

Grammatical Explanations in the EFL Class

by Mauricio Pilleux

This paper is addressed to those teachers who are searching for a way to help their students not just "parrot" the foreign language they are learning, but speak sensibly and know what they are saying. The stretch of the road between mechanical drills and communicating new ideas in the foreign language is hard going for the students and many times puzzling and discouraging for the teacher. Because of the influence of the audio-visual approach we have been warned to teach the language, not to teach about the language. A clear example of this view is furnished by Palmer, who back in 1921, in his book *Principles of Language Study*, defined language learning as a "habit forming process," urging teachers to use repetitive drills as a means of teaching the foreign language. His expression of dislike for grammatical explanations (GEs) is worth quoting (1921:57):

Nearly all the time spent by the teacher explaining why such and such a form is used and why a certain sentence is constructed in a certain way is time lost, for such explanations merely appease curiosity; they do not help us to form new habits, they do not develop automatism. Those who have learnt to use the foreign language and who do use it successfully have long since forgotten the why and the wherefore; they can no longer quote to you the theory that was supposed to have procured them command of the language.

Bolinger (1968:34) says that being given a grammatical rule is "like being introduced to a stranger; we may be able to recognize him on later encounters, but cannot be said to know him. . . . To imagine that drills are to be displaced by rule-giving is to imagine that digestion can be displaced by swallowing." One cannot agree more with Bolinger in his justification of retaining drills in the classroom. However, in his statement he implicitly recognizes the value of the grammatical explanation (GE). By

examination of his simile we can conclude that pattern drill exercises ("digestion") can be improved when the students know the reasons why ("swallowing") they are drilling a certain pattern. Besides, Bolinger speaks of rule-giving and not of grammatical explanation. For the purpose of clarification we will understand a GE as a statement—which in no way replaces the exercises or activities requiring the students to manipulate the structure under consideration in a grammar class—that explains or clarifies the principle being taught. It should not be considered as an end in itself, but as a means of helping the students to generate new utterances in the foreign language freely.

Due to the strong influence of the audio-lingual approach, GEs have been largely neglected in the EFL class. It has been our experience, however, that adolescent and adult learners at the college level find GEs particularly useful. It would seem indeed that "the grammar explanation should play a more crucial role than that attributed to it by audio-lingual approaches, and while we don't want to turn our language lessons into lengthy analyses, there are several arguments that support the position that more careful attention and increased emphasis be given to the presentation of grammar rules" (Furey 1977:1).

If we accept the view that the role of grammar in the EFL class is to facilitate the understanding of the foreign language, both in its spoken and written forms, and that this role is best attained by intensive guided practice with the help of materials which provide the necessary information and good models of usage, then the GE serves as a medium for making that practice meaningful.

Justification of GEs in the EFL class

1. "Implicit" versus "explicit" explanations

The fact that in the last few years foreign-language learning has been found

to have some resemblance to first language acquisition cannot erase the fact that foreign language learning for most adolescent and adult students is an artificial process—in the sense that it is not learned *in situ* with native speakers of that language. This implies that all the elements a child has at his disposal in learning his native language are not present in the classroom. Moreover, the need expressed by our students to have more grammatical explanations is not something felt by the child, who has not reached a stage in his neurophysiological development when a GE could be of any service. Even though one cannot deny that studies on first language acquisition have shed new light on the processes involved, there is no evidence saying that implicit rules the child assimilates from the linguistic environment cannot be taught explicitly to adolescent and adult learners. This does not mean that we assume that such abilities as understanding, speaking, reading, and writing can be mastered just because a grammatical explanation is given—only that the GE can be a very useful device on the way to mastery. The student will understand the *why* and *how* he has to drill a certain pattern, and situations where students are very “active” in choral or individual repetition but do not know what they are doing will be avoided.

2. Seeing versus hearing

Because of the different constitutions of our students, different learning strategies are used in class. Some students learn more effectively just by listening to what their teachers and classmates say. They have a “hearing” memory. Other students can benefit appreciably from seeing the structure under consideration written on the blackboard; they have a “visual” memory. By using both approaches, all the students can benefit from the class.

3. Inductive versus deductive learning

Since our adolescent and adult learners have expressed the need for more GEs and have asked for more discussion of the rules underlying the structures they are learning, one has to conclude that different learning strategies are at work here than

those in small children. Some of them learn better through inductive strategies, in which they learn the grammatical constructions “correctly” during the presentation of the lesson. Later, with the aid of the teacher, they are led to form their own rules for the pattern they have been practicing. There is no doubt that when students are allowed to derive their own rules by themselves, they will find them meaningful. Nevertheless, other students learn more effectively through deductive strategies, requiring understanding of general principles prior to their application in language exercises and activities. The latter approach has the advantage of saving precious time in class. There is nothing wrong—at least our experience does not so indicate—in catering to the learning needs of this type of student. It needs to be repeated again that the GE cannot be considered as language, and consequently there will be plenty of illustrative examples to be done orally

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and/or in writing, together with intensive pattern practice exercises later on. The use of either of these approaches is recognized by Rivers (1976:106) when she states that “at some stage students must learn the grammar of the language. This learning may be approached deductively. . . or inductively. . . . In either of these approaches there is a phase wherein the student practices the use of grammatical rules in possible sentences.” Paulston and Bruder (1975:23) assert that it also “helps the student to know what he is supposed to be learning and to concentrate his attention and efforts on discrete items of language, although undeniably global aspects of language are being learned and reinforced.”

4. Speaking versus writing

Students have a chance to confirm GEs in oral as well as in written exercises. The oral exercises are useful because the student can practice, be corrected, and receive feedback on the spot as to how he is applying a certain rule. The teacher, on the other hand, will know exactly when a rule has been understood, and be able to add or skip some exercises according to the performance of his (her) students. Written exercises allow the students to test their rules by focusing their attention on specific problems, and also give them a chance to check—by means of dictionaries, texts, grammar books, etc.—whether or not the sentences they want to produce follow the principles stated by the rule.

5. Meaningful learning

Educational psychologists (Cronbach 1963; Glaser 1966; Ausubel and Robinson 1969) advise language teachers that understanding of underlying principles aids learning. Meaningful learning results when the student relates in a sensible way the pattern being learned to what he already knows (Ausubel and Robinson 1969). It is precisely this GE approach that can help our adolescent and adult students in assimilating and integrating into their cognitive structure the newly learned material. Meaningful learning can be facilitated by demonstrating the logical, systematic organization of language, and by introducing and reinforcing the appropriate ideas to which new material can be related. Meaningful learning means, in other words, going from the known to the unknown in graded stages.

Summing Up

GEs are useful in the grammar class in order to help make practice more meaningful, against the claims of the audio-lingual

approach that rule explanation should be discarded from the foreign-language class. Experience has shown that the use of GEs with adult and adolescent students is very fruitful.

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