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TEACHING GRAMMAR *in an* ENGLISH *as a* FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) CONTEXT

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■ Abstract

This paper is based on my recent experiences as a classroom teacher in Coconut Island State School on Poruma (Coconut Island), a Torres Strait primary school, and discusses best practice in explicitly instructing Islander students in Standard Australian English grammar. I argue for a variety of approaches, informed by a careful consideration of the students' cultural understandings and their language needs. These are crucial for determining which grammatical approach is most effective in ensuring effective independent second language acquisition in Standard Australian English.

■ Introduction

This paper draws on my recent experiences as a classroom teacher with primary-aged Torres Strait Islander students at Coconut Island State School on Poruma (Coconut Island), a central island in the Torres Strait. I will use these experiences in order to discuss best practice in explicitly teaching Standard Australian English (SAE) grammar through a variety of approaches. I argue that consideration of cultural context and the language needs of students on Coconut Island are crucial for determining which grammatical approach is most effective in ensuring independent second language acquisition in SAE. I also define and explain how an understanding of grammar is necessary for effective language acquisition.

■ Background and cultural context

I was until recently working for Education Queensland on a remote island called Poruma (Coconut Island) in the Torres Strait. The lingua franca of the community is Torres Strait Creole (TSC), which is also the first language of most if not all Islanders on the island. However, it should be noted that when used in reference to TSC, the term "first language" is objectionable to many residents of Poruma. They believe that the term should be used only when referring to Kulkulgal Ya, the traditional language of the island (F. Pearson, personal communication, September 20, 2001). Children at Coconut Island State School can be identified as English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. That is, their first active engagement with SAE is during their first year of formal education. Although students have access to SAE mainly via the television, they are not actively engaged in SAE. The language in which children are actively engaged in is TSC. Language must be functional and have a purpose. For these students SAE does not meet this criteria. Despite this, SAE is the language of school instruction. For most students, the main experience they have at using SAE is within the classroom context.

■ What is grammar?

[G]rammar, then, is what we know; it represents our linguistic competence. To understand the nature of language we must understand the nature of this internalized, unconscious set of rules, which is part of every grammar of every language (Fromkin et al., 1999, p. 10).

Understanding what grammar truly means gives a new insight and deeper understanding to language teaching pedagogy. Within each cultural and socio-economic group, certain sets of rules are required for effective, meaningful communication. There has to be a shared understanding for important knowledge or communication to be efficacious. These rules include the grammatical rules of the language spoken by group members.

With each language there is also a set of cultural understandings. Living outside my own cultural context, it was sometimes difficult to feel part of the group, partly because I did not share some of these rules. These sets of rules help groups of people identify themselves as distinct from other groups. It could be said that I did not have linguistic or pragmatic competence in TSC. However, I do in SAE.

Moreover, particular grammatical forms are used in particular contexts. In each context the user makes unconscious linguistic choices depending on such factors as social distance (e.g., relationships with friends or strangers); status (e.g., social roles: teacher-student or doctor-patient); formality (e.g. in a church ceremony); and function (e.g., goal of interaction) (cf. Holmes, 1992, pp. 29-30).

Inevitably we use our language for different purposes in the various contexts of our day-to-day lives. For each of these purposes we use language differently, and this becomes evident in the choices of grammar and vocabulary that we make (Collerson, 1997, p. 4).

Communication is also dependant on more than context and function. When learning any language, we learn its phonology (sound system), morphology (structure of words), syntax (rules of sentence structure), semantics (system of meanings), and lexicon (vocabulary of words). We must be reasonably competent in all of these if we are to have communicative competence in any language (Fromkin et al., 1999, p. 15). It is by being aware of the differences and similarities across the totality of the grammar of a language that language teachers can teach their students to express their ideas and thoughts in another tongue:

If something can be expressed in one language or one dialect, it can be expressed in any other language or dialect. It might involve different means and different words, but it can be expressed. No grammar, therefore no language, is either superior or inferior to any other (Fromkin et al., 1999, p. 11).

Difficulties in teaching Standard Australian English at Coconut Island State School

Torres Strait Creole, although superficially similar to SAE in its vocabulary, is a separate language from SAE. It has

its own phonological, grammatical and semantic structures. However, it has been influenced by SAE, which is why it was originally known as "Broken English". TSC has been and still is seen as an inferior language by some Torres Strait Islanders and White Anglo-Australian teachers. Some Torres Strait Islanders view it as the language of oppression created by the missionaries long ago. Some middle class white Anglo-Australian teachers consider it as bad English (Shnukal, 1995, p. 4). But, as Fromkin, Blair and Collins point out, no language is inferior to any other (1999, p. 11).

There were a number of difficulties in teaching SAE at Coconut Island, which I believe arose because of the influence of English in TSC. One difficulty students had was in recognising the language (grammatical) differences between TSC and SAE. Shnukal (1995, p. 6) reports that:

Students find writing much more difficult than listening and speaking, citing difficulties with "the little words that go in the wrong place". Unstressed word endings, prepositions and auxiliary verbs tend to disappear in Australian English speech, but cannot be omitted in written work. This mismatch between oral and written English goes largely unnoticed by native literate speakers, but constitutes a problem for English as a second language speakers, who are at the same time learning both English grammar and subject content from teachers who rarely model English explicitly.

Therefore, errors in written work are a result of non-applicable transference between TSC and SAE. Moreover, "because it superficially resembles English, teachers assume that the students should be able to cope easily with English" (Shnukal, 1995, p. 3). Education Queensland has noted similar issues in preparing for the future professional development for teachers of Indigenous students:

The implications for us then were to make explicit the differences between the languages Indigenous children often speak as Home Languages (HL) and the SAE language variety of schooling. We needed to make language the major focus of cross-cultural teaching situations. In summary, it seemed critical that teachers in Queensland schools be skilled in the teaching of Standard Australian English as a second language/dialect if they were to be effective with this group of learners (Taylor, 2002, p. 47).

Thus, there are some issues that need to be addressed before students are able to actively learn SAE language structures. Students, especially very young students, appear to have difficulty separating the two languages. Thus, if students are not explicitly taught the differences between the two languages, code-switching and independent second language acquisition is very difficult or even impossible.

Another difficulty that arises out of the factor of cultural context is the necessity to create a context where students feel comfortable and are able to engage and use SAE. This could at times be difficult, as the environment that I created may not have been exciting or relevant enough for my students to engage in. Most of the time my students did not see the need to use SAE at all. However, when contexts were meaningful, then grammar structures were easily grasped.

I believe that for teachers working in the Torres Strait, having a clear understanding of the differences between SAE and TSC (the regional *lingua franca*), should give a deeper understanding of students' language needs. Education Queensland is continuing to address such staff understandings through professional development in ESL and other initiatives under the auspices of the Indigenous Education and Training Alliance (IETA) as outlined recently by Taylor (2002).

■ Grammar approaches

I believe that explicit teaching of grammar is necessary if independent language acquisition is to occur. However, different contexts and groups of students have different language learning needs. So, teachers need to consider these issues when planning and presenting a language learning experience. An understanding and grounding in different approaches to grammar instruction ensures the implementation of effective language learning pedagogy.

When considering second language learning activities, inductive and deductive learning plays an important role in planning and presenting. The P-P-P (presentation-practice-production) approach, which I will discuss first, is both deductive and inductive. With deductive learning, presentation of the rule is introduced followed by an authentic example. The focus is on product (Thornbury, 1999, p. 29). The other approaches I will mention, such as Skehan's communicative task-based approach, Rutherford's grammatical consciousness-raising approach and Krashen's natural approach, all take the inductive approach to learning. That is, meaningful or authentic examples are introduced first, with rules for grammar then inferred. The focus is on process.

The method that proved most suitable for my educational and cultural situation at Poruma was the P-P-P approach. Here, the teacher presents the context or situation for eliciting language production and models correct language or grammatical structure to the students (for example, the use of "is" and "are" - singular and plural). Students then practice that particular grammar structure until they feel confident in using it independently. This may occur over a period of time through a variety of games, songs and activities using listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. It is in the production stage that students are able to discuss and use the grammar structure in different real world situations. Different activities are introduced which resemble a real world context (Harmer, 1998, p. 31).

Since rote learning is the preferred choice for Islander instruction, even in child rearing, the P-P-P approach seems very appropriate to use within the Islander context. It is also crucial for students in their primary school years to experience success in their language learning, especially as SAE is foreign to them and educational expectations are sometimes unrealistic. That is, systemic and teacher expectations do not take second language development into consideration, but rather compare and benchmark students against mainstream students (who mostly have SAE as their first language). The reader should nevertheless be aware that, however successful this approach may be within the context I am discussing, other theorists dismiss its theoretical underpinnings:

The underlying theory for a P-P-P approach has now been discredited. The belief that a precise focus on a particular form leads to learning and automatization (that learners will learn what is taught in the order in which it is taught) no longer carries much credibility in linguistics or psychology (Skehan, 1996, p. 18, cited in Richards, 1999, p. 3).

My experience, however, leads me to disagree strongly with Skehan's views. If grammar is taught within a meaningful context and students are given the opportunity to practise and produce SAE structures in a simulated real world context, then automatising is unlikely to occur. I think that Skehan does not take into consideration students learning a language but having no real world context in which to use this new language. The P-P-P approach also addresses the particular difficulties of teaching SAE to TSC speakers. It clearly defines the language differences and enforces SAE structures by correcting common errors found in speakers of TSC.

The benefit of explicit teaching of grammar through the P-P-P approach was highlighted by an incident that occurred when I was having a writing conference with one of my students. We were discussing her information report on whales. It was during this conference that she became consciously aware of errors in her written work. Without any input from me, she was able to use her own understandings of grammar structure and rules to correct her own work. In her written work she consistently omitted "s" in plurals and used singular "is" where sentences required the plural form "are". When reading out her work, she said: "This is plural, so I need to put a "s" here and change "is" to "are", because I am talking about lots of whales not one". Other similar outcomes have convinced me that only through explicit teaching of grammar through the P-P-P approach within context can successful grammar-conscious awareness arise.

One function of Rutherford's grammatical consciousness-raising approach has been to assist language learners to identify the gap between their own language production and that of native speakers (Schmidt & Froda, 1986, cited in Nunan, 1998, p. 150). The situation of my student and her

report seems to suggest that this approach may support my ideas of teaching grammar. However, learning grammar structures by a grammatical consciousness-raising approach is not sufficient by itself. I agree with Rutherford's belief that activities should provide students with an opportunity to form and test hypotheses about new language structures by helping students link what they already know (Nunan, 1998, p. 149). However, he rejects the notion that grammar can be directly taught to students and it takes the position that process is more important for language acquisition than product (Nunan, 1998, pp. 149-150). In the case of my student and her information report, process and product were seen as equally important.

Another theorist who dismisses the explicit teaching of grammar is Krashen, whose "natural approach does away with both a grammar syllabus and explicit rule-giving. Instead, learners are exposed to large doses of comprehensible input. Innate processes convert this input into output, in time" (Thornbury, 1999, p. 21). Here, again, my experience contradicts part of this statement. I find that, if I give my students a communicative task without any formal grammar instruction, the learning experience is rarely successful. Students know they have to use SAE and fear of failure results in their sitting without speaking until the time is up. However, when I present them with a variety of structures, they then have a framework within which to work; and they are more likely to participate in the activity and try the new structures.

While I disagree with some of Krashen's ideas on language learning, I do support the idea of exposing students to comprehensible input. Students need to experience authentic language contexts. Language is indeed about communication and, as teachers of language, we need to promote learning experiences that lead to communicative competency. Richards (1999, p. 3) asserts that:

The belief that successful language learning depends upon immersing students in tasks that require them to negotiate meaning and engage in naturalistic and meaningful communication is at the heart of much current thinking about language teaching and has led to a proliferation of teaching materials built around this concept, such as discussion-based materials, communication games, simulations, role plays and other group or pair-work activities.

However, there are a number of issues in communicative language tasks that tend to suggest that the resulting independent second language acquisition may be limited. Nor are such tasks the only way to ensure independent language acquisition. During communicative activities, I have often observed low levels of accuracy and little fluency in the target language. Another example put forward by Richards (of English speaking students studying French) suggests that "in spite of the input-rich communicatively orientated classrooms the students

participated in, the students did not develop native-like proficiency" (Swain, 1998, pp. 5-6, cited in Richards, 1999, p. 4). Again, these are issues that I have identified in my own classroom, which suggests that a more explicit way of presenting communicative language tasks is necessary to help students develop proficiency in the target language. The explicit presentation of rules supported by examples is the most effective way to teach difficult and new texts (spoken and written) (cf. Ellis, 1994, p. 643).

How should grammar be taught at Coconut Island State School?

My own philosophy of teaching grammar is derived from the model of systemic functional linguistics, which emphasises the social function and purpose of language. As Nunan (1998, p. 151) puts it:

Language exists in context, and the context and purposes for which language is used will determine the ways in which language is realized at the levels of text and grammar.

The teaching of grammar must be meaningful and fun, if it is to be successful. Teaching Year 3, 4 and 5 students at Poruma meant that I had to be creative and find ways to make sure that they were learning content as well as SAE. Literacy and *student's* language development must also be taken into consideration. This sometimes seemed too difficult. However, by creating a meaningful context, students hopefully gained a sense of purpose for participating in grammar activities:

Sometimes children have no idea why they have to write in a particular way; they may be doing so simply because that's what the teacher has asked for. However, if they have some understanding of how their writing is based in a particular context, of what its purpose is and how specific feature of language function in that kind of text, they can improve their choice of words and grammatical structures (Collerson, 1997, p. 51).

The teaching of genre (generic conventions) in schools draws specific attention to the differences between oral and written languages (Yates, 1998, p. 9). Most of my students had difficulty distinguishing between spoken and written forms. Their writing often seemed disjointed and thus appeared reflective of how they spoke SAE. Allowing students to speak, read and write a variety of genres gives them an opportunity to learn different grammar structures that are necessary for each genre, whether spoken or written. It is crucial to make very explicit the social function of each genre they encounter. This hopefully will enable them to apply appropriate language structures in the appropriate social context, not with fear of failure but with confidence.

I found that teaching through genres gave me more opportunity and creativity to use a variety of grammar approaches and a wide range of different activities that enhanced second language acquisition. It enabled me to teach grammar explicitly through authentic texts and to provide communicative activities (for example, barrier games and information gap activities) that were reflective of the genre being taught. In addition, it provided my EFL students with clear communicative purposes and explicit differences between spoken and written forms of SAE.

■ Conclusion

It is through greater understanding of the issues related to grammar teaching and grammar approaches that teachers are able to make informed decisions when preparing a language learning experience within their social or cultural context. Taking into account students' cultural understandings is crucial for successful and effective second language acquisition. Teachers need to understand which approach (or approaches) works best for their group of students. As teachers, our responsibility is to ensure that all students are given the opportunity to access and have independent communicative competency in spoken and written SAE. At Coconut Island School, I found that using a range of grammar approaches and strategies was effective, but other contexts may demand very different approaches. However, I believe that teachers of EFL students have a common goal: to design learning experiences that provide students with strategies that will in the long term promote independent language acquisition in SAE.

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Lisa Garrett has lived and worked in various remote area Indigenous communities and urban areas in the Northern Territory (Bulman in Arnhem Land and Darwin) and Queensland (Thursday Island, Warraber Island, Coconut Island and Cairns). She has worked as a classroom teacher, an ESL specialist teacher and a teacher of VET in both primary and secondary contexts. At the end of 2002 she was seconded by TAFE Queensland from Education Queensland and is now working for the community-based teacher education program, RATEP, writing Learning Guides for Certificate III, IV, and Diploma courses in Education. These courses are written for Indigenous Australians living in remote or urban areas who wish to seek a pathway to James Cook University to complete their Bachelor of Education. Lisa is currently completing her Masters of Education (TESOL) through Deakin University.

