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# *Current Issues in the Teaching of Grammar: An SLA Perspective*

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The study of how learners acquire a second language (SLA) has helped to shape thinking about how to teach the grammar of a second language. There remain, however, a number of controversial issues. This paper considers eight key questions relating to grammar pedagogy in the light of findings from SLA. As such, this article complements Celce-Murcia's (1991) article on grammar teaching in the 25th anniversary issue of *TESOL Quarterly*, which considered the role of grammar in a communicative curriculum and drew predominantly on a linguistic theory of grammar. These eight questions address whether grammar should be taught and if so what grammar, when, and how. Although SLA does not afford definitive solutions to these questions, it serves the valuable purpose of problematising this aspect of language pedagogy. This article concludes with a statement of my own beliefs about grammar teaching, grounded in my own understanding of SLA.

This article identifies and discusses a number of key issues relating to the teaching of grammar in a second language (L2) and, by drawing on theory and research in SLA, suggests ways to address these problems. It points to a number of alternative solutions to each problem, indicating that more often than not there are no clear solutions currently available. The aim, therefore, is not to identify new solutions to existing controversies, nor even to present new controversies. Rather it addresses within the compass of a single article a whole range of issues related to grammar teaching, problematises these issues, and by so doing, provides a counterweight to the advocacy of specific, but also quite limited, proposals for teaching grammar that have originated in some SLA quarters. However, I conclude with a statement of my own position on these issues.

The questions that will be addressed are

1. Should we teach grammar, or should we simply create the conditions by which learners learn naturally?
2. What grammar should we teach?

3. When should we teach grammar? Is it best to teach grammar when learners first start to learn an L2 or to wait until later when learners have already acquired some linguistic competence?
4. Should grammar instruction be massed (i.e., the available teaching time be concentrated into a short period) or distributed (i.e., the available teaching time spread over a longer period)?
5. Should grammar instruction be intensive (e.g., cover a single grammatical structure in a single lesson) or extensive (e.g., cover many grammatical structures in a single lesson)?
6. Is there any value in teaching explicit grammatical knowledge?
7. Is there a best way to teach grammar for implicit knowledge?
8. Should grammar be taught in separate lessons or integrated into communicative activities?

## DEFINING *GRAMMAR TEACHING*

Traditionally, grammar teaching is viewed as the presentation and practice of discrete grammatical structures. This is the view promulgated in teacher handbooks. Ur (1996), for example, in her chapter titled "Teaching Grammar" has sections on "presenting and explaining grammar" and "grammar practice activities." Hedge (2000) in her chapter titled "Grammar" similarly only considers "presenting grammar" and "practising grammar." This constitutes an overly narrow definition of grammar teaching. It is certainly true that grammar teaching *can* consist of the presentation and practice of grammatical items. But, as will become apparent, it need not. First, some grammar lessons might consist of presentation by itself (i.e., without any practice), while others might entail only practice (i.e., no presentation). Second, grammar teaching can involve learners in discovering grammatical rules for themselves (i.e., no presentation and no practice). Third, grammar teaching can be conducted simply by exposing learners to input contrived to provide multiple exemplars of the target structure. Here, too, there is no presentation and no practice, at least in the sense of eliciting production of the structure. Finally, grammar teaching can be conducted by means of corrective feedback on learner errors when these arise in the context of performing some communicative task. The definition of grammar teaching that informs this article is a broad one:

*Grammar teaching* involves any instructional technique that draws learners' attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps them either to understand it metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they can internalize it.

## SHOULD WE TEACH GRAMMAR?

This question was motivated by early research into naturalistic L2 acquisition, which showed that learners appeared to follow a natural order and sequence of acquisition (i.e., they mastered different grammatical structures in a relatively fixed and universal order and they passed through a sequence of stages of acquisition on route to mastering each grammatical structure). This led researchers like Corder (1967) to suggest that learners had their own built-in syllabus for learning grammar. In line with this, Krashen (1981) argued that grammar instruction played no role in acquisition, a view based on the conviction that learners (including classroom learners) would automatically proceed along their built-in syllabus as long as they had access to *comprehensible input* and were sufficiently motivated. Grammar instruction could contribute to learning but this was of limited value because communicative ability was dependent on *acquisition*.

There followed a number of empirical studies designed to (a) compare the order of acquisition of instructed and naturalistic learners (e.g., Pica, 1983), (b) compare the success of instructed and naturalistic learners (Long, 1983) and (c) examine whether attempts to teach specific grammatical structures resulted in their acquisition (e.g., White, Spada, Lightbown, & Ranta, 1991). These studies showed that, by and large, the order of acquisition was the same for instructed and naturalistic learners (although there were some interesting differences<sup>1</sup>), that instructed learners generally achieved higher levels of grammatical competence than naturalistic learners and that instruction was no guarantee that learners would acquire what they had been taught. These results were interpreted as showing that the acquisitional processes of instructed and naturalistic learning were the same but that instructed learners progressed more rapidly and achieved higher levels of proficiency. Thus, some researchers concluded (e.g., Long, 1988) that teaching grammar was beneficial but that to be effective grammar had to be taught in a way that was compatible with the natural processes of acquisition.

Subsequent research, such as Norris and Ortega's (2000) meta-analysis of 49 studies, has borne out the overall effectiveness of grammar teaching. Further, there is evidence that, contrary to Krashen's (1993) continued claims, instruction contributes to both acquired knowledge (see Ellis, 2002a) as well as learned knowledge. There is also increasing

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Pica (1983) notes that some structures (e.g., plural-s) were used more accurately by instructed learners and some (e.g., Verb-ing) by naturalistic learners. In other structures (e.g., articles) there was no difference.

evidence that naturalistic learning in the classroom (as, e.g., in immersion programmes) does not typically result in high levels of grammatical competence (Genesee, 1987). In short, there is now convincing indirect and direct evidence to support the teaching of grammar. Nevertheless, doubts remain about the nature of the research evidence. Many studies (including most of those reviewed by Norris and Ortega) measure learning in terms of *constrained constructed responses* (e.g., fill in the blanks, sentence joining, or sentence transformation), which can be expected to favour grammar teaching. There is only mixed evidence that instruction results in learning when it is measured by means of *free constructed responses* (e.g., communicative tasks). Also, it remains the case that learners do not always acquire what they have been taught and that for grammar instruction to be effective it needs to take account of how learners develop their interlanguages. As we will see, there is controversy regarding both how interlanguage development occurs and how instruction can facilitate this.

## WHAT GRAMMAR SHOULD WE TEACH?

Assuming, then, that grammar teaching can contribute to interlanguage development, the next logical question concerns what grammar we should teach. This question can be broken down into two separate questions:

1. What kind of grammar should we base teaching on?
2. Which grammatical features should we teach?

Linguistics affords a broad selection of grammatical models to choose from, including structural grammars, generative grammars (based on a theory of universal grammar), and functional grammars. Traditionally syllabuses have been based on structural or descriptive grammars. Structural syllabuses traditionally emphasised the teaching of form over meaning (e.g., Lado, 1970). Though the influence of structural grammars is still apparent today, modern syllabuses rightly give more attention to the functions performed by grammatical forms. Thus, for example, less emphasis is placed on such aspects of grammar as sentence patterns or tense paradigms and more on the meanings conveyed by different grammatical forms in communication. Some attempt was once made to exploit the insights to be gleaned from generative theories of grammar (see, e.g., Bright, 1965), but in general, syllabus designers and teachers have not found such models useful and have preferred to rely on modern descriptive grammars, such as Celce-Murcia and Larsen-



Freeman's (1999) *Grammar Book*. This resource is especially valuable because it not only provides a comprehensive, clear, and pedagogically exploitable description of English grammar but also identifies the kinds of errors that L2 learners are known to make with different grammatical structures. Such information is important because it helps to identify which structures and which aspects of a structure require special attention. The *Grammar Book* is also ideal in that it presents information not only about linguistic form but also about the semantic and discoursal meanings realised by particular forms. As VanPatten, Williams, and Rott (2004) emphasise, establishing connections between form and meaning is a fundamental aspect of language acquisition. Thus, any reference grammar that fails to describe the form-meaning connections of the target language must necessarily be inadequate. In general, then, the choice of which type of grammar to use as a basis for teaching is not a major source of controversy; descriptive grammars that detail the form-meaning relationships of the language are ascendant.

In contrast, the choice of which grammatical structures to teach is controversial. Two polar positions can be identified and various positions in between. At one end of this continuum is Krashen's minimalist position. Krashen (1982) argues that grammar teaching should be limited to a few simple and portable rules such as 3rd person-*s* and past tense-*ed* that can be used to monitor output from the acquired system. He bases his argument on the claim that most learners are only capable of learning such simple rules—that more complex rules are generally not learnable or, if they are, are beyond students' ability to apply through monitoring. Krashen's claim, however, is not warranted. There is now ample evidence that many learners are capable of mastering a wide range of explicit grammar rules. Green and Hecht (1992), for example, found that university-level students of English in Germany were able to produce clear explanations for 85% of the grammatical errors they were asked to explain, while overall the learners in their study (who included secondary school students) managed satisfactory explanations for 46% of the errors. Macrory and Stone (2000) reported that British comprehensive school students had a fairly good explicit understanding of the perfect tense in French (e.g., they understood its function, they knew that some verbs used *avoir* and some *être*, they were familiar with the forms required by different pronouns, and they were aware of the need for a final accent on the past participle). Hu (2002) found that adult Chinese learners of English demonstrated correct metalinguistic knowledge of prototypical rules of six English structures (e.g., for the definite article *specific reference* constituted the prototypical rule) but were less clear about the peripheral rules for these structures (e.g., *generic reference*).

At the other pole is the comprehensive position: Teach the whole of

the grammar of the target language.<sup>2</sup> This is the position adopted by many course book writers (e.g., Walter & Swan, 1990) or authors of grammar practice materials (e.g., Murphy, 1994). Such a position would also seem unwarranted because learners are clearly capable of learning a substantial amount of the L2 grammar without instruction and because most teaching contexts have limited time available for teaching grammar so some selection is needed.

What then should selection be based on? The answer would seem obvious—the inherent learning difficulty of different grammatical structures. The problem arises in how to determine this. To begin with, it is necessary to distinguish two different senses of *learning difficulty*. This can refer to (a) the difficulty learners have in understanding a grammatical feature and (b) to the difficulty they have in internalising a grammatical feature so that they are able to use it accurately in communication. These two senses relate to the distinction between learning grammar as explicit knowledge and as implicit knowledge, which is discussed later. Clearly, what is difficult to learn as explicit knowledge and as implicit knowledge is not the same. For example, most learners have no difficulty in grasping the rule for English third person-*s* but they have enormous difficulty in internalising this structure so they can use it accurately. These two senses of learning difficulty have not always been clearly distinguished in language pedagogy, with the result that even when the stated goal is the development of implicit knowledge, it is the anticipated difficulty students will have in understanding a feature that guides the selection and grading of grammatical structures. Third person-*s*, for example, is typically taught very early in a course.

How then has learning difficulty been established? Traditionally, factors such as the frequency of specific structures in the input and their utility to learners have been invoked (Mackey, 1976), but these factors would seem to have more to do with use<sup>3</sup> than with inherent cognitive difficulty. Here I consider two approaches that have figured in attempts to delineate cognitive difficulty.

1. Teach those forms that differ from the learners' first language (L1).
2. Teach marked rather than unmarked forms.

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, it is not possible to specify the whole grammar of a language. Though the grammar of a language may be determinate, descriptions of it are certainly not. The Longman *A Grammar of Contemporary English* (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1972) ran to 1081 pages (excluding index and bibliography) but doubtlessly does not account for all the known facts of English grammar. Nevertheless, there is a recognized canon of English structures that, in the eyes of syllabus designers and textbook writers, constitutes the grammar of English.

<sup>3</sup> Structures like English articles that are very frequent in the input can impose considerable learning difficulty. Structures such as English conditionals may be very useful to learners but are also difficult to learn.

The first approach was, of course, the one adopted in many early structural courses based on a contrastive analysis of the learner's L1 and the target language. Although the contrastive analysis hypothesis as initially formulated is clearly not tenable (see Ellis, 1985, chapter 2), SLA researchers still generally agree that learners transfer at least some of the features of their L1 into the L2. For example, there is ample evidence (Trahey & White, 1993) to show that French learners of English produce errors of the kind *Mary kissed passionately John* because French permits an adverb to be positioned between the verb and the direct object. Nevertheless, contrastive analysis does not constitute a sound basis for selecting grammatical structures. In many teaching contexts, the learners come from mixed language backgrounds where it would be impossible to use contrastive analysis to tailor grammar teaching to the entire group because the learners have different L1s. Also, we simply do not yet know enough about when difference does and does not translate into learning difficulty, and in some cases, learning difficulty arises even where there is no difference.

The second approach, however, is also problematic. *Markedness* has been defined in terms of whether a grammatical structure is in some sense frequent, natural, and basic or infrequent, unnatural, and deviant from a regular pattern (Richards, Platt, & Weber, 1985). Thus, the use of an infinitive without *to* following *make*, as in *He made me follow him* can be considered marked because *make* is one of the few verbs in English that takes this kind of complement and because this pattern occurs only infrequently. The general idea is that we should teach the marked features and leave the learners to learn the unmarked forms naturally by themselves. The problem is that, as the definition suggests, markedness remains a somewhat opaque concept, so that it is often difficult to apply with the precision needed to determine which structures to teach.

The selection of grammatical content, then, remains very problematic. One solution to the kinds of problems I have mentioned is to base selection on the known errors produced by learners. In this respect, lists of common learner errors such as those available in Turton and Heaton's (1996) *Longman Dictionary of Common Errors* and Swan and Smith's (2001) *Learner English: A Teacher's Guide to Interference and Other Problems* are helpful.

The problems of selection probably explain why grammatical syllabuses are so similar and have changed so little over the years; it is safer to follow what has been done before. Of course the selection of what to teach will also depend on the learner's stage of development. The problems that the learner's stage of development involve are discussed in subsequent sections.

## WHEN SHOULD WE TEACH GRAMMAR?

There are two competing answers to this question. According to the first, it is best to emphasise the teaching of grammar in the early stages of L2 acquisition. According to the second, it is best to emphasise meaning-focused instruction to begin with and introduce grammar teaching later, when learners have already begun to form their interlanguages. I will briefly consider the arguments for both positions.

A key premise of behaviourist theories of language learning is that “error like sin needs to be avoided at all costs” (Brooks, 1960). This premise holds that once learners have formed incorrect habits, they will have difficulty eradicating them and replacing them with correct habits. Thus, it is necessary to ensure that learners develop correct habits in the first place. This was one of the key premises of the audiolingual method (Lado, 1964). Other arguments can be advanced in favour of beginning to teach grammar early. The alternative to a form-focused approach emphasises meaning and message creation, as in task-based language teaching (Skehan, 1998), but many teachers believe that beginning-level learners cannot engage in meaning-centred activities because they lack the necessary knowledge of the L2 to perform tasks. Thus, a form-focused approach is needed initially to construct a basis of knowledge that learners can then use and extend in a meaning-focused approach. Finally, current connectionist theories of L2 learning, which give primacy to implicit learning processes based on massive exposure to the target language, also provide a basis for teaching grammar to beginners. N. Ellis (2005) has suggested that learning necessarily commences with an explicit representation of linguistic forms, which are then developed through implicit learning. He suggests that teaching grammar early is valuable because it provides a basis for the real learning that follows. This seems to echo Lightbown’s (1991) metaphor, according to which grammar instruction facilitates learning by providing learners with “hooks” which they can grab on to. The idea behind this metaphor is that a conscious understanding of how grammatical features work facilitates the kind of processing (e.g., attention to linguistic form) required for developing true competence.

The argument against teaching grammar early on derives from research on immersion programmes (e.g., Genesee, 1987), which shows that learners in such programmes are able to develop the proficiency needed for fluent communication without any formal instruction in the L2. For example, learners of L2 Spanish do not need to be taught that adjectives follow nouns in this language; they seem to be able to learn this naturalistically from exposure to communicative input (Hughes, 1979). Similarly, learners of L2 English can master simple relative clauses



(e.g., clauses where the relative pronoun functions as subject and the clause is attached to a noun phrase following the verb). There is ample evidence to show that learners can and do learn a good deal of grammar without being taught it. This being so, why bother to teach what can be learned naturally? A second reason for delaying grammar teaching to later stages of development is that early interlanguage is typically agrammatical (Ellis, 1984; Perdue & Klein, 1993). That is, learners rely on a memory-based system of lexical sequences, constructing utterances either by accessing ready-made chunks or by simply concatenating lexical items into simple strings. Ellis (1984) gives examples of such utterances in the early speech of three classroom learners:

*Me no* (= I don't have any crayons)

*Me milkman* (= I want to be the milkman)

*Dinner time you out* (= It is dinner time so you have to go out)

Such pidginised utterances rely heavily on context and the use of communication strategies. They are very effective in simple, context-embedded communication. Arguably, it is this lexicalised knowledge that provides the basis for the subsequent development of the grammatical competence needed for context-free communication. This, then, is a strong argument for delaying the teaching of grammar until learners have developed a basic communicative ability.

In general, I have favoured the second of these positions (see Ellis, 2002b). Given that many classroom learners will not progress beyond the initial stages of language learning, it seems to me that a task-based approach that caters to the development of a proceduralised lexical system and simple, naturally acquired grammatical structures will ensure a threshold communicative ability and, therefore, is to be preferred to an approach that insists on grammatical accuracy from the start and that, as a consequence, may impede the development of this communicative ability. Task-based language teaching is possible with complete beginners if the first tasks emphasise listening (and perhaps reading) and allow for nonverbal responses. However, it is possible that such an approach can be usefully complemented with one that draws beginners' attention to some useful grammatical features (e.g., past tense-*ed* in English) that they might otherwise miss. This is the aim of *input-processing instruction* (VanPatten, 1996, 2003), which is discussed later.

## SHOULD GRAMMAR TEACHING BE MASSED OR DISTRIBUTED?

This question is logically independent of the preceding question. That is, irrespective of when grammar teaching commences, we need to consider whether it should be concentrated into a short period of time or spread over a longer period. Remarkably little research has addressed this question.

The research that has been undertaken reports on the relative effects of massed and distributed language instruction on general language proficiency rather than the effects on grammar learning. Collins, Halter, Lightbown, & Spada (1999) summarise the available research as follows:

None of the language program evaluation research has found an advantage for distributed language instruction. Although the findings thus far lead to the hypothesis that more concentrated exposure to English may lead to better student outcomes, the evidence is not conclusive. (p. 659)

Collins and colleagues then report their own study of three intensive ESL programmes in Canada, one (the distributed programme) taught over the full 10 months of one school year, one (the massed programme) concentrated into 5 months but taught only to above average students, and the third (the massed plus programme) concentrated into 5 months, supplemented with out of class opportunities to use English and taught to students of mixed ability levels. The main finding was that the massed and especially the massed-plus students outperformed the distributed programme students on most of the measures of learning, including some measures of grammatical ability, although this finding might in part be explained by the fact that the massed programmes provided more overall instructional time.

Collins et al.'s study points to the need for further research, especially through studies that compare massed and distributed instruction directed at specific grammatical structures. Ideally such a study would compare short periods of instruction in a particular structure spread over several days with the same amount of instruction compressed into one or two lessons.<sup>4</sup> Received wisdom is that a cyclical approach to grammar teaching (Howatt, 1974) is to be preferred because it allows for the kind of gradual acquisition of grammar that is compatible with what is known about interlanguage development. However, the results of

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<sup>4</sup> Given the problems that arise in controlling extraneous variables in evaluations of entire programmes, it might prove much easier to conduct rigorous studies of massed and distributed learning when these are focused on specific grammatical structures.

Collins et al.'s study suggest, at the very least, that such a position needs to be investigated empirically. Here, then, is an issue about which nothing definitive can be said at the moment.

## SHOULD GRAMMAR TEACHING BE INTENSIVE OR EXTENSIVE?

*Intensive grammar teaching* refers to instruction over a sustained period of time (which could be a lesson or a series of lessons covering days or weeks) concerning a single grammatical structure or, perhaps, a pair of contrasted structures (e.g., English past continuous vs. past simple). *Extensive grammar teaching* refers to instruction concerning a whole range of structures within a short period of time (e.g., a lesson) so that each structure receives only minimal attention in any one lesson. It is the difference between shooting a pistol repeatedly at the same target and firing a shotgun to spray pellets at a variety of targets. Instruction can be intensive or extensive irrespective of whether it is massed or distributed. The massed-distributed distinction refers to how a whole grammar course is staged, while the intensive-extensive distinction refers to whether each single lesson addresses a single or multiple grammatical feature(s).

Grammar teaching is typically viewed as entailing intensive instruction. The present-practise-produce (PPP) model of grammar teaching, which underlies most discussions of grammar teaching in teacher handbooks (see, e.g., Hedge, 2000; Ur, 1996), assumes an intensive focus on specific grammatical structures. Although such discussions acknowledge that learners' readiness to acquire a specific structure limits the effectiveness of teaching (no matter how intensive it is), they also assume that with sufficient opportunities for practice, learners will eventually succeed in automatising the structures they are taught. As Ur says, "the aim of grammar practice is to get students to learn the structures so thoroughly that they will be able to produce them correctly on their own" (p. 83). Thus, the idea that practise makes perfect is the primary justification for the intensive approach. *Practise*, however, must involve both drills and tasks (i.e., opportunities to practice the target structure in a communicative context).

It is perhaps less easy to see how grammar teaching can comprise extensive instruction. A teacher would probably not elect to present and practise a whole range of grammatical structures within a single lesson. Extensive grammar instruction of a kind, however, has always had a place in grammar teaching. Some 30 years ago, while teaching in a secondary school in Zambia, I regularly gave lessons where I illustrated and

explained some of the common errors that I had observed my students making in their written compositions. Similarly, in the context of task-based teaching, some teachers have been observed to note the errors that learners make and then to address them when the task is over (Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004). However, extensive grammar teaching can occur *within* a learning activity, not just as some kind of postscript. Teachers provide corrective feedback in the context of both form-focused and meaning-focused lessons, and although feedback in form-focused lessons may be directed primarily at the structure targeted by the lesson, in the meaning-focused lessons it is likely to be directed at whatever errors learners happen to make. Studies of corrective feedback (e.g., Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001) demonstrate that in communicative lessons a wide variety of grammatical forms are addressed incidentally through corrective feedback.

There is little doubt now that intensive grammar lessons can be effective. Though earlier research showed that learners do not always learn what they are taught, especially when learning is measured in terms of spontaneous production (e.g., Kadia, 1987), more recent research (e.g., Spada & Lightbown, 1999) indicates that even if learners are not ready to learn the targeted structure, intensive grammar teaching can help them progress through the sequence of stages involved in the acquisition of that structure. In other words, teaching a marked structure intensively can help learners learn associated, less marked structures even if it does not result in acquisition of the marked structure. Intensive instruction also helps learners to use structures they have already partially acquired more accurately (e.g., White, Spada, Lightbown, & Ranta, 1991).

There are also theoretical arguments and some empirical evidence in favour of an extensive approach. Cook (1989) has argued from the perspective of universal grammar that learners require minimal evidence to set a particular parameter for the grammar they are learning. Other researchers have emphasised the importance of negative evidence through corrective feedback for grammar learning by adults. Loewen (2002) has shown that even very brief episodes of corrective feedback are related to correctness on subsequent tests. In that study, Loewen identified the errors that teachers addressed incidentally in the context of communicative language teaching and then developed tailor-made tests, which he administered to the learners who made the specific errors either one day or two weeks later. These tests showed that the learners were subsequently often able to identify and correct their own errors.

There are pros and cons for both intensive and extensive grammar instruction. Some structures may not be mastered without the opportunity for repeated practice. Harley (1989), for example, found that anglophone learners of L2 French failed to acquire the distinction



between the preterite and imparfait past tenses after hours of exposure (and presumably some corrective feedback) in an immersion programme but were able to improve their accuracy in using these two tenses after intensive instruction. However, intensive instruction is time consuming (in Harley's study the targeted structures were taught over a 6-month period), and thus, time will constrain how many structures can be addressed. Extensive grammar instruction, on the other hand, affords the opportunity to attend to large numbers of grammatical structures. Also, more likely than not, many of the structures will be addressed repeatedly over a period of time. Further, because this kind of instruction involves a response to the errors each learner makes, it is individualized and affords the skilled teacher real-time opportunities for the kind of contextual analysis that Celce-Murcia (2002) recommends as basis for grammar teaching. However, it is not possible to attend to those structures that learners do not attempt to use (i.e., extensive instruction cannot deal effectively with avoidance). Also, of course, it does not provide the in-depth practise that some structures may require before they can be fully acquired.

Arguably, grammar teaching needs to be conceived of in terms of both approaches. Therefore, grammar teaching needs to be reconceptualised in teacher handbooks to include the kind of extensive treatment of grammar that arises naturally through corrective feedback.

## **IS THERE ANY VALUE IN TEACHING EXPLICIT GRAMMATICAL KNOWLEDGE?**

The distinction between explicit and implicit knowledge was mentioned briefly earlier. *Explicit knowledge* consists of the facts that speakers of a language have learned. These facts are often not clearly understood and may be in conflict with each other. They concern different aspects of language including grammar. Explicit knowledge is held consciously, is learnable and verbalisable, and is typically accessed through controlled processing when learners experience some kind of linguistic difficulty in using the L2. A distinction needs to be drawn between explicit knowledge as analysed knowledge and as metalinguistic explanation. *Analysed knowledge* entails a conscious awareness of how a structural feature works, while *metalinguistic explanation* consists of knowledge of grammatical metalanguage and the ability to understand explanations of rules. In contrast, *implicit knowledge* is procedural, is held unconsciously, and can only be verbalized if it is made explicit. It is accessed rapidly and easily and thus is available for use in rapid, fluent communication. Most SLA researchers agree that competence in an L2 is primarily a matter of implicit knowledge.

Whether there is any value in teaching explicit knowledge of grammar has been and remains today one of the most controversial issues in teaching grammar. To make sense of the different positions relating to the teaching of explicit knowledge, it is necessary to consider three separate questions:

1. Is explicit knowledge of any value in and of itself?
2. Is explicit knowledge of value in facilitating the development of implicit knowledge?
3. Is explicit knowledge best taught deductively or inductively?

I partly addressed the first question when I considered what grammar to teach. I noted that researchers disagree over learners' ability to learn explicit knowledge, with some (e.g., Krashen, 1982) seeing this as very limited and others (e.g., Green & Hecht, 1992) producing evidence to suggest that it is considerable. There is, however, a separate issue related to the first question. This issue concerns the extent to which learners are able to use their explicit knowledge (whatever that consists of) in actual performance. Again, one position is that this ability is limited. Krashen argues that learners can only use explicit knowledge when they *monitor*, which requires that they are focused on form (as opposed to meaning) and have sufficient time to access the knowledge. There is also some evidence that teaching explicit knowledge by itself (i.e., without any opportunities for practising the target feature) is not effective. Studies by VanPatten and Oikarinen (1996) and Wong (2004) indicate that experimental groups that received explicit information alone performed no differently on interpretation and production tests than a control group did. But other positions are also possible. I have argued that explicit knowledge is used in the process of formulating messages as well as in monitoring and that many learners are adroit in accessing their explicit memories for these purposes, especially if the rules are, to a degree, automatised. However, this does require time. Yuan and Ellis (2003) showed that learners' grammatical accuracy improved significantly if they had time for *on-line planning* while performing a narrative task, a result most readily explained in terms of their accessing explicit knowledge.

Irrespective of whether explicit knowledge has any value in and of itself, it may assist language development by facilitating the development of implicit knowledge. This issue is addressed by the second of the two questions. It concerns what has become known as the *interface hypothesis*, which addresses the role explicit knowledge plays in L2 acquisition. Three positions can be identified. According to the *noninterface position* (Krashen, 1981), explicit and implicit knowledge are entirely distinct with the result that explicit knowledge cannot be converted into implicit knowledge. This position is supported by research suggesting that

explicit and implicit memories are neurologically separate (Paradis, 1994). The *interface position* argues the exact opposite. Drawing on skill-learning theory, DeKeyser (1998) argues that explicit knowledge becomes implicit knowledge if learners have the opportunity for plentiful communicative practice. The *weak interface position* (Ellis, 1993) claims that explicit knowledge can convert into implicit knowledge if the learner is ready to acquire the targeted feature and that this conversion occurs by priming a number of key acquisitional processes, in particular *noticing* and *noticing the gap* (Schmidt, 1990). That is, explicit knowledge of a grammatical structure makes it more likely that learners will attend to the structure in the input and carry out the cognitive comparison between what they observe in the input and their own output. These positions continue to be argued at a theoretical level. Although there is plentiful evidence that explicit instruction is effective in promoting L2 learning (e.g., Norris & Ortega, 2000) no published study has directly tested whether explicit knowledge converts directly into implicit knowledge or simply facilitates its development. One reason for the lack of research is the problem of measurement, that is, the difficulty of ascertaining which type of knowledge learners employ when they perform a language task or test.

The three positions support very different approaches to language teaching. The noninterface position leads to a *zero grammar* approach, that is, it prioritizes meaning-centred approaches such as immersion and task-based teaching. The interface position supports PPP—the idea that a grammatical structure should be first presented explicitly and then practised until it is fully proceduralised. The weak interface position also lends support to techniques that induce learners to attend to grammatical features. It has been used to provide a basis for consciousness-raising tasks that require learners to derive their own explicit grammar rules from data they are provided with (Ellis, 1993; Fotos, 1994). It is likely that all three approaches will continue to attract supporters, drawing on different theories of L2 acquisition and citing research that lends indirect support to the preferred approach. It is unlikely that this controversy will be resolved through research in the near future.

The third question assumes there is value in explicit knowledge and addresses how best to teach it. In deductive teaching, a grammatical structure is presented initially and then practised in one way or another; this is the first P in the present-practise-produce sequence. In inductive teaching, learners are first exposed to exemplars of the grammatical structure and are asked to arrive at a metalinguistic generalisation on their own; there may or may not be a final explicit statement of the rule. A number of studies (see Erlam, 2003, for a review) have examined the relative effectiveness of these two approaches to teaching explicit knowledge. The results have been mixed. For example, Herron and Tomosello

(1992) found a clear advantage for inductive instruction, Robinson (1996) found that a deductive approach was more effective, while Rosa and O'Neill (1999) found no significant difference in effectiveness. Erlam's (2003) own study revealed a significant advantage for the group receiving deductive instruction. Perhaps the main lesson to be learned from the research to date is the need for a differentiated approach to both researching and teaching explicit knowledge. It is likely that many variables affect which approach learners benefit most from, including the specific structure that is the target of the instruction and the learners' aptitude for grammatical analysis. Simple rules may best be taught deductively, while more complex rules may best be taught inductively. Learners skilled in grammatical analysis are likely to fare better with an inductive approach than those less skilled.

## IS THERE A BEST WAY TO TEACH GRAMMAR FOR IMPLICIT KNOWLEDGE?

To answer this question it is necessary to identify the instructional options for teaching grammar. I have attempted this in a number of publications (e.g., Ellis 1997, 1998, 2002b).<sup>5</sup> I will consider just two: the difference between input-based and production-based instruction and between different types of corrective feedback.

The case for the input-based option is based on a computational model of L2 acquisition, according to which acquisition takes place as a product of learners comprehending and processing input. Such approaches, when directed at grammar, seek to draw learners' attention to the targeted structure(s) in one or more ways: simply by contriving for numerous exemplars of the structure(s) to be present in the input materials, by highlighting the target structure(s) in some way (e.g., by using bold or italics in written texts), or by means of interpretation tasks (Ellis, 1995) directed at drawing learners' attention to form-meaning mappings. VanPatten (1996, 2003) has developed a version of the input-based option that he calls *input processing instruction*. This is directed at helping learners to overcome the *default processing strategies* that are a feature of interlanguages (e.g., assuming that the first noun in a sentence is always the agent). A case for the output-based option can be found in both skill-building theory (see previous discussion) or in a sociocultural theory of L2 learning, according to which learning arises

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<sup>5</sup> I distinguish between psycholinguistic and methodological options (cf. Ellis, 1998). *Psycholinguistic options* are related to some model of L2 acquisition. *Methodological options* are evident in instructional materials for teaching grammar. Here I consider only psycholinguistic options.



out of social interaction which scaffolds learners' attempts to produce new grammatical structures (Ohta, 2001). A number of studies have compared the relative effectiveness of input-based and production-based instruction, with mixed results, resulting in ongoing debate about the relative merits of these two options (VanPatten, 2002; DeKeyser, Salaberry, Robinson, & Harrington, 2002). It may be that, in classrooms, this comparison is ultimately meaningless because, in practice, both options are likely to involve input-processing and production. For example, it is quite conceivable that in an input-based approach, individual students silently produce the target structure, while in a production-based approach, an utterance produced by one student serves as input for another. It is, therefore, not surprising that both options have been shown to result in acquisition.<sup>6</sup>

There is a rich descriptive literature on corrective feedback (i.e., teacher responses to learner errors) but remarkably few studies have investigated the relative effects of different types of feedback on acquisition. Key options are (a) whether the feedback is implicit or explicit and (b) whether the feedback is input or output based. *Implicit feedback* occurs when the corrective force of the response to learner error is masked, for example, a *recast*, which reformulates a deviant utterance correcting it while keeping the same meaning:

NNS: Why he is very unhappy?

NS: *Why is he very unhappy?*

NNS: Yeah why is very unhappy? (Philp, 2003)

Or, as in this contrived example, a request for clarification:

NNS: Why he is very unhappy?

NS: *Sorry?*

NNS: Why is he very unhappy?

*Explicit feedback* takes a number of forms, such as direct correction or metalinguistic explanation. There is some evidence that explicit feedback is more effective in both eliciting the learner's immediate correct use of the structure and in eliciting subsequent correct use, for example, in a post-test (Carroll & Swain 1993; Lyster 2004). But some evidence and

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<sup>6</sup> There is also controversy regarding how to measure the effectiveness of these two (and other) instructional options. Norris and Ortega (2000) have shown that the effectiveness of instruction varies depending on whether it is measured using metalinguistic judgements, selected response, constrained constructed response, or free constructed response. Most SLA researchers (and teachers, too, perhaps) would consider the last of these the most valid measure. Ellis (2002a) reviewed a number of studies that examined the effects of different kinds of instruction on learners' free constructed responses, reporting that instruction can have an effect on this type of language use.

some strong theoretical reasons exist to support implicit feedback (see Long 1996, in press). Indeed, this type of feedback is more compatible with the focus-on-form approach discussed earlier because it ensures that learners are more likely to stay focused on meaning. However, as Muranoi (2000) notes, implicit feedback is probably more effective when it is targeted intensively at a preselected form than when it occurs extensively in incidental focus on form. In the latter, explicit attention to form may be more effective.

*Input-based feedback* models the correct form for the learner (e.g., by means of a recast). *Output-based feedback* elicits production of the correct form from the learner (e.g., by means of a request for clarification). Again, there is disagreement about the relative effectiveness of these two feedback options and no clear evidence for choosing between them. Some descriptive studies have shown that output-based feedback is more likely to lead to learners correcting their own initial erroneous utterances in what is referred to as *uptake*. However, uptake is not the same as acquisition.

In short, although considerable progress has been made toward identifying those instructional options that are likely to be of psycholinguistic significance, as yet, few conclusions can be drawn about which ones are the most effective for acquisition. It is possible to point to studies and theoretical arguments that suggest that each of the major options discussed can contribute to acquisition.

## SHOULD GRAMMAR BE TAUGHT IN SEPARATE LESSONS OR INTEGRATED INTO COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES?

In Ellis (2001) I considered three broad types of form-focused instruction, as shown in Table 1. "Focus on forms" refers to instruction involving a structure-of-the-day approach, where the students' primary focus is on form (i.e., accuracy) and where the activities are directed intensively at a single grammatical structure. This approach, then, involves teaching grammar in a series of separate lessons. *Focus on form* entails a focus on meaning with attention to form arising out of the communicative activity. This focus can be *planned*, where a focused task is required to elicit occasions for using a predetermined grammatical structure, as, for example, in Samuda (2001). In this approach, attention to the predetermined grammatical structures will also be intensive. Alternatively, focus on form can be *incidental*, where attention to form in the context of a communicative activity is not predetermined but rather occurs in accordance with the participants' linguistic needs as the activity

**TABLE 1**  
**Types of Form-Focused Instruction**

Type	Primary Focus	Distribution
1. Focus on forms	Form	Intensive
2. Planned focus on form	Meaning	Intensive
3. Incidental focus on form	Meaning	Extensive

*Note.* This table is adapted from Ellis (2001, p. 17).

proceeds. In this approach, it is likely that attention will be given to a wide variety of grammatical structures during any one task and thus will be extensive. Focus on form implies no separate grammar lessons but rather grammar teaching integrated into a curriculum consisting of communicative tasks.

There is considerable theoretical disagreement regarding which of these types of instruction is most effective in developing implicit knowledge. Long (1988, 1991) and Doughty (2001) have argued strongly that focus on form is best equipped to promote interlanguage development because the acquisition of implicit knowledge occurs as a result of learners attending to linguistic form at the same time they are engaged with understanding and producing meaningful messages. Other researchers, however, have argued that a focus-on-forms approach is effective. DeKeyser (1998), for example, has argued that grammatical structures are learned gradually through the automatization of explicit knowledge and that this can be achieved by means of a focus-on-forms approach. This approach acknowledges the value of teaching explicit knowledge and subsequently proceduralising it by means of activities (drills and tasks) that practise *behaviours* (i.e., involve meaning) rather than *structures*. It is worth noting, however, one point of agreement in these different positions: Instruction needs to ensure that learners are able to connect grammatical forms to the meanings they realise in communication. So far, the debate has addressed the difference between focus on form and focus on forms. There has been little discussion of the relative merits of planned and incidental focus on form. In effect, this discussion would involve a consideration of whether instruction should be intensive or extensive, a question we have already considered.

## CONCLUSION

Grammar has held and continues to hold a central place in language teaching. The zero grammar approach was flirted with but never really

took hold, as is evident in both the current textbook materials emanating from publishing houses (e.g., Whitney & White, 2001) and in current theories of L2 acquisition. There is ample evidence to demonstrate that teaching grammar works.

Although there is now a clear conviction that a traditional approach to teaching grammar based on explicit explanations and drill-like practice is unlikely to result in the acquisition of the implicit knowledge needed for fluent and accurate communication, there continues to be disagreement regarding what should replace this. It seems appropriate, then, to finish with a statement of my own beliefs about grammar teaching, acknowledging that many of them remain controversial:

1. The grammar taught should be one that emphasises not just form but also the meanings and uses of different grammatical structures.
2. Teachers should endeavour to focus on those grammatical structures that are known to be problematic to learners rather than try to teach the whole of grammar.
3. Grammar is best taught to learners who have already acquired some ability to use the language (i.e., intermediate level) rather than to complete beginners. However, grammar can be taught through corrective feedback as soon as learners begin to use the language productively.
4. A focus-on-forms approach is valid as long as it includes an opportunity for learners to practise behaviour in communicative tasks.
5. Consideration should be given to experimenting with a massed rather than distributed approach to teaching grammar.
6. Use should be made of both input-based and output-based instructional options.
7. A case exists for teaching explicit grammatical knowledge as a means of assisting subsequent acquisition of implicit knowledge. Teaching explicit knowledge can be incorporated into both a focus-on-forms and a focus-on-form approach. In the case of a focus-on-forms approach, a differentiated approach involving sometimes deductive and sometimes inductive instruction may work best.
8. An incidental focus-on-form approach is of special value because it affords an opportunity for extensive treatment of grammatical problems (in contrast to the intensive treatment afforded by a focus-on-forms approach).
9. Corrective feedback is important for learning grammar. It is best conducted using a mixture of implicit and explicit feedback types that are both input based and output based.



10. In accordance with these beliefs, grammar instruction should take the form of separate grammar lessons (a focus-on-forms approach) and should also be integrated into communicative activities (a focus-on-form approach).

Many (if not all) of these statements are open to challenge. They constitute a personal interpretation of what the research to date has shown. It may also seem that I am hedging my bets by encompassing a wide number of options and that I am suggesting that anything goes. It is certainly true that I do not believe (and do not think the research demonstrates) that there is just one preferred approach to teaching grammar. The acquisition of the grammatical system of an L2 is a complex process and almost certainly can be assisted best by a variety of approaches. But what is important is to recognize what options are available, what the theoretical rationales for these options are, and what the problems are with these rationales. This is the starting point for developing a personal theory of grammar teaching.

The fact that so much controversy exists points to the need for more research. One of the greatest needs is for research that addresses to what extent and in what ways grammar instruction results in implicit knowledge. Ideally, this would require methods of measuring acquisition that tap into learners' ability to use the grammatical structures they have been taught in communication (especially oral communication). Studies that employ such methods are still few and far between. Another need is for longitudinal studies that investigate the effects of instruction over time. Although most recently published studies include delayed post-tests, they typically incorporate instructional treatments of a relatively short duration. Longitudinal studies that employ qualitative as well as quantitative methods will help to show not just if there is a delayed effect for instruction but also its accumulative effect. The effects of corrective feedback, for example, are most likely to become evident gradually when learners are repeatedly exposed to feedback on the same grammatical structures. Further research, even if it does not succeed in providing clear-cut answers to the questions raised in this article, will deepen our understanding of the issues involved and afford better defined provisional specifications (Stenhouse, 1975), which teachers can experiment with in their own classrooms.

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