The Structural Syllabus: The Golden-Egg-Laying Goose That Should Not Be Killed

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The structural syllabus has served materials writers and language teachers for a long time. Since the inception of the audio-lingual method in the 1950s, it has formed the backbone of many popular and widely used textbooks such as *English 900* (English Language Services, 1964) and *Lado English Series* (Lado, 1977). In this type of syllabus, grammatical items, graded from easy to difficult, are the point of departure for designing language courses (Nunan, 1988, 2001a; White, 1988). Thus, the structural syllabus is one which attributes a high priority to grammatical features and views "the structure of language teaching as being principally provided by an ordered sequence of grammatical categories" (Wilkins, 1981, p. 83). In practical terms, the structural syllabus is an immediate solution to an important problem that most language teaching professionals are preoccupied with, which is seeking the most appropriate unit of analysis for syllabus design (Breen, 2001; Long & Crookes, 1992, 1993).

Although popular in the 1960s and then criticized in the 1970s and 1980s, the structural syllabus is a golden-egg-laying goose that should not be killed. As argued by Ellis (2002b), such a syllabus ensures a systematic coverage of the grammar of the target language to be taught and provides both teachers and learners with a sense of achievement and satisfaction.

Below we shall look at the major criticisms from both sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic fronts raised against the structural syllabus. This is followed by a practical suggestion for its improvement through the task-supported structural syllabus (TSSS).

The Sociolinguistic Front

In the 1970s, language teaching scholars realized that there is more to language learning than simply mastering grammatical forms. They observed that students who had learned a second or foreign language such as English through purely grammatically centered materials were capable of producing well-formed sentences. However, they were drastically incapable of communicating effectively in real-life settings. As Widdowson (1979) rightly comments:

> The ability to compose sentences is not the only ability we need to communicate. Communication only takes place when we make use of sentences to perform a variety of different acts of an essentially social nature. Thus we do not

> communicate by composing sentences, but by using sentences to make statements of different kinds, to describe, to record, to classify and so on. (p. 118)

It follows from the above argument that to be able to communicate naturally, students ought to be aware of the communicative value of the grammatical elements that they study. In other words, they should know how to *use* a grammatical form rather simply study its *usage* (Widdowson, 1978). For example, a teacher is focusing on grammatical usage when she teaches present progressive by saying that it is formed by adding *am/is/are* to the *-ing* form of a verb through well-known classroom examples like *I am writing on the blackboard* and *She is writing on the blackboard*. However, the teacher is teaching use when she concentrates on the communicative acts performed by this tense, such as descriptions, as in *My daughter is standing next to John*. *She is wearing a white dress*. Therefore, it is argued that taking care of use is as important as, if not more important than, taking care of usage.

Quite similarly, a distinction has been drawn between two dimensions of language proficiency: cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) and basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) (Cummins, 1980). BICS refers to one s ability to communicate successfully in various social contexts. It is obvious that the main shortcoming of the structural syllabus, from a sociolinguistic perspective, is that it merely caters for CALP and takes no heed of BICS. Hence, as Wilkins (1979) genuinely contends, "The grammatical syllabus fails to provide the necessary conditions for the acquisition of communicative competence" (p. 83). That is, it does not equip students with the capacity to know how to use language appropriately and know how to use and react to various speech acts such as requests, apologies, and complaints (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992).

The Psycholinguistic Front

The second major criticism launched against the structural syllabus is concerned with how individuals acquire a second language and therefore has a psycholinguistic rationale. More often than not, the structural syllabus has been implemented through the well-established PPP methodology, which advocates three stages: presentation, practice, and production (Shehadeh, 2005; Skehan, 1998; Willis, 1996). The presentation stage focuses on a new grammatical item, often contextualized, and introduces it to students. The practice stage gives students an opportunity to automatize the newly presented structure through intensive drilling and controlled practice. Finally, at the production stage, students are encouraged to produce the target structure more freely and spontaneously through communicative activities. However, recent second language acquisition (SLA) research has shown that this is not the way language learning takes shape. Therefore, it is wrong to assume that students will learn language in the same order in which it was taught. As Skehan (1996) observes:

> The belief that a precise focus on a particular form leads to learning and automatization no longer carries much credibility in linguistics or psychology. Instead, the contemporary view of language development is that learning is constrained by internal processes. Learners do not simply acquire the language to which they are exposed, however carefully that exposure may be orchestrated by the teacher. It is not simply a matter of converting input into output. (p.18)

The linear approach to language acquisition posits that students cannot and, of course, should not work on a new grammatical item unless they have completely mastered the one preceding it. For example, students should first master conditional type I before being introduced to type conditional type II. This issue is illustrated by Nunan's (2001b) metaphorical example. According to Nunan, learning a new language is like constructing a wall, the building blocks of which are grammatical units functioning as bricks. The easy grammatical bricks should be placed at the bottom in order to provide a foundation for the more difficult ones. The task for the language learners is to get the linguistic bricks in the right order: first the word bricks, and then the sentence bricks. If the bricks are not in the correct order, the wall will collapse under its own ungrammaticality (Nunan, 2001b).

Thus, contrary to this picture, learners do not learn a new language in this step-by-step fashion. Rather, they demonstrate a U-shaped behavior (Kellerman, 1985). A typical example of this U-shaped behavior, experienced by most EFL/ESL teachers, occurs when learners apparently master irregular past-tense morphology (e.g., went, wrote, came) and then proceed to confuse them with regular past forms, the result of which is the production of wrong forms (e.g., goed, writed, comed).

Hence, dissatisfied with the brick laying metaphor, most SLA researchers have abandoned it in favor of an organic metaphor (Nunan, 2001b; Rutherford, 1987). This metaphor views second language acquisition more like growing a garden than building a wall (Nunan, 2001b). In this garden, some linguistic flowers appear at the same time, but they do not grow at the same rate. This is exactly similar to how interlanguage develops. One might learn several items concurrently, though imperfectly, yet the rate of mastery for each item is different. This rate, however, is determined by a complex interaction of several factors which are beyond the scope of this paper. The important thing to remember is that second language acquisition does not follow a discrete-point fashion: one does not first learn *Rule A* perfectly and then proceed to *Rule B*.

Grammar and Grammar Teaching

The two preceding major criticisms, coupled with a number of other minor objections, persuaded language teaching experts that grammatical items cannot be a suitable unit of analysis for designing instructional materials. Some, who were disillusioned with certain methods and approaches such as audiolingualism or situational language teaching, adopted

an anti-grammarian stance and argued in favor of grammarless classes (Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Prabhu, 1987).

A closer examination of the criticisms leveled against the structural syllabus reveals that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with grammatical rules functioning as the building blocks of language teaching materials. Although, as mentioned earlier, learners pass through certain developmental sequences governed by the interlanguage route, formal grammar instruction is likely to help them process the target structure if it coincides with their requisite developmental stage (Lightbown, 2000; Pienemann, 1984, 1999). The fact that language learners cannot use grammatical forms for communicative purposes may imply that they have not received adequate formal instruction. Likewise, the fact that second language acquisition is not orchestrated by mastery of one grammatical item followed by another does not suggest that grammar teaching should be expelled from language syllabuses and textbooks. As Ellis (2006) puts it, there is now convincing indirect and direct evidence, some of which will be examined below, to support the teaching of grammar.

The first argument for teaching grammar comes from immersion programs in Canada. In recent years, many Anglophone students have received their education through French. These students have been exposed to a lot of meaning-focused input in French and their progress has been carefully studied. The results of these studies (e.g., Swain, 1985; Swain & Lapkin, 1995) indicate that although the majority of these students have achieved native-like comprehension skills, their productive skills are still far from native-like norms, suggesting that meaning-focused instruction devoid of any grammar teaching is likely to result in fossilization.

Another argument to support grammar instruction comes from Ellis (2002b), who maintains that, for adult learners, grammar is the central component of language and adults make strenuous efforts to understand it. As he further puts it:

> In an analysis of the diaries written by abinitio learners of German in an intensive foreign language course at a university in London, I was struck by the depth of the learners concern to make sense of the grammar of German. Their diaries are full of references to their struggle to understand particular rules of grammar and their sense of achievement when a rule finally clicked. It should be noted, too, that grammar for these learners consisted of explicit rules that they could understand; it was not the kind of implicit grammar that comprises interlanguage. (p. 20)

Ellis, of course, rightly warns us that not all learners are interested in studying grammar, as some younger learners might be more inclined to study language functionally. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that grammar is an invaluable asset to adults, particularly those with an analytic learning style.

Finally, a very recent argument in favor of the importance of grammar teaching comes from Cullen (2008). Building on Widdowson's (1990) conception of grammar as a liberating force, Cullen argues that "without any grammar, the learner is forced to rely exclusively on lexis and the immediate context, combined with gestures, intonation and other prosodic and non-verbal features, to communicate his/her intended meaning" (p. 1). For instance, the three lexical items *dog*, *chase*, and *cat* can be combined in a variety of ways to signal different meanings such as: a) The dog is chasing the cat, b) The dog chased the cat, c) The dog has chased the cat, and d) A dog must have chased the cat. It is grammar and grammar alone that helps us see the distinction in these sentences through the use of articles, number, tense, and aspect. "[It] generally enables us to communicate with a degree of precision not available to the learner with only a minimal command of the system. In this sense, grammar is a liberating force" (Cullen, 2008, p. 222).

Based on the above justifications and many more that can be found elsewhere (see Ellis, 2006; Thornbury, 1999), it can be safely argued that grammar cannot and should not be sacrificed in language classes.

The Poststructural Syllabuses

The last three decades have witnessed a number of attempts to find a substitute for the structural syllabus. For a long time, syllabus designers experimented with other units of analysis such as situations, functions, notions, topics, and lexis. Nevertheless, these units of analysis were not without their critics (Long & Crookes, 1992; Long & Robinson, 1998; White, 1988), and in many cases proved to share the same faults previously found with the structural syllabus.

At last, attracted by the innovations in the Bangalore project (Prabhu, 1987), a number of scholars voted for the (pedagogic) task as an effective unit of analysis for designing language courses (Ellis, 2003; Long & Crookes, 1992, 1993; Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 1996, 1998, 2003).

But what is a task? According to Nunan (2004), a pedagogic task, i.e. one which requires learners to do things they are unlikely to do outside the classroom, is defined as follows:

> A piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. (p.4)

Implicit in the above definition is the fact that deployment of one's grammatical knowledge is an important element in successful completion of a task, "and that grammar exists to enable the language user to express different communicative meanings"

(Nunan, 2004, p. 4). The interrelation between form and meaning while doing a task brings us to the main point of this paper, the concept of a task-supported structural syllabus. However, before addressing this issue, it is important to clearly define and illustrate a number of tasks and activities which constitute the basic elements of the task-supported structural syllabus.

The first activity refers to *language* or *structural exercises*. These exercises explicitly draw learners' attention to specific grammatical or lexical items (Kumaravadivelu, 1993, p. 80). The following activity is a typical language exercise from *American Headway 2: Workbook* by Soars and Soars (2001, p. 36). This exercise requires learners to use their knowledge of present perfect tense and fill in the blanks with *for* or *since*.

Activity 1

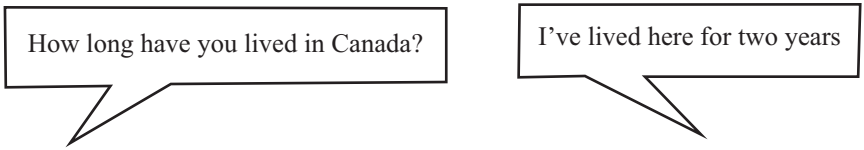
Complete the sentences with *for* or *since*.

1. I haven t seen Keith _____ a while.
2. He s been in China _____ January.
3. I have known them _____ many years.
4. He works for a company called KMP. He has worked for them _____ several years.
5. I m taking care of Tom today. He s been at my house _____ 8:00 this morning.

Next, there are *communicative activities*, which are often done in pairs or small groups and require learners to manipulate one or more structures in a genuine information exchange (Nunan, 2004). Communicative activities are similar to language exercises in that they involve manipulation of a limited number of grammatical items. However, they differ from language exercises in that they provide learners with a choice and freedom of what to say. Seen in another light, language exercises are tightly controlled and there is only one correct answer to each item or question, while communicative activities could be handled in a variety of ways. In the following communicative activity, learners work in pairs and make short conversations using present perfect tense. The second student, however, has a choice of answering with *for* or *since*.

Activity 2

Work with a partner. Make questions with *how long* and answers with *for* or *since*.



1. live in Canada
2. work as a nurse
3. have your car
4. live in this apartment
5. be a soccer fan

The next term to be elaborated on is *consciousness-raising* (CR), which is defined as a deliberate attempt on the part of the teacher to make the learners aware of specific features of the L2 (Ellis, 1993). According to Ellis (2002a), the main characteristics of CR tasks are as follows. First, there is an attempt to *isolate* a specific grammatical structure for focused attention. Second, the learners are provided with *data*, which illustrate the target structure, and with an explicit rule describing the feature. Third, the learners are supposed to utilize *intellectual effort* to understand the target structure. Fourth, misunderstanding of the target structure by the learners leads to *clarification* in the form of further data, description, or explanation. And fifth, learners may be required, though it is not necessary, to state the rule describing the target structure. CR tasks are completely different from language exercises and communicative activities in that they do not require learners to produce a given grammatical feature; rather, they provide learners with an opportunity to discover how a grammatical rule works (Ellis, 2002a, 2003).

The following CR task adapted from Ellis (2002a, p.173) is a typical activity designed to make learners aware of the grammatical difference between the prepositions for and since.

Activity 3

A consciousness-raising problem-solving task

1. Here is some information about when four people joined the company they now work for and how long they have been working there.

Name	Date Joined	Length of Time
Amanda	1975	35 yrs
Bill	1990	20 yrs
Sue	2009	9 mths
Walter	2010	10 days

2. Study these sentences about these people. When is "for" used and when is "since" used?
   a. Amanda has been working for her company for most of her life.
   b. Bill has been working for his company since 1990.
   c. Sue has been working for her company for 9 months.
   d. Walter has been working for his company since February.
3. Which of the following sentences are ungrammatical? Why?
   a. Amanda has been working for her company for 1975.
   b. Bill has been working for his company for 20 years.
   c. Sue has been working for her company since 2009.
   d. Walter has been working for his company since 10 days.
4. Try and make up a rule to explain when "for" and "since" are used.
5. Make up one sentence about when you started to learn English and one sentence about how long you have been studying English. Use "for" and "since."

Finally, there are *focused* and *unfocused* tasks. A focused task is an activity that is designed to provide learners with an opportunity to use a specific grammatical structure while communicating (Ellis, 2003, 2009; Nunan, 2004). An unfocused task, on the contrary, is a task designed to prompt comprehension and production of language for the purpose of communication without aiming at eliciting a particular grammatical feature (Ellis, 2003, 2009). Thus, the borderline between a focused and an unfocused task is that the former involves production of a particular linguistic form, whereas the latter does not. The following activity with fictitious names adapted from *Focus on Grammar: An Intermediate Course for Reference* and *Practice* by Fuchs, Westheimer, and Bonner (1994, p.104) is a good sample of a focused task. It requires learners to solve a problem—deciding whom to hire—and at the same time produce sentences using present perfect tense with *for* and *since*.

Activity 4

A prestigious college is going to hire a new English professor. Look at these two resumes. In small groups, decide who to hire and why. Use for and since in discussing their qualifications. Here are some things to consider: years of teaching experience, number of jobs, number and types of classes, awards, and number of published articles.

Examples:

A: Philip Long has had the same job since he got his Ph.D.

B: Rita Harmer has a lot of experience. She's been a teacher since 2000.

Philip Long	**Rita Harmer**
Education: 2002 Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics (UCLA) Teaching Experience: 2002- present UCLA Courses Taught: Syllabus design Methodology CALL Publications: "Introducing Computers into the English Class" (*The Journal of Linguistics Applied*, 2006) Awards: Distinguished Professor 2005	Education: 2000 Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics (UCLA) Teaching Experience: 2008-present Temple University 2003-2007 Seattle University 2000-2002 UCLA Courses Taught: Second Language Acquisition Academic Writing Psycholinguistics Publications: "Incidental Vocabulary Learning" (*MJLS*, 2001) "Collocations in SLA" (*MJLS*, 2006)

The following activity from *Interchange: Intro* (3rd edition) by Richards (2005, p.55) is an example of an unfocused task where learners read four job profiles and do the related tasks.

Activity 5

Read the following extracts. Which person has the most interesting job? Why?

Lisa Parker has two jobs. She works as a waitress at night, but she's really an actress. During the day, she auditions for plays and television shows. Her schedule is difficult, and she's tired a lot. But she's following her dream.	Lots of teenagers want **John Blue**'s job. He plays video games for eight hours a day. And he gets paid for it! John is a video game tester for a big video game company. Is it ever boring? Never. John almost always wins!
Becky Peck walks in the park every day for many hours – rain or shine. Becky is a professional dog walker. She walks dogs for other people. Sometimes she takes 20 dogs to the park at one time!	**Carlos Ruiz** is a busy man. He plans lessons, grades homework, helps with after-school activities – and of course, he teaches! His salary isn't great, but that's OK. His students like his classes, so he's happy.

A. Read the article. Who says these things? Write your guesses.

1. After I win, I take a break.
2. I don t usually work in the summer.
3. The restaurant closes late around 2:00 AM.
4. After work, my feet and arms are tired!

B. Write a short description of a job, but don t write the name of the job. Then read it to the class. Your classmates guess the job.

A Task-Supported Structural Syllabus

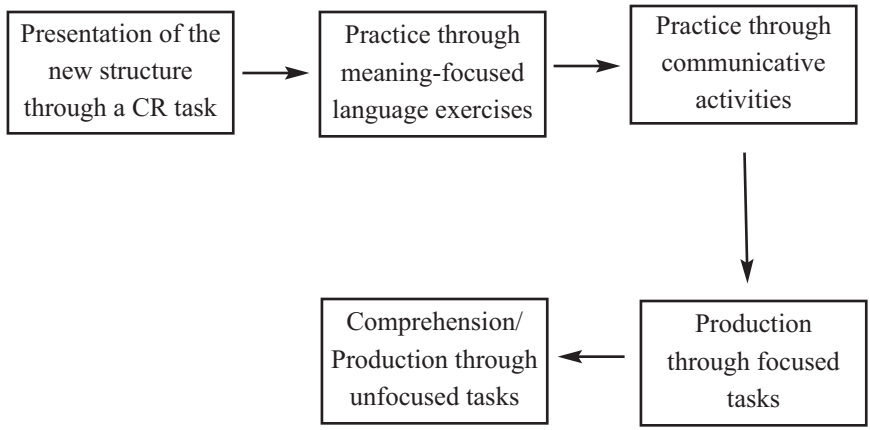
As mentioned earlier one of the serious problems associated with the structural syllabus and its accompanying presentation-practice-production (PPP) methodology is

that it presents language piece by piece and takes grammatical items as point of departure for materials development. However, it was previously argued that grammar is not something to be dispensed with. Fortunately, there is no antipathy between grammar teaching and task-based teaching and they can be easily integrated. This integration can result in what I have called the task-supported structural syllabus (TSSS) after Ellis's (2003) coinage of task-supported language teaching. The idea of integrating grammar teaching with pedagogic tasks is not a new one and has been around for a long time. In a praiseworthy attempt to sort out misunderstandings about task-based language teaching, Ellis (2009) has made a distinction between three syllabus types regarding this integration: a pure task-based syllabus (consisting entirely of unfocused tasks), a grammar-oriented task-based syllabus (consisting entirely of focused tasks), and a hybrid type (consisting of a mixture of focused and unfocused tasks). One might, therefore, wonder how TSSS differs from the grammar-oriented task-based syllabus or the hybrid type. The answer given to this query is that in all the above syllabus types, the primary unit of analysis for course design is the task, while grammatical items in TSSS still play a pivotal role. Hence, each typical TSSS lesson centers on a target grammatical structure supported by various task types (CR, focused, and unfocused). Figure 1 shows the major components of a typical TSSS lesson.

We can see that each TSSS lesson starts with a presentation stage. Nevertheless, it is totally different from that of PPP. The presentation stage in a TSSS lesson comes about through a CR task rather than the teacher's explicit teaching. This allows learners to

Figure 1

Major components of a task-supported structural lesson



discover the rules for themselves through the teacher's support and supervision. Presentation is followed by the practice stage where learners do both language exercises and communicative activities. Traditional PPP methodology requires students to do communicative activities at the production stage, which, as discussed previously, was abortive. The production stage in a typical TSSS lesson, however, requires students to do a focused task through which they both focus on form and meaning. Finally, the lesson comes to an end through an unfocused task in which students do a truly meaning-focused activity regardless of whether the input they receive contains familiar or unfamiliar structures. This unfocused task serves two purposes. The first is exposing students to previously taught structures, hence recycling them. The second is holding new, unrehearsed structures before their eyes. Both of these purposes extricate the structural syllabus from the chronic criticism of being purely linear. Moreover, doing unfocused tasks allows students to learn numerous things simultaneously and imperfectly (Nunan, 2001b), which is in line with recent models of second language acquisition.

The activities that shape a typical TSSS lesson are consistent with three interrelated principles of effective grammar instruction recently proposed by Batstone and Ellis (2009). The first is the Given-to-New Principle, where existing world knowledge should be utilized as a resource for connecting known, i.e. given meaning with new form-function mappings. The second is the Awareness Principle, which ensures the importance of consciousness in language learning. And the third is the Real-Operating Conditions Principle, which states that the process of acquiring form-function mappings will not be complete unless learners are provided with an opportunity to practice them through activities where there is primary focus on meaning, but form is not ignored. These three principles, undoubtedly, are embodied in the activities which appear in Figure 1. The CR task through which the new structures are presented to the learners reflects the Given-to-New and Awareness Principles. Such tasks enable learners to use their existing knowledge to identify the meaning(s) conveyed by a specific grammatical feature, helping them do form-function mapping. Moreover, they allow learners to notice and understand the given structure, hence ensuring the Awareness Principle. Meanwhile, the focused tasks ensure the Real-Operating Conditions principle, as they allow learners to use the given structure in a communicative context where there is attention to both meaning and form.

Conclusion

The arguments throughout this paper are aimed at providing a justifiable rationale for improving the traditional form of the structural syllabus. To this end, the major criticisms often sharpened against the structural syllabus were first reviewed. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the structural syllabus has been traditionally condemned on the grounds that it does not arm learners with the needed means for successful communication. From a psycholinguistic perspective, it has been criticized for depicting a false picture of

second language acquisition, embodying a linear, step-by-step learning fashion. To solve this problem, language teaching experts (e.g., Long & Crookes, 1992) suggested that grammatical items, as the unit of syllabus design, receive minimal attention and be replaced by tasks. Given the importance of grammar instruction in EFL settings, this paper calls attention to a compromise between grammar teaching and task-based instruction. It was contended that it is possible to moderate and modify the structural syllabus through the use of tasks as an adjunct to structure-based teaching, and that it may be possible to clothe structures through tasks (Skehan, 2003). The outcome would be the task-supported structural syllabus in which grammatical structures are first presented through consciousness-raising tasks, then practiced through meaning-focused language exercises and communicative activities, and finally produced through focused tasks. The novelty of TSSS lies in the fact that this chain is completed by an unfocused task with a twofold aim: recycling the previously taught structures and introducing the new structures to be taught later. This last episode extricates the structural syllabus from the often raised problem of linearity.

Let us now see how this could be operationalized through a hypothetical lesson designed to teach the difference between *for* and *since* to a group of elementary students who have recently been taught the present perfect tense. At first, the teacher presents the difference between for and since through a CR task (Activity 3), whereby the learners have to discover for themselves what these two mean and how they should be used. Next the learners are given a language exercise in which they have to fill in the given gaps with *for* and *since* (Activity 1). This is followed by a communicative activity, done in pairs, where the learners have more freedom in using these two forms (Activity 2). Then the teacher asks the learners to do a focused task, whereby they naturally communicate and solve a given problem, using *for* and *since* (Activity 4). Finally, the learners do an unfocused task (Activity 5), where they do not have to use a specific target structure (*for* and *since* in the case of this lesson). It should be noted that this last activity could be a comprehension task, a production task, or both, thematically linked to previous activities (in this case jobs). Thus, whatever form it takes, the goal of this episode is to provide learners with an opportunity to receive further input (preferably authentic) which exposes them to unrehearsed, uncontrived samples of language and allows them to freely communicate in the class.

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