

ՎԵՐԱՊԱՏՐԱՍՏՈՂ ԿԱԶՄԱԿԵՐՊՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ

«Շիրակի ուսուցիչների միություն» գիտակրթական կենտրոն

Ավարտական հետազոտական աշխատանք

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պրոցեսում

Կատարող՝ Լիլիա Իլիչի Հովսեփյան

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# THE PLACE OF GRAMMAR IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

## 1 What is grammar?

*Grammar* may be roughly defined as the way a language manipulates and combines words (or bits of words) in order to form longer units of meaning. For example, in English the present form of the verb *be* in the third person has two distinct forms, one (*is*) being used with a singular subject, and the other (*are*) with a plural; and if the plural *are* is combined with a singular subject, the result is usually unacceptable or 'ungrammatical'. Thus, a sentence like: *This is a book* is grammatical, whereas *This are a book* is not. There is a set of rules which govern how units of meaning may be constructed in any language: we may say that a learner who 'knows grammar' is one who has mastered and can apply these rules to express him or herself in what would be considered acceptable language forms.

I have not attempted here to describe the structures themselves, nor to define what is grammatically acceptable and what is not; for this you should refer to books of English grammar or usage. We want to provide ideas for classroom practice.

## 2 Grammar in language teaching

There is no doubt that a knowledge - implicit or explicit - of grammatical rules is essential for the mastery of a language: you cannot use words unless you know how they should be put together. But there has been some discussion in recent years of the question: do we have to have 'grammar exercises'? Isn't it better for learners to absorb the rules intuitively through 'communicative' activities than to be taught through special exercises explicitly aimed at teaching grammar?

The fact that a learning process is aiming for a certain target behaviour does not necessarily mean that the process itself should be composed entirely of

imitations of that behaviour. In other words, ability to communicate effectively is probably not attained most quickly or efficiently through pure communication practice in the classroom - not, at least, within the framework of a formal course of study.

In 'natural learning' - such as the learning of a first language by a child — the amount of time and motivation devoted to learning is so great that there is no necessity for conscious planning of the learning process: sooner or later the material is absorbed. However, in a formal course of study, there is very much less time available, and often less motivation, which means that learning time has to be organized for optimum efficiency. This means preparing a programme of study — a syllabus - so that bits of the total corpus of knowledge are presented one after the other for gradual, systematic acquisition, rather than all at once. And it also means preparing an organized, balanced plan of classroom teaching/ learning procedures through which the learners will be enabled to spend some of their time concentrating on mastering one or more of the components of the target language on their way to acquiring it as a whole. These components may be things like spelling or pronunciation or vocabulary - or grammar.

Grammar, then, may furnish the basis for a set of classroom activities during which it becomes temporarily the main learning objective. But the key word here is temporarily. The learning of grammar should be seen in the long term as one of the means of acquiring a thorough mastery of the language as a whole, not as an end in itself. Thus, although at an early stage we may ask our students to learn a certain structure through exercises that concentrate on virtually meaningless manipulations of language, we should quickly progress to activities that use it meaningfully. And even these activities will be superseded eventually by general fluency practice, where the emphasis is on successful communication, and any learning of grammar takes place only as incidental to this main objective.

### 3 What does learning grammar involve?

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

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

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

**ASPECTS OF THE TEACHING/LEARNING OF STRUCTURES**

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

		context
Writing	Production of well-formed examples in writing	Use of the structure to convey meanings in writing

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

#### **4 The organization of grammar teaching**

Any generalization about the 'best' way to teach grammar - what kinds of teaching procedures should be used, and in what order - will have to take into account both the wide range of knowledge and skills that need to be taught, and the variety of different kinds of structures subsumed under the heading 'grammar'. Thus the organization suggested here represents only a general framework into which a very wide variety of teaching techniques will fit. I suggest four stages:

- a) *Presentation*
- b) *Isolation and explanation*
- c) *Practice*
- d) *Test*

##### **a) PRESENTATION**

We usually begin by presenting the class with a text in which the grammatical structure appears. The aim of the presentation is to get the learners to perceive the structure - its form and meaning — in both speech and writing and to take it into short-term memory. Often a story or short dialogue is used which appears in

written form in the textbook and is also read aloud by the teacher and/or students. As a follow-up, students may be asked to read aloud, repeat, reproduce from memory, or copy out instances of the use of the structure within the text. Where the structure is a very simple, easily perceived one, the presentation 'text' may be no more than a sample sentence or two, which serves as a model for immediate practice.

### **b) ISOLATION AND EXPLANATION**

At this stage we move away from the context, and focus, temporarily, on the grammatical items themselves: what they sound and look like, what they mean, how they function - in short, what rules govern them. The objective is that the learners should understand these various aspects of the structure. In some classes we may need to make extensive use of the students' native language to explain, translate, make generalizations and so on.

In more academic classes, or where the structure is particularly difficult for the students to grasp, this stage may take some time. However, where the structure is very simple, or very close to a parallel in the native language, or when the students tend to learn the language intuitively rather than intellectually, it may take only a minute or so or be entirely omitted.

### **c) PRACTICE**

The practice stage consists of a series of exercises done both in the classroom and for home assignments, whose aim is to cause the learners to absorb the structure thoroughly; or, to put it another way, to transfer what they know from short-term to long-term memory. Obviously, not every grammar practice procedure can 'cover' all aspects of the structure as listed in the table on page 6; therefore we shall need to use a series of varied exercises which will complement each other and together provide thorough coverage.

With a structure whose formal rules are difficult to grasp, we might start by devoting some time to manipulation of the written and spoken forms, without relating particularly to meaning. Such practice is usually given through exercises

based on 'discrete items' (a series of words, phrases or sentences with no particular connection between them, except insofar as they exemplify the structure to be practised). Commonly found exercises of this type are:

1. *Slot-fillers (the learner inserts the appropriate item)*

e.g. He is.....boy. We have ..... umbrella, (a, an)

Answer: He is *a* boy. We have *an* umbrella.

2. *Transformation (the learner changes the structure in some prescribed manner)*

e.g. This is a woman, (put into the plural) Answer: *They are women.*

The function of such exercises is simply to help make the rules of form clearer and to ensure that they are learnt more thoroughly. A learner who has worked through a series of them may find it easier, eventually, to express him or herself correctly, in language that will be acceptable to a native speaker. But because they give no practice in making meanings with the structure (and are therefore, incidentally, usually not very interesting) these exercises have limited usefulness; so we should move on to meaning-based practice as soon as we feel our students have a fundamental grasp of the rules of form and their application. (They may, of course, grasp these rules adequately as a result of the presentation and explanation, in which case we will not need purely form-based exercises at all.)

Another category of practice procedures still stresses the production or perception of correct forms, but involves meanings as well - though as yet unlinked to any general situational framework - and cannot be done without comprehension. Such exercises are, again, usually based on discrete items, and tend not to be open-ended. Some examples:

1. *Translation, to or from the native language*

2. *Slot-filling, or multiple-choice, based on meaning, e.g. He (works, is working, worked) at the moment. Answer: He is working at the moment.*

3. *Slot-filling, with choice of answers not provided,*

e.g. Last night we .. television.

Answer: Last night we *watched* television.

4. *Matching* e.g.

He			
I	<i>is</i>		an animal
She	are		soldiers
The men	am		a woman
The dog			a student
			a soldier

Answers: *He is a soldier, etc.*

The language is still not being used to 'do' things, but merely to provide examples of itself (it is, in other words, not 'communicative') - but at least the exercises cannot be done through mere technical manipulation. They are certainly more interesting to do than purely form-based ones (and this interest can be increased by the introduction of piquant or amusing subject matter, or some game-like techniques), and provide more learning value.

The third, and probably most productive - certainly most interesting - type of exercise is that in which the stress is on the production or comprehension of *meanings* for some non-linguistic purpose, while keeping an eye, as it were, on the way the structures are being manipulated in the process. Such practice may be obtained through information- or opinion-gap communication techniques or through activities based on the production of entertaining ideas. For example, the students might discuss or write about the possibilities arising out of a dilemma situation using the modals *may, might, could, should*, etc. or make up stories to practise the past tense.

If all three of the types of practice exercises described here are in fact used, they are likely to come in the order they have been laid out here - though not always. We may in the course of a communicative activity find that the students are making consistent mistakes in a certain structure and decide to return



temporarily to an exercise that focuses on correct forms. Or it may be found feasible in some cases to do only one kind of practice (usually the third, as described above), if the structure is very easily mastered.

#### **d) TEST**

Learners do tests in order to demonstrate - to themselves and to the teacher — how well they have mastered the material they have been learning. The main objective of tests within a taught course is to **provide feedback**, without which neither teacher nor learner would be able to progress very far. We have to know where we are in order to know where to go next.

Formal examinations, usually preceded by revision on the part of the learners, and followed by written evaluation on the part of the teacher, are only one kind of testing, arguably the least useful for immediate teaching purposes. (I do not give here a list of techniques that can or should be used for formal grammar testing, since the subject is outside my terms of reference.) Most testing, however, is done automatically and almost unconsciously by teacher and learners as the course proceeds, the most valuable - though necessarily impressionistic - feedback on learning being supplied by the learners' current performance in class and in home assignments. Often 'practice' exercises are used to supply such informal feedback, in which case they may function virtually as tests: but if this aspect is stressed, their effectiveness as practice techniques is usually lessened.

Of the four stages in grammar teaching described above, the *practice* stage is, I think, the most important, in that it is through practice that the material is most thoroughly and permanently learnt. So let us consider next what a grammar practice technique entails, and what makes it effective.

#### **2 Practice**

The practice stage comes after the initial presentation and explanation, «r\_en the learner is assumed to have perceived the material and taken it nto short-term memory, but cannot be said to have really mastered it yet. Practice may be defined

as any kind of engaging with the language on the **part** of the learner, usually under teacher supervision, whose primary objective is to consolidate learning. During practice the material is absorbed into long-term memory and the learner enabled to understand and produce examples of it with gradually lessening teacher support. A practice technique may involve reception - 'passive' exposure to spoken or written input - or 'active' production of language items and discourse.

What makes a language practice - or, more specifically, a grammar practice - procedure effective? There is, of course no one generalization that will answer this question, but some of the factors that definitely contribute to successful practice are the following.

### 1. Pre-learning

Practice is the second or third stage in the process of learning a structure as described in the previous chapter) - not the first. The function of a practice procedure is to familiarize learners with the material, not to introduce it; learners should not be asked to practise material they have not yet been taught. This sounds obvious, but it is surprising how often teachers do in fact launch into practice activities in the classroom without sufficient initial presentation of the material. If effective pre-learning has not taken place prior to the practice - that is to say, if the material has not been clearly perceived and taken into short-term memory by the learners - then much time will be wasted on incomprehension or unacceptable responses, forcing the teacher to interrupt the procedure for explanations and corrections, and lessening the time available for real practice. If there is virtually unlimited time available, of course, as in a 'total immersion' situation, this does not matter so much; the learners will gradually understand and absorb the material through the practice itself. But such is not the case in most language courses.

There are apparent exceptions to the principle of pre-learning: when, for example, you introduce a structure for the first time in a brief sentence or two and then go straight into a perfectly well-functioning practice procedure. This happens

where the structure's form and meaning are very straightforward, or consist of a simple variation of something already learnt, and the learners grasp it after being exposed to only one or two examples. Pre-learning has, however, still taken place, though using a rapid and almost casual presentation appropriate to the simplicity of the structure.

## 2. Volume and repetition

By 'volume' I mean the sheer amount of (comprehensible) language that is spoken, heard, read or written in the course of the activity. Crudely speaking, the more language the learners are exposed to or produce, the more they are likely to learn: this means devoting plenty of time to practice sessions, and exploiting that time efficiently. When the material to be practised is non-specific, as in fluency exercises, this just means spending as much time as possible using the language in general (as distinct from talking about it). When, however, the material is specific, as in the learning of a grammatical structure, most of the volume should consist of repetition of the items to be learnt. In other words, we want to design procedures that will induce the learners to engage with the items to be learnt as many times as possible. This does not mean mere mechanical reiteration of forms, but repeated reception and production, in speech and writing, of different examples of the structure's form and meaning.

In a brief exercise where there is insufficient volume and repetition, the learners may provide you with some feedback on what they know, or do not know, but they will not get much opportunity to consolidate their learning. In other words, the procedure will probably function as an informal test rather than as a practice.

In simple terms, the principle of repetition means that you have to get the learners to produce or perceive examples of the structure - say, sentences using the present perfect tense - over and over again. This would seem to be a perfect recipe for boredom. However, the two features of interest and repetition, though not

easily combined, are by no means mutually exclusive; and thinking of ways to achieve both of them simultaneously is perhaps the central challenge facing the teacher and materials writer in designing effective practice techniques.

### 3. Success-orientation

Although it is certainly true that correction of mistakes does contribute towards learning (on a conscious, intellectual plane), the kind of

the thorough, semi-intuitive absorption of material we are aiming for in language teaching can only be achieved if, after mistakes have been eliminated, learners have plenty of experience of 'doing it right'. Thus practice in general is most effective if it is based on more or less successful performance, and practice activities should be designed and presented in such a way as to make it likely that learner responses will be acceptable. Besides immediate efficiency of practice, this principle of success-orientation has wider pedagogical implications, no less important. A student whose performance is consistently successful will develop a positive self-image as a language learner, whereas one who frequently fails will be discouraged and demotivated. It should also be noted that tension and anxiety are fairly high if learners feel there is a possibility of failure (that is, if they are in a sense of being tested), and are correspondingly lowered if they are confident of success. Thus, success-orientation contributes significantly to a positive classroom climate of relaxation, confidence and motivation.

On the other hand, the fact that there is no risk of failure in producing acceptable language lessens the challenge of the activity for some participants, so we have to find other ways of making it interesting.

### 4. Heterogeneity

A 'heterogeneous' exercise, as I am using the term here, is one which may be done at various different levels. Because most (all?) classes are in fact composed of mixed-ability groups, a 'homogeneous' exercise cannot possibly provide effective practice for all the students: it will be too difficult for the weaker ones,

and/or lacking in volume and challenge for the stronger. It is, however, possible - and desirable - to design practice tasks that can be interpreted and performed at whatever level the individual student feels appropriate, so that some will be able to do more than others - in terms of both quality and quantity.

An example of an exercise lacking heterogeneity is one based on multiple-choice questions; for example:

A male chauvinist help with the washing-up.

- a. don't
- b. isn't
- c. doesn't
- d. aren't

Such an item can only be done by students above a certain level of proficiency, but on the other hand gives no opportunity for the really advanced ones to exercise their capabilities. An example of a heterogeneous task might be to give an initial sentence model, and ask students to contribute further examples. For instance:

A male chauvinist doesn't help with the washing-up. What else doesn't he do?

Students may respond with simple sentences like 'He doesn't cook', or more complicated ones like 'He doesn't approve of women going out to work.' In this way, the slower learners can succeed at the same time as the brighter ones can stretch themselves to the limits of their ability. Also, of course, the quicker ones can simply make more sentences, as well as more difficult ones, particularly if the exercise is done partly or wholly in writing.

An exercise which is not heterogeneous will provide you with more reliable feedback on learner performance, because the task is standardized and it is possible to assess the relative acceptability of different learner responses. But if this aspect is seen as a major objective, then the procedure is probably being used as an informal test, and is likely to be less effective as practice.

The use of heterogeneous exercises not only ensures that a higher proportion of the class get learning value out of the practice; it also, like success-orientation, has

a positive effect on learner attitude and motivation. Response at many different levels can be 'right', hence these exercises provide an opportunity for the teacher to give slower or less confident students the approval and encouragement they need.

## 5 Teacher assistance

Having presented the practice task, we then need to make sure that our students do in fact perform it successfully, and fairly briskly (to get through as much volume of language as possible and to maintain interest). There should be very little correction of mistakes if there has been proper pre-learning, and if the exercise is really success-oriented. Teacher activity in the course of the practice should therefore be largely directed towards supporting and assisting the students in their production of acceptable responses rather than towards assessing and correcting. Examples of such assistance are: simply giving extra time to reread or think; repeating or simplifying a text; approving the beginning of an utterance in order to encourage production of the whole; suggestions, hints, prompts. All this means that we have to be very alert to sense when and where help is needed and what form it should take. Again, there is a wider 'message': I, the teacher, am here to help you, the learner, succeed and progress in your learning, not to judge, scold or make you feel inferior.

It may be argued that if we constantly help our students to get it right, we will never know if they can manage by themselves or not. Part of the answer to this is, of course, that we should be sensitive enough to feel when they are going to be able to produce acceptable utterances on their own, and not rush in to help unnecessarily. If, on the other hand, we let them get it wrong and then correct, there will have been virtually no practice: only a brief (failed) test, followed by a re-presentation of the correct form.

## 6 Interest

Interest in language-practice procedures may derive to some extent from extrinsic motivation: for instance, a student may be motivated to take part and succeed in exercises if by doing so he or she may earn class 'credit points' or 'stars', or if he or she badly needs to know the language for promotion at work. But such factors are based on success or failure in test-like procedures and therefore do not operate well in success-oriented practice; and they are often completely beyond our control and unpredictable (like how much the learner needs to know the language for career purposes). Thus, in most practice activities, motivation has to derive rather from the intrinsic interest of the activity itself: its (non- linguistic) topic and the task to be done.

An otherwise well-designed practice procedure may fail to produce successful learning simply because it is boring: interest is an essential feature of successful practice, not just an optional extra. Learners who are bored find it difficult to concentrate, their attention wanders, and they may spend much of the lesson time thinking of things other than the learning task in hand; even if they are apparently engaged with the exercise, the quality of the effort and attention given to learning drops appreciably. Moreover, because boredom, particularly in younger classes, often produces unruly behaviour, more valuable learning time may be wasted on coping with discipline problems. If, however, the class is interested in what it is doing, its members will not only learn more efficiently, they are also likely to enjoy the process and to want to continue.

Effective practice procedures, then, are usually characterized by the features of pre-learning, volume and repetition, success-orientation, heterogeneity, teacher assistance and interest. Any one particular exercise may of course lack one or more of these and still be effective in gaining specific objectives; but if too many of them are absent, the exercise is likely to become a virtual test, and provide little learning value.

For example, if you give five sentences with either have or has missing, and ask individual students to fill in the missing word, correcting them if they get it wrong - then this is what I would call a virtual test. There is relatively little volume or repetition, no particular success-orientation or teacher assistance, the exercise is homogeneous and lacking in interest. (The aspect of pre-teaching is difficult to illustrate in an isolated example.) You may find out which of the responders know the difference between have and has (hence the 'test' aspect), but will have done little to help those whose knowledge is still a little shaky and simply need practice. If, on the other hand, we tell the students about some interesting or unusual possessions of our own ('I have...'), invite and help them to describe some of their own to each other, and then challenge them to remember what possessions another student has - there will be volume, repetition, etc., and the exercise is likely to produce effective practice.

Unfortunately, 'virtual test' procedures are extremely common in the classroom - being much more convenient to design and administer than real practice ones - and teachers and coursebook authors are often unaware that they are testing more than teaching.

So far we have looked at topics connected with the place of grammar in language teaching and how it may, or should, be taught; and we have considered some aspects of language practice, within the context of grammar teaching.