SOME IDEAS FOR TEACHING GRAMMAR MORE EFFECTIVELY IN AN EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract

Most teachers in an EFL context place a great importance on grammar and see their primary function as reducing their students' grammar errors. While ignoring the value of this attitude, this article sets out to show how teachers' view of grammar is limiting and their approach to teaching grammar (PPP lesson plan and a strong emphasis on grammar production) generates unsatisfactory results. The article then goes on to show how we actually learn grammar through noticing language patterns, noticing-the-gaps, and production, then shows how making hypotheses and testing their validity with authentic texts, building systems to record language patterns and collocations, extensive reading, and scaffolding are the keys to learning grammar. Yet, they are not part of the PPP equation nor are they included in most teachers' language-teaching routines. It is suggested that these elements along with a more task-based approach could provide useful alternatives. The first part of this article provides some of the theoretical underpinnings, and the remainder looks at some effective techniques for their implementation and some important implications made by these underpinnings and their application in large classes of Indonesian EFL students.

Keywords: collocations, extensive reading, grammar of orientation, grammar of structure, notice-the-gaps, noticing, pattern grammar, PPP lesson plan, production-practice, scaffolding, task-based approach.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most frustrating things for teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is that no matter how hard we try, no matter how much time we spend, or how much drilling we do, our students never seem to remember all of the grammar we teach them. And some aspects of grammar, they just simply never seem to get (Allen, 2004; Willis D., 2003).

As we gain more experience, we can more accurately predict what grammar points and what aspects of a given grammar point are going to challenge our students. Our skills of explaining grammar become more refined, but we do not necessarily help students produce more grammatically accurate sentences.

Our students' difficulties have two important implications. First, it shows us that grammar is a very complex thing. It is easy to get the impression by looking at our textbook that a grammar point—such as the present simple—is actually simple. We just use the base form of the verb if the subject is *I, we, you*, or *they,* or we add an "-s" if the subject is *he* or *she.* Simple and easy to memorize! And although our students may be able to recite the rule: add "-s" after the verb if the subject is 3rd person singular— they still do not get it. They cannot use it. They still say "She study English." In fact, they never really seem to master it (Larsen-Freeman, 2003; Willis, 2003).

The second implication is how we view our job. When asked what an EFL teacher thinks is really an important part of their job, most will quickly respond—grammar. When their students are asked what aspect of learning English is the most important, they will also respond—grammar! But when we dig deeper and ask students how they know if their grammar is good, they logically say, "if we make only a few mistakes, our grammar is good." Teachers have a similar perspective. They spend most of their energy in trying to get students to reduce their grammar errors as much as possible. In fact, I think it is safe to say that most teachers have a very clear teaching objective—reduce the number of grammar mistakes their students make (Allen, 2004; Willis D., 2003).

This article sets out to explain why students continue to make grammar mistakes and how we can help them make fewer mistakes. It will start by explaining that there are actually three types of grammar, then it will move to demonstrating how we typically teach grammar. Next, it will go on to point out some of the problems with how we (and our course books) treat grammar in light of what we have previously learned. Finally, it will make some suggestions how this can be overcome by noticing, noticing the gaps, system building, extensive reading, and scaffolding.

THREE TYPES OF GRAMMAR

Grammar of Structure

Grammar of structure refers to the way words and phrases are sequenced to make larger units. At its simplest level, the study of grammatical structure is getting the parts of the sentence in the right order.

Strangely enough, most course books, with the exception of academic writing books, totally ignore it. It is never taught either explicitly nor is it the focus of implicit instruction. It is assumed that students will magically pick it up. Students do learn it, but there are many parts of grammar of structure that they have difficulty mastering using the materials and curriculums commonly utilized today (Willis D., 2003, pp. 69-93).

Grammar of structure provides us with powerful rules that explain a lot of mistakes that our students make. In many Asian languages, such as Thai and Japanese, EFL teachers commonly find their students saying:

"Raining now" to mean "It is raining."

These languages do not require subjects in their clauses if the subject is already obvious. So Thai students may continue to say "raining now" even at the Pre-Intermediate or Intermediate level, because there is no equivalent for "it" in Thai. Similarly, at the phrase level we will encounter problems. "Pencil big is mine." The English noun phrase follows the pattern (determiner) + (adjective[s]) + noun. So a Thai student will commonly forget to use "the", "a", or "an" as they are not part of Thai.

Since teachers commonly are concerned about reducing the number of grammatical errors their students make, they might ask: What's wrong? These are simple rules, so why do my students continue to make these mistakes?

The answer to this perplexing question lies in how our brains work. Our brains can only allow us to perform a certain amount of conscious language work at any given time. When we communicate, we have to devote a certain amount of our attention to getting our message across, so it is common that we make grammar mistakes, as we do not have enough attention to spare. We have to sacrifice grammatical accuracy to communicate our message. To make matters worse, all this grammar gymnastics has to occur within a split second as we have the pressure of real-time spontaneous speech to deal with. And this does not include pronunciation or body-language issues either (Lewis, 1993; Thornbury, 2001).

Grammar of Orientation

A second type of grammar, and one which is already familiar, is grammar of orientation. When teachers think of grammar, they are in fact often thinking of grammar of orientation. Grammar of orientation deals with the verb system, articles, determiners, etc. These things all show how one part of a sentence is related (or oriented) to other parts of the sentence

and to the rest of what we are saying or writing. The English verb system, for example, is built primarily to express time relationships. In other words, it helps the speaker orient how one event occurs in relation to other events (Willis D., 2003).

We spend a tremendous amount of time teaching grammar of orientation. No surprise, it is the most illusive and challenging part of learning grammar. When we open our textbook, and we "teach the present continuous", we find the grammar explanations to be nice, short, and memorable. But in fact, these grammar rules are only half truths. In our textbook, we find rules like: "the present continuous is used to describe actions occurring now." However, we know that present continuous can also describe actions which are temporary or actions that may occur in the future. The problem is that if we are to thoroughly describe a given verb tense, we would have to give our students too much information. Therefore, we give our students parts of the rule with the hope that they learn these and later are able to put all the pieces together to build up a complete grammar system (Thornbury, 2001, pp. 43-57). This is the assumption that most textbooks, curriculums and many teaching methodologies are based on. However, it has one problem: it does not work very well. The proof is that although we have spent many hours teaching the present simple, for example, our students still make mistakes.

Students do eventually become able to master the verb system with all of its intricacies and subtle differences, but it takes time—a lot of time. Those students who eventually do grasp it, normally do not do the actual "mastering" in our classrooms. They do it after our course has finished. When we meet these students years later, we proudly claim them to be the successful learners of English, because they can produce sentences with very few mistakes. But when you stop to think about it; this is really frightening! In most cases, those few students who have become competent and proficient users of English do so AFTER they have finished our course. They "mastered" the language outside of the classroom, without our help. In most cases they have become proficient in English by living abroad for a few years, by working for an international company for some years—where they had to use English on the job eight hours a day, five days a week, 310 days a year—or they are simply bookworms, who spend hundreds, if not thousands, of hours reading in English on their own. But we all know that most of our students will never have the opportunity to live abroad, work in an English environment, and are certainly not bookworms.

To my mind, this phenomenon is scary. It implies our students really master English without our help. What separates the "successful" students from the "unsuccessful" ones? The successful ones have had massive exposure to English—through reading and/or listening—and over

the years they subconsciously are able to figure out the intricate and small differences of grammar of orientation.

Does this mean it is impossible for us to teach grammar of orientation, the subtle differences between 2nd and 3rd conditionals, or the differences between present perfect and past simple, for example? There are ways to do this, but before attempting to examine them, let us move on to the third type of grammar—pattern grammar.

Pattern Grammar

Pattern grammar deals with how certain words commonly bond with other words in predictable patterns. "*I wonder if* you understood that last sentence." It expressed a difficult idea (Willis D., 2003, pp.142-167).

Make a list of words that can fill this blank:
I wonder _____

Your list is likely to include:

If	I wonder **if** you understood that last sentence.
Why	I wonder **why** you didn't understand it.
What	I wonder **what** the teacher is trying to do.
Where	I wonder **where** this is all going.
When	I wonder **when** this will end….it's driving me crazy

Similarly, you may realize that it is grammatically incorrect to slot in:

Her	I wonder her name [wrong]	I wonder what her name is
The rain	I wonder the rain will stop [wrong]	I wonder when the rain will stop.
Banana	I wonder bananas are green [wrong]	I wonder why bananas are green.
Slept	I wonder she slept [wrong]	I wonder if she slept.
Etc.		

Notice that the types of words that can fill the blank in "I wonder _____" are quite limited. It is mainly *Wh-* Question words or *If* clauses. As you can see, the expression—"I wonder _____"—is actually a pattern with highly predictable usage.

Let us look at another example. Here is a group of verbs called *double object verbs* because they are followed by two nouns.

He / handed / me / some money.
We / sent / you / a message.
She / brought / John / a cup of coffee.
I / will read / you / a story.

These can be grouped as follows:
Group A   **give/send**: give, offer, hand
Group B   **bring**: bring, get, buy
Group C   **ask/tell**: ask, tell, read, teach

The significance of pattern grammar cannot be over emphasized. These patterns, as well as others governing how words combine with other words to form common expressions or phrases, make up a tremendous amount of our discourse.   A lot of the words native speakers use in a given conversation, presentation, or writing either follow patterns or form phrases. The percentage can reach over 30% for spoken English and over 50% for written English. Furthermore, their use helps us to sound more like native speakers. Yet, we rarely find these patterns taught either explicitly or implicitly in our teaching materials or in our curriculums (Lewis, 1993, 1998, 2000).

So far we have seen how grammar really can be divided into three types, yet we typically only concentrate on one type—grammar of orientation. Now I would like to examine how we typically teach grammar; and in light of what we have just covered, some questions should come to mind.

HOW WE TYPICALLY TEACH GRAMMAR

Most course books and teachers still follow the PPP formula for teaching grammar. Presentation is the first step—the first P. In this stage, grammar is presented, normally in context, and the rules are either explicitly given or implicitly derived by students working through a set of guided questions. This has a few important implications. The first is that grammar is learned in a carefully sequenced order and students cannot progress to step Y until mastering step X. Any seasoned teacher knows that this is certainly not the case. Grammar acquisition is somewhat orderly, but students will often not master a particular grammar point until a few chapters or terms after they have first encountered it. That is to say, students do not acquire grammar as a set of "accumulated entities", rather they work on a number of grammar features simultaneously, often subconsciously. In the process, they acquire grammar by approximation. They either consciously or unconsciously come up with a hypothesis, test

that hypothesis, then either confirm it or restructure it. Gradually they become more accurate. In the meantime, they develop interlanguage systems—language systems that are over-generalized and not completely accurate. Grammar development is to a large extent developing these interlanguage systems (Ellis, 1997; Willis, 1996).

But the question arises: Will students gradually pick up the grammar without the help of formal explicit grammar teaching? They will, but explicit grammar teaching speeds up the learning process. However, it is only helpful when students are ready to acquire it. That is, students progress through a sequence, and when they are ready, they will gain control over those grammar features which they are ready for. For example, students quickly learn simple sentences, such as "John plays football on Fridays." They quickly identify the structure of the sentence: subject + verb + object + time phrase. But some features remain difficult for them to master; in this case, adding an "s" to the verb "play". There is a simple rule to explain it, but students often do not produce this grammar point correctly until they reach the intermediate or upper intermediate level, even though they are taught it at the beginning/elementary level. The reason is that this feature (i.e. verb –s for 3rd person singular present simple verbs) may be missing in their own language. Thus, they have to consciously apply this rule when speaking, but the pressures of getting their message across in real-time communication make this hard. Another possibility is that the utterance "John play football on Fridays", although wrong, is understandable. Therefore, students can get by without having to use completely accurate grammar (Thornbury, 1999).

Will students ever correct these types of errors on their own? Over time, explicit grammar teaching will begin to show benefits. A number of researchers have shown that formal grammar instruction may contribute towards learning in two ways. First, through practice it can convert into the kind of implicit knowledge necessary for communication (Interface Hypothesis). The other possibility is that it may have a delayed effect by bringing to the students' attention the features of a given grammar point, which they may draw upon later when they are ready to acquire those features (Delayed-Effect Hypothesis). Other studies have shown that students who have been taught the rules eventually acquire the language better than those who were not taught the rules. But interestingly enough, students learn grammar by first trying it, often while performing a given communication task, then focusing their attention to the form.

In a sense, this calls into question the traditional PPP formula. The second "P" in this formula is practice—controlled practice of the grammar point—with the hope that students will soon internalize it and make it part of their implicit knowledge. But as shown, students often "pick up" the

grammar after a) attempting to use it, b) noticing their mistake (noticing-the-gap), or c) noticing that native speakers would say it differently. It is at this point (i.e. b or c) where they can refer to the rule, which they have undoubtedly come across in their previous lessons, and draw upon it for self-correction and self-monitoring. At first, this correction will be slow, but gradually they will automatize it so that they can apply the rule in real time.

This brings us to the last "P"—practice. This is the part of the chapter or lesson where the students use what they know to communicate with a special emphasis on fluency. Practice is necessary. In fact, most of our students, particularly in an EFL context, will never gain enough practice to enable satisfactory language development. By practicing, students come to automatize the language, which in turn will lead to durable changes in their interlanguage systems—finally making their grammar production more accurate in real time.

The PPP approach takes a very simplistic linear approach and assumes that learning occurs in this fashion. A way that is more in line with how we actually acquire grammar resembles a sandwich more than a line. This alternative involves three steps. First, we get students to a) use the grammar in a communicative task and then to notice-the-gaps in their performance compared to a more proficient model or b) notice how grammar works in authentic materials. Then, we move on to the actual grammar "teaching" by either providing students the rule or facilitating their discovery of it. Finally, we have our students again attempt the same task (or a similar one) and try applying what they have learned. This approach is a sandwich in that the grammar is lodged in the middle of two practice sessions, the first designed to notice-the-gap and the second to practice producing the grammar.

WAYS OF SUPPLEMENTING AND ADAPTING GRAMMAR TREATMENT IN A COURSE BOOK

If we look at how our course book or our lessons teach grammar overall, we are bound to notice that they put a lot of emphasis on production. That is, we give our students rules and the majority of the time they use the rules to produce language (through speaking or writing exercises, drills, and activities). This language production will vary, covering a continuum starting with easy, close-ended activities, extending to more challenging, open-ended ones, called communication activities.

Notice the Gap

This leads to an important question: What is the mechanism by which these production-practice activities lead to grammar learning? They are based on the premise that students, while producing language with target grammar features, will notice their mistakes. This can occur in two ways: negotiating meaning and noticing differences in how they express themselves and how native speakers do so. By nature, communication activities may pose students problems in completing the task because they do not understand each other. In order to understand each other, i.e. to communicate, they have to enter into a negotiation process, often relying upon communication strategies (e.g. clarification devices "What do you mean?", checking devices "Is that right? Do you get it?", repetition devices, "Say that again, please," etc.). Through this negotiation, the speakers will note how they differ in trying to express a similar idea. At this point, if it is not clear that one of them is wrong, they could elicit help from the teacher. Another way for them to notice their mistakes is by hearing or reading a native speaker express an idea and noting how the native speaker expresses himself differently. They then compare their versions with the native speaker's, often later with the use of resources (i.e. dictionary, teacher, grammar book, etc.). Theoretically, this new awareness may stick, and they will notice further differences and act on them (i.e. self correct). Together these two methods enable students to notice the gaps between their present level and their target level. This noticing-the-gap, it is believed, will lead to learning.

Noticing

Another type of noticing also plays a key role in grammar acquisition. Students can notice how native speakers use language while speaking/writing to communicate. This type of noticing occurs, not by comparing his own output with that of a native speaker, but by focusing on input, during reading or listening. It is at this juncture, where greater opportunities lie for language development. A given teacher can select articles and devise activities around them that cause the students to notice salient features of language use (either grammar of structure, grammar of orientation, or pattern grammar). This is relatively easy and can accommodate a great number of students at once. But trying to get students to notice differences between their own output and that of native speakers is more difficult. It is much more personal, specific, and it must be done in real time; furthermore, the teacher cannot control what the students will say.

It is not useless, but it is difficult to successfully bring about (Schmidt, 1990; Skehan, 1998; Nation, 2001).

Here are some exercises that could help prompt students to notice how language (i.e. both grammar and vocabulary) is used in authentic texts. These particular exercises focus on pattern grammar and collocations, but similar ones could be devised to focus on other types of grammar.

A   Read the text and underline the collocations.

All pupils should <u>carry out</u> compulsory <u>community service</u> <u>as part of a</u> <u>radical approach</u> to promoting <u>moral values</u> in schools, a <u>Government advisory group</u> <u>is</u> <u>expected to recommend</u>. The group suggest that <u>public service</u>, such as <u>assisting</u> <u>the elderly</u> or <u>hospital work</u>, would strengthen children's <u>sense of social</u> <u>responsibility</u>.

B Use your dictionary to find:
1. What other verbs collocate with service:
   - carry out …………service
   - improve …………..service
   - offer ………… service
   - support ……….. service

2. Find the main collocation pattern in the first sentence, then find similar ones in other articles. What is their purpose? What kind of news article are you most likely to find them in?
   - _____, a _____ is expected to recommend

3. What other expressions could we use to express the concept "as part of a"?
   - an element of
   - included in
4. What other adjectives precede "approach"?
   - alternative
   - different
   - flexible

(Lewis, 1993, 1998, 2000)

Exploring and System Building

Noticing is not enough. Our students also need to find patterns of grammatical usage and how words come together to form phrases. This can

be achieved, no doubt, quite effectively by noticing and noticing the gaps, but to increase its potential students' need to use these patterns to explore. By exploring more texts, students can confirm their hypothesis and see how patterns are formed; they can see the role played by parts of speech, or how phrases of similar function or meaning can be used, compared and contrasted. In other words, what is being suggested is that our students should be taught the skills of being a language detective. They should use rules and patterns, either implicitly or explicitly learned, to survey texts to find data, which they are to either confirm or deny (Willis, 2003).

The next step requires students to take this newly noticed language and use it to build up systems. System building uses patterns and provides students with a retrieval system that is constructed around some key features of how the patterns act. It also provides a dynamic system that students can build upon.

Take for instance the word "for". Here is a list of some of its basic meanings.

1. How long?
    a. Time
    b. Distance
2. Why?
    a. Ask/look for
3. Who wants or needs….?
    a. After good/bad, easy/difficult, right/wrong

Let us look at the first basic meaning: How long (time) and build a system around it.

	a moment
	a few years
	the afternoon
For	an afternoon
	a term
	a long time
	three years
	about a day
	probably a night

There are undoubtedly many other words/phrases we can use to follow "for" that express duration of time, but with this simple list, we can categorize them further.

	A moment A few years	*An unspecified, probably approximate, amount of time*
	The afternoon	*A specified, better defined, amount of time, usually referring to the here and now*
For	A term	*An unspecified, better defined, amount of time which is related to a man-made (unnatural) segment*
	A long time	*An unspecified amount of time that is relevant to the speaker's opinion (i.e. a long time for you may be a short time for me)*
	Three years	*Adjective (number) before unit of measure*
	About a day Probably a day	*Emphasizing approximation*

Note that the above chart has blank spaces, which students can use to build their system by either adding more categories or more examples. It is also worthwhile to take this a step further by adding genuine example sentences so students can see how they operate in context and better understand their meanings and differences. Lastly, students could also add similar expressions from their own language for comparison purposes.

Noticing, exploring, and system building are important because through them students will better learn and use these patterns, which in turn will increase their fluency and accuracy. We have already seen that students tend to repeat grammatical mistakes, even "simple" ones, for which they can explicitly state the rules, while speaking or writing. We noted that this is because these grammatical features are often different from their first language, or are not needed to communicate their ideas, so students do not attend to them. Rather, students devote more time to getting their message across under the pressure of real-time spontaneous speech instead of focusing on grammar. By learning and being able to use patterns efficiently, students will be able to free up a lot of processing space to focus on grammar. In other words, by using more collocations, polywords, phrases,

and sentences stems our students can focus more of their attention on getting the other bits of grammar correct (Ellis, 2003).

Teachers and course books typically teach grammar by emphasizing production-practice, but, as we have seen, this has its drawbacks. Therefore, it is wise to supplement this approach by focusing not only on how students are using the language (speaking/writing), but also on how they are noticing it (input comprehension) and reflecting upon how they use it (noticing-the-gaps). This can apply to grammar of structure, grammar of orientation, and pattern grammar. From this the students build up pattern systems, formulate hypotheses and test their hypotheses with further data, either from the original text or from additional ones. This will lead to hypotheses reformulations and interlanguage development (Willis & Willis, 1996, pp. 63-76).

There are two methods of doing this. The first is a teacher-directed one, whereby the teacher and the materials focus the students' attention on the grammatical features and patterns, encourage them to make hypotheses, test those hypotheses, and build systems. We have already addressed this approach. Another alternative lies in a flooding approach whereby the students are exposed to massive amounts of language and they form their hypotheses and test them consciously, and more commonly subconsciously. The most practical way to do this is by extensive reading.

Extensive Reading

Extensive reading means reading a lot of materials that the students find both interesting and easy. A simple but effective rule of thumb to gauge suitable materials, in that students should not attempt to read materials in which they find more than five unknown words per page. Furthermore, as motivation is a key ingredient to extensive reading, students will only read materials, which they personally find interesting. This means they will have reading materials that differ from those of their classmates. Another important feature of extensive reading is quantity. While engaged in an extensive reading program, students should read as much as possible—the more the better. Last, if students come to either unknown words or unknown grammar patterns, they should not stop to look them up rather they should continue reading. Reading fluency, using contextualization and predicting skills, as well as speed-reading, play a prominent role in extensive reading too.

Students seriously engaged in an effective reading program benefit grammatically as well. By coming across vast amounts of grammar, with only a little bit of it out of the reach of their current mastery, they will come to notice how it works in terms of meaning, form, and usage, both

consciously and subconsciously. This will also lead to interlanguage development. Interestingly, research has also shown if teachers set aside 30 minutes a day of their time devoted to extensive reading, their students will progress up to twice as much in grammar and vocabulary development on a variety of measures compared to students who did not have the advantage of an extensive reading program. Furthermore, those gains in grammatical knowledge, when tested, are retained for a year.

So far we have seen that most students today are taught grammar using a production-practice approach and that there is some value to enhancing it with noticing, noticing-the-gaps, exploring, system building, and extensive reading. But all of these approaches are based on the premise that the teacher and/or materials predetermine the grammar to be taught. Every student is different, every student is at a different point in their interlanguage development, thus any pre-packaged attempt to teaching grammar will have limited use and not benefit all students equally. Those students who are ready to internalize the lesson's targeted grammar features will benefit the most, while those who are not yet ready or those who already know it, will not benefit as much (Day, 2001).

Scaffolding

This problem can be in part solved by scaffolding. Scaffolding is the interaction between a student and a more proficient speaker (usually a teacher) whereby the more proficient speaker helps the student express his ideas. This entails that the teacher gently brings out the student's language problems and shows him a more effective and correct way to express the student's original ideas but still helping to progress the communication act. This differs greatly from stopping a conversation with a student, pointing out his mistakes, correcting him, explaining the rules, giving some examples and a few drills. Scaffolding has five functions—vocabulary correction, recasting, grammar correction, commenting/extending, prompting self-correction.   Below is a dialog between a student (S) and teacher (T) that illustrates how the teacher uses scaffolding.

S: I don't go bungee, but my sister does.
T: go bungee jumping [vocabulary correction]
S: Yes, bungee jumping. I don't go bungee jumping.
T: Have you ever tried bungee jumping?
S: No, I have ever tried it before.
T: I have never tried it before. [recasting] Do you want to try it?
S: Um…don't know. Yes, I want to trying sometime.
T: try it [grammar correction]
S: Yes, I want, I want to try it.

T: Good, I'm happy you want to try new things.
          [commenting/extending]
S: I wanting to go traveling to Paris.
T: I want to… [prompting self correction]
S: I want to go traveling to Paris

Teaching Collocations

Now that we have looked at ways of recognizing word patterns, let us look at what we can do to help our students commit these to memory. By far the most common way is to do **matching** activities where the students match collocation halves.

1. healthy	a) a balanced diet
2. daily	b) weight
3. to watch	c) excessive eating
4. to follow	d) an exercise program
5. to control	e) food
6. to loose	f) routine
7. to eat	g) your weight

These exercises, however, need to be carefully planned to ensure maximum benefit. It is essential to understand that they are generally merely testing activities. When completing them, students will not have learned anything, rather they would have been tested. But to help ensure that learning occurs, students need to recognize and match those that they already know (testing), and through deduction, be able to match the remaining by making educated guesses, then confirm their answers. If there are either too many known combinations or too many unknown combinations, the exercise will be of limited value. The order of words should be from the easiest to the most difficult, so students use their knowledge rather than guesswork to match them. Also, a few confusing pairs should be chosen to highlight the differences, such as "to watch your weight" and "to lose weight."

Many lexical items come in patterns, and we should take advantage of these patterns in that they can aid memorization. Some ways to do this are **categorizing expressions** which are more formal or more informal; words or expressions which have positive or negative connotations; expressions which are elements of two different dialogs.

Along similar lines is the use of **sentence heads**. In this exercise type, we provide a list of sentence heads in column 1 and a list of group

endings in column 2. Each sentence head in column 1 can only match all of the examples of only one group from column 2.

List 1	**List 2**
1. I'm trying	a. to concentrate. to understand it, but I can't. to remember where it put them.
2. I'm doing	b. what I can do about it. Nothing yet. The best I can.
3. I'm wondering	c. if anyone else knows. what we can do about it. if it will make any difference.

This activity, just like lines from a concordance, helps students to notice patterns. For example, "I'm trying" is followed by "to–infinitive verb form"; "I'm wondering" is followed by either Wh-question words or "if".

Students frequently overgeneralize, often due to L1 (first language) interference. If teachers are able to predict these common overgeneralized mistakes, they can use them to form activities that require students to delete the "**odd one out**". Which of the following words do not form a strong word partnership with "pay"?

Pay   a debt   a bill   a taxi driver   money
          for a meal

These types of exercises bring to the students' attention how they may be allowing their L1 to interfere and wrongfully transfer to English.

This does not suggest there is no role for using L1 in the foreign language classroom. L1 **translation** can aid learning. By giving our students common fixed expressions which they often produce incorrectly due to L1 interference, then asking them to give it L1 translation, teachers can point out their students' reoccurring mistakes as well as suggest why.

Here are a few examples:
1. It's up with you.
2. Look at it from my line of view.
3. Have your time—there's no hurry.
4. Sorry, I didn't catch your meaning.

One way to help students learn is by getting them to think about how to apply grammar rules—**grammaring**. By giving students fixed expressions with the words in jumbled order, they will have to apply their grammatical knowledge to work out the correct order, What we to there are supposed time get?----What time are we supposed to get there?

Fixed expressions offer wonderful opportunities for our students to see how words really work in context to enable them to express important communication functions and notions. One of these is the use of **softeners** (quite, a bit, rather, a little). In these types of exercises we provide the students with semi-fixed expressions but remove the softener, which we ask them to place in the correct slot.

I still can't believe it. (quite)	I still can't quite believe it.
About the list.	"I'm traying" goes with the to group
	I'm doing goes with the a group
I was upset when they told me. (a bit)	I was a bit upset when they told me.

Not only do these fixed expressions add to our students repertoire, but they also show how softeners really work, so that they can experiment and apply softeners to their own sentences. (Lewis, 1993, 1998, 2000)

Putting it all Together—a Task-based Framework

We have looked at ways to supplement and change our course books' activities to more effectively teach grammar, but this may leave the impression that there is one well-integrated system for doing this. Furthermore, the suggested activities above may not seem very communicative. The most effective way to create a systematic method and promote communication lies in the task-based approach. This approach commonly follows these stages:

Stage 1   Perform the task
Stage 2   Planning and rehearsing stage
Stage 3   Perform the task again   (Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996)

Stage 1

In this stage students are given a communicative task to perform. They will use some of the target language (and some unpredictable language) to communicate in order to fulfill the task. Their communication will be improvised and stretching them beyond what they feel comfortable using. Students' performance of this task is unlikely to be very good. They will be focusing on their meaning, and not be able to devote enough attention to form.

Example:

You are going to read a newspaper article about someone trying to rob a shop. Here are some details to help you understand the story.

Characters: a shopkeeper, the shopkeeper's two children, a man, an eight-year-old boy, and the police

Place: a corner shop in Ashton-under-Lyme, near Manchester.

Props: a carrier bag, a pistol, and a ski-mask

Quotes:

Shopkeeper: "As I gave him his change a man came in"

                "I'm not sure whether it was real or not."

                "He threw a plastic carrier bag at me, pointed a gun at me, and told me to put everything in it."

Task 1:
  A) Work in a group of 4-5 people and guess what happened in the story. Include all of the information given above.
  B) Compare your ideas with those of other groups.

Stage 2

In this stage students plan what they will tell the class (their public performance). We do not want to allow them to use too much information when they do their task; otherwise, they may just read it, which will reduce the value of the activity. Planning, however, is not enough; students also need to rehearse it. For logistic reasons, it might be best to have each group elect a spokesman to tell the story to the entire class, but all group members should help plan and rehearse.   In this stage the emphasis changes from concentrating on meaning (improvised communication) to focus on accuracy (rehearsed communication).   This is in fact a consolidation activity.

Task 2:
  A) Write down a few notes to help you retell the story to the class, but don't include more than 10 words.
  B) Rehearse your story.

Stage 3

The final stage involves students giving public performances and actively listening. It is followed by comparing the different versions with that of a native speaker's. Students should draw their attention to the way the native speaker expresses his meaning (by **noticing**) differences in the way they expressed their ideas and the way a native speaker expressed similar ideas (**notice the gap),** and they should be encouraged to record useful lexical

items (**system building**). In general, this stage allows **exploring** and presents opportunities for **scaffolding**, depending on the activity type.

Task 3:
    A) The spokesman tells the class his group's version of the story. As he does so, the remainder of the class, the audience, will listen to how their versions differ.
    B) Students look at the original newspaper article and decide which group's version came closest to the original.

In the previous section we saw a number of exercises that would be very useful in helping students acquire lexical phrases—matching, double-gap-fills, categorization, odd-one-out, restructuring fixed expressions, translation, sentence heads, etc. Now we will turn to some similar activities, but which aim to consolidate grammar.

Cloze exercises: Provide students with texts where specific language features have been deleted for students to fill in, such as referential systems, synonyms, conjunctions, verb tenses, etc.

Progressive deletion: Take a sentence from the text which exemplifies a grammar point you want to draw to your students' attention. Have the class read the complete sentence, then rub out a word or two and ask students to read the complete sentence. Repeat the process over and over, each time eliminating one or two words, until nothing is left. This will help students commit an example of the grammar pattern to memory and the teacher can use this internalized pattern to explore its grammatical features.

Grammarization: For this activity, provide students with the key content words of a memorable sentence from the text.

Example: Police last night search eight-year-old boy attempt hold up candy shop pistol

Students will then add the needed words as well as make the necessary grammar changes to the sentence to restore the sentence.

Example: Police last night were searching for an eight-year-old boy who attempted to hold up a candy shop with a pistol.

At this juncture the teacher can make any needed comments about the grammar, discourse structure, vocabulary etc. It will also allow teachers to see what exact problems their students are having.

Consolidation: The teacher provides some controlled words, expressions, or grammar points and the students use them to communicate with their classmates about themselves.

Example: Name three things your parents don't allow you to do. Explain these to your partner and how this makes you feel.

CONCLUSION

This article has assumed that most teachers view their jobs as primarily reducing the number of errors their students make. First, we saw that there are three types of grammar—grammar of orientation, grammar of structure, and pattern grammar—but we typically focus only on the first. Then we challenged the implicit logic of the PPP lesson plan and most course books. That is, students acquire grammar by gradual approximation to the target rather than being presented rules, then immediately being able to apply them flawlessly. Language acquisition occurs at different rates depending on the individual; students learn a new piece of grammar when their interlanguage system is ready for it. This does not suggest that there is no role for formal grammar teaching. Rather, formal grammar teaching does aid grammar acquisition.

The approach used by most teachers and course books needs to be questioned. Students do not pick up grammar in a linear, highly predictable, sequential manner. Rather, the key for getting them to use grammar correctly lies in getting them to:

a) **noticing** how grammar is used by proficient speakers,
b) **notice-the-gaps** in their performance compared to that of more proficient speakers,
c) **explore** through cycle of hypothesizing, testing, and verifying patterns and rules,
d) use the data they find to **build systems** for storage and retrieval,
e) flood students with massive amounts of language through **extensive reading** and
f) the use of **scaffolding.**

The question of how to put all of these techniques together is most suitably answered by the task-based approach. This three-stage approach provides students with tasks that they improvise using the best of their communication abilities by focusing on meaning. This is followed by planning and rehearsing then performing the task again in public. The theory is that by planning and rehearsing students can draw their attention to form and improve their accuracy. This can be followed by a consolidation

phase, which is comprised mostly of non-communicative exercises built around the lexical phrases and grammar patterns of the unit.

These suggestions are not meant to prompt teachers to throw away their cherished materials or make drastic changes to their comforting routines. Rather, it suggests some alternatives, such as teaching grammar in sandwiches, slotted between two practice sessions where students can notice gaps, notice language, and practice what they have learned. It also suggests the value that the task-based approach can make in providing an organizing principle to both lesson planning and course book syllabus design. It also implies a host of new teaching procedures that teachers can experiment with to add both more variety to their teaching and alternative ways of getting better long-term results.

Now let us turn to the question of the benefits of these techniques in an EFL context. The dangers that teachers encounter when blindly following a highly interactive "communicative" approach are that they often get students to talk for the sake of talking, mistakenly believing that practicing talking alone is sufficient for satisfactory language development. In places like Southeast Asia, where teachers have been experimenting with communicative approaches, often, in the way I had just described, they have come to notice that their students' accuracy does not make satisfactory progress. In addition, as I have previously argued, teachers are always concerned about how to get their students to minimize their grammar mistakes. This presents a clash of values and a possible disappointment for teachers. Furthermore, our job is made more difficult by the fact that interactive communicative methods are difficult to conduct in large classes of shy students. Classes, which for cultural reasons, students do not want to stand out from the crowd, are reluctant to express their opinions, especially if it may offend others, and have been trained to be passive learners.

By teaching grammar, using the techniques above, our students spend less time talking to each other and more time converting input into intake. The communicative dimension of language teaching is certainly not ignored all together; rather it is supplemented with activities that work especially well for shy students (and shy teachers) of oversized classes.

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