

Principles for teaching grammar in a foreign language

Teaching grammar in a context with limited hours of exposure

To use grammar quickly and accurately, learners need:

- 1) accurate and reliable knowledge about the grammar and its meaning (or function),
- 2) lots of practice using this knowledge in listening and reading, then in writing and speaking,
- 3) gradual transition from using the grammar in controlled, scaffolded activities to using it in freer, more meaningful tasks.

It can be useful to think of 'phases' in the teaching of grammar. Here we describe three such phases: (1) 'introducing', (2) 'embedding and consolidating' and (3) 'extending'.

1 INTRODUCING NEW GRAMMAR

1.1 Contrasting "pairs of features" which have different meanings (or functions)

Many existing resources tend to introduce full grammatical paradigms in one go (for example present tense verb endings for 1st, 2nd, 3rd person singular and plural, and sometimes in three different patterns (-er, -ir, -re) simultaneously or in close succession). However, introducing and practising full paradigms at one time is likely to overload learners' attentional capacity and memory, and is likely to lead to false expectations about what has *really* been learned. Learners tend to pay attention to a limited number of new features at any one time (Robinson, 2003; VanPatten, 2004). Introducing full paradigms can therefore be confusing and demotivating for learners, especially when all the components of the paradigm are not given sufficient practice. There is also very strong evidence that grammar systems, such as verb inflections, are not really learned linearly, in neat, holistic packages (such as "present tense '-ar', '-er' and '-ir'; then perfect tense; then imperfect tense) (Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden, 2019).

It is likely to be most helpful for most learners to use activities that introduce and practise *pairs of grammar features* which have different meanings (or functions). For example, to describe events in the present, we contrast the use of a verb ending that 'means' 1st person singular with another feature that 'means' 1st person plural; or we juxtapose a word order that conveys the 'function' of a question with another word order that functions as a statement.

These 'pairs' of meanings (or functions) can be juxtaposed in different combinations. In this way, we ensure that features are revisited and reinforced by being contrasted with different grammar features (e.g. comparing the previously taught 1st person singular with the new 3rd person singular verb ending).

Very gradually, activities may incorporate more than two features, but *extensive* initial practice of pairs of features is likely to be efficient, for most learners. When these forms have been practised in both modes (comprehension and production) and both modalities (oral and written), in a range of contexts and tasks, then activities can more usefully and efficiently draw on a wider range of features.

1.2 Very briefly describing the new grammar feature before plenty of practice

Providing a *succinct, explicit description* of the grammar feature, *before* practice, can help learners to understand the meaning (or function) of the feature.

Content. It is important to describe the *meaning (or function)* of the grammar (e.g. 'to talk to more than one person, use ...' or 'to talk about what someone else did in the past, use ...'), rather than just give information about forming the grammar. It is also sometimes useful to explain why this grammar might be difficult (e.g., 'it is tempting to rely on other parts of the sentence to guess the meaning'). Developing learners' awareness of the relationship between English and the L2 is also beneficial, particularly for grammar features where the relationship is complex (e.g., when the L2 grammar feature exists in English but works differently in some way). The brief explanation can include pointers like 'This sound might be difficult for you to spot because English does not attach a meaning to this sound'. See the 'What Makes Grammar Difficult' Handout.

Timing. A body of research suggests that, for most learners, for most of the time, and for several different grammar features, providing an explanation upfront, *before* practice, is more beneficial than waiting for or asking learners to spot patterns (e.g. Erlam, 2000, 2003; Henry, Culman & VanPatten, 2009; Lichtman, 2016; McManus & Marsden, 2017, 2018; Norris & Ortega, 2001). There are several reasons for this.

First, providing an explanation can help learners to 'break down' the language and notice particular features when they are listening and reading. This can speed up learning.

Second, although some learners are good at hearing or seeing patterns in language, many are not, and so providing an explanation may be fairer to help most learners in a class.

Third, if learners are left to work out the pattern themselves at the start, they can establish erroneous connections between the grammar and its meaning (or function). Although errors can sometimes be useful, they can also make learning less accurate and slower, particularly in contexts with limited exposure to the language and limited opportunity to notice ('undo') the erroneous connection.

Fourth, being told about how grammar works enables learners to apply this 'pattern spotting skill' later, when they are more proficient or are learning other languages. But, they need plenty of information and guidance in the early stages, given that language is so complex.

However, most importantly, there is a strong body of research that suggests that, in any case, explicit grammar explanations (whether before or after practice, whether full paradigms or short explanations about a small number of features) are not very effective and are less useful than the practice itself. It is the amount and nature of **practice** that seems to have the biggest benefits for learning (e.g., Marsden, 2006; Sanz & Morgan-Short, 2004).

2. EMBEDDING AND CONSOLIDATING GRAMMAR: PRACTICE!

2.1 Embedding grammar in reading and listening

Certain grammar features are particularly challenging for learners to notice and 'use to understand meaning' (Ellis, 2006). This might be because:

- (a) the features are difficult to perceive (hear in speech or notice in writing),

(b) the meaning (or function) of the feature is associated with another word or element of the sentence (such as '-ed' verb endings in English often appearing with words such as 'yesterday' or 'last year'),

(c) the expectations learners bring with them from English,

(d) learners' common sense about the world.

Please see the 'What Makes Grammar Difficult' Handout.

Due to these difficulties, learners benefit from practising paying attention to these grammar features and making the correct connection between a grammar feature and its meaning (or function) in the L2 (VanPatten, 2002, 2004).

Once we have identified why a particular grammar feature may be problematic, we can predict where learners may get stuck and design activities that focus learners' attention on the grammar feature and its meaning.

Initially, learners need plenty of practice to reinforce knowledge of the grammatical form and its meaning / function in the 'input' (i.e. when reading and listening). Input practice should make the grammar feature *task-essential* (Marsden & Chen, 2011; VanPatten, 2002). That is, in order to complete the activity correctly, the learner needs to connect the grammar feature to its meaning (or function). We make the grammar feature *task-essential*, during practice, by removing as many other cues from the sentence as possible. For example, by hiding the subject to make the verb ending for person or number *task-essential* or by removing the temporal adverb to make the grammar that communicates 'tense' *task-essential* or by removing intonation cues if we want to really focus attention on just the word order in questions.

2.2 Embedding grammar in writing and speaking

Grammatical knowledge can be *skill-specific* (or modality- and mode-specific) (DeKeyser, 2015). When we teach a grammar feature, we need to establish these different types of knowledge, via multiple routes (not just one route). For example, for some learners, practice in hearing the feature will probably have less benefit on written production than on listening; written production practice may have little observable benefit on speaking.

So, once a learner can connect a grammar feature to its meaning (or function) when reading and listening, they then need to establish and practise accessing knowledge they can use when writing and speaking.

Initially, writing and speaking practice can be through controlled, scaffolded, phrase- or sentence-level activities, e.g. gap-fill or picture matching or picture descriptions. Wherever possible, such activities should make the grammar *task-essential*, i.e. the grammar is essential for communicating meaning and, critically, this meaning is a requirement of the way the task is set-up (e.g., someone else needs to understand the meaning being conveyed).

2.3 Varying the lexicon around the grammar

Learners need to encounter grammar with a varied lexicon (vocabulary) (Marsden & David, 2008). For example, they need to: see verb endings on a wide range of frequent verbs; produce adjectival agreement on a wide range of adjectives; hear questions with a wide range of subject-verb combinations. That is, grammar practice is not confined to one or two

topics that seem to 'lend themselves' to one particular grammar feature, but is practised across a wide range of (preferably, high-frequency) vocabulary. This 'diversity' helps learners consolidate their knowledge of a grammatical system that works across multiple contexts.

3 EXTENDING KNOWLEDGE OF A GRAMMAR FEATURE

Knowledge is often thought to be context-specific. That is, learners might be able to access their knowledge in one kind of task or test, but not in another situation (DeKeyser, 2015; Lightbown, 2008). They need the opportunity to 'proceduralise' their knowledge in different contexts. Pupils will need lots of practice comprehending and producing grammar features, in different kinds of activities, in oral and written modalities. Gradually, this practice will include freer, more spontaneous activities, where learners are focused on communicating meaning. See Resources for 'Meaningful Practice'.

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