

What determines the difficulty of grammar in a foreign language?

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS THE BEST 'ORDER' TO TEACH GRAMMAR IN?

As teachers, many of us hope that what we teach first is learned first. And we would like to think that there is a 'best order' in which to teach grammar. However, there is little strong evidence to support one prescribed order at a fine level of detail. That is, finding out what the 'easiest' and 'most difficult' grammar is, or what is 'learned first' and what 'comes later' under instruction, (or even what are the most 'useful' grammar features to teach) are heavily researched and hotly debated topics. This is particularly the case for languages other than English, like French, German and Spanish (as we know more about development when learning English). This may be disappointing, but it does liberate teachers from being held to one particular fine-grained order being advocated as 'best', or feeling that the order suggested in textbooks is obligatory.

The good news is that research has shown that certain **factors** influence the difficulty of grammar: language factors, learner factors, and context/task factors (Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden, 2019). So, we can think of **broad principles** to help us design schemes of work and inform our expectations about what learners can do, when.

1 "LANGUAGE FACTORS" THAT INFLUENCE THE DIFFICULTY OF GRAMMAR

1.1 Salience of the grammar. High salience – 'physically standing out'- can make grammar easier to learn. Grammar with 'low salience' can be short sounds or non-syllabic letter groups on the end of or before a word (e.g., French verb inflections such as '-e' versus '-a', '-ons' versus 'ez'). Grammar with 'high salience' can be when it is clearly 'syllabic' or 'multi-syllabic' (e.g., to express the perfect tense, 'ich habe' preceding lexical verbs in German versus 'j'ai' in French).

But remember, salience is 'relative'; what is salient in a new language depends on what you are used to hearing and seeing. So, grammar can be of 'low salience' and not perceived when the sounds do not exist in the L1 or they do exist but they don't make a difference to *meaning*. Grammar is of high salience when you are expecting to hear or see something. Habits entrenched in your L1 orient your attention towards noticing certain features and assigning meaning to them.

1.2 Communicative value, reliability and overshadowing. High communicative value is the idea that a grammatical feature conveys an easily understood 'real world' meaning (or function) and is a frequent and familiar way of communicating that meaning (or function). For example, lexical items, such as time adverbs ('yesterday'), are clear and familiar expressions of 'pastness'. Another example is that the word order in English of 'Subject Verb Object' is a reliable way of indicating who does what to whom (i.e., grammatical roles). This reliable cue 'overshadows' other cues. English speakers are 'entrenched' in relying on this Subject Verb Object routine. As such, they expect other languages to behave in the same way and tend to interpret the language they hear and read as 'Subject Verb Object'. This can overshadow other cues, reducing the chances that learners attend to these other cues, such as case marking (e.g., 'der' versus 'den' in German) or cues that an Object can be first in Spanish (e.g., 'le habla' versus 'él habla' ('to him he speaks' versus 'he speaks')). Similarly, this overshadowing can lead to learners misinterpreting 'me' in 'me gusta' and 'me llamo' as a subject (I). In other words, grammar is said to have low communicative value when other familiar items (words) or features (intonation, word order) convey a similar meaning and often co-occur with the grammar. For example, auxiliaries (e.g., 'habe' in German) are said to have low communicative value when temporal adverbs (e.g., 'Letztes Wochenende', last weekend) are also present to convey the time something happened; case marking can have low communicative value as it is very often co-occurs with a frequent and familiar word order and with prepositions that express the same thing as the case marking.

1.3 Frequency of the grammar. High frequency of grammar is important for learning. But, there is a much less straightforward relationship between frequency and grammar than between frequency and vocabulary (where, essentially, high frequency helps). There are different types of frequency:

Token frequency. High frequency is when the feature appears a lot in the input (reading and listening). For example, 'subject verb object' word order in English; 3rd person singular, present of avoir 'a' in French. But this kind of frequency does not always help learning – advanced learners of English still omit 's' from 3rd person verbs; 'a' in French is highly frequent but hard to learn. These forms may be highly frequent but they appear with different functions and meanings.

Type frequency. If the feature appears with lots of *different* words, this usually makes it easier to notice and learn (e.g., '-ons' appearing on *different* French verbs; 'pas' appearing after lots of different lexical verbs). If a feature appears with just very small set of words, this makes it harder to spot and generalise the grammar (e.g., '-ons' only appearing with three or four verbs; 'mon' usually appearing with biologically masculine nouns (mon frère, mon père) rather than a wider range; 'pas' mainly appearing after 'aime').

Frequency of the association between the grammar and its meaning (or function). This kind of frequency really helps learning. If there is a reliable association between a grammatical feature and its meaning or function, this make it easier to learn. E.g., 'a' might be difficult because it has so many functions; 's' on English words has many functions (plurality, 3rd person singular, possessive, 'be').

1.4 Similarity to /distance from the first language. The effects of the relationship between the L1 and L2 are complex. It is not always true that things that are different are harder to learn. But, it is useful to be aware of types of difference:

- **'Unique'**. When the L2 grammar feature is completely 'unique' to the L2 as it does not occur in the L1. For example, definite article agreement for number (e.g., for English L1 speakers, 'le'/'la' vs. 'les' in French).
- **'Similar but different'**. When the L2 grammar feature exists in the L1 but works differently in some way. For example, the word 'for' can be expressed by both 'por' and 'para' or by no word at all in Spanish in different grammatical contexts; the word 'be' can be expressed by both 'estar' and 'ser' in Spanish; describing habitual events in the past in French is expressed by a verb ending (imperfect), which is similar to how English grammar can work ('I talk-ed to him' [every day]) but English *also* uses lexical expressions, such as 'used to talk', or modals 'would talk'. Additional differences are that the French imperfect also expresses 'ongoing' in the past, whereas the English -ed does not (English uses 'BE + ing' such as 'was walking') and '-ed' can also express once completed events, as the preterit).
- **'Same'**. When the L2 grammar works in very similar ways in the L1, like plural marking on nouns, or basic word order for declaratives in English and French (subject + verb + complement [full noun object or preposition]); the meanings conveyed by 'to be' generally have one French form (être).

Very few researchers have investigated the most effective ways of teaching for these 'categories of difference'. To date, perhaps the two most robust findings are that (a) when grammar is the 'same' in both languages, it does not need to be taught very much and (b) when grammar is 'similar but different' or 'unique', it is useful to teach it explicitly and give plenty of practice, including clear information about how the language works differently in the first language.

(Caution! This area has surprisingly few very clear findings from robust research. For example, it has also been found that when the grammar is 'unique' to the L2, explicit rules and explicit practice are *not* very helpful. Reasons for this could include: the feature is so difficult – like gender - that long-term reliable learning gains in speech are difficult to detect; or it is so complicated that rules cannot help most learners and more practice is needed than could be provided within the research study.)

2 “LEARNER FACTORS” THAT INFLUENCE THE DIFFICULTY OF GRAMMAR

Individual differences between learners affect which grammar can be learnt when. As teachers are more than aware, in any one class of learners there is a wide range of learner characteristics. Here are some factors that affect the difficulty of learning grammar in a foreign language.

2.1 Vocabulary knowledge. We know that a good vocabulary is important for learning grammar systems so as to ensure a high type frequency (see above). For example, a good verb lexicon is

necessary before verb agreement (for tense, person, number etc.) becomes reliable (Marsden & David, 2008); a good noun lexicon is necessary before agreement (on articles and adjectives) becomes reliable. A grammar system needs a lexicon on which to 'hook itself', so the regular patterns 'around and between' words can be picked out and generalised.

2.2 Analytic ability. Some learners have a stronger tendency to try to 'figure out the puzzle' of language, i.e., chop it up, make generalisations, and work out rules. Many learners do not do this and need a lot of training (Erlam, 2005; Kasprowicz, Marsden, & Sephton, 2019; Li, 2015).

2.3 Working memory. Working memory has different functions and so it may affect learning in several ways. Some learners are able to remember longer strings of sounds than others, making it easier to temporarily hold words and phrases in their mind. Some learners are able to 'hold on' to information (like a rule) *and* do something else at the same time (like manipulate that rule to fit new language, or think about expressing a new thought). Some learners are able to 'inhibit' (repress) their L1 more easily than other learners.

2.4 Learning capacities / types of memory relied on. Some learners tend to draw more on explicit memory systems (rules, conscious thoughts) and so these learners tend to find grammar easier when it is presented explicitly. Other learners have less capacity in this kind of memory, and tend to rely on other memory systems (implicit learning), but these memory systems require a certain type of context that is rarely available in a foreign language class (i.e., a lot of input and a lot of opportunities for practice). These learners will need more support to understand and apply rules.

3 "CONTEXT AND TASK FACTORS" THAT INFLUENCE THE DIFFICULTY OF GRAMMAR

The 'difficulty' of grammar depends on how we *measure* grammar knowledge: What kind of task is the grammar needed for? When thinking about the influence of the task or test, it can be useful to frame our expectations in terms of the 'Complexity', 'Accuracy', and 'Fluency' of language. These three constructs (or ways of measuring language use) can work in tension with each other.

3.1 Modality: Oral or written? The oral modality is generally thought to be more difficult than the written. So, grammar that learners can read or write is likely to be more **complex** than grammar they can use in their speech or listening. Grammar that learners produce in writing is likely to be more **accurate** than grammar they can produce in spontaneous speaking.

3.2 Mode: Comprehension or production? The grammar that learners can *understand* (by linking grammar that they hear or read to meaning or function) and grammar that learners can *produce* are usually different (DeKeyser, 2015). Production is generally thought to be more difficult than comprehension (but not always). So, grammar that learners can understand in reading and listening is likely to be more **complex** than grammar they produce in speaking or writing.

Combining sections 3.1 and 3.2 together: Grammar that learners can produce in writing is often more complex and more accurate compared to the grammar they produce when speaking *more spontaneously*; grammar learners can understand when reading is often more complex than the grammar they can understand in listening. Note, however, that these are not hard and fast rules!

3.3 Task complexity: Varying the cognitive load. Different demands of an activity influence what learners can do with grammar (Bui & Skehan, 2018). Some activities place a higher cognitive load on learners than other activities. *Varying* this cognitive load, by varying task demands, is important. It can show where learners need more practice. Also, varying task demands provides opportunities for learners to encounter 'desirable difficulty' (Bjork & Bjork, 2014), where they are really pushed to recall some language. Here are a few examples of this idea:

(a) If learners have to produce just one grammatical feature repeatedly in one task (e.g., a gap fill practising *just* the past tense, or a description of *just* last weekend), their language is more likely to be **accurate** than if they had to choose between different grammar systems (e.g., compare past and

present events). When using just one grammar system, the **complexity** of language is very low, as learners can follow a mechanical pattern without choosing between different grammatical systems.

(b) If learners plan what they are going to say or write, this can improve the **accuracy** of their grammar and the **fluency** (increase speed and reduce certain types of pauses), compared to not planning. But planning does not necessarily increase **complexity**. Also, the fluency gained by planning is a very distinctive type of fluency that can reveal that the language was planned – with few pauses *between* sentences or clauses, where in fact it is *normal* to pause while we think about what to say.

(c) If learners have to talk spontaneously about an event that is 'there and then' (e.g., future, in another place), rather than 'here and now', their grammar is likely to be more **complex** but less **fluent**. Also, if events are not linear in time or do not happen in just one place, the task will require learners to use **complex** language such as different tenses to switch between time frames, or use prepositional phrases to express different movement or change of location.

(d) If learners have to provide rich descriptions that force them to distinguish one entity (or event) from another, their grammar is more likely to be more **complex** than when talking about one entity, as the task will require the use of comparisons or relative clauses. However, language may not be as **accurate**.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: CONSEQUENCES FOR PLANNING SCHEMES OF WORK

NCELP's schemes of work have to, by definition, propose an order for teaching grammar. The schemes take the above factors into account where possible. However, many considerations are still needed at a local level, such as the tests used to check progression and the learners' vocabulary. It is important that whichever schemes *are* followed, they plan for ample opportunity to re-visit the same grammar in different contexts, for different tasks, with a range of vocabulary. It is also important that interim tests acknowledge that the complexity, accuracy and fluency of grammar will vary according to what learners are asked to do. It is important to be able to justify, in a principled way, the order in which we teach grammar and to ensure it is re-visited along the way.

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