

Towards a more realistic FL grammar syllabus: a few thoughts from SLA research

Eloy J. M. Romero-Muñoz, University of Namur (FUNDP), Belgium

Introduction

In the microcosm of SLA research, there is no shortage of theories and hypotheses to explain why and how languages are acquired. While the proliferation of competing, sometimes diametrically opposed accounts may in the end prove beneficial (Jordan 2004), the fact remains that our field is plagued with uncertainties. None of these differences of opinion have prevented the ELT publishing world from going round. Nor should they, of course. Educators and students cannot be expected to wait until someone conjures up the ultimate method, provided such a panacea exists in the first place. Moreover, however imperfect they may be, current practices and methods do seem to work for some students. Or, more accurately perhaps, some students and teachers *believe* they work, which, considering the importance of affective factors in language learning and teaching, means a lot. This paper is premised on the idea that, for all its uncertainties, SLA research *can* and *should* still play a role in language teaching, especially materials development. The purpose is to provide teachers and future materials developers with some objective, research-based content requirements for grammar teaching materials and thereby help them make informed decisions when choosing or drafting a new title. The paper ends with a short lesson plan in which the theoretical principles advocated in the paper are put into practice.

Important premises

Before content requirements for grammar teaching materials can be identified and outlined, there is a need to establish why teaching form is believed to be conducive to L2 learning in the first place. This in turn leads to a need to elaborate on the very concept of 'form'.

Why teach 'form'?

To teach or not to teach form? That is the question that has been dividing SLA researchers for a while. In

the not so distant past, the potential of Form-Focused Instruction was considered as limited, non-existent or even counterproductive. There was simply little room for an interface between learning (what you were taught in class) and acquisition (what you actually transferred in your brain). Or, to use Krashen's widely quoted terms, 'the only contribution that classroom instruction [could] make [was] to provide comprehensible input that might not be available outside the classroom' (1985:33-4). Following detailed treatments of instructional options in SLA, the pendulum started to shift in favour of formal instruction, culminating in Doughty and Williams' seminal volume on Form-Focused Instruction (1998). The shift has been quite radical in fact, for even if instruction does seem to have a facilitative effect for SLA, available findings have not always been considered with the necessary caution. However, as Doughty reminds us, 'the evidence to date for either relative or absolute effectiveness of L2 instruction is tenuous at best, owing to improving, but still woefully inadequate, research methodology' (2003: 256). To this day, the interface debate is still very much ongoing, polarised and, as of yet, highly undecided.

This paper makes the basic assumption that some focus on form is conducive to FL acquisition. As such, it takes an intermediate position in the interface debate. It is believed that acquisition is best achieved by repeatedly drawing the learners' attention to salient aspects of the language (Doughty and Williams, 1998). The role of the teacher or materials developer is to plan such meaningful exposure.

What 'form'?

What 'form', then, should a learner be taught in a FL classroom? The answer to this question largely depends on your conception of form and of its role in language.

Traditionally, FL teaching materials have approached English through the prism of dead languages and theoretical linguistics, which has resulted in an abstract, decontextualised and atomistic representation of linguistic structures. For instance, the rule that

pronouns following a copula be should take the nominative ('It is *I*') rather than the accusative ('It is *me*') is in fact a Latin rule that was transferred to the English language. Corpus data shows that actual usage invalidates this normative view for most registers (Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English, pp 335-7). Learning a language was, and for many still is, a matter of learning the words of a language (its morphology) and the rules governing them (its syntax).

This traditional 'words and rules' approach has largely been problematised by recent developments in linguistics, especially from usage-based models of language (Barlow and Kemmer, 2000). More than anything else, these theories have induced a change of perspective. It seems that language is an integral part of our overall cognitive development and is intimately linked with our bodily experience of the world – linguists use the terms 'embodiment' or 'embodied cognition' to refer to this view. Language acquisition is understood as a bottom-up, frequency-sensitive and usage-based process in which form results from the abstraction and reinforcement of recurring usage events or constructions. As Langacker (2001) reminds us, 'a usage-based approach is necessarily a *construction-based* approach. That is, constructions are basic rather than epiphenomenal, and rules are nothing more than schematic constructions' (4, author's emphasis). Recent developments in corpus linguistics have provided empirical data that confirms the ubiquity of such form-meaning pairings in actual usage.

In short, there is nothing wrong with a fragmented description of language from a heuristic viewpoint. We can still talk about the semantics of English prepositions, the phonology of English or the morphology of English verb forms. What we can no longer do, however, is pretend that these linguistic attributes do not combine in actual usage. Language teaching materials should therefore venture beyond word-level considerations to foster a realistic representation of the language in the learner's mind; the focus ought to be on constructions rather than rules, which has clearly not been the norm so far.

Content requirements for FL grammar teaching: A usage-based assessment

Perhaps the first step in the direction of better FL pedagogy is to move from a form-as-*facts* to a form-as-*meaning* approach. Such a paradigm shift presupposes that we reconsider the very nature of grammaticality. The central idea here, borrowed from Rosch's experiments in cognitive psychology (1978), is that natural semantic categories are radial and graded rather than binary in nature. Membership in a category

is thus a question of degree, not of absolutes; some elements are more representative – Rosch uses the term 'prototypical' – of their category. Take the famous example of birds. A robin and a penguin are both birds, but the former will be more easily associated with the category 'birds' than the latter. Prototype theory allows us to treat rules and so-called exceptions in the same way. Exceptions are simply more marginal or less prototypical instances of rules and linguistic anomalies which have all-too-easily been dismissed as linguistic quirks, but which may in fact belie deeper misunderstandings about the nature of conceptual representations in a language.

This has crucial implications for FL teaching. First, the underlying conceptual nature of language may account for the limited effectiveness of feedback at the morphosyntactic level also known as 'declarative recasts'. The careful analysis of recasts has indeed demonstrated that learners attend primarily to meaning and not form (Nicholas et al., 2001). Second, as Danesi (2008) suggests, learners may make different mistakes depending on their linguistic background. When using teaching materials that are designed for a worldwide audience as most people do, you will likely be missing on important contrastive conceptual and formal aspects while at the same time wasting valuable class time on things that are 'transparent' for learners, not to mention the deficit in affective engagement. Besides, current research in materials development has demonstrated the added value offered by localised, teacher-generated and learner-centered materials (Mishan and Chambers, 2010). Thirdly, while conceptual errors have been shown to be more disruptive in communication than morphosyntactic ones (Danesi, 2008), many language courses still focus on teaching structurally. In the end, the structural syllabus postulates a linear progression that is at odds with both the increasing multimodality of our education (Kress et al., 2001) and the network-like configuration of our brain (Lamb, 1999).

One cannot deny the obvious attraction of a form-based taxonomy such as the one we find in most textbooks, for it allows teachers and learners to structure language teaching / learning (Romero-Muñoz, 2011). However, the kind of artificial layer it imposes on language might hinder rather than facilitate both teaching and learning. A strictly form-based compartmentalisation is bound to ignore overarching, mostly conceptual principles of the language. Take English tenses, for instance. Textbooks and reference guides typically pair the simple and continuous realisation of the same tense (present simple vs. continuous, past simple vs. continuous, etc.) and thereby obscure the more fundamental similarities among, say, all continuous verb forms (see lesson plan at the end of the paper). Recent advances in cognitive linguistics have gone a step further; they convincingly argue for a joint treatment of traditionally separate grammatical categories such as the progressive aspect and the

mass / count distinction (see for instance Niemeier & Reif, 2008). The problem with the morphosyntactic approach, then, is that it overstates idiosyncracies and, as a consequence, obscures the 'geometry' of linguistic meaning.

Another major step towards a better understanding of language involves the promotion of language awareness in foreign language teaching. Typical teaching suggestions for the English indefinite articles are a case in point. Textbooks – and from my experience also teachers – consistently give more or less the following rule of thumb: a in front of a consonant and an in front of a vowel. Students usually also receive a list of 'exceptions' (a uniform, a university, a European country, an hour, an heir, etc.). It would be more accurate and far more effective to speak about sounds and not letters, for this is what determines the choice in this case as in many others (see for instance the pronunciation of other morphological suffixes such as –(ed) and –(e)s and the assimilation phenomenon). Of course you would need to engage in some metalinguistic considerations (What is a vowel sound? What is a consonant sound? What is the difference between spelling and pronunciation? Do you notice how certain sounds seem to 'go well' together?), but you could do that with simple, interactive activities. More importantly, you would also foster the belief that English is not as arbitrary as it seems.

One thing that needs to be avoided at all costs, however, is the assumption that because a language feature is attested we ought to include it in the syllabus. Larsen-Freeman (2003) calls this the 'reflex fallacy'. Naturally occurring discourse may sometimes resemble stream of consciousness, but that does not mean that our textbooks should too. As we said earlier, the role of the teacher is to plan meaningful exposure to the target language, which is more likely to happen in the presence of carefully selected input. Equally dangerous for our pedagogical endeavour is the desire to unveil the ins and outs of the language in minute detail, even if some of your students ask for it.

The English tense system: a cognitively sound approach

So far, the belief in the underlying conceptual nature of language and the value of teaching form-as-meaning rather than form-as-facts has been central to the discussion. We have also pinpointed the many limitations of the traditional, discrete-item syllabus. What we did not say, however, was that rules were to be banned from language teaching altogether; the structural approach and the usage-based approach are not mutually exclusive. Favouring an alternative, meaning-based and inductive approach to grammaticality does not mean we adopt a postmodernist, 'anything goes'

philosophy. Far from it. Language forms should still be clearly identified as acceptable or not depending on the context of use. Rules provide a much-needed roadmap to sift through the amount of usage data that students have to process to gain an understanding of the grammaticality (or otherwise) of language forms. As such, from an affective point of view, rules may have a placating effect on learners, teachers and parents. On the other hand, recognising the role of rules in language learning does not mean that teaching endeavours should promote rules to the centre-stage. Whereas knowledge of the rules of a language may be an important component of language learning and teaching, declarative knowledge of this nature remains a means to an end.

In what follows, an attempt is made to approach the FL grammar syllabus in a more cognitively sound, yet realistic manner. I do so by offering suggestions for materials development on the English tense system. Traditionally (see for instance Aitken, 2002), the English tense system has been taught contrastively (that is by pairing two tenses, usually the simple and progressive variants or the perfective and the imperfective variants) and using categories such as 'a finished action in the past' (a) or 'action in progress at present' (b), which prove problematic for even the most common usage events as in (c), (d) and (e).

- (a) The phone rang yesterday
- (b) I am listening to the radio
- (c) ?I listened to the radio from 8 till 9
- (d) ?I was listening to the radio when the phone rang
- (e) ?I'm lovin' it! (McDonald's slogan)

As the question marks indicate, these sentences may prove hard to fit within traditional categories. Students will typically say that in (c) the action lasted for some time just as the phone must have been ringing in (d) and we should be using the progressive or that a stative verb cannot be put in the continuous as in (e). To avoid such pitfalls I suggest we start by teaching the conceptual nature of English tenses. As we said earlier (cf. 'reflex fallacy'), we should only focus on what is absolutely necessary to students. Most students will not need to know more than the following concepts:

Past: (an action has no connection with the present and is finished);

Simple: (an action is envisaged as having an identifiable beginning and / or end);

Progressive / Continuous: (an action is envisaged as having no identifiable beginning and / or end – it is viewed as a process).

Perfect: (an action is connected to another)

At this stage, students need not be confronted with terminology like ‘present simple’ or ‘past continuous’. They should instead be required to reflect on the meaning conveyed by those verb forms using carefully selected, explicitly contextualised and above all highly prototypical examples. The so-called ‘exceptions’ like statives can be accounted for if we foster the awareness that grammar encodes our subjective perspective, which Langacker (2001) refers to as ‘viewing arrangements’ (16), and that perspectivisation is flexible. Students will see that a verb like ‘love’ is prototypically *simple*, but may be used in the *progressive* in less prototypical cases as in (e) above. Once you have made sure a linguistic feature is understood at the conceptual level (for instance that students know the simple past refers to actions that are completely finished), you may provide more factual information about forms (essentially morphological information). Subsequently, you may resort to good old testing and drilling to ensure that more formal aspects are mastered.

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Eloy JM Romero-Muñoz is a PhD candidate in Applied Educational Linguistics at the University of Namur (FUNDP) in Belgium. He is currently looking at the status of grammar instruction in Belgian FL classrooms. His PhD project also assesses the values and flaws of Cognitive Linguistics for language teaching, especially materials development. His teaching duties include various courses in English grammar, composition, and translation at the BA level.

eromerom@fundp.ac.be

FOR MATSDA MEMBERSHIP PLEASE CONTACT

Susi Pearson, MATSDA Membership Secretary, Norwich Institute for Language Education,
82 Upper St Giles Street, Norwich NR2 1LT, UK, e-mail: matsdamembershipsec@nile-elt.com