

WHAT DOES LEARNING GRAMMAR INVOLVE?

Kateryna Oleksandrenko (Khmelnyskyi, Ukraine)

Before planning the organization of our teaching, we need to have clear in our minds exactly what our subject-matter is: What sorts of things are included under the heading *grammar*, and what is involved in ‘knowing’ a structure?

The sheer variety of all the different structures that may be labelled ‘grammatical’ is enormous. Some have exact parallels in the native language and are easily mastered; others have no such parallels but are fairly simple in themselves; while yet others are totally alien and very difficult to grasp. Some have fairly simple forms, but it may be difficult to learn where to use them and where not (the definite article, for example); others have relatively easy meanings, but very varied or difficult forms (the past simple tense). Some involve single-word choices (*a/an/some*), others entire sentences (conditionals).

When we teach any one of these types of structures, we are — or should be — getting our students to learn quite a large number of different, though related, bits of knowledge and skills: how to recognize the examples of the structure when spoken, how to identify its written form, how to produce both its spoken and written form, how to understand its meaning in context, and produce meaningful sentences using it themselves. All these 'bits' may be presented in the form of a table thus:

ASPECTS OF THE TEACHING/LEARNING OF STRUCTURES

	<i>Form</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
<i>Listening</i>	Perception and recognition of the spoken form of the structure	Comprehension of what the spoken structure means in context
<i>Speaking</i>	Production of well-formed examples in speech	Use of the structure to convey meanings in speech
<i>Reading</i>	Perception and recognition of the written form	Comprehension of what the written structure means in context
<i>Writing</i>	Production of well-formed examples in writing	Use of the structure to convey meanings in writing

Some teachers, and/or the coursebooks they use, have a tendency to concentrate on some of these and neglect others: they may spend a lot of time on getting the forms right and neglect to give practice in using the structure to convey meanings: or they may focus on written exercises and fail to cover the oral aspects satisfactorily. It is important to keep a balance, taking into account, of course, the needs of the particular class being taught.

Any generalization about the “best” way to teach grammar – what kinds of teaching procedures should be used, and in what order – will have to take into account both the wide range of knowledge and skills that need to be taught, and the variety of different kinds of structures subsumed under the heading “grammar”. We suggest four stages of grammar teaching:

- a) presentation;
- b) isolation and explanation;
- c) practice;
- d) test

Of the four stages in grammar teaching, the practice stage is the most important, in that it is through practice that the material is most thoroughly and permanently learnt.

References

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