

Chapter 3 Noticing grammar

In Chapters 1 and 2, we put the case for grammar being considered less as a set of facts about the language than as a kind of mental process that is activated whenever an utterance is in need of fine-tuning. This verb-like, process view of grammar seems to apply not only to the production of language, but to the way grammar develops in both first and second language acquisition. Left to their own devices, however, many second language learners do not get very far with these developmental processes – in some cases, little or no grammaring takes place at all. So, what can we do to nudge the process along? In this chapter we take a look at the kind of things that teachers can do to oil the grammaring processes.

Instruction plus and instruction minus

Me (*meeting a student of mine in downtown Cairo*): Hey Hamdi, where are you going?

Hamdi: I go to Sporting Club.

Me (*unable to resist a chance to correct*): Go?

Hamdi (*impatiently*): Oh, go, going, went!

Question: How was I to interpret Hamdi's outburst?

- 1 'Correction is for classrooms – the street is for communication!'
- 2 'You understood what I meant, so why the correction?'
- 3 'Search me. I still don't know the difference between *go/going/went*.'
- 4 'Don't expect me to say what I mean and get it right at the same time!'
- 5 All of the above.

My interpretation is probably 5: All of the above. Hamdi was right: my correction was definitely out of order, and, it's true, I knew exactly what he was trying to say. (Contextual clues like the fact he was carrying a tennis racquet helped.) Whether or not Hamdi 'knew' the difference between *go*, *going* and *went* is less clear: you can know something in theory, but you may not be able to put it into practice. In learning a second language, as in learning to drive, there is a lag between 'know what' and 'can do'. Finally, with regard to point 4, my experience as both language learner and language teacher has taught me that it is very hard – often impossible – to focus on communication and accuracy at the same time. Or, put another way, you can't devote equal attention to meaning and form. It's a condition not unlike that of the US president of whom it was said that he couldn't walk and chew gum.

The problem is, however, that good language learners *can* walk and chew gum, metaphorically speaking. The ability to say what you mean on cue and, at the same time, to get it right is perhaps the defining characteristic of a proficient speaker. Unless this capacity is developed, there is a danger that learners like Hamdi will follow the path of least resistance and *never* get beyond the *Me Tarzan, you Jane* phase of second language development. In other words, the system settles for second best and simply shuts down. After all, *I go to Sporting Club* does the job, even if it is not technically precise. The effort involved in cranking up the system into *I'm going to the Sporting Club* mode may just not seem worth it, so the system freezes (or *fossilizes*) at the *I go...* stage. It may not seem like a big deal. As Hamdi implies: *go, going, went* – they're just little words that mean roughly the same thing. But there is reason to believe that if the system locks at the *I go...* stage, it

may have a knock-on effect, such that a whole range of emergent grammatical structures are effectively ‘turned off’ too. The learner who gets stuck on saying *I go* instead of *I’m going* is as likely to get stuck on saying *I no like* instead of *I don’t like*, and *I am student* rather than *I am a student*. Again, none of these errors is critical, in a strictly communicative sense, but their combined effect may seriously prejudice the learner who needs English for more than just buying bus tickets.

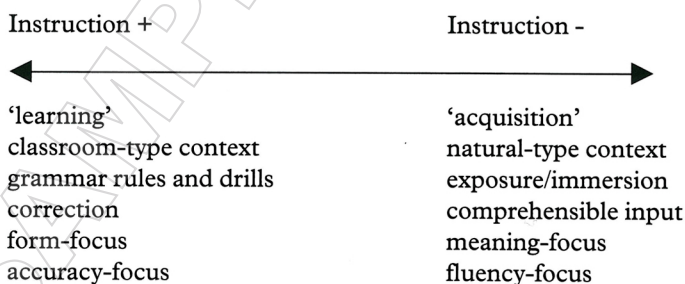
Discovery activity

What do you think is the best approach to take, in order that fossilization doesn’t occur?

- 1 Teach Hamdi the grammar rules of English and make sure he practises them until he gets them right?
- 2 Correct him every time he makes a mistake?
- 3 Give him books and tapes for exposure to language in context?
- 4 Send him to an English-speaking country for a couple of months?
- 5 All of the above?
- 6 None of the above?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

A great deal of ink has been expended on this question, and anybody reading the literature on second language acquisition (SLA) might be forgiven for thinking that we have been going round in circles for much of the time. At first grammar was in, then it was out, and now it is back in again. Ditto correction. Ditto immersion: once it was thought that immersion (option 4 above) was the answer; then immersion went out of fashion. Ditto ‘comprehensible input’ (option 3). In fact, it seems that if the pendulum swings towards options 1 and 2, it swings away from options 3 and 4. And vice versa. In other words, there is a tension between what might be called *instruction plus* solutions, and *instruction minus* solutions – what some writers call *learning*, on the one hand, and *acquisition*, on the other. Certain beliefs and procedures tend to be associated with either one or the other:



Most practising teachers tend to situate themselves somewhere along a line between the two extremes. Where does your own position lie? ■

Form-focus versus meaning-focus

As suggested in the diagram above, correction is associated with *instruction plus* solutions. It is also associated with *form* – getting the forms right for the meanings that are intended. Thus, when I attempted to jog Hamdi’s memory regarding the forms *go* and

going it wasn't that I didn't understand what he meant. It was simply that I didn't accept the way his meaning was formed. This is what correction typically means: I understand what you mean, but that's not the way you say it. This is what is meant by a *focus on form*. The alternative – which is associated with *instruction minus* approaches – is a focus on the message, a focus on *meaning*. But does a *focus on meaning* mean no correction?

Here is an imaginary but not untypical exchange between a teacher and student:

- T What did you do at the weekend, Ana?
 S I go to the mountains.
 T Oh, really? Did you go alone?
 S No, I go with my friend.
 T How nice. What did you do?
 S We go skiing...

Notice that the student consistently makes a mistake in situations where the past tense (*went*) is obligatory. The teacher has chosen not to correct her, adopting, instead, a purely conversational style, perhaps because it is the beginning-of-lesson chat stage. The focus is entirely on the *message*. What would be the effect if all the teacher's exchanges with the student were as uncritical? Without any signals to the contrary, it is quite possible that the student's capacity to make the necessary changes to her mental grammar would simply shut down. It's as if the brain were to say 'They obviously understand me out there, so there's nothing more to be learned.'

This, then, is the argument for *negative feedback* – for correction and a focus on form. A focus exclusively on *meaning* may not be enough to trigger the reorganization of the learner's internal grammar. (The technical term for this process is called *restructuring*, and we will be looking at it in more detail in Chapter 4.) Simply communicating with each other in pairs or groups is unlikely to push learners into uncharted territory. Students can get very good at communicating using only minimal resources. What is required, as well as the meaning-focus, is a form-focus, a focus on the language itself, on the medium and not just the message.

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So, how is this focus on form engineered? Compare the following exchange with the one above.

- T What did you do at the weekend, Ana?
 S I go to the mountains.
 T Not *go*. What's the past of *go*?
 S *goed*?
 T No, it's irregular. Look (*writes on board*): *go* → *went*
 S I went to the mountains.
 T Good. Juan, what did you do at the weekend?

The teacher's two interventions are examples of negative feedback. They unambiguously signal a mistake. As such, they send a clear message to the brain that some restructuring is called for. But what happened to the conversation? With the teacher firmly in the role of 'inquisitor' it is not going to make much headway. The problem of this kind of fairly heavy-handed approach to focusing on form is that it shifts the attention on to 'getting things right', which is not the ideal mindset for exploring the communicative possibilities of a new language. (Witness Hamdi's impatient reaction to my well-meant attempt to correct him!)

Now, compare the last two exchanges with this one:

- T What did you do at the weekend, Ana?
 S I go to the mountains.

- T** Last weekend, I mean.
S Last weekend, I... erm... *went* to the mountains.
T Did you go alone?
S No, I go with my friend.
T You *went* with your friend?
S Yes, I went with my friend.

In this case, the teacher's intention is to nudge the student to self-correct without interrupting the flow of the talk: a case of *intervening* but not interfering. In the first case, the teacher signals to the student that her utterance is in some way unclear or ambiguous. It may not be the case that the meaning is really unclear – the teacher is simply pretending that it is. The student gets the message that she needs to fine-tune her utterance (to *grammaticize* it) in order to clear up the difficulty.

In the second instance, the teacher *recasts* the student's utterance, as if simply checking, but with sufficient emphasis to draw the student's attention to the error. Thus, the focus on form is engineered without disrupting the flow of the talk: an overall focus on the message is maintained throughout, even if the meaning has to be negotiated a little. The research into the effects of these kinds of feedback devices is quite encouraging. Moreover, it seems quite natural. After all, negotiation of meaning is what happens in genuine communication breakdowns, where form–meaning matches collapse altogether, for example:

- S1** How long are you staying here?
S2 Three weeks.
S1 Oh, so you were here for New Year?
S2 No, I arrive yesterday.
S1 But you say you are here since three weeks.
S2 No, I *will* be here for three weeks! You ask me how long I am staying! etc.

Student 1 had intended to ask a question about the past (*How long have you been here?*) but selected a form that is used to talk about the future. The effect of choosing the incorrect form caused a temporary communication breakdown. It has been argued that experiencing such breakdowns and their subsequent repair is an ideal platform for learning. The system is 'shocked' into restructuring itself. Therefore, misunderstanding (or pretending to misunderstand) may be a useful teaching strategy. It is a way of showing how form and meaning are powerfully (as opposed to trivially) interrelated.

It may be the case, however, that the student (Ana) doesn't recognize these veiled prompts to self-correction, and simply interprets them as a certain denseness on the part of the teacher:

- T** What did you do at the weekend, Ana?
S I go to the mountains.
T Last weekend?
S Yes.
T Did you go alone?
S No, I go with my friend.
T You *went* with your friend?
S Yes, I go with my friend, we go skiing.

In this case, the teacher uses conversational-style prompts but the student doesn't take the bait. Here we have a classic case of not noticing: perhaps because the student is not *ready* to notice, or she is too focused on getting her meaning across, or because the teacher's feedback signals are *too* subtle. Or all three.

The same obstinate refusal to notice corrections occurs in children learning their first language, as this example¹ demonstrates:

Child: Want other one spoon, Daddy.
 Father: You mean, you want the other spoon.
 Child: Yes, I want other one spoon, please Daddy.
 Father: Can you say 'the other spoon'?
 Child: Other... one... spoon.
 Father: Say 'other'.
 Child: Other.
 Father: 'Spoon'.
 Child: Spoon.
 Father: 'Other spoon'.
 Child: Other... spoon. Now give me other one spoon?

As we said earlier, learners have one-track minds: when they are focused on meaning, they find it very difficult to focus on form. And yet, unless they focus on form, there is a danger that their capacity to restructure will close down. The great challenge of teaching, then, is to set up activities which are essentially meaning-focused, but within which a focus on form can be engineered. It means finding a position that accommodates both *instruction minus* and *instruction plus*. It is an enormously delicate balancing act. It is what makes teaching an *art*, not a science.

Noticing

In the last teacher–student scenario above, I suggested that the student didn't *notice* the subtle corrections that the teacher was offering. The notion of *noticing* is a key one in the study of second language acquisition. Have you ever had the experience, for example, of being taught a new word in a second language, and subsequently seeing it everywhere? It must have been there before, but you simply didn't *notice* it. The importance of *noticing* in language learning was first suggested by a researcher called Richard Schmidt². Schmidt went to Brazil with the intention of learning Portuguese. While there he kept a diary of his language-learning experience. One effect of the Portuguese classes he initially enrolled in was that they seemed to prime him to *notice* things later, when he was simply chatting with friends:

Journal entry, Week 6

This week we were introduced to and drilled on the imperfect. Very useful!... Wednesday night A came over to play cards... I noticed that his speech was full of the imperfect, which I never heard (or understood) before, and during the evening I managed to produce quite a few myself, without hesitating much. Very satisfying!

Discovery activity

Reflect on your own experiences of noticing when learning a second language. For example, while writing this chapter, I happened to notice the expression *¡Ni se te ocurre!* in a comic strip in a Spanish newspaper I was reading. The context suggested that this might mean *Don't even think of it!* I checked this with a friend who confirmed my hypothesis, but who was surprised that I hadn't heard this expression before. Sure enough, the very next day I came across the expression in an interview in a magazine. Now I am waiting for an opportunity to try it out!

Schmidt concluded that classroom instruction was useful because it helped him notice things in the natural input he was exposed to. He also suspected that simply being taught and drilled a form was not enough: he needed to notice it being used naturally. In other words, the two types of experience (*instruction plus* and *instruction minus*) seemed to complement each other quite neatly. Without the formal instruction, specific features of naturally-occurring language use might have washed right over him. But without the real-life interaction, the outcomes of formal instruction may have simply sat on a shelf in the brain and gathered dust. What's more, Schmidt insisted that both kinds of learning required a degree of *attention*. In other words, language learning involves *conscious* processes.

How does all this apply to my student Hamdi? What does he need to notice? And what is my role (ie the teacher's role) in the process?

For a start, Hamdi needs to notice the way the present continuous (*I'm going...*) is preferred when talking about activities in progress. As a teacher, I can help by trying to focus Hamdi's attention on this feature of the target language in the input that he is exposed to.

But Hamdi also needs to notice that his communicatively acceptable *I go...* is not what a more proficient speaker of English would use in this instance. So, as a teacher I need to provide opportunities for Hamdi to become aware of the distance to be covered between the present state of his second language (his *interlanguage*) and the target forms of that language.

To summarize: in order to learn a language

- learners must pay attention to linguistic features of the input that they are exposed to
- learners must *notice the gap*, ie they must make comparisons between the current state of their knowledge, as realized in their output, and the target language system, available as input.

One way to get Hamdi to notice the gap is to give him feedback when he makes a mistake. But, as we saw earlier, this is a tricky business. Too much correction, and the learner shuts up. Too little – or too subtle – and the learner simply doesn't notice. And the system shuts down. One possibility is to encourage learners to compare their output on a specific task with the output of a more proficient speaker on the same task. This is the principle behind the *grammaring* activities we looked at in Chapter 2.

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Consciousness-raising

Providing learners with feedback on their output is one way of raising their awareness about the current state of their language acquisition, but sometimes a pre-emptive strike may be what's called for. Activities designed to make students aware of features of the language – to *notice* them – are called *consciousness-raising* activities. Traditionally, such consciousness-raising was mediated by the teacher's explanations and presentations.

Here, for example, is an activity designed to introduce Hamdi to the present continuous (*I am going...*), which, as we saw, he fails to use in contexts where it is appropriate (*I am going to the Sporting Club*). Read it and decide how useful it might be.

T (*writes on board: 'the present continuous – I am going...'*): The present continuous is formed by the auxiliary verb *be* plus the present participle. We use the present continuous to describe things happening now. For example, *the sun is shining*. Is that clear?

Crystal clear, but perhaps not a lot of use to Hamdi. Apart from the lack of context there are some tricky ideas and terms to process (remember Hamdi is not a fluent English speaker – not yet). And where is Hamdi in all this? Probably thinking of the tennis match he's playing after class.

OK, then, what about this as an alternative?

T Watch me. (*walks across room*) I am walking across the room. I am walking. I am walking. I am walking. What am I doing?

S You are walking.

T Good. Everyone, repeat.

Ss You are walking.

Here the teacher is attempting to shortcut the explanations by using actions to associate a form (the present continuous) with a meaning (activity in progress). But he could just as easily – and correctly – say *I walk across the room*. Is this little bit of theatre really going to get to the heart of Hamdi's problem?

OK. Here is another one. The teacher draws two stick figures on the board. He names one Chris and the other Kim. He tells the class that one day Chris meets Kim in the street. Kim is carrying a tennis racquet. The teacher says: 'Chris says to Kim "Hi Kim, where are you going?" Kim says "I'm going to the club."' 'OK,' says the teacher, 'repeat: I'm going to the club. Everybody: I'm going to the club.' Class repeat in unison.

Well, we seem to be getting somewhere. We have a situation. We have a context. We have natural-sounding language. We would seem to have all the necessary ingredients to guarantee that the students, including Hamdi, can make the connection from the classroom context (the context of learning) to the real-life context (the context of use), when and wherever it occurs.

We could, of course, further improve this presentation by role-playing it in front of the class, by making a recording of the encounter, by showing a video of it with professional actors acting out the roles, and so on. But, the problem may not be with the method of presentation at all. It may lie in the idea of presentation itself. As every experienced teacher knows, the clarity and relevance of the presentation are no guarantee that the transfer from classroom to real-life will take place. There is something about language learning which seems to confound the best laid plans of teachers. It's as if the human mind had – well – a mind of its own.

In fact, it's not just teachers who have discovered this. Researchers have been saying for some time now that you can lead a student to grammar but you can't make him learn; that the process of learning (a language at least) is not a mechanistic, linear, input-output one. It seems to be much more capricious than that. As one researcher, Diane Larsen-Freeman³, put it:

Learning linguistic items is not a linear process – learners do not master one item and then move on to another. In fact, the learning curve for a single item is not linear either. The curve is filled with peaks and valleys, progress and backslidings.

In this sense, language development is more organic than mechanistic – an argument that will be explored in Chapter 4. Such a view has meant that there is less faith than there used to be in the *presentation* and *practice* of language rules: they are no guarantee of a smooth run through the language-learning process.

So, why should consciousness-raising be any different? The difference is basically one of reduced expectations. With consciousness-raising there is not the expectation of immediate and consistently accurate production – the assumption underlying a presentation-type methodology. The aim of consciousness-raising is to provide the kind of data that is likely to become *intake*, which, when the time is right, will have the effect of triggering the restructuring of the learner’s mental grammar. To use a metaphor, consciousness-raising is like a slow-release pill that affects the system over time. The effects may not even be very direct. As Schmidt found, being taught the Portuguese imperfect primed him to notice it when his friend came round; his noticing it a few times was the incentive to use it. This is a different view of learning than implied by presentation-practice, which assumes a direct link between input and output, between teaching and learning. The two views can be represented like this:

1 PP (Presentation + Practice)

input → output

2 C-R (Consciousness-raising)

input → noticing → intake → output

Meaning and form together

As we saw with correction, the best kind of feedback is probably the kind of feedback that sends a signal to the student that their message is unclear or ambiguous – not simply because the message is ill-formed, but because the form sends out a different message than the one the student had intended.

It follows that the best sort of consciousness-raising activities should also attempt to raise the learner’s awareness as to how form and meaning are connected – not through tedious explanation, or even demonstration, but in such a way that the connection is seen to *matter*.

It seems to be the case that, unless the learner notices *the effect that grammatical choices have on meaning*, then the noticing is not sufficient to have any long-term effects on restructuring. To notice the effect of grammatical choices on meaning assumes that the focus is on meaning to start with. The frequent and repetitive occurrence of a language item during an activity is not enough. Learners need to realize why the choice of that item – as opposed to the choice of another, or zero choice – *matters*.

Here, for example, is part of a classroom exchange that happened when I was presenting and practising the present perfect to a class of adult students, again in Egypt. We are practising the previously taught pattern *Have you done X yet?*, using prompts I am supplying:

- Me: Visit the Pyramids. Hisham?
 Hisham: Have you visited the Pyramids yet?
 Me: Good. Eat kebab. Mervat?
 Mervat: Have you eaten kebab yet?
 Me: Good. See oriental dancer. Magdi?
 Magdi: Have you seen an oriental dancer yet?
 Me: Good. Hear Om Kalthoum [a well known Egyptian singer]. Hoda?
 Hoda: Have you heard Om Kalthoum yet?
 Me: Good...
 Hisham *surprised by this reference to ‘insider’ cultural knowledge and interrupting to ask a ‘real’ question*: Did you hear Om Kalthoum, Mr Scott?
 Me: Hisham! *What are we practising?!*

How is it that the student (Hisham) seemed incapable of retrieving the correct form (ie the present perfect: *Have you heard Om Kalthoum?*) for the meaning he wished to express, when the form would seem to have been optimally available? The sole purpose of the drill was for students to practise the form of the present perfect. Yet as soon as the student's attention shifted to the expression of a real meaning, the form went out the window, and he reverted to a kind of default setting: the past simple. The reason is probably due to the fact that the drill required no decision-making at any but the most superficial level. It did not allow the student to appreciate the effect on meaning of the 'marked' form (the present perfect) over the default form (the past simple). The present perfect wasn't made to *matter*. And, not mattering, it wasn't noticed.

Compare the drill above, with this activity:

The teacher draws two stick figures on the board and establishes that one is Ben and one is Betty. Ben is back in the UK after a three-week holiday in Egypt. Betty is half-way through her three-week holiday in Egypt. The teacher is having a three-way conversation with Ben and Betty by phone.

- T** Ben, did you see the Pyramids?
(*indicates that Ben answers 'Yes'*)
- T** Betty, have you seen the Pyramids yet?
(*indicates that she, too, answers 'Yes'*)
(*The teacher writes both these sentences on the board, then invites the class to tell him who he is speaking to – Ben or Betty?*)
- T** Have you been to Aswan yet? (Answer: Betty)
Did you eat falafel? (Answer: Ben)
Did you go sailing on the Nile? (Answer: Ben)
Have you been sailing on the Nile? (Answer: Betty)
Did you learn any Arabic? (Answer: Ben)
Did you ride a camel? (Answer: Ben)
Have you learnt any Arabic? (Answer: Betty)

To do this activity, the students have to attend to the form (ie whether it's past simple or present perfect) in order to perform a task which is essentially a meaning-focused task, ie who is the teacher speaking to? The exercise is so contrived that the only clue they have is the form of the verb phrase. In this way the form of the verb is made to matter.

Did that last exercise seem a little *too* contrived? Well, here is an alternative:

The teacher tells the class that they are going to listen to some answerphone messages that he (the teacher) has just received. All the messages are from friends who are on holiday or who have just returned from holiday. The students' first task is to guess which city or country each message refers to. Here are the messages:

- Hi, Joe. How are you? Great holiday! We've been to the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower, but we haven't been to Versailles yet. We'll phone you back. Bye.
- Joe, it's Barry. Fantastic holiday! We went everywhere – the Coliseum, St Peters, Hadrian's Villa – and we had great Italian food. Speak to you soon. Bye.
- Hi, Joe, Cathy here. How was your holiday? I went sightseeing and shopping and spent a fortune. Didn't have time to see Big Ben! But I bought you a fab T-shirt. Bye.
- Joe, baby! Donald speaking. Amazing holiday. Taj Mahal, Rajahstan. I've travelled thousands of miles, all by train. Third class. And I've met some really interesting people. I've even seen a tiger! Money running out, have to go...
- Hello, Joe. It's six o'clock Tuesday evening. Just phoning to tell you about my trip. I had a great time. I climbed to the top of Ayers' Rock, can you believe it! And I went surfing at Bondi Beach. But I never made it to Cairns. I have some great photos to show you. Well, speak to you soon. Bye.

Having checked the first task, the teacher then asks the students to listen again and tell him which of his friends are still on holiday and which are back home.

Here we have an activity that is, for all intents and purposes, almost wholly meaning-focused. The first task, designed to familiarize students with the text, is relatively easy and simply requires students to pick out a few proper names. The second task is much more subtle and cannot be done without paying attention to the verb forms: are they past simple (thereby situating the holiday in a period of time unconnected to the present), or are they in the present perfect (implying a period of time that is connected to the present)? For students who are unfamiliar with, or unsure of, this distinction, the task forces them to *notice* it. Again, there are no other clues in the text to help them.

Grammar interpretation activities

Both the preceding activities belong to a class of consciousness-raising tasks that are called either *grammar interpretation activities* or *structured input tasks*. The principles underlying them have been elaborated by the writer and researcher Rod Ellis⁴. Ellis supports the view that *comprehension* is a prerequisite for acquisition, and preferably comprehension without immediate production. Forcing production of a newly learned item too soon (as in the presentation–practice model) may be counter-productive, in that the effort involved in articulation diverts attention away from simply understanding how the new item works: a case of getting-your-tongue-round-it at the expense of getting-your-mind-round-it. And, as we have seen, the processes of restructuring run deep and are not necessarily instant nor direct. There is a body of research that lends support to this view. Hence, the two tasks above (about holidays) require students simply to listen and understand. This is why they are called *grammar interpretation activities*.

Look, for example, at this task:

Task 1 Choose the appropriate form of the verb in these texts:

- a) Jack Kerouac (1922–69), the American writer, _____ (spend) much of his life travelling the USA. He also _____ (visit) Mexico and North Africa. He _____ (write) a number of novels including *On The Road* (1957), which _____ (sell) a million copies in Kerouac's lifetime.
- b) Gary Snyder (1930–), the American poet, _____ (spend) his childhood in Oregon. He then _____ (study) Japanese and Chinese at the University of California. From 1956 to 68 he _____ (live) in Japan. Since then, he _____ (live) in California. He _____ (do) many different jobs in his life: seaman, logger, carpenter among others. He _____ (write) a number of books of poetry, including *Myths and Texts*, which _____ (be) published in 1960.

It is a classic grammar practice task (and not a bad one, either), in which students choose the correct form of the verb to fill the gap. The choice of verb form depends on their understanding of the context. The fact that Kerouac is dead and Snyder is alive will, in some cases, determine a different choice of verb form (past simple or present perfect).

Thus:

(Kerouac) *wrote* a number of novels...

(Snyder) *has written* a number of books...

Note that the students have to *produce* the target form. It is not a case of simply interpreting it. However, notice how the following task differs:

Task 2 Here are two US writers:

Jack Kerouac	Gary Snyder
(1922–1969)	(1930–)

- Can you complete these sentences, with either Kerouac or Snyder?
 - a) _____ was born in 1930.
 - b) _____ died in 1969.
 - c) _____ was a writer.
 - d) _____ wrote several novels as well as poetry.
 - e) _____ is a poet.
 - f) _____ has written many books of poetry.
 - g) _____ lived in USA, Mexico and Tangier.
 - h) _____ has lived in USA and Japan.
 - i) _____ has done many different jobs – seaman, logger, carpenter among others.
 - j) _____ has been married for 28 years.
 - k) _____ never married.
-

In this task, students do not have to produce the targeted verb forms; they simply have to understand their significance. This, then, is a true grammar interpretation activity. On the assumption that understanding precedes production, it would make more sense to start with this activity and then follow with Task 1 above, although not necessarily immediately. On the ‘slow release’ principle, it might be better to delay the production task, but not so long that students forget the interpretation task. It has been suggested that learning is ‘remembering understanding something’. If this is the case, then the two activities could complement each other neatly.

Ellis⁴ identifies three main goals for grammar interpretation tasks:

- 1 To enable learners to identify the meaning(s) realized by a specific grammatical feature;
- 2 To enhance input in such a way that learners are induced to notice a grammatical feature that otherwise they might ignore;
- 3 To enable learners to notice the gap between the way a particular form works to convey meaning and the way they themselves are using it.

He is cautious about making strong claims for these task types, being a scientist by disposition. Nevertheless, there seems to be a good deal of sound theory to support their use. Anything that promotes noticing, after all, must be of enormous benefit to the learner.

Summary

We started this chapter by emphasizing the importance of consciousness, and in particular of *noticing*, in language acquisition. Learners need to notice features of the input – specifically the way that the choice of form impacts on meaning. They also need to notice how far they have to travel to achieve target-like grammaring: they need to notice the gap. Unless their awareness is raised in these two ways, it is unlikely that restructuring of their mental grammar will occur, in which case it may stabilize into a less than fully grammaticized state.

We have also looked at ways a focus on form can be integrated into activities that are essentially message-focused. One way is by providing feedback on the effectiveness of the learner's message-making, even if, at times, we have to pretend we don't understand. Another activity is the grammar interpretation task, a way of enhancing input so as to optimize noticing. In Chapter 2 we looked at grammaticization tasks, which are output oriented. In the next chapter we will take a closer look at restructuring and integrate it into a view of language learning that sees grammar(ing) as being an emergent phenomenon – something that, like a tree, just grows. Such a view has important implications for the teacher's role, and we will be looking at those implications in more detail in Chapter 5.

References

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