

Grammar Acquisition and Pedagogy

Introduction

Many linguists and language teachers believe that pedagogic grammar is an important aspect of second language acquisition (SLA); however, others believe that a foreign grammar cannot be taught explicitly. The first part of this paper will explore how the Grammar-Translation Method has affected foreign language teaching in schools and universities in the United States, in addition to Larsen-Freeman's order of grammatical morpheme acquisition for second language and Krashen's distinction between acquisition and learning. There are several theories that try to explain the difference between grammar acquisition in first and second language as well as the properties of Universal Grammar (UG) that make learning a foreign language possible. The second part of this paper will focus on the current debates and issues in grammar instruction such as deductive versus inductive approaches and the importance of requisite knowledge and familiarity with English grammar.

The last part of this paper will be an analysis of the presentation of grammatical rules in seven college-level introductory textbooks of French, Spanish, German, Italian and Russian. I was interested in whether these textbooks provide an adequate explanation of grammar in a learnable order or whether these textbooks fail at teaching grammar overall. Based on my own classroom experiences and years of studying languages, I believe that the current methods of explicit grammar instruction in the classroom are not conducive to learning a foreign language. I believe that these textbooks do not follow the advice or research of linguists regarding grammar acquisition and, in effect, make learning a foreign grammar harder than it needs to be.

Teaching Methods

Before research began on language learning, methods used to teach foreign languages in the United States were based on the Classical Method previously employed for teaching Latin and Greek. The studying of classical languages was thought of as "mental gymnastics" and "indispensable to an adequate higher education."¹ Students were forced to memorize declension and conjugation patterns, vocabulary lists, and other grammatical rules. Translations and drills remained the only use of the language, while pronunciation and conversational skills were ignored. Opponents of this method maintain that there is no theoretical basis or practicality to the Classical Method (also known as the Grammar-Translation Method). Yet it remains the most popular teaching method because it does not require that teachers be experts or even fluent in the language, and it is the easiest gauge of foreign language ability that can be determined by standardized tests.

However, after the United States became involved in World War II, the military realized that Americans needed to be able to speak foreign languages rather than merely read them. The Army Method, later known as the Audio-Lingual Method, was actually based on linguistic theory and focused on oral and aural skills including conversation practice, with little to no exposure to grammar.² The popularity of this method eventually waned, but several schools today employ techniques that are a combination of the Grammar-Translation and Audio-Lingual methods.

Second Language Acquisition

During the 1980's, Noam Chomsky introduced a theory of Universal Grammar (UG), which stated that the knowledge of grammar was dependent on two components: principles, properties shared by all languages, and the parameters, the way in which these properties vary.

¹ Brown, 15.

² Ibid., 74.

Controversies abound with the UG model, but it does explain how all natural languages are similar in some respects and how humans are able to learn their first language as well as other languages. UG simplifies the ideas about learning a second language by claiming that "learning the grammar of a [second language] is not so much learning completely new structures, rules, etc as discovering how to set the parameters for the new language."³ Although UG "has left untouched a number of areas which are central to our understanding of the second language learning process," it has also explained and established "some of the facts about second language acquisition."⁴ This model has greatly contributed to our understanding of the stages that language learners experience for first and second language development.

A major aspect of SLA theory is the Natural Order Hypothesis that states "the acquisition of grammatical structures proceeds in a predictable order."⁵ Observations of children learning English as a first or second language indicated that certain grammatical morphemes were acquired before others. Furthermore, distinctions or differences among native language did not seem to interfere with this order of grammatical acquisition (e.g. native speakers of Chinese and German learned English morphemes in relatively the same order). In addition, children and adults had roughly the same order of acquisition.

Although Cook refers to this list proposed by Dulay and Burt as a "natural order of difficulty,"⁶ other researchers such as Krashen and Larsen-Freeman refer to this list as an order of acquisition of morphemes, i.e. the order in which they are actually learned. Yet researchers agree "that it is not necessarily true that things that are easy to use are learnt first and vice versa" and that "an order of acquisition cannot be based solely on an order of difficulty."⁷

³ Cook, 24.

⁴ Mitchell, 70-1.

⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁶ Cook, 14

⁷ Ibid., 15

The Larsen-Freeman order of grammatical morpheme acquisition for learners of English in a natural setting is as follows:⁸

- -ing
- copula
- article
- auxiliary
- short plural
- regular past
- third person singular
- irregular past
- long plural
- possessive

In comparison, the Larsen-Freeman order of grammatical morpheme acquisition for learners of English in a structured, classroom setting is as follows:

- copula
- auxiliary
- third person singular
- -ing
- regular past
- irregular past
- article
- long plural
- short plural
- possessive

Another hypothesis of SLA is Krashen's Acquisition-Learning Distinction. According to Krashen, *acquisition* is more related to the development of first language abilities while *learning* describes the development of second language abilities.⁹ Acquisition is a subconscious process of implicit or natural learning. This term is applied to the way in which humans learn their native language without the use of formal rules or instruction. On the other hand, learning describes the conscious study and knowledge of grammatical rules that are most often associated with foreign language education. As seen by the discrepancies between Larsen-Freeman's two orders of

⁸ Krashen, 101.

⁹ Krashen, 10.

acquisition, there is indeed a difference between these two manners of obtaining the grammar of a language. Although by analysis of these data, the difference does not seem that extreme.

Although English has been the most studied language with respect to acquisition of grammatical morphemes, research on grammar acquisition has also been done on other languages such as Russian and Spanish that confirm the validity of the Natural Order Hypothesis.¹⁰ The orders presented by Larsen-Freeman can only be applied to those students learning English, but a basic understanding of a natural order can be applied to other languages as well. This order may not be the same, however, because of the differences in grammatical features of the diverse human languages. Further research needs to be done so that these natural orders can be discovered and utilized in the teaching of foreign languages. Originally, my research was to include these other natural orders, but I was unable to find any research pertaining to the languages I was studying. So I decided to focus instead on the way grammar is taught in general in classrooms and how it is presented in textbooks.

Styles of Teaching Grammar

The Inductive presentation of grammar allows students to form generalizations about grammatical rules after oral and written practice of examples given in class. Acquisition may occur quickly and after little exposure with this approach; however, some students are too easily confused if the rules are not presented directly before practice is required.¹¹ Those students benefit more from the Deductive approach, in which the teacher presents the grammatical patterns and then the student is given ample time to become familiar with them. Whereas the Inductive approach works best with regular patterns, the Deductive approach works best with irregular patterns, "for these by their very nature cannot be discovered through analogy."¹² The

¹⁰ Krashen, 14.

¹¹ Allen, 90.

¹² Ibid., 85.

Deductive approach does save time for the teacher and the class; nevertheless, a major drawback is the tedious and technical presentation of grammar that may bore or frustrate the student if he doesn't understand the rules.

Although these two basic approaches to teaching grammar seem to correlate to Krashen's acquisition vs. learning, Krashen states that both approaches are indeed learning and not acquisition.¹³ With Inductive learning, students focus on form and not meaning. The rules are learned consciously and the student analyzes the structural components of the message instead of the message itself. Conversational courses often employ the Inductive approach with little focus on the grammatical rules, although students still do learn the rules and are consciously aware of them. This fundamental difference between Krashen's acquisition and the teaching approach of induction is often overlooked by those who employ the Inductive or Implicit method to emulate native language acquisition in the foreign language classroom.

Problems of Teaching Explicit Grammar

Similarly, opponents of teaching explicit grammar maintain that this method only teaches about the language and not the actual language itself. As Omaggio stated, this method "sends a clear message that the focus of the lesson is on talking *about* the language rather than on talking *in* the language."¹⁴ Students learn the linguistics of the language but not how to communicate easily or effectively. They may be consciously aware of the rules and how to use them most of the time, at least in writing, but they are unable to speak with any real fluency. "Use of the conscious grammar... is limited to easily learned, late-acquired rules, simple morphological additions that do not make an overwhelming contribution to communicating the speaker or writer's message."¹⁵

¹³ Krashen, 113.

¹⁴ Omaggio, 419.

¹⁵ Krashen, 112.

Therefore, as Krashen maintains, it is unfair to "emphasize accuracy on communicatively unessential, late acquired items in the beginning language classes, with students who are unable to understand the simplest message in the second language."¹⁶ Emphasis should be put on learning to understand and communicate effectively in the language, rather than on analyzing texts for their grammatical value or writing styles. If students are unable to say or write the simplest phrases in the target language, they should not be expected to read and analyze literature in the target language either. Yet the natural progression in foreign language education is from courses that focus on basic grammar and conversation to courses that require intellectual and sound analyses of foreign literature, although students may not even be prepared to do so in their native language. Most students do not do well in these courses because they lack a basic understanding and comprehension of the grammatical structures, as well as basic vocabulary, of the language. Requiring students to be fluent in the target language before studying texts written completely in that language would decrease frustration and dissatisfaction with those students' foreign language education.

Writing in a foreign language is often easier than speaking for those who have learned grammar explicitly, yet teachers still expect students to perform perfectly in speech. There is a basic difference between *competence* and *performance* however, that teachers need to be more aware of. The conscious knowledge of a grammatical rule has no direct relationship to the speaker's ability to use it in free speech, especially not for a nervous student who is forced to speak in front of the class or who is being evaluated and judged for a grade. There are cases of students who write a foreign language with near-fluent abilities, but who also make several mistakes while speaking. Krashen attributes this to his Monitor and Input Hypotheses which state that students make corrections only when they are consciously aware of them (such as in

¹⁶ Ibid., 112.

writing) and that students should not be required to speak in the target language until they feel comfortable to do so (ie. they have acquired enough "comprehensible input"). Furthermore, Krashen's fifth hypothesis, Affective-Filter, claims that students who experience low anxiety and high self-confidence will have a greater success at learning a foreign language.¹⁷

Second Language Acquisition theories of grammatical acquisition are often based on simplicity and frequency of occurrence, yet "it is not at all the case that the more linguistically simple an item is, the earlier it is acquired. Some very 'simple' rules may be among the last to be acquired."¹⁸ An example of an apparently simple rule is the possessive -s in English. Yet in both of Larsen-Freeman's orders of acquisition, the possessive remains late-acquired. In addition, just because some grammatical forms occur often does not mean they will be easy to learn or teach. For example, verbs with separable prefixes are very common in German and Dutch, but they are not easy for students to learn, so they are not taught until near the end of the language course.

Another facet of foreign language learning that needs to be addressed is the hierarchy of difficulty "by which a teacher or linguist could make a prediction of the relative difficulty of a given aspect of the target language."¹⁹ Two levels that present particular problems with learning foreign grammar are underdifferentiation and overdifferentiation. With underdifferentiation, "an item in the native language is absent in the target language."²⁰ For example, the present tense has three forms in English, but sometimes only one in other languages (such as French and German). On the other hand, overdifferentiation is the opposite, i.e. an item exists in the target language but not in the native language. The case system markers for nouns are barely existent in English, but thrive in Germanic and Slavic languages. This hierarchy attempts to make possible the predictions of how easy or difficult it will be to learn a certain foreign language.

¹⁷ Brown, 278-9.

¹⁸ Krashen, 91.

¹⁹ Brown, 209.

²⁰ Ibid., 209.

Yet another feature of foreign language learning that classes and textbooks seem to ignore is the importance of the knowledge of native grammar before attempting to learn a foreign grammar. If students do not know the jargon particular to grammar in their native language, they will not know the vocabulary in the target language either. Basics of the native language or of grammar in general, should always supplement and precede the explanation of foreign grammar. In addition, requisite knowledge of earlier grammatical rules needs to be reinforced. However, textbooks often do not have the space to review earlier rules before presenting new ones.²¹ Therefore, ample class time must be devoted to this task.

Analysis of Textbooks

Because I have had years of experience with studying foreign languages at the secondary school and university level, I chose to analyze several introductory textbooks of foreign languages used in the classroom. I was interested in seeing if the order of grammatical rules presented in these textbooks correlated to what linguists believe to be helpful and practical for second language acquisition. I chose seven textbooks to analyze (two Spanish, two French, one German, one Italian and one Russian). All were written for the university classroom and most were published within the last decade.

All of the textbooks present grammar in the order of easy to hard rules, which makes teaching and learning easier, but actually using the language more difficult. For example, the gender and number of nouns, the present tense of regular verbs, and direct and indirect objects are given before the past or future tenses or the conditional or subjunctive moods of verbs. The order of the tenses of the verbs progresses from present to past to future. However, some of the compound tenses are taught first (such as the present perfect in French and Italian) because they are used more often in conversation than writing. Overall, it seems as though the textbooks

²¹ Allen, 82.

rarely take into consideration the frequency of use of certain grammatical rules that native speakers employ. Some of these common rules, such as irregular plural nouns in Italian or the future tense in Spanish, are relegated to the last few chapters.²² Surprisingly, Panorama does not even include the future tense of verbs, although this is generally covered in a first year language program.²³

Additionally, all of the textbooks include present tense conjugations of irregular verb forms throughout the material. Most of these verbs are very common in the languages and occur often in speech and writing, but some are not introduced until the end of the textbook and even then, they are still in the simple present tense. This is more prevalent with the Romance language textbooks, but the Germanic and Slavic textbooks have problems as well concerning the case system. Deutsch Na Klar! and ГОЛОСА teach the case system in the order of most simple to most difficult case to learn. The German order includes Nominative, Accusative, Dative and Genitive, whereas Russian begins with the Prepositional case, then progresses to the Accusative, Genitive and Dative and switches back and forth among the cases as new material is presented.²⁴ Yet all of the cases, with the exception of Genitive, are used quite often and in basic speech and writing.

A major problem with the Spanish books is the order in which the Imperative mood is introduced. The formal commands are taught first, and the informal/familiar commands are presented a few chapters later. The reasoning is that students will not need to use the informal commands when travelling or speaking to other people. However, students use the informal forms of address with other students, as well as with children, animals, and others with whom

²² Prego and Puntos de Partida

²³ голосо does not include the future tense of verbs either, but there are two books in the first year series.

²⁴ There are actually 6 cases in the Russian language, but because I only reviewed Book 1 of the голосо series, I do not know the order of the rest of the cases.

they have a close relationship. In fact, it is becoming more and more common in languages that use the formal vs. informal distinction to use the informal for everyone.²⁵

None of the textbooks analyzed reviewed grammar previously learned or explained the corresponding English grammar rules. Direct translations were not given for verb conjugations, so that students must figure out for themselves that "ich spiele" in German can mean "I play," "I do play" or "I am playing" in English, unless the teacher explains this rule. Moreover, many of the paragraphs and passages in each chapter were completely in the target language with little to no translations into English. Although the directions to the exercises were always in English, for the most part, all other text was in the target language beyond the students' comprehension level.

Conclusion

Based on several semesters of foreign language study, I do not believe that current methods of teaching grammar in the classroom are sufficient enough for acquiring the abilities to survive in a second language. Textbooks teach grammar inadequately by only focusing on the simple rules by which they hope students will not be confused. Real world knowledge of a foreign language is ignored in favor of written techniques that will only encourage the student to read. The Classical Method is still very much alive in the foreign language educational system, although it has never proven itself to be a practical or successful method of learning a foreign language.

²⁵ Swedish is an excellent example of this form of progression. Today, it is actually rare to use the formal form of address (Ni) except in extremely formal situations. The informal form (du) is generally used for all meanings of "you."

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