
Grammar: To Teach or Not To Teach?

Walter Hirtle

Cross Currents
Vol. XVI, No. 2
Fall 1989

Nothing is as easily overlooked, or as easily forgotten, as the most obvious truths. The tenet that language is a tool for expressing meaning is a case in point. Nobody would deny it—but many influential schools and trends in modern linguistics have ignored it and have based their work on entirely different and often incompatible assumptions.... Grammar in general, and syntax in particular, is seen as more or less autonomous of semantics, and can be pursued independently.... (Wierzbicka, 1988, p. 1)

Introduction

A fairly recent volume, *The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher's Course*, which seems to have been well received in the field of English language teaching, aims at providing teachers with the knowledge of English grammar required for the average classroom. In their introduction, where the authors are trying to convince the reader of the importance of grammar—"You must have conscious knowledge of the rules of the English language" (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1983, p. 1)—they make the following assessment of the attitudes of teachers:

Teachers of English seem to have a variety of reactions to the subject matter traditionally referred to as English grammar. Some have an aversion to it and whenever possible avoid either studying it or teaching it. Some others may feel indifferent yet believe it is necessary, and thus do what they can to understand it and present it effectively to their students. There are still other teachers who enjoy studying English grammar for its own sake and cheerfully accept the challenge of presenting it clearly and interestingly to their students. (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1983, pp. 1-2)

Because this description corresponds to

the experience of most ESL teachers, it is probably accepted as quite commonplace. And yet if we pause to reflect on it we come to realize that it depicts quite an unusual, even startling, situation. Consider for a moment the other sectors of language teaching. Can one imagine a language teacher with such an aversion to, for example, the *sounds* of English as to avoid studying or teaching them? What sort of English teacher would be indifferent to the *vocabulary* of English? Such attitudes would be unthinkable, and yet for most teachers grammar is an object of either aversion or indifference. At the very best they cheerfully accept the challenge of teaching grammar, as though it were a dose of unpleasant medicine which is good for both teacher and student. It is not difficult to imagine the effect of such attitudes on students and on the learning of grammar. Nor is it difficult to understand why grammar teaching is so often abandoned, if not right at the beginning, then as soon as decently possible after the introductory course. And yet many teachers, like the authors of *The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher's Course*, are convinced that it is important and even necessary to teach grammar.

The intent of the remarks that follow is to point out that this widespread situation is by no means inevitable, and to show not only that grammar can be taught in such a way as to stimulate students' interest in English and to aid their ability to express themselves and to

Walter Hirtle is the author of a number of English grammar studies. He is Director of the Fonds Gustave Guillaume at Laval University, Quebec City, Canada. He has taught English and ESL for over thirty years.

Cross Currents

communicate, but that it can even be made interesting for teachers. In order to make these points, however, we must first try to discern the root of the situation described above by the authors of *The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher's Course*.

Language as a Means of Communication

A key to language as a means of communication is provided by the sentence quoted above where it is implicitly assumed that grammar consists of a finite set of rules: "[Teachers] must have conscious knowledge of the rules of the English language." The consequence of teaching grammar on this assumption is well known to most teachers. Not long after giving a rule for the use of a form we must introduce another rule, generally as an exception to the first, soon to be followed by other rules, exceptions to the exception. And yet not even the most elaborate of rule-based grammars manages to provide a complete description of how we use the simple form of the verb, or of the progressive, or the perfect, or the articles, or any of the other forms we try to teach. In short, the ramifications of a rule-based approach become so complicated and involved that neither student nor teacher can keep all the conflicting rules in mind and so the venture is sooner or later abandoned. If we pause to analyze this scenario, we are led to one inescapable conclusion: Rules do not provide a satisfactory basis for teaching the complexities of usage. This conclusion naturally leads us to question the assumption that grammar is a set of rules. What is this rule-based conception of grammar based on?

The answer to this question would appear to be a very simple one: The conception of grammar as a set of rules is based on the widespread view that language is nothing more

than a means of communication. Since we communicate by means of discourse—of sentences—it follows from this view not only that language is a set of sentences, but also that grammar is sentence-based, and is essentially a matter of syntax, consisting of the correlations observed between different elements in the sentence. These relations are generally described by means of rules, the type of rule depending upon the entities related. Because of this, a sentence-based view of grammar leads directly to the classroom situation depicted above, where teacher and student are bound up in an inextricable tangle of rules and exceptions, to the detriment both of the teaching and learning processes and of the student's resulting ability to communicate. Thus it appears that the ultimate cause of the predicament of grammar teaching lies in an assumption about the nature of language, an assumption which has given rise to the type of linguistic analysis implicit in most teaching manuals.

Before we explore an alternative assumption, one giving rise to a different type of linguistic analysis, let us briefly reflect on the present relation between linguistics and language teaching, since this is where our analysis has led us. On the one hand, we observe a flourishing linguistics industry whose production of grammatical studies is on the increase. Hardly a year goes by without some new model of grammar arriving on the market. On the other hand, in the language classroom where, one would think, grammatical theory should find its most immediate and widespread application, we are confronted with the situation described above in *The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher's Course*. Surely there is a problem here. Is it too much to expect of linguistic theoreticians that they should produce grammars that are of some use in the language classroom? What is

Grammar: To Teach or Not To Teach?

the validity of a theory of grammar which is not applicable to real language, or at least to the reality of the language we try to teach in the classroom? Such questions should trouble the linguist more than they do and should be raised by the grammar teacher more often than they are. As for the middleman between the two, the so-called "applied linguist," the "expert" in language teaching who writes the manuals and organizes the teacher training programs, he seems to be blissfully unaware that his often unanalyzed assumptions about the nature of language are largely responsible for the way grammar is taught today.

Language as a Means of Representation and Expression

Let us get back to our more immediate concern: finding a way out of the classroom dilemma, which we have traced from rules back through a sentence-based type of grammar to its root in the underlying conception of language as a means of communication. The next step in our considerations is to move beyond the inadequacy of this conception of language and suggest a more adequate one. The point here is not that this conception is false—quite obviously language *is* a means of communication—but that it is incomplete and reductionist, and that it leaves out an essential part of the reality of language.

This point can perhaps best be made by observing that communication itself involves more than a means: It necessarily involves what is communicated, a message. "The human speaker, unlike the communication system, does not merely transmit the message; he also creates it," as Palmer (1986, p. 16) remarks. This is obvious, but what is not so obvious is that language provides, besides a means of communicating a message, a way of *thinking* the message to be communicated.

Unless we take into account the fact that an act of language involves both *thinking* what we want to communicate and *using the physical means of communicating it*—both *representation* and *expression*—our view of language will be reductionist and our teaching of grammar inadequate.

To avoid any misunderstanding of this fundamental point, let it be said that language does not provide the message: It is our *experience* of reality which gives rise to the endlessly varied subjects whereof we can discourse. Our language intervenes to permit us to *think* the content of our experience by means of words, to *represent* what we want to communicate in such a way that it can be *expressed* through sentences. The important point here is that without this translation from experience to mental representation, human language could not be a means of communication, because every person's experience is absolutely individual, singular, unique; individual experience, be it immediate, remembered or imagined, can be communicated to others only if it has something in common with the experience of others, only if it can be seen in a more general, categorical framework. Therefore, if language provides a means of communicating the content of our experience, it must also provide the means of converting experience into that more general, categorical framework.

This enlarged assumption concerning the nature of human language avoids the reductionism of the view examined above and ensures a more adequate basis for the teaching of grammar, as we shall now see. In this enlarged view, grammar is no longer seen as simply a matter of relationships in a sentence—as syntax—but also, and even primarily, as part of the representational mechanism involved in *thinking* a word. Grammar helps to render

Cross Currents

the message, and so is rooted in the semantic part of language, contributing to the content or meaning. It is not, of course, the role of grammar to render all the meaning involved—the lexicon represents the notional content or matter of the message—but rather to render the way we *think* the notional content of a word, its semantic form. (For example, one need merely think of how a given notion is thought differently in the singular and the plural of a noun, or how the progressive and the simple of a verb provide different ways of thinking an event.) Thus grammar should be viewed primarily as a means of representation, of thinking and categorizing, before it is a means of expression, of communication.

Viewing grammar as first and foremost a matter of providing categorical meanings leads to a very different way of accounting for usage in discourse. The grammarian is no longer limited to a surface or syntactic view of usage but now can appeal to another dimension—that of the meaning which the grammatical form represents on the sentence level. Once this point of view is adopted, it can be seen that what governs the use or non-use of a grammatical form is its meaning. In other words, one can account for usage with all its constraints and possibilities by examining the relation between the meaning of a form and the message to be expressed. The moment one gets beyond the reductionist view of language as merely a means of communication and adopts the more comprehensive view that language also provides a categorical representation of what is to be communicated, then grammar can be taught on the basis of meaning, the fundamental factor governing usage.

An example at this point may help to clarify what has just been said. A number of grammatical studies (e.g. Hirtle & Curat, 1986) have suggested that the progressive form is an

“imperfective,” that its underlying meaning is an impression of imperfectivity, of something incomplete: It is an event that can be added to. This meaning has provided an invaluable basis for teaching the use of the form. Students readily understand that we use the progressive for most “activities going on at the moment of speaking,” as the grammar books say, because most such activities are seen by the speaker as incomplete at the moment. They can soon be brought to see why we do not use it to express a habit or a performative action which goes on at the moment of speaking, and why it is infrequent with the verbs of perception, or with *to be*, *to know*, and the like. As their grasp of English deepens, they can appreciate the nuance of meaning brought in by the progressive when such verbs are actually used in the progressive. This increasing sensitivity to the expressive effects of the form, which can be carried to the point where it approaches that of a native speaker, provides the passive awareness necessary for more and more subtle use, and for increasingly effective communication.

This example (cf. Hirtle, 1988 for another example) illustrates an important consequence for teaching, namely that one cannot introduce a form and its meaning, give a few exercises to illustrate the meaning and consider the form taught. Our paraphrases of grammatical meaning are at best approximate descriptions, clumsily evoking a very general impression which can be exploited in many different ways. As a consequence, the teaching of a form like the progressive can never be considered to be finished since every new context offers the possibility of a new interpretation of the general impression constituting its meaning. Hence once a form has been introduced, it must be revisited regularly to introduce the student to ever-widening circles

Grammar: To Teach or Not To Teach?

of usage, all centered on the underlying impression. This examination of the uses of a form in carefully ordered contexts is most effective when the form is compared with another form to bring out the expressive nuance it contributes to the meaning of the sentence. Although it takes time and effort, this type of teaching shows students how speakers of English have used the form to represent their experience, and puts them in a position to do likewise because it relates the form to impressions arising from similar categories of their own experience.

One big advantage of this meaning-based approach is that it is more economical than the rule-based approach. Rather than appeal to rules, which are as varied and as numerous as the contexts in which a form is used, one can always appeal to the one underlying meaning. As a result it is possible to lead students through the complexities of usage without confusion and contradiction, because there is a single guiding principle in all cases. In fact, as one progresses to more surprising cases of usage, the study of grammar becomes more interesting, because it is always a challenge to discern how the underlying impression can account for some apparently contradictory use. What, for example, is the relation between an impression of imperfectivity and the use of the progressive in *I am seeing stars*, or *We are going to Spain for our holidays this year*, or *It was being a successful party*?

In the final analysis, the difficulty with the rule-based approach is that it is concerned with the results of acts of language—sentences—and so is descriptive by nature. A meaning-based approach, on the other hand, attempts to present the meaning of a form as such, independent of its use in any given context, and thus as what motivates its use. This approach is therefore explanatory by

nature. A set of rules describing discourse can never be complete, since discourse itself is unlimited, and can be acquired only by an effort of memory, at best a fastidious task; by contrast, the application of an explanatory principle calls on the intellect, the exercise of which most students find stimulating. As a consequence, the former approach leads to the early abandoning of grammar teaching, whereas the latter approach invites students to tackle more and more challenging problems as they progress. Indeed, from the point of view of meaning-based grammar, it is certainly not far-fetched to regard the teaching of grammar as a means of furthering students' intellectual development.

Conclusion

Grammar: to teach or not to teach? The answer will depend upon one's conception of language. If a person is content to take language at its face value as a means of communication—as discourse—and grammar as a rule-bound component based on sentences, then grammar is of limited value in the classroom and should probably be taught very little, if at all. This option, of course, foists off on students the whole task of discerning the conditions governing usage and may even suggest to them that teachers are ignorant of these conditions.

If, on the other hand, we are prepared to make the effort of viewing language as both a means of *representation* and of *expression*, then grammar will be seen as the meaning-forming part of language, as a "systematic whole englobing the entire range of what is thinkable," to quote Gustave Guillaume (1984, p. 104). From this point of view, not only can grammar teaching develop and refine students' appreciation of nuances expressed in discourse, thereby enabling them to develop

Cross Currents

their own competence, but it can also provide an occasion for exercising the students' intellect. It should therefore be fostered and encouraged particularly at intermediate and advanced levels where students can derive maximum benefits from it.

For teaching, it would seem preferable to regard grammar as an integrated system of abstract mental forms rather than an apparently arbitrary set of rules concerning usage. □

Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1983). *The grammar book: An ESL/EFL teacher's course*. Rowley, MA.: Newbury House.

Guillaume, G. (1984). *Foundations for a science of language*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Hirtle, W.H., & Curat, V.N. (1986). The simple and the progressive: 'Future' use. *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 42-84.

Hirtle, W.H. (1988). Some and any: Exploring the system. *Linguistics*, 26, 443-447.

Palmer, F.R. (1986). *Semantics* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wierzbicka, A. (1988). *The semantics of grammar*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

References

SAINT MICHAEL'S COLLEGE

Winooski, Vermont 05404

MASTER'S IN TESL

36 credits

ADVANCED TESL Certificate Program

18 credits

INSTITUTE IN TESL

— summers only —

9 graduate credits

INTENSIVE ENGLISH TRAINING PROGRAM

Intensive English courses for foreign students
conducted on a year-round basis

St. Michael's also offers Master's degrees in
Education, Theology, Administration and Clinical Psychology
Also available M.Ed. with concentrations in
TESL, Special Education, Administration, Curriculum,
Reading and Computer Education

write:

Director
TESL Programs
Box 11
St. Michael's College
Winooski, Vermont 05404
U.S.A.