necessarily equal as much (p. 273). If students are told a certain construction does not exist or is impossible only to encounter it later, confusion is inevitable (p. 281). Odlin suggests that acceptability, what native speakers deem as comprehensible, should be stressed over grammaticality, what is deemed as prescriptively accurate (p. 288).


Johns's article is similar to Odlin's in that they are both concerned with how the language is actually spoken rather than what is considered grammatically correct by prescriptive standards. John advocates “data-driven learning” that reflects authentic usage of the language. He believes that much of what we believe to be true about language is actually mythical or distorted, and that our teaching material must be rewritten to match up with corpora (Johns, 1991, p. 296).

Johns concedes that corpora-based teaching may have limitations, as it may have a bias toward written English (particularly that of journalism). However, he also believes that by looking at corpora and concordances, both teachers and students have access to how language is formed (grammar and pronunciation) and how language functions (in writing and in social interactions), in both formal and formal situations. Information-gap activities can easily be created from corpora (Johns, 1991, p. 311), and students can transfer concordance-based skills to other tasks as well (p. 312).

Reflection

This anthology is intended for teachers; however, I am torn on its applicability to the classroom. Often, technical language is used that I believe would be incomprehensible to many teachers without specific prior instruction. Though it is necessary “to understand the principles on which their theory is
based” (Little, 1994, p. 118), and despite the fact that good theories have the potential to be practical, this anthology unfortunately does not present teachers with many techniques for putting these theories to use in the classroom. Furthermore, several of the studies did not present conclusive results that truly made the case for the particular theory they were proposing.

That being said, I believe this book is an important resource for those who do not believe that grammar should be taught explicitly. Krashen's theory that comprehensible input is sufficient for acquisition could be used as a way for teachers to neglect their responsibilities, but this anthology continually reinforces the idea that teachers must devote time to explicitly teaching grammar and places a large emphasis on the importance of the teacher in the classroom. For teachers who do not believe that grammar needs to be taught outright or are not familiar with methods of doing so, this book could be an excellent resource for both dispelling that myth while providing teachers with empirically proven methods of grammar instruction.

References


