Critical Appraisal of a Grammar Focused Start to a FL Course

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Abstract

In this paper, I analyze a statement which characterizes many teachers' views on foreign language teaching:

"Students need to be taught the foundations of the language - it's grammar.
That's what I start the course with."

In my analysis, I consider four assumptions behind the statement.   In relation to each assumption, I discuss classroom practices that may result if a teacher believes in the statement, critically evaluate the assumption in relation to some relevant theory and research, and also offer suggestions for the teacher.

Keywords: grammar focus, top-down, bottom-up, immersion, ideal self

1. Introduction

The statement, due to its brevity, is of course vague in some respects. So to give this analysis some direction I will add some simple caveats on two points as a guide.   The first point is "Students".   The level of the students will be relevant, because an absolute beginner may (or may not!) require a stronger focus on grammar instruction than an advanced student. So for continuity, I will narrow the meaning of 'Students' to upper-beginner to intermediate level students. The second point is "the course". If the course description requires a focus on grammar, e.g. it is an exam preparation course where grammar knowledge is a significant portion of the exam, then of course a grammar focus is warranted.   However, I will assume it is a communication focused EFL/ESL course.

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2. Assumptions

The following are four assumptions that I expect could be behind the statement;

3. Assumption one: A 'bottom up' approach is the best way to learn language.   As opposed to a 'top down' approach.

This assumption has led the teacher to approach the class like building a house. The 'foundations' first, then progress from there.   This 'bottom up' approach is assembling the knowledge needed first, and then moving on to attempting to use the language/grammar.   The 'top down' approach in contrast is learning to swim by diving in the deep end.   While a little scarier for the learner, it has substantial support as a more effective method of learning language.

For example, Yeldham (2016) found overall listening comprehension is better among students who only had a 'top down' approach to instruction, ignoring 'bottom up' instruction.   Also, in reference to the four strands of language learning (Meaning Focused Input - MFI,

Meaning Focused Output - MFO, Language Focused Learning - LFL, and Fluency Development - FD) detailed in Nation & Newton (2009), the grammar focus proposed in the statement falls under LFL - the strand closest to 'bottom up' processing with a focus on form.

The meaning focused strands MFI and MFO are more 'top down' oriented with the focus on meaning before form. Although the four strands are recommended to be given equal weight in a balanced language course, if focus on speaking is desired, "It would then be important to make sure that the spoken language classes……. only had a very small amount of LFL" (p. 11). This confirms an overall judgement I agree with, "Typically too much time has been given to LFL in courses…" (p. 147).

If the course is indeed, as I assumed, a 'communication focused EFL/ESL course' then I suggest the teacher focus on MFI and MFO activities, and include FD as judged necessary. MFI and MFO activities can practically be any interactive communication activity and are limited only by the teacher's imagination. Good ideas to start for spoken MFI and MFO activities are interviews (to get information about others), 'find someone who…' activities, opinion sharing, debates, and so on.

4. Assumption two: The best way for learners to master grammar is to have it taught in a course at the start before other instruction.

One problem facing teachers who said the statement is 'what grammar to teach?' Except for a class involving absolute beginners, all students will bring different levels of grammar knowledge to the classroom. A typical class will always have some range of abilities, even if students are streamed through level assessment. Because teachers do not know how much or what kind of grammar knowledge each student has, if grammar focused instruction is chosen there will be some overlap in instruction content and already held knowledge. So how many students are wasting their class time revising rather than learning?

A better option is for grammar to be taught when the need arises. Waiting for grammar issues to arise

in communicative activities and addressing gaps in grammar knowledge is my suggestion for more effective grammar teaching and use of precious classroom time. When grammar mistakes or gaps surface, the teacher can use their sense to decide for an 'on-the-spot' correction of the grammar mistake, or waiting to the end of the activity or class to have a micro-lesson on the grammar point. Or possibly, they may choose to ignore the mistake for the present time. Considerations on which of the three choices is taken will include the student's receptiveness to correction in front of other students, the importance of the correction to the student's progress and communicative ability, and the value of the correction to the entire class. These corrections or 'mini-lessons' are great opportunities for formative feedback to enhance learning, but style is very important. An excellent list of what to do, and what to avoid with formative feedback is provided by Shute (2008), Tables 2 to 5, p. 177～181.

In addition to teacher led grammar corrections, there is also the possibility of grammar learning through negotiation and language related events (LREs) between students. Kim & McDonough (2008) studied how linguistic issues were resolved when students collaborate. They found that if a collaborative pair dynamic occurs students can get value from other students of the same level and, more expectedly, from higher level students. Such learning opportunities where higher level students help lower level students can also benefit the higher level student in 'mastery through teaching'. As always, teacher monitoring to avoid proliferation of incorrect language habits is ideal. The key here, though, is to develop collaborative peer dynamics through explicit instruction on how to interrupt or question English used by other students and negotiate meaning. In addition, fostering social cohesiveness through 'bonding activities' between participants is also ideal. Examples would be 'get to know your partner' interviews and mutual cooperation activities, such as problem solving in pairs or teams.

5. Assumption three: Language (including grammar) is not acquired through communication.

Even if 'the foundations of language is grammar', it doesn't mean starting the course with grammar is the best choice for mastery.

Munoz (2014) found that hours of immersion in an English-speaking environment are more important for long term oral performance gains than years of FL learning. This would suggest that FL students in a communicative language class would benefit more from a focus on immersive activities than a grammar focus. Although study abroad is ideal for creating opportunity for immersive situations, there is also room in a classroom or home for creating immersive experiences. One suggestion here is creating interaction opportunities with local native speakers of the FL such as international students or local groups (if available). Technology opens a lot of doors for immersive experiences as well - e.g. changing electronic devices to the foreign language, using authentic subtitled videos, or developing an exchange program using skype with a foreign school. In the near future, virtual reality technology may provide exponential opportunities for immersion also.

Finally, I have heard of and seen many anecdotal examples of excelling students in FL classes who later revealed a girl/boyfriend who was a native speaker of the FL, or immersed themselves in online games involving communicative interaction with native speakers of the FL. While possibly crossing ethical boundaries, for many reasons, for a teacher to encourage such pursuits, these examples give support to the value of a focus on communicative interaction and immersion vs grammar.

6. Assumption four: What we study is more important than why we study.

Imagining myself as a student, I am picturing the classroom of the teacher who believes this statement. The teacher announces the importance of grammar as the foundation of language, and proceeds to LFL teaching of grammar forms and rules. My immediate thought is 'how long is this lesson?'. The teacher has

crushed my motivation for continued learning before we get any momentum. I have no personal connection to the 'why' of our study. We have jumped directly to the 'what' of our study.

In relation to motivation, Pfenninger & Singleton (2016), in a study on starting age of FL instruction (including grammar) in secondary school, found no difference in the level of achievement based on starting age. One important conclusion they found was that, "A strong future vision of L2 use and usefulness [i.e. motivation] was a significant predictor of success for both early and late starters" (p. 336).

A suggestion for a healthy start to the course, instead of grammar focus, is to develop a 'strong future vision of L2 use' in a way relevant to the learners and contributed to by the learners. For example, I recommend asking names of admired bi-lingual people (personally known, or famous people), eliciting images of times when it would be empowering and exciting to have bilingual capability, and emphasizing what value communicative ability in the L2 would have for them. Flexibility and adapting the exercise to the specific students is essential as motivation is highly situated and varies greatly across settings and time (Ellis, 2015). This is more than assigning 'learning goals' for the course. It requires students personalizing and internalizing goals to create a projection of their 'ideal self'. Thompson & Vasquez (2015) found the importance of the 'ideal self' (vs an external goal driven - 'ought to self') as a motivation in L2 learning.

7. Limitations and conclusion

Slow and gradual is probably a good way to describe L2 learning. Ellis (2015) summarizes it as, "development is gradual, dynamic, variable, and non-linear" (p. 92). As conscientious teachers (as I have tried to be in my critical analysis here), we try to focus on 'best practices' to maximize potential gains for students over a course or year, which is usually how long we interact for. As such I have argued against starting a course with a grammar focus. From a bird's eye view of a learner's long term progress, however, it is highly possible that a course starting with the teaching of

grammar would be a valuable experience for the FL learner when considered over the span of many years of language learning.

Another possible support of the statement, and challenge to my critical analysis, is that an interaction approach to learning using noticing and negotiation to acquire language is more likely to have a larger effect on vocabulary than a grammar approach (Ellis, 2015). This may limit the value of my suggestions under assumption two, and support pre-teaching of grammar. However, with well guided instruction, students can be coached as auditors to take note and focus on grammatical points as well as lexical points in LREs.

Finally, if a teacher is truly passionate about starting a course with grammar teaching, that energy may be contagious to the students and a great learning environment created regardless of minimal support from theory and research.

On balance, I would hope that a teacher saying the opening statement would appreciate the critique of the assumptions behind it detailed here and transfer their passion to a more interactive and communicative classroom with the suggestions offered.

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外国語教育課程開始時における文法中心指導に対する批判的評価

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要　旨

本研究では多くの教師が持つ意見について検討している：

"学生達が必要としているのは言語の基礎部分の教授であり，それは文法である．コースの初めに教えるのはまさにそれである．"

今回の検討ではその意見の裏付けとなるであろう 4 つの仮説について考察する．それぞれの仮説について，教師がその意見を信じていた場合に行われる演習について考察する．またその仮説に関連すると思われる方法や研究について批判的な評価をし，いくつかの提案をする．

キーワード：文法中心，top-down 型，bottom-up 型，没入法，理想自己

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