Grammar Pedagogy in Second and Foreign Language Teaching

MARIANNE CELCE-MURCIA
University of California, Los Angeles

To provide some perspective on current issues and challenges concerning the role of grammar in language teaching, the article reviews some methodological trends of the past 25 years. When, and to what extent, one should teach grammar to language learners is a controversial issue. The paper proposes a decision-making strategy for resolving this controversy, based on learner and instructional variables. Then taking Canale and Swain’s (1980) model of communicative competence, which views grammatical competence as one component of communicative competence, the paper argues that grammar instruction is part of language teaching. In this new role, grammar interacts with meaning, social function, or discourse—or a combination of these—rather than standing alone as an autonomous system to be learned for its own sake. After addressing feedback and correction in terms of research and pedagogical techniques, the article concludes with a survey of options for integrating grammar instruction into a communicative curriculum and with a reformulation of the role of grammar in language teaching.

When the TESOL Quarterly first began publication in 1967, the teaching of grammar (i.e., the teaching of morphological inflections, function words, and syntactic word order) was a central concern in English language teaching. In fact, as Rutherford (1987) points out, for 2,500 years the teaching of grammar had often been synonymous with foreign language teaching.

In 1967 the audiolingual approach had dominated language teaching in the U.S. for over two decades; its followers held that language learning occurred largely through habit formation. This view of language learning was about to be challenged by proponents of the cognitive code approach who, countering audiolingualism’s adherence to habit formation, argued that language learning was rule-governed behavior.
Prior to 1967 and for several years thereafter, however, no one challenged the centrality of grammar either as content for language teaching or as the organizing principle for curriculum or materials development. Such a challenge emerged in the mid-1970s, and in the section below, entitled “Integrating Grammar Into a Communicative Curriculum,” we shall consider the major changes that have taken place since 1967 in terms of content and curriculum in language teaching and the implications for teaching grammar.

Since the differences between the way we viewed grammar in 1967 and the way we view it today are yet to be fully appreciated, this article will begin with an historical overview followed by a discussion of relevant issues and research. This discussion will serve as background for a reformulation of the role of grammar in language teaching.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

During the past 25 years, the major methodological approaches to language teaching have differed regarding whether explicit grammar instruction has a role to play in the second or foreign language classroom. The four methodological approaches I shall survey are the (a) audiolingual approach, (b) cognitive code approach, (c) comprehension approach, and (d) communicative approach. (For a broader historical survey that treats several additional approaches, see Celce-Murcia, 1991.)

The audiolingual approach (e.g., Fries, 1945; Lado, 1964) represents the first attempt by U.S. structural linguists to influence the teaching of modern foreign languages. Grammatical structures were very carefully sequenced from basic to more complex (based on linguistic description), and vocabulary was strictly limited in the early stages of learning. Consonant with the then-current behavioral school of psychology, audiolingual proponents assumed that language learning was habit formation and overlearning; thus, mimicry of forms and memorization of certain sentence patterns were used extensively to present rules inductively. A variety of manipulative drill types was practiced with the objective of minimizing (or preventing altogether) learners’ errors, which were viewed as bad habits that would be hard to break if they became established. Errors were the result of interference from the first language. Teachers were told that they should correct all errors that they were not able to prevent. The focus of instruction rarely moved beyond the sentence level.

The cognitive code approach (Jakobovits, 1968, 1970), largely a reaction to the behaviorist features of audiolingualism, was
influenced by the work of linguists like Chomsky (1959) and psycholinguists like Miller (e.g., Miller & Buckhout, 1973). Language learning was viewed as hypothesis formation and rule acquisition, rather than habit formation. Grammar was considered important, and rules were presented either deductively or inductively depending on the preferences of the learners. Errors were viewed as inevitable by-products of language learning and as something that the teacher and learner could use constructively in the learning process. Error analysis and correction were seen as appropriate classroom activities, with the teacher facilitating peer and self-correction as much as possible. The source of errors was seen not only as transfer from the first language but also as normal language development (errors similar to early L1 errors) and/or the internal complexities of the target language. The focus was still largely sentence-oriented, and materials writers often drew on Chomsky’s early work in generative grammar (1957, 1965).

The comprehension approach (Winitz, 1981) represents attempts by many language methodologists working in the U.S. during the 1970s and 1980s to recreate the first language acquisition experience for the second/foreign language learner. The notion that comprehension is primary and that it should thus precede any production epitomizes this approach; a pedagogical offshoot is the view that comprehension can best be taught initially by delaying production in the target language while encouraging the learner to use meaningful nonverbal responses to demonstrate comprehension. Some practitioners of the comprehension approach carefully sequence grammatical structures and lexical items in their instructional programs (Asher, 1977; Winitz, no date); they thus present grammar inductively. Others propose that a semantically based syllabus be followed instead and that all grammar instruction be excluded from the classroom since they feel that it does not facilitate language acquisition; at best it merely helps learners to monitor or become aware of the forms they use (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Proponents of this latter philosophy also believe that error correction is unnecessary, perhaps even counterproductive, since they feel that errors will gradually self-correct as learners are exposed to ever more complex, rich, and meaningful input in the target language.

The communicative approach, which came to the fore in the mid-1970s, originates in the work of anthropological linguists in the U.S. (Hymes, 1972) and functional linguists in Britain (Halliday, 1973), all of whom view language as an instrument of communication. Those who have applied this philosophy to language teaching (e.g., Widdowson, 1978; Wilkins, 1976), claim that communication is the goal of second or foreign language instruction and that the syllabus
of a language course should not be organized around grammar but around subject matter, tasks/projects, or semantic notions and/or pragmatic functions. In other words, language instruction should be content-based, meaningful, contextualized, and discourse-based (rather than sentence-based). The teacher's role is primarily to facilitate language use and communication; it is only secondarily to provide feedback and correct learner errors. Among the proponents of this approach, there is currently some debate regarding the nature, extent, and type of grammar instruction or grammar awareness activities appropriate for second or foreign language as well as a certain ambivalence about issues such as whether, when, and how teachers should correct grammatical errors.

THE CURRENT CHALLENGE

Given the preceding historical survey, it is obvious that TESOL methodologists have not offered consistent advice to teachers about the role of grammar in language teaching over the past 25 years. Even today the situation is far from clear. Teachers who want to know what, if anything, they should do about their ESL/EFL students' errors are understandably frustrated because of the many conflicting positions taken at professional conferences and in the methodological literature.

Existing research, while not conclusive, strongly suggests that some focus on form may well be necessary for many learners to achieve accuracy as well as fluency in their acquisition of a second or foreign language (see, for example, Long, 1983; Rutherford & Sharwood Smith, 1988). Indeed as Richards (1985) points out, there is no actual empirical evidence that proves "communicative" language classrooms—especially those that preclude any learner focus on form—produce better language learners than do more traditional classrooms. In spite of the intuitive appeal and the anecdotal evidence supporting proposals for exclusively communicative language teaching, there is equally appealing and convincing anecdotal evidence (Higgs & Clifford, 1982) that a grammarless approach—whether comprehension-based or communicative—can lead to the development of a broken, ungrammatical, pidginized form of the target language beyond which students rarely progress. Following Selinker (1972), such learners are often said to have "fossilized" (i.e., prematurely plateaued) in their acquisition of the target language.

Thus, while we await a more satisfactory conclusion to this debate regarding when and how to teach grammar, it is clear that no one should dismiss grammar instruction altogether, for there is at
present no convincing evidence that to do so would ultimately be beneficial to second or foreign language learners, especially those who need to achieve a high level of proficiency and accuracy.

A PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGY

A strategy proposed by Celce-Murcia (1985) provides guidelines to assist teachers in deciding to what degree they ought to deal with grammar in their own classes.

Learner Variables

An observant ESL/EFL teacher knows that individuals learn in different ways (Hartnett, 1985). Some learners, consciously or unconsciously, have an analytic style and learn best by formulating and testing hypotheses or “rules.” Other learners have a holistic style and learn best by experiencing, gathering, and restructuring relevant data but doing little or no apparent analysis.

Young children, for example, are by necessity more holistic in their approach to learning than adults. This suggests that age is an important learner variable in helping ESL/EFL teachers decide the extent to which they should focus on form. If the ESL learners concerned are young children, it is most likely that little explicit grammar instruction is needed. If the students are adolescents or adults, however, their learning may well be facilitated by some explicit focus on form.

Proficiency level is also a factor. If the ESL students are beginners (regardless of age), there is little justification in focusing on form, beyond presenting and practicing the obvious form-meaning correspondences in context. This is because when one is beginning to learn something completely new and different, one tends to initially approach the new “object” holistically for a time before feeling ready to do any meaningful analysis. However, if the learners are at the intermediate or advanced level, it may well be necessary for the teacher to provide some form-related feedback and correction in order for the learners to progress.

The educational background of the students is another learner variable. If students are preliterate with little formal education, then it is probably not very productive to focus extensively on form. Even this population (i.e., preliterate or semiliterate adults with little formal education) may demand some grammar because of cultural expectations regarding what constitutes language instruction. While they may not benefit linguistically from grammar instruction, the teacher who satisfies their cultural expectations with some
grammar may then do other things that will be beneficial and which the students will accept. On the other hand, if the students are literate and well educated, they may become frustrated and annoyed if the teacher does not provide adequate opportunity for them to focus on the formal aspects of the target language, which would, of course, include correction of their errors and answers to their questions.

Instructional Variables

The need to focus on form also changes according to the educational objectives that the ESL teacher must address. When one is teaching a receptive skill such as listening or reading, it is distracting and irrelevant to emphasize grammar unduly since these receptive skills require competence primarily in the areas of word recognition and semantic processing. (Even listening and reading may involve some focus on form. For example, better understanding and awareness of logical connectors can enhance both reading and listening comprehension.) However, if the teacher is focusing on productive skills (i.e., speaking and, in particular, writing), then formal accuracy can become an important concern because rules of pedagogical grammar are essentially rules of production.

Furthermore, for the productive skills, register and medium are additional factors to consider. If the teacher is offering a conversation class, then accuracy of form is much less an issue than it is if the class is dealing with formal expository writing.

Finally, what does the learner need to be able to do in the target language? If the learner’s immediate goal is survival communication, formal accuracy is of marginal value; on the other hand, if the learner wants to function as an academic, a diplomat, or a business executive, then a high degree of formal accuracy is essential.

Judging the Importance of Grammar for a Given Class

Given the six variables discussed above, it is somewhat complicated but not impossible for ESL/EFL instructors to decide the degree to which it is appropriate to focus on form with a given group of students. I have found that a grid such as the following is a useful visual aid to help teachers arrive at a sound decision.

The more factors the teacher identifies on the left side of the grid, the less important it is to focus on form; the more factors the teacher identifies on the right, the more important the grammatical focus. Such a grid helps the teacher decide, for example, when teaching
Variables that Determine the Importance of Grammar


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learner variables</th>
<th>Less Important</th>
<th>More Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficiency level</td>
<td>Beginning</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational background</td>
<td>Preliterate,</td>
<td>Literate,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no formal education</td>
<td>well educated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill</td>
<td>Listening, reading</td>
<td>Speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Register</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Consultative*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need/use</td>
<td>Survival</td>
<td>Vocational</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Joos (1962) defines the consultative register as the language we use with people we deal with frequently—perhaps every day—but with whom we are not close on a personal level. This register is between formal (the language for public lectures or academic articles) and informal (the language used among peers who know each other well). For purposes of this paper, I have ignored the two extreme registers described by Joos: frozen and intimate.

beginning-level adults who are preliterate and in need of survival communication skills, that focus on form is not a top priority. On the other hand, the grid suggests that when teaching literate young adults who are in college and at the high-intermediate proficiency level, some focus on form is essential if the teacher wants to help the students successfully complete their composition requirement.

The importance of a reasonable degree of grammatical accuracy in academic or professional writing cannot be overstated. McGirt (1984), for example, found that 40% of the university-level ESL writers in his study were judged to have produced fully acceptable writing after he corrected their essays for surface-level morphological and syntactic errors. Without McGirt’s grammatical corrections, the same essays were rated unacceptable (nonpassing) by experienced composition teachers. Of the remaining ESL writers in McGirt’s study, 20% produced essays that were judged acceptable even without the grammatical errors corrected (but this 20% committed only 3.1 errors per 100 words); 40% wrote essays that were rated unacceptable with or without the errors corrected. It should also be noted that the ESL writers in McGirt’s study committed an average of 7.2 grammatical errors per 100 words, which one can assume is too many errors for the context described.
Given that under certain circumstances grammar instruction is absolutely necessary and given that there are classes in which it is imperative that ESL teachers use effective techniques to remediate errors, the next two sections of this paper will deal with grammar instruction and error correction.

GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION

As a result of the communicative revolution in language teaching, it has become increasingly clear that grammar is a tool or resource to be used in the comprehension and creation of oral and written discourse rather than something to be learned as an end in itself. When learned as a decontextualized sentence-level system, grammar is not very useful to learners as they listen, read, speak, and write in their second or foreign language. Indeed, as Canale and Swain (1980) have posited, communicative competence consists of four components, only one of which—Item 3 below—involves grammar:

1. Sociolinguistic competence (i.e., appropriacy): The speaker/writer knows how to express the message in terms of the person being addressed and the overall circumstances and purpose of the communication.

2. Discourse competence: The selection, sequence, and arrangement of words and structures are clear and effective means of expressing the speaker/writer’s intended message.

3. Linguistic competence (i.e., accuracy): The forms, inflections, and sequences used to express the message are grammatically correct.

4. Strategic competence: The speaker/writer has effective and unobtrusive strategies to compensate for any weaknesses s/he has in the above three areas.

Certainly, in many person-to-person communications, sociolinguistic appropriacy and discourse competence are more important than grammatical accuracy, provided that the grammar used is not inaccurate to the point of miscommunicating the intended message; communication is the overriding concern. However, there are situations where a reasonable degree of accuracy is also critical, and this is our current focus.

In order for ESL/EFL teachers to consistently present grammar as serving some higher-order objective, Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988) suggest that grammar should never be taught as an end in
itself but always with reference to meaning, social factors, or discourse—or a combination of these factors. Larsen-Freeman's (1991) position is similar: She sees form, meaning, and function as three interacting dimensions of language; the classroom teacher must decide in which dimension the students are experiencing the greatest learning challenge at any given moment and respond with appropriate instruction.

Teaching Grammar as Meaning

As an example, teaching the different spatial meanings signaled by the prepositions in and on is best viewed as grammar in the service of meaning. If learners are presented with many fully illustrated and well-demonstrated examples such as the following and then asked to describe other similar situations, they have a basis for understanding and practicing the correct use of these two prepositions:

1a. Bob put the book in the box./The book is in the box.
   b. Bob put the book on the table./The book is on the table.

2a. Ann threw the ball in the basket./The ball is in the basket.
   b. Ann threw the ball on the floor./The ball is on the floor.

A sufficient number of good, clear examples will be enough for some learners; others will also find it useful to know quite explicitly that in favors the placement of objects in three-dimensional containers and on favors the placement of objects on two-dimensional flat surfaces.

Teaching Grammar as Social Function

An example of grammar used in the service of socially appropriate messages is the use of certain modal auxiliaries to express politeness when one is requesting a favor. When they make requests, ESL/EFL learners need to know that would is more polite than will and that could is more polite than can:

3. (Will/Would) you open the door?
4. (Can/Could) I talk to you for a minute?

Learners must become aware of the possible consequences of using the wrong modal form in a request: The addressee may conclude that the nonnative speaker is being inappropriately abrupt, familiar, or rude even when this is not at all the social
message intended. Sufficient practice with intended social messages in dialogues, role plays, and simulations (as well as careful observations of native-speaker behavior and/or elicitation of native-speaker preferences with reference to specific request situations) will help establish the link between grammar and socially appropriate behavior.

**Teaching Grammar as Discourse**

The link between grammar and discourse is especially crucial for ESL composition students. They will have to learn that definitions, for example, make heavy use of adjectivals such as relative clauses:

5. A thermometer is an instrument that measures temperature.
6. A relative clause is an embedded sentence that modifies a noun.

In addition, students need to realize that such definitions can easily be reversed with the functional definition preceding the name of the device being defined:

7. An instrument that measures temperature is a thermometer.
8. An embedded sentence that modifies a noun is a relative clause.

Learners must also recognize that these structures are used for a variety of communicative purposes, for example:

1. **Vocabulary elicitation**
   
   *What do you call an instrument that measures temperature?*
   
   *A thermometer.*

2. **Extended definition**

   A relative clause is an embedded sentence that modifies a noun. It consists of a relative pronoun, a word that refers to the noun being modified, along with the other elements needed to complete the modifying proposition. For example, in the sentence *I read the article that John wrote, that John wrote* is the relative clause modifying the noun *article*. The relative pronoun *that* refers to the same thing as the noun *article*. In fact, we can paraphrase the relative clause with the sentence *John wrote the article*. A relative clause is thus a useful stylistic option that allows speakers and writers to combine into one sentence two propositions, both of which contain a noun referring to the same person or thing.

   Not only does the paragraph above define the notion of a relative clause, it also contains several relative clauses as well as some other
adjectivals that students can examine at the discourse level to appreciate not only how different types of relative clauses are formed but also how they are used. My colleagues and I have found that after comprehesion and analysis of two or three similar example texts defining other objects or concepts, ESL composition students are better prepared to write their own extended definition on some object or concept that is familiar to them and useful in their major field of study.

Almost as important as developing a sense of when to use certain structures in discourse depending on topic or genre is the need to master the conventions of discourse that cross sentence boundaries and help the writer create text. Halliday and Hasan (1976) refer to these features of text structure as cohesion. According to them, cohesion involves the principled use of (a) referential forms (e.g., pronouns, demonstratives, the definite article); (b) substitute expressions such as one(s), do, and so; (c) ellipsis; (d) conjunction; and (e) lexical chaining to create texture in discourse.

FEEDBACK AND CORRECTION

Error Gravity

Burt and Kiparsky (1974), in an analysis of error gravity, noted that there are local errors produced by second language learners such as an omitted article or a superfluous preposition:

9.*Let us consider Stevenson’s invention of the steam engine as 0 starting point.

10.*It was dark as we approached to the house.

They claimed that such local errors do not usually cause problems with communication, and they contrasted such relatively innocuous local errors with global errors such as faulty word order (Example 11) or the use of the wrong logical connector (conjunction in Halliday and Hasan’s terms) (Example 12):

11.*The English language use many people.

12.*I didn’t question his decision yet [instead of because] I trusted him completely.

Burt and Kiparsky concluded that global errors contribute to miscommunication and thus require correction much more than local errors do, a hypothesis subsequently confirmed by Tomiya-

Virtually all the errors that Burt and Kiparsky cited—whether local or global—were discussed and exemplified at the sentence
level. Today, however, it is useful to reinterpret their notion of local errors as sentence-level errors and global errors as discourse-level errors. ¹ This leads us to conclude that discourse-level errors deserve our closest attention because they are more likely to be a source of miscommunication or confusion than sentence-level errors, a conclusion which has been confirmed by Frodesen’s (1991) study of unacceptable ESL compositions. Thus familiarity with the cohesive devices of English (i.e., the grammatical and lexical “glue” of discourse) and careful observation of how these and other discourse conventions are employed by effective writers will give nonnative learners of English tools for creating more accurate and coherent text. As Carrell (1982, 1987) reminds us, however, skill in using cohesive devices will not guarantee that ESL writers will produce effective and coherent prose since higher-order discourse principles such as content-schemata and formal-schemata also come into play.

**Stages for Error Correction**

There are times during an ESL lesson when the teacher may reasonably ask the students whether a sentence is grammatically correct and, if not, why. Chaudron (1983) cautions us, however, that learners become better at this type of exercise as they become more proficient and that beginners are typically weak at making grammaticality judgments in a second language. Chaudron’s review of the research also reminds us that while intermediate-level learners can begin to recognize and correct their own errors, more advanced learners are able to correct the errors of other learners as well.

Thus ESL teachers with low-intermediate learners may want to facilitate their students’ ability to recognize and locate errors, since these skills precede the ability to accurately correct an error. How can this be done? The teacher might begin by asking students to identify the incorrect—instead of the correct—sentences in sets of two or three sentences:

13a. *I enjoy to take photographs.
   b. I enjoy taking photographs.

14a. *The professor which wrote the book gave the lecture.
   b. *The professor wrote the book gave the lecture.
   c. The professor who wrote the book gave the lecture.

¹ *Word order* is of course a notion that applies to both the syntactic level and the discourse level. Some word-order errors such as *The English language use many people* are syntactic in that at the sentence-level one may say either *Many people use the English language* or *The English language is used by many people* but not *The English language use many people*. At the discourse level, one of the two syntactically permitted strings will be more appropriate than the other depending on discourse factors such as topic continuity, speaker’s intention, and so on.
If students have difficulty with somewhat analytical discussions of grammaticality and correctness, the teacher may want to begin to raise their awareness of form more indirectly. For example, Sentences A and B below are on the board or visible via the overhead projector:

T: Okay, many of you say Sentence A, while I say Sentence B. What’s the difference?
   A. We have done that exercise yesterday.
   B. We did that exercise yesterday.

For a more complex and demanding activity, students at higher proficiency levels can be asked to judge each sentence in a connected series, and if judged ungrammatical, to correct it, as in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2
Error Detection and Correction Exercise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence/Clause</th>
<th>Grammatical?</th>
<th>Correction if needed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If I won the lottery,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would to buy a new car.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'd buy my mother a house,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and my sister some furnitures.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teaching Exceptions to Rules

Teaching grammar normally involves helping learners internalize rules and patterns that they can then apply more generally in their language use; however, most rules or patterns have exceptions, a problem that requires a different type of learning. In an interesting study, Tomasello and Herron (1988) compared two methods for teaching grammatical exceptions to two groups of U.S. learners of French (the technique reported, however, is very likely also applicable to learners of ESL/EFL). In one method, students induced the rule after receiving several regular examples, and then the teacher stated the exceptions. In the other method, referred to as the garden path condition, the teacher presented regular examples to induce the rule, and then asked the class to apply the rule to an exception. This elicited an erroneous overgeneralization, which the teacher then immediately corrected. Eight structures with exceptions were targeted for treatment—four for each method (the two groups of students received the opposite treatment).
Subsequent formal testing revealed that students learned the exceptions better when the garden path condition had been the treatment. This advantage persisted for the entire semester. The researchers hypothesized that by inducing an overgeneralization and then immediately correcting it, the teacher helped the learners focus their attention on both the rule and the special features of a given item that marked it as an exception.

Holistic Correction Techniques

Most holistic error correction techniques involve getting students to work with their own texts. For example, if students tape-record a narrative about a frightening experience, they can then be instructed to transcribe the story exactly as they related it on tape. Later they can rewrite the narrative as written text, trying to avoid the grammatical errors they made when speaking as well as making other appropriate adjustments as they generate the written version. (Such adjustments would include getting rid of fragments, false starts, using fewer initial *ands*, etc.) With the tape recordings and the written versions in hand, the teacher can verify the accuracy of each transcription and the subsequent changes and corrections the learner made in the written text.

Another holistic correction technique is *reformulation*, which has been explored by Cohen (1983, 1985), among others. In reformulation the teacher or tutor takes a paragraph or short essay written by the learner and instead of correcting the learner’s mistakes, the teacher/tutor rewrites the passage on another sheet in his or her own words, which means that vocabulary and overall organization may change as well as grammar. The learner then compares the original with the reformulated version to see if the intended message is preserved and, in consultation with the teacher/tutor, the learner comes to understand why the changes were made. This process can be very useful but also time-consuming; fortunately, there are some less demanding adaptations such as the teacher’s attaching a sheet to the original with several reworded phrases and clauses that the learner might want to consider when s/he revises the paper.

For those intermediate learners interested primarily in correction of oral production, Wechsler (1987) developed and tested “interview analysis,” a holistic technique where spontaneous speech is elicited, recorded, and transcribed at intervals. The teacher/tutor reviews the transcripts with the learner and trains him/her to correct the transcript with a brightly colored pen. After several months of doing the interview analysis procedure with two intermediate-level French speakers, Wechsler was able to reduce
significantly the frequency of errors in their spontaneous English speech with regard to regular and irregular past-tense forms, plurals, possessives, and for-to purpose constructions. Errors in the use of the third-person singular, present tense, however, did not decrease significantly for Wechsler's two learners.

Correction in Written Work

Returning to ESL writing, which is where much if not most error correction is done, there are many traditional feedback techniques that teachers have long used with a degree of success. These include underlining but not correcting errors, indicating error types on a checklist attached to the essay (Knapp, 1972), and indicating error type and frequency on a note returned with the essay (e.g., find three verbs that are missing the third-person singular, present inflection and correct them). Some teachers have used peer-correction activities with good success (Witbeck, 1976), while others prefer to prepare composite essays for class/group correction that illustrate common errors from several students' written work in order to prevent the embarrassment students may experience when their peers publicly correct their written work. Finally, some teachers advocate the use of audiocassettes to correct ESL compositions (Bracy Farnsworth, 1974), claiming that it is more useful to the students than either checklists or written notes in the margin and that it is less time-consuming than individual conferences with students, which is yet another feedback technique that some teachers use.

Intervention

Sometimes feedback and correction must be accomplished quickly and spontaneously. Such a need arises in the course of an ESL/EFL lesson when it becomes clear that a particular aspect of grammar is troubling many students in the class. A fully professional ESL/EFL teacher should be able to intervene, and in a few minutes, get students to focus on the problem, to become aware of both the error and the correct form, and to practice the correct form briefly.

Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988) refer to such interventions as "minigrammar lessons" (p. 145) and illustrate this procedure for errors such as the following: *You should to speak louder. In a minigrammar lesson the teacher presents relevant data to the class and without lecturing gets the students to detect and correct the targeted error. The teacher then helps the students generate a rule or paradigm and gives them a contextualized exercise so they can
immediately practice the problematic structure and produce the correct form.

After such an intervention, the class returns to the lesson at hand, and if necessary the teacher presents more elaborate follow-up practice in a subsequent lesson.

Answering Questions

Another form of feedback that many students seek is the teacher's answers to questions they have about aspects of English that puzzle them. When a student asks “What's a relative clause?” often an example sentence on the board with the relative clause underlined is faster and more effective than a definition. When a student asks why ten dollars is correct in *This book costs ten dollars but incorrect in *This is a ten dollars book, the teacher should be able to explain quickly and concisely that a measure phrase like ten dollar(s) consists of a cardinal number followed by a unit of measure; when the measure phrase does not precede and modify a noun, the unit word is plural if the number is greater than one:

15. The house has one bath.
16. The car has four doors.
17. The magazine costs one dollar.
18. The book costs ten dollars.

However, when the measure phrase functions as a modifier and occurs before a noun, then the measure word is never plural:

19. *This is a ten dollars book.
20. This is a ten dollar book.
21. *John has a two bedrooms house.
22. John has a two bedroom house.

The teacher might consider giving the student who asked the question follow-up exercises to ensure that the explanation has been understood.

INTEGRATING GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION INTO A COMMUNICATIVE CURRICULUM

Prior to the advent of communicative language teaching, the content of a language course typically consisted of the grammatical structures and words that would be covered in the course. At best, the structures and words were organized around situations or topics (e.g., the post office, going to the movies). Strongly influenced by
the English for specific purposes movement (see Johns, 1991; Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991), communicative language teaching often starts with a determination of the purposes or objectives that the learner has. This is followed by an examination of the content the learner must understand and the tasks the learner will need to perform as well as the oral and/or written discourse the learner will be expected to comprehend and produce in the target language in the course of performing the tasks previously identified.

For any language learner with a definable learning purpose, the question of what grammar to teach does not become relevant until an adequate corpus of purposeful task-based discourse samples has been compiled. A discourse analysis can then be performed to identify discourse-level and sentence-level structures (as well as vocabulary items) that are especially useful and frequent for a given topic (i.e., content) and/or task or genre (e.g., writing a report). The language course ideally will be organized around the relevant content, or tasks, or both. And the discourse-level and sentence-level grammar, vocabulary, and other aspects of language form will be presented and practiced in the context of texts like the ones that were compiled and organized for the course.

For the general purpose language learner, the beginning-level course can develop a base by dealing first with grammar-meaning correspondences (e.g., in vs. on; present tense vs. present progressive, etc.) and then with grammar-function correspondences (e.g., could is more polite than can in requests; well at the beginning of a conversational response often signals that the speaker is about to express a disagreement, etc.). As soon as a basic threshold level (van Ek, 1976) has been established, the course must also begin to deal with discourse-level grammar (e.g., use of articles, use of active vs. passive voice, etc.).

A related issue is the kind of content and tasks that the language teacher can use to organize language courses. Many options exist for integrating form, meaning, and content. Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989) show how academic subject matter from areas such as psychology or history can be organized in various ways to complement and facilitate language instruction. Stern (1991), among others, shows how literature can be used as content for language instruction in ways that include but go far beyond traditional literary appreciation. Fried-Booth (1986) shows the teacher how projects of different scope and type can provide a focus for language development; and while Eyring (1991) adds insights about using project work with academic learners, she also suggests that the learners’ past and ongoing life experiences constitute appropriate content for more general language classes.
The greatest potential—and also the greatest challenge—in these new and innovative language curricula lies in integrating focus on form with content-based and/or task-based language teaching. Teachers and learners alike must come to appreciate that dealing with such content and tasks requires both top-down and bottom-up language skills. The top-down skills represent understanding the content and the tasks, specifically what the meaningful task components are and how they are organized and sequenced in relation to each other. The bottom-up skills involve accurately using the words and structures needed to accomplish the tasks in relation to the content. Thus grammar instruction comes in when bottom-up skills are inadequate. If learners do not have the words and structures needed to carry out the tasks or to understand the content, then relevant discourse samples must be presented. Language features must be practiced in the context of the content and tasks with the help of the language teacher, who in effect will be teaching the learners to do a type of discourse analysis which focuses on grammar and many other things as well.  

Alternatively, if the learners are able to produce a rough approximation of the task, then the learners’ performance can be used as the starting point. A careful analysis of and presentation of appropriate and inappropriate—and correct and incorrect—performance features will raise learner awareness and set the stage for discourse-based remedial activities, some of which will include correction of faulty grammatical structures along the lines suggested above in the sections on grammar instruction and error correction.

CONCLUSION

During the past 25 years we have seen grammar move from a position of central importance in language teaching, to pariah status, and back to a position of renewed importance, but with some diminution when compared with the primacy it enjoyed 25 years ago and had enjoyed for so long before then. Grammar is now viewed as but one component in a model of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972), and thus it can no longer be viewed as a central, autonomous system to be taught and learned independent of meaning, social function, and discourse.

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2 Going well beyond the sentence level, discourse analysis is concerned with how language users produce and interpret language in context. It examines how lexicogrammar and discourse systematically vary across social situations and, at the same time, help to define those situations. Analysts attend to the form, meaning, and function of language whether they begin with discourse-level segments and work down to forms or begin with forms and work up to the discourse level.
structure. Nor can the grammar of adolescent and adult second and foreign language learners be viewed as a system that will simply emerge on its own given sufficient input and practice. Grammar, along with lexis—and also phonology for spoken discourse—are resources for creating meaning through text and for negotiating socially motivated communication. These resources need to be learned and sometimes they also need to be taught; however, when taught, they must be taught in a manner that is consonant with grammar’s new role. Finding effective ways to do this is the current challenge.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe an enormous debt to Diane Larsen-Freeman and Sharon Hilles, with both of whom I have coauthored books related to the teaching of grammar. Many of my ideas are a direct result of these collaborations. With specific reference to this paper, I sincerely thank Diane, Sharon, and also Bill Rutherford for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft. Responsibility for all errors and omissions in the paper are mine alone, however.

THE AUTHOR

Marianne Celce-Murcia is Professor of TESL and Applied Linguistics at the University of California, Los Angeles. She has served as member-at-large on the TESOL Executive Board and also as a member of the TESOL Quarterly’s Editorial Advisory Board. She is coauthor with Diane Larsen-Freeman of The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher’s Course (Newbury House, 1983) and with Sharon Hilles of Techniques and Resources in Teaching Grammar (Oxford University Press, 1988).

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