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TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR AND CRISP PEANUT BUTTER SANDWICHES

Review by Thomas S. C. Farrell

INTRODUCTION

In many countries around the world, the method of teaching English has changed over the years from an emphasis on overt grammar instruction in the past to a more communicative approach in recent times. This communicative approach to the teaching of English suggests the omission of grammar teaching in favor of achieving proficiency in English through communicative type activities in class.

This is the case in Singapore too. The Ministry of Education in Singapore states: "*Grammar should not, as far as possible, be taught in discrete sentences nor treated in isolation from other language components*" (MOE Syllabus 1999, p. 61). However, some people (administrators, parents, students) have not been comfortable with this abandoning of overt grammar instruction and as such, have voiced complaints about the continued presence of grammar errors in students' work, especially English writing where they would be visible. Now there seems to be a movement in some countries to question this communicative approach to teaching English (and in some cases a call for a re-introduction of grammar instruction) in that students are still making grammar mistakes and this may be linked to lack of explicit instruction in grammar. Language teaching has seen many swings in approaches such as this: teach grammar, do not teach grammar; and teachers are being advised to follow each swing. However, the ideas presented in this paper

are such that teachers can implement a combined approach to the teaching of English grammar that takes both swings into consideration.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly review some literature on the teaching of English grammar and then suggest a method of teaching English grammar that integrates both an inductive and a deductive approach. The paper first starts with a question of why we teach grammar; next, the paper presents a brief review of the literature on grammar teaching. Finally, an integrated approach to the teaching of English grammar that is CRISP is presented.

WHY TEACH GRAMMAR?

Before answering the question why teach grammar, I will first define what I mean by grammar. This paper uses Cross's definition of grammar as "*the body of rules which underlie a language.*" This includes rules that govern the structure of words and the structure of clauses and sentences "*that are acceptable to educated native speakers*" (Cross 1991, p.26) - in this case, educated native speakers of English.

The most common reason for teaching grammar as a system for analyzing and labeling sentences has been to accomplish some practical aim or aims, typically the improvement of writing or speaking. For decades, however, research has demonstrated that the teaching of grammar

rarely accomplishes such practical goals. Relatively few students learn grammar well, fewer retain it, and still fewer transfer the grammar they have learned to improving or editing their writing. In fact, for many students, the systematic study of grammar is not even particularly helpful in avoiding or correcting errors, yet we still 'feel' that if we do not teach grammar overtly, then our students will make grammar mistakes. Also, if we teach them grammar they will not make mistakes. When will we learn as teachers (and parents) that, even though some students may be helped by overt grammar instruction, this nevertheless may do more harm than good in the long run?

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

The literature on teaching English grammar is vast and as such beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore I will review the literature on two approaches to the teaching of English grammar, the inductive and the deductive approach. Shaffer (1989, p. 395) defines an **inductive approach** to teaching grammar as one "*in which the students' attention is focused on the structure being learned and the students are required to formulate for themselves the underlying pattern*". She defines a **deductive approach** to teaching grammar as one "*where, regardless of the timing relative to the practice part of the lesson, students are given an explanation*" (p. 396).

Deductive teaching of grammar, then, refers to giving the students rules of the grammar item before they are given examples in actual usage. According to Shaffer (1989) students should try to infer grammar rules from examples instead of being told explicitly what the rules are. This inductive

approach supports work done in cognitive research which has shown "that discovering rather than being told underlying patterns favorably affects retention" (Shaffer, 1989 p. 401). Also, Willis (1986) says that the best way to teach grammar is not by teaching it at all but by providing students with opportunities to learn it. This focus on opportunities reinforces the notion of end use in meaningful situations. Additionally, Celcia-Murcia (1991) has pointed out that grammar is a tool or resource to be used in the comprehension of oral and written discourse rather than something to be learned as an end in itself.

However, there is a body of research that supports the need for an **explicit**, or **deductive** study of grammar and this is borne out by empirical research performed by Harley, 1989; Scott, 1989; Scott, 1990, and Shaffer, 1989. Scott (1989, 1990) found that explicit grammar teaching of structures results in improved recall and production of those structures on tests that target the particular grammar points studied. Furthermore, Scott (1990) found that implicit grammar instruction through which students listen to grammatical structures repeated in a natural context does not promote learning of these target structures. Larsen-Freeman (1991) cautions teachers about jumping on the bandwagon of pointing to the communicative approach as the answer to all language teaching problems. She writes: "*We used to think that if students learned the form, communication would somehow take care of itself. Now we seem to think that if students somehow learn to communicate, mastery of the forms will take care of itself*" (p. 319). In fact, Richards (1985, cited in Celcia-Murcia, 1991) points out that there is no evidence that the communicative approach produces better



Sam Cheah

language students than more traditional approaches that focus on form. So, where does this leave the confused teacher of English? It is the thesis of this paper that both approaches can be integrated into an approach where student attention “*is focused on grammatical structure used in context so that students can consciously perceive the underlying patterns involved*” (Shaffer, 1989 p. 395). It is with this in mind that I present the CRISP peanut approach to the teaching of English grammar in the next section.

CLASSROOM APPLICATION

Teaching grammar with the ‘peanut butter sandwich approach’ follows Brown’s (1994 p. 349) ideas that “appropriate grammar focusing techniques should be embedded in meaningful, communicative contexts; contribute positively to communicative goals; promote accuracy with fluent communicative language; do not overwhelm students with linguistic terminology; are lively and intrinsically motivating”. Also this approach takes up Schrum & Glisan’s (1994) concept of

‘guided participation’ where teachers and learners are the collaborators in co-constructing grammar explanations.

Method

During the course of the lesson the teacher:

1. takes out a jar of peanut butter and a knife and two slices of bread;
2. puts peanut butter on the knife and then on one side of one of the slices of bread;
3. asks the class what he/she is doing, thus practising the present continuous tense and the class answers;
4. then asks the class what he/she just did, thus practising the past tense and the class answers;
5. goes on to make a sandwich always stopping to ask what he/she was doing and what he/she just did, reinforcing the meaning of the present continuous tense and the past tense rather than teaching these tenses explicitly as is usual in many English classes.

When the teacher is finished, he/she gives out a handout (see Appendix A) for the students to answer. This handout can then be used as a diagnostic device and/or a means of ‘teaching’ tenses from meaning. I have done this in my Grammar Module Classes for Secondary English teachers and believe me nobody was sleeping! At the end of the exercise the teacher may eat the sandwich in class. Homework can be for the students to bring in the ingredients of their favorite sandwich and go through the same steps outlined above in pairs to practise whatever tenses or items of grammar the teacher wants to teach.

The CRISP Approach

This approach is also ‘**CRISP**’ (English Unit, MOE, 1995, p. 10). It is:

Clear;
Relevant;
Interesting;
Short;
Productive.

- The presentation of the sandwich by using actual bread and peanut butter and making a sandwich in class is **Clear**. The students do not have much difficulty understanding what you are doing or how to answer the questions.
- It is also **Relevant** to the students although I cannot say for sure that all students will have tasted and liked these

sandwiches. I can say, however, that no student will sleep in the class when the teacher starts taking out bread, a knife and some peanut butter.

- Even the student with his/her head surgically attached to the wall will move when the teacher starts to make a sandwich in class and then eats it. So, this is **Interesting**. The whole process takes between ten to fifteen minutes. Therefore it is **Short**.
- It is also **Productive** as the students fill in the worksheet after the event of making a sandwich. It will be even more productive if they can duplicate the process for making their favourite sandwich, which can be assigned for homework. Therefore, success of this activity is when the students are able to use grammar outside the class, and not in “*their score on discrete-point grammar tests*” (Brown, 1994 p. 353).

FURTHER IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH

It seems that we will always have a certain amount of controversy when the issue of teaching English grammar comes up. The teaching of grammar is usually done in reaction to students’ errors—if you teach grammar overtly then the students will make fewer mistakes—is the reasoning behind this statement. However, at the very least, teaching students rules and correcting their every error does not help a language learner avoid errors. At worst, it can impede language production because this attention on errors makes the student focus on form at the expense of communication.

Teachers may combine both approaches by presenting grammar points inductively and by using authentic materials and visuals which involve the students directly. Thus grammar explanation can be *interactive* and *meaningful* as in the ‘peanut butter sandwich approach’. The most important aspect of this approach is where teachers and learners according to Shrum & Glisan (1994 p. 92) “*collaborate on and co-construct the grammar explanations*” and therefore both contribute to the success of the lesson.

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