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Teaching grammar to young learners

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Introduction

When young children start learning English at school, they approach the new language (L2) in significantly different ways from those used by older learners. Younger learners do not perceive language as a system that needs to be learnt, but as communication. They want to understand what you (and later their classmates) are saying to them in the L2. They listen to a story, and as the narrative unfolds in their own imagination they get more and more drawn into the L2.

Grammar is of course an integral part of such language encounters, but for young learners it is not a part they are aware of. What is much more the focus of their attention is the sounds of the L2, its rhythm, the process of interacting with you and their classmates, the fun they have when playing games, the fascination with stories, songs and chants and their growing wish to express themselves meaningfully in the L2.

When we talk about learning grammar in general, we usually refer to the need to develop knowledge of how words in their correct forms (word grammar) are put together to create meaningful sentences (sentence grammar), and how sentences are organised to form coherent texts (text grammar).

However, when it comes to teaching younger children, experience shows that grammar as a formal system that needs to be understood and mastered is not an issue. Rather, we need to look at grammar from the perspective of the learner, bearing in mind that children tend to ‘grow their grammar’ (Nunan 2005, p. 45), not learn it as a formal system. Cameron (2001, p. 100) distinguishes between ‘external grammars’ (the grammars in grammar books and teaching materials) and ‘internal grammars’. (The latter are the ways in which grammar is organised in each student’s mind – a process that does not follow the grammar progression as taught by the teacher any more than it is found in the syllabus or the teaching materials.) The outcomes of conveying grammar to younger students can only be measured by how well your students are able to understand a new structure in context – and later, whether or not they can use it meaningfully in their own production.

Following on from what has been said so far, I would like to stress that unless otherwise stated I use the term ‘young learners’ in this chapter in order to refer to children aged 5 to 9.
Focusing mainly on this age group is a deliberate choice I have made because of the limited space available for this chapter, but also because it is the lower segment of the young learners age bracket, where teaching grammar needs to be dealt with in ways that are very different from children aged ten and upwards – when learners’ cognitive capabilities make it increasingly possible for them to think about language in more abstract and explicit ways.

**Historical perspectives**

The following reflections on the history of teaching grammar are in no way complete, nor are they a detailed overview of the developments. Rather, I intend to give a speeded-up motion picture of how language teaching has developed over time and what role the teaching of grammar has played in that process in general. As Cameron (2001, p. 105) speeded-up, ‘Young learner classrooms are inevitably affected by the trends that sweep through foreign language teaching’, and a cogent reason for that seems to lie in the fact that teachers of young children often teach other age groups too. It is also important to point out that the various methods and approaches mentioned here do not always have clear-cut boundaries; they have not developed completely separately, several of them having influenced others.

We also need to consider the growing demand for teachers of young learners, necessitated by the ‘rapid introduction of Primary ELT’ (Enever 2016, p. 361) – according to Johnstone (2009, p. 36) ‘possibly the world’s biggest policy development in education’. One outcome of this development has been that teachers of older students or even adults have not infrequently ended up in front of young learners’ classrooms. Naturally, those colleagues tend to have belief systems about language teaching that are based on their experiences, techniques and knowledge as teachers of those older age groups, which will influence their ways of teaching the younger ones.

As far as state school systems in particular are concerned, another issue often needs to be considered: the lowering of the age when children start learning English has led to a situation where not enough qualified teachers are available. ‘This often means that many teachers who are assigned to teach English hold qualifications in other disciplines and have either received no training or insufficient training, such as short, intensive courses’ (Burns et al 2013, p. 7). Unsurprisingly, many unqualified teachers do not speak English well enough to teach children successfully. We can infer, too, that they will have a very limited understanding of how grammar might emerge in the young learners’ classroom without being properly taught, and their beliefs about this process will be influenced by their own experiences as learners of grammar at school rather than by sound pedagogical knowledge and up-to-date insights into how young children learn language.

**Teaching grammar explicitly**

It is a fact that ‘for 2500 years the teaching of grammar had often been synonymous with foreign language teaching’ (Celce-Murcia 1991, p. 459). This explicit approach to teaching language clearly focuses on grammar rules, the exceptions to them and their application – mainly in the form of the translation of (often meaningless) sentences from one language to the other. It was based on how languages such as ancient Greek and Latin were taught for centuries, the main purpose being to translate literature rather than to learn to communicate in the L2. Within the framework of this kind of grammar teaching, mistakes were not tolerated – a sharp contrast to the modern-day view that errors are not only unavoidable, but are natural phenomena that are an integral part of the language learning process.
The audio-lingual method

Around the middle of the twentieth century, the amalgamation of insights from behaviourism with those from linguistic structuralism led to the development of audiolingualism. The main claim of this theory of language teaching and learning was that students would learn to speak English by following a stimulus-response routine based on oral drills of grammatical structures that according to Celce-Murcia (1991, p. 460) were ‘carefully sequenced from basic to more complex (based on linguistic description)’. In audio-lingual classrooms, grammar was hardly ever taught explicitly, nor would the teacher attempt to tackle the rules governing it.

In the UK, this led to the so-called structural-situational method being developed for teaching modern foreign languages. Coursebooks for children from that era often presented page spreads with situational dialogues on the left-hand page, followed by exercises aimed at drilling the key structure(s) from the dialogue on the right-hand page. The language in the dialogues used was a clear departure from the often meaningless sentences on which the explicit grammar lessons of the previous era had been based, and a large amount of teaching time was now spent on oral drills in which the students listened to model sentences that they then had to manipulate according to grammatical cues given by the teacher or the audio tape. This was often carried out in language laboratories.

Other teaching techniques used were dialogue memorization and question-and-answer formats based on a substitution table. As Richards (2015, p. 64) comments, ‘Great attention to accurate pronunciation and accurate mastery of grammar was stressed from the very beginning stages of language learning, since it was assumed that if students made errors, these would quickly become a permanent part of the learner’s speech’. Celce-Murcia (1991, p. 460) explains that this belief was so strong because language learning was seen as habit formation, hence mistakes were ‘regarded as bad habits’ and ‘the result of interference from the first language’.

For many teachers, the fact that a lot of the language practice involved speaking drills created the impression – and indeed the hope – that their students were thus learning language that would be useful for social interaction. But with the hindsight of several decades, and the insights into authentic spoken language use provided by corpus linguistics, we can now see how bizarre the dialogues were that students had to listen to, repeat and learn by heart: here’s an extract from one of the leading coursebooks, Look, Listen and Learn (Alexander 1968), based on the structural-situational method for children:

**Mother:** This egg is for you, Sandy!

**Sandy:** Thanks, Mum.

**Sue:** Listen, Sandy!

That’s Dad’s car.

Eat your egg quickly!

Now put the egg in the egg-cup like this.

**Father:** Good evening, Betty.
**Mother:** Good evening, Jim.
**Father:** Good evening, children.
**Children:** Good evening, Dad.
**Sandy:** Tea’s ready, Dad.

This egg is for you.

**Father:** An egg!
That’s nice.
I’m hungry.

**Father:** Oh! It’s empty!

Of course, nobody would claim nowadays that the above is an authentic dialogue, and we don’t need to consult language corpora to confirm that. After all, even the middle-class children of the 1960s would have been highly unlikely to greet their father on arrival home from work by saying, ‘Good evening, Dad’. And Dad would have been highly unlikely to have reacted to the children’s invitation to eat an egg by saying: ‘An egg! That’s nice. I’m hungry!’.

But we can easily understand the enthusiasm many teachers felt for the new approach, because what we’re doing here is comparing the quality of this dialogue with the language that had been used in explicit grammar teaching. A look at Richards and Rodgers (2014, p. 5) quoting sentences used for grammar translation listed by the Italian scholar Titone (1968, p. 28) may make this clear:

- The philosopher pulled the lower jaw of the hen.
- My sons have bought the mirrors of the Duke.
- The cat of my aunt is more treacherous than the dog of your uncle.

As a young teacher, I myself was among those of us who put a lot of hope into the structural-situational method. However, together with others, I soon noticed that after the first few weeks of teaching, and as soon as the utterances in the dialogues became a bit longer, kids had problems remembering the sentences and acting them out by heart – and worse, rather frustratingly, the realization dawned on us that children definitely weren’t learning grammar through the drills we had used.

Nevertheless, Hall (2018, Location 1625, p. 66) has observed that ‘drills are still used by many teachers today, whether or not they explicitly associate such techniques with Audiolingualism and know about the structuralist view of language and behaviourist theory of learning that underpins this method’. Likewise, other techniques associated with lingualism – such as learning short dialogues by heart, and getting students to answer teacher questions with the help of substitution tables and choral drills – have certainly not vanished from young learners’ classrooms and we will see later that there are justifiable reasons for using them.

**Comprehensible input – the natural approach**

Krashen (1982, p. 18) argued that ‘mechanical drills can be, and often are, done without understanding on the part of the learner’ and that language is far too complex to be consciously learnt. Hence students should ideally ‘acquire’ (rather than ‘learn’) a new language in the classroom through plenty of ‘comprehensible input’ and a focus on meaning, in a process similar to the way children pick up their own language. ‘Learning’ a language, on the other hand, refers to the process that results from the teacher explaining rules to the students, and getting them to practise language consciously.

Grammar, according to the theory laid out by Krashen and Terrell in their book *The Natural Approach* (1983), is acquired through lots of comprehensible input, provided students are in an emotional state that allows them to pick up language; this is a process that does not work well if students are scared of making mistakes or nervous because they have negative
beliefs about their language learning capabilities. The development of the students’ internal grammar runs independently from the grammar they have learnt, following a natural order of acquisition influenced by the quality of input and their emotional state. The students’ knowledge of grammar and grammar rules edits their language correctness via their internal monitor. This is a kind of editing processor in the students’ minds that ideally corrects the students’ production without interrupting its flow; so, not too much monitor or too often, as that creates inhibited students (monitor overusers), or students whose language has become fossilised (underusers.) What type of user a student turns out to be depends on their personality. Introverted people are usually overusers, while extroverted people tend to be underusers.

While much of Krashen’s early work has come under scrutiny in the last twenty years, his notion that input should be largely comprehensible to children has – thankfully – been generally adopted in teaching young learners. This seems reasonable, particularly as decoding more complex texts requires cognitive skills that young learners have often not yet developed. This is not to say that children have to understand everything in a text, but that their ability to grasp the overall meaning of narratives in particular is paramount as it gives them a sense of security and keeps them engaged.

Communicative language teaching (CLT)

CLT was developed from a multidisciplinary perspective that according to Savignon (2007, p. 209) ‘includes, at least, linguistics, psychology, philosophy, sociology, and educational research’. It can be seen as a result of the early days of globalization in the 1960s and 70s which ‘was beginning to have an impact on travel, communications, education, commerce and industry. The world was becoming smaller, and proficiency in English was becoming a more urgent priority for countries in many parts of the world. The language-teaching profession was challenged to provide a response’ (Richards 2015, p. 68). In Europe, research and classroom practice in a number of countries had shown the limitations of audiolingualism and a merely grammar-oriented approach to language teaching and learning, so researchers from various fields, supported by educational politicians from the Council of Europe, were working together on a theory of language learning that specified the student’s communicative competence as the goal of learning. This early vision of students achieving communicative competence focused on the analysis of the learners’ future needs, in the form of a description of the roles and situations they would find themselves in (e.g., as a customer in a shop), and the language functions they would need to master (e.g., asking for the price of something), and the lexis they would need for that. When Ek (1991) published the so-called Threshold Level that specified what students of various European languages should be able to do with the language at certain levels of their learning process, this was the beginning of great enthusiasm in teachers, methodologists, linguists and authors of ELT materials. Soon afterwards, the first functional-notional coursebooks became available. The description of the linguistic needs for communicative competence was then widened to include the development of the students’ strategic competence, with the goal of furnishing them with the language needed to negotiate meaning, take turns in conversation, ask for clarification, paraphrase language that a partner did not understand, and the like.

The prospect of preparing students more efficiently to be able to communicate successfully in the real world had an important impact on the teaching of adult learners. However, teaching language ‘not primarily through memorization, but through meaningful tasks involving real communication’ (Nunan 20011, Location 741) was soon going to become influential in the teaching of young learners, too.
Critical issues and topics

The role of grammar itself has been the source of a lot of confusion among teachers since the early days of communicative language teaching. The two opinions – grammar needs to be formally taught vs. grammar cannot be taught but will take care of itself as long as the focus of language use is on meaning and its practice is motivating and fun – still represent the two extremes between which the pendulum of language teaching methodology has swung during the last three decades.

What happens in the primary classrooms has been strongly influenced by such swings, by the teachers’ knowledge about how children learn, by the teachers’ beliefs and theories about learning and their own experiences as language learners, and not least by the materials and the technologies they are using. Hereafter, a number of critical issues in the form of questions is discussed. Hopefully, the discussion will offer a kind of roadmap towards the principled teaching of grammar to young learners.

Can grammar be taught in isolation?

Wilkins (1972, pp. 111–112) states that ‘while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed’. The point is obvious – in order to communicate and to become more articulate, learners need both.

Van Lommel et al. (2006, p. 255) argue in line with the lexical approach (Lewis 1993; Long 1996) that vocabulary acquisition is a first and necessary step to acquire grammar, as ‘language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar; that is, learners do not first acquire rules and then vocabulary to apply it to. Rather, they learn collections of complex but initially unanalyzed chunks of language, which they then progressively analyse, and thus extract grammatical regularities’.

Although I agree with the gist of this assertion, we need to be wary of claims that learners learn grammar by ‘progressively analysing’ language, at least in the young learners’ classroom. Such a claim could lead to the misunderstanding that all the teacher needs to do is provide rich lexical input, and the analysis of this input and the subsequent development of grammatical understanding will follow automatically. As Pinter (2017, p. 85) argues, there is sufficient evidence that ‘learning grammar is a messy process requiring the teacher to provide lots of meaningful input, recycling and guidance in attending to language form’. The following extract is, I believe, a good example of how grammar and vocabulary develop together as part of such a process. It comes from a research project at an Austrian primary school I was involved in at the time of writing this chapter.

In that beginners’ class, the teacher was doing a word revision activity, asking learners to call out words from lexical sets that had been taught, while she counted how many words they remembered. She asked the students to ‘name words for things we can eat’ (using gestures to support the children’s understanding). Several words were mentioned:

\[ SI: \] Apple . . .
\[ T: \] Do you like apples?
\[ SI: \] Yes.
\[ T: \] I love apples. (adding a point to the tally list on the board) And I love apple pie.
\[ S2: \] Apple pie. Apple pie. (looking quizzical)
\[ S3: \] Apple pie yummy.
S4: Yummy strawberry. (nonverbally expressing delight by rubbing her tummy)
S5: Pie pie. Strawberry pie.
T: Wow. That’s a new word. You like strawberry pie. It’s good, isn’t it?
Ss: Is good . . . strawberry pie.
Ss: Banana. (word incomprehensible)
T: Ah. Do you like banana pie?
Ss: Yes, yes. Banana pie.

This short extract shows how grammar and lexis are interconnected. The children had not learned the phrase ‘apple pie’ until the teacher introduced it. Then, when S4 mentioned the word ‘strawberry’ (which had been taught before) a classmate created ‘strawberry pie’ following the ‘apple pie’ word pattern (first fruit, then ‘pie’). Finally, another classmate said ‘banana’, followed by an indeterminate word, which the teacher interpreted as a possible attempt to form the word ‘banana pie’. When the teacher prompted the word, what the students said and their body language suggested to the teacher that her interpretation had been right.

As pointed out by Cameron (2001, p. 104), ‘rote-learnt chunks of language will make up a substantial part of early learning, and . . . the learnt chunks also provide a valuable resource for developing grammar, as they are broken down and reconstituted. Ways of teaching that help learners notice words inside chunks and how other words can be used in the same place may help with the development of grammar.’

Does explicit grammar work facilitate language use?
Thornbury (2001, p. 43) maintains that ‘grammar is less a thing than something that we do: it is a process. Learning, producing and understanding language involve engaging in processes of ‘grammaring’, as above, when the learners created the words ‘strawberry pie’ and ‘banana’ and the latter followed by the teacher facilitating, but not teaching it explicitly. Thornbury stresses that ‘this contrasts with a product view of grammar, which construes grammar as an “out there” phenomenon: a body of facts about the language that have to be learned and then taken down off the shelf, so to speak, every time an utterance is produced or interpreted’. The metaphor of grammar growing or emerging over time rather than being taken in from outside through the teacher teaching it explicitly – by using rules and labels such as ‘demonstrative pronoun’ – is becoming more and more accepted these days among ELT specialists (although its application to practical teaching is still far away). One of the reasons for this insight is the commonsense understanding that children tend to learn in a holistic way and therefore ‘little explicit grammar instruction is needed’, as Celce-Murcia (1991, p. 463) argues.

The very few studies looking at the outcome of explicit grammar teaching in young learners’ classrooms do not contradict this claim, as Bouffard and Sarkar (2008, p. 21) conclude in a study analysing the training of 8-year-old French immersion students in metalinguistic analysis: ‘it is clear that a pedagogy oriented towards language analysis and metalanguage use will improve language awareness, but less clear that it will improve language use’. However, the analysis by Marsden (2016, p. 282) of various studies shows that drawing learners ‘attention’ to aspects of the language (promoting intentional and explicit ‘learning’) is far more promising and ‘has most convincingly demonstrated that intentionally and explicitly orientating students’ attention to features of the language tends to lead to larger learning gains than instruction that hopes to do so incidentally and/or implicitly’ (ibid.).
Does imitation facilitate grammatical competence?

It is folk wisdom that children learn skills through imitating significant adults or their older siblings. It would be surprising, however, if grammatical competence was acquired through mere imitation. A search for the effect of imitation on the development of grammatical competence has not come up with any recent studies. However, a surprisingly clear answer comes from a study carried out almost two decades ago: Tager-Flusberg and Calkins (1990, p. 591) argue that the ‘results of this study suggest that across a broad range of children, including some with disorders in language acquisition, imitated speech is neither longer nor grammatically more advanced than non-imitated, spontaneous speech. Despite the very small number of exceptions to these overall results, our conclusion is that imitation does not facilitate grammatical development.’

Reflection on those research outcomes helps produce at least three reasons supporting the argument that imitation does not lead to grammatical competence: first, as mentioned above, some kind of ‘grammaring’ is needed in order for learners to be able to ‘grow’ grammar, or for grammar to ‘emerge’ in the students’ language repertoire.

Secondly, neurobiology shows that the brain is not a machine that stores sentences that have been imitated and then lets the learner retrieve them later. On the contrary, as Schnelle (2010, p. 133) states: ‘the speakers of the language select spontaneously phrasings and structures from the repertoires of possible expressions and “construe” what they consider as appropriate in the communicative situation’. According to this view, the brain is like a growing system where new things get connected with what is already known, and learning is a process that involves going through phases where errors are not only unavoidable, but an inherent ingredient of the learning process. If imitation was all that’s at work, children would simply repeat sentences they have previously heard, and although the sentences might be correct, they would not necessarily be meaningful or communicatively useful. However, we know that language learning is about communicating messages.

Thirdly, the short-term or working memory that we use when we imitate sentences is, well, short term; it is not suitable for storing information for a longer time and then enabling us to ‘retrieve’ it. As Schnelle (2010, p. 50) argues, ‘this kind of activation is often misleadingly called retrieval in thought processes, though there is no agent in the brain that retrieves something’.

Is meaning-focused input sufficient to develop grammatical learning?

A growing body of research indicates that it is not enough to expose students in language classrooms to input, however meaningful and engaging it may be, and hope they will then pick up the correct forms. Cameron (2001, p. 101), for example, argues that ‘It seems increasingly likely that paying attention to grammatical features of the language is not something that happens automatically in communicating, and that therefore some artificial methods of pushing attention are needed, i.e. teaching! In line with this argumentation, Nassaji (2004, p. 127) sums up the literature on the importance of ‘noticing’ – a process of ‘registration of the occurrence of a stimulus event in conscious awareness and subsequent storage in long term memory’, as suggested by Schmidt (1994, p. 179) – and argues that students will ‘fail to process and acquire’ grammatical forms unless they (1) are given the opportunity to notice them, (2) are frequently exposed to input that focuses on them, and (3) get plenty of opportunities to practise forms and to use them in output-oriented activities.
When it comes to teaching young children, beginners in particular, it seems important to stress that until a structure gets brought into conscious awareness, the process requires time and patience. The teacher can support it by keeping in mind that the third suggestion above does not necessarily need to focus on output, but can (and in the case of beginners must) consist of ‘comprehension based input tasks’. Some recent studies focusing on incidental grammar acquisition for young beginner learners were carried out by Shintani (2012 and 2015). Using listen-and-do tasks with Japanese beginners, the author explores whether noticing two grammatical structures – plural -s and copular be – leads to learning, and concludes that ‘the only way to conduct the task-based teaching needed for FonF (focus on form) is through input-based tasks’ (2014, p. 137). The classroom excerpts quoted in the articles show how the process of noticing is closely connected to the learners’ private speech used for ‘self-regulation’ and ‘language play’, which the author says ‘have both been considered facilitative of L2 acquisition’. The children’s speech was shown to result in fairly realistic classroom interactions, with turn-taking ‘mostly managed by the students’ and ‘repair’ initiated by the students and then completed either by them or their teacher. Shintani reports a high level of motivation in the children to communicate in English in order to complete the task, and concludes that the learners’ ‘social speech increased considerably over time’, referring to other studies (Pinter 2005; Van den Branden (1997) showing that ‘task repetition leads to greater participation of children in tasks’ and ‘task familiarity makes meaning negotiation easier’ (Shintani 2012, p. 266).

Another important condition for the incidental (from the learner’s point of view) and focus-on-form-oriented (from the teacher’s point of view) learning is that it seems to work with those structures in which the teacher can design tasks based on the principle of a ‘functional value’ rather than a mere ‘grammatical need’. Plural -s has functional value: if you have two pictures, one showing one apple and the other six, and you say to your learners ‘Point to the apples’, then in order to point to the right picture the students need to understand the meaning of the plurality marker -s as against no -s (‘Point to the apple’). N.B. This looks like an extremely important principle that could lead to the creation of a range of incidental focus-on-form-based activities, perfect for very young and beginner learners – see also Puchta and Elliott (2017, p. 11).

However, in the third person singular although the -s must be used for grammatical correctness it has no functional value, and seems far more difficult for children to understand and produce. The practical suggestions section in this chapter contains an idea on how you can increase your learners’ awareness of such structures.

**Can output help with learning grammar?**

There seems to be solid evidence that expecting children to produce a target structure that the teacher has chosen to ‘teach’ too early could be counterproductive. However, once children have received more input and are at ease with the L2, it is ‘equally important that learners have the chance to use new language (both vocabulary and grammar) in meaning-focused output in situations where they have control over the choice of language’ (Pinter 2006, 85).

Nassaji (2004) has analysed various studies on textual enhancement and its effect on drawing learners’ attention to grammar. He argues that while visually manipulating the appearance of structures in a text (through bolding, italicizing, etc.) may have helped learners notice those forms, this ‘did not result in gains in accuracy using the target form’ (Nassaji 2004, p. 130), and quotes Batstone (1994, p. 59), arguing that in order for learners to learn grammar effectively, they have to ‘act on it, building it into their working hypothesis about
how grammar is structured’. In terms of what kinds of output tasks are particularly effective, Nassaji quotes various research studies, specifically mentioning ‘collaborative output tasks’ and ‘discourse-based approaches’.

**When should teachers start teaching grammar more explicitly?**

There is obviously no clear-cut answer to this question as there is a broad range of variables influencing a child’s ability and motivation to deal with grammar more explicitly, such as the child’s levels of maturity and cognition, the number of teaching hours, the methodology used, the quality of the classroom interaction, and the teacher’s level of experience, to name just a few.

Pinter (2011, p. 142) offers a comprehensive analysis of research findings into the ‘age factor’ in language learning and the differences between younger and older children. She stresses that ‘some recent work also shows that adolescents are more similar to adults in their L2 acquisition processes whereas younger children follow a somewhat different order of acquisition, at least in some areas of grammar’. Other differences mentioned refer to younger children’s tendency to ‘rely more on imitation skills, repetition and implicit learning’ (ibid.), while older ones use ‘their cognitive and analytical abilities and more explicit learning methods’. Although the majority of the research available pertains to natural learning contexts (and looks for example at immigrant children learning a second language rather than children learning a foreign language), Pinter (ibid.) cautiously concludes that ‘even in foreign language contexts . . . research suggests that more challenges should be offered to young learners in addition to fun activities’. These insights further confirm some of the claims that have been made above, namely that – age and maturity of the learners permitting – the teacher needs to challenge children by going beyond simply giving them a good time in the ELT classroom to progressively including activities that challenge their ability to notice and think about language.

**Current contributions and research**

For many years, the young learners’ classroom did not receive the level of attention it deserved from researchers. It has only been in recent years that a noticeable change has got under way, although a lot more research into various aspects of ELT to young learners is still needed, and the teaching of grammar is certainly among them. I agree with Enever (2016, p. 361) who states, ‘It can no longer be claimed that there is little research in the field of primary ELT. However, while the wealth of linguistic, sociocultural and education-focused research worldwide is now strongly developing in the field of primary ELT, there remain a number of areas still hardly explored by empirical research’.

There are now a number of studies available that look at the differences and similarities of young language learner contexts in various countries and regions. The so-called ‘ELLiE’ (Early Language Learning in Europe) research project (Enever 2011), for example, examines – among other aspects of teaching English to young learners – the outcomes of teaching languages in state primary schools in various European countries. One of the chapters in a research report (Szpotowicz and Lindgren 2011) titled ‘Language Achievements: A Longitudinal Perspective’ convincingly shows ‘significant correlations between lexical diversity and syntactic complexity in Year 3 indicating that the more varied children’s vocabulary was, the more determiners they used. Thus, the results indicate that children tended to syntactically complexify their language once they had a large enough vocabulary size’.
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(p. 129). A number of concrete suggestions are made, one of them in the form of a recommendation to policy makers to make available TV programmes and films in the original language versions in order to provide children with more frequent contact with the target language.

Two substantial longitudinal studies carried out in Croatia (Djigunović and Krajnović 2015) have made available key insights into the language developments of children over time. With the study focusing on ‘the learner as an individual’ (p. 217) the data showed significant differences in the learning gains between individual students. A comprehensive meta-study (Butler 2015) analyses the situation of teaching English in schools in East Asia. The analysis of various studies into the development of children’s interlanguage suggests that ‘while some features observed seem to be unique to this group, other features are similar to those experienced by adult L2 English learners and/or child L1 English learners’ (ibid., p. 317).

An important discussion on ‘Cognitive perspectives on classroom language learning’ can be found in Hall (2016). The authors, Collins and Marsden, argue that modern SLA research has had to move beyond ‘borrowing concepts from cognitive psychology to the elaboration of sophisticated research methodologies and theoretical constructs’ (ibid., p. 281). They make the point that ‘as more of the research is now conducted in classrooms, in addition to the more controlled laboratory environments, there are clear implications for teaching’ (ibid.). Evaluating the research in language learning cognition in recent years, they differentiate between ‘five issues relevant to teaching and learning that have been well-researched and about which some level of consensus has been reached’: (1) Implicit and explicit learning and explicit and implicit knowledge; (2) Practice and automatization of explicit knowledge; (3) Roles of working memory and attention; (4) Characteristics of the input influencing learning; and (5) Making form-meaning connections (ibid., p. 282). The authors list ‘three areas of debate: one related to language knowledge and two to language use’ (ibid., 285): (1) Influence of previously learned languages; (2) Benefits of comprehension and production practice; and (3) Contributions of formulaic language and exemplars to learning.

A passionate plea to include formulaic language in young learners’ classrooms can be found in Bland (2015). Based on the outcomes of various studies, Kersten 2015 argues that frequently exposing young learners to lexical chunks rather than just isolated words, and guiding learners to notice and play with the parts of the chunks, gives them the opportunity to unpack or analyse ‘formulaic language into its components, which then leads to an abstraction of the underlying construction with all its constraints as well the acquisition of its parts’ (p. 129). This approach is in line with what children naturally do in their own language, as observed by Cook (2010).

**Recommendations for practice**

Below are a number of recommendations for practice in the form of suggestions aimed at helping children to notice the relationship between linguistic form and meaning, by practising form through short behavioural activities in tandem with noticing tasks, and bringing form and lexical practice together in creative ways through language play. These activities have been selected particularly with a view to being used in larger classes too, where it is usually more challenging to find tasks that are meaningful and engaging at the same time. This refers to a family of activities that help students notice why the choice of an ‘item – as opposed to the choice of another, or zero choice – matters’ (Thornbury 2001, p. 38).

Here is an example of such a practice activity (see Gerngross et al 2006). It supports the students’ noticing of the differences in the use of the present perfect for completion (rather than the present progressive).
Assuming that students have been introduced to the present progressive and the present perfect already, the teacher can first introduce or revise the verb phrases have lunch, wash the dishes, write postcards and bake a cake. The teacher then tells the students they will see a column of pictures and hear sentences. After hearing each sentence, they should quickly call out the number of the picture that goes with that sentence. The teacher presents only the left-hand column of the pictures below (Figure 13.1), and, giving the students little time, says the following sentences: Ben has washed the dishes. Bridget has had lunch. Barney has baked a cake. Betty has written five postcards.

The teacher then presents all the pictures and says ‘Bridget has had lunch’. Inevitably, students will notice that ‘have lunch’ is somehow connected to both pictures 1 and 2. If the teacher then offers another sentence ‘Brenda is having lunch’, he or she can scaffold the students’ understanding of the structure. Sentence pairs for the remaining horizontal picture pairs are as follows:

N.B.: It is highly recommended that the same activity be used several times (initially with the same pictures, later with other pictures) as there is evidence that ‘task-repetition leads to greater participation of children in tasks’ and ‘task familiarity makes meaning negotiation easier’ (Shintani 2012, p. 266).

**Mini-grammar lessons**

As early as (1991, p. 473) Celce-Murcia stressed the need for professional teachers to be able to get students to focus briefly on a certain grammar problem so that they ‘become aware of both the error and the correct form, and practice the correct form briefly’. It is up to the teacher when to carry out such a ‘mini-grammar lesson’, but an appropriate moment may be when the teacher has noticed the frequent occurrence of a certain error in the students’ production.

Let’s imagine that the teacher notices that in a role-play where students go shopping for clothes, they have problems with the correct form of be in the phrase ‘How much is/are . . . ?’ After the role-play the teacher can write on the board two sentences that the students need to complete with one of the two possible endings in brackets:

How much is (the T-shirt/the T-shirts)?
How much are the (jumpers/jumper)?

The teacher tries to elicit the correct answer, and maybe afterwards an explanation from the students as well. This could be followed by an activity where the teacher presents a picture showing one item (e.g., a pullover), and another picture showing two items (e.g., pullovers). The teacher then calls out a stem sentence, e.g., ‘How much is . . . ?’ and the students have to point at the correct picture. The teacher can then react and say, e.g., ‘That’s right. How much is the pullover?’ etc.

In the next lesson, this could be followed by a short drill. The teacher can have pictures (e.g., items of clothing) ready and then hold up one picture after the other and get students to call out questions along the lines of, ‘How much are the jeans? How much is the jumper?’ etc. Note that error correction in this case works best when not done by the teacher, but by the students themselves (prompted by the teacher’s non-verbal reaction indicating that there is something wrong in a sentence).

I should like to stress that there are serious arguments (e.g., Nassaji 2004, p. 128, quoting Skehan 1996, p. 18) that ‘the belief that a precise focus on a particular form leads to learning and automatization no longer carries much credibility in linguistics or psychology’.
Figure 13.1 Activity from Gerngross et al. (2006, p. 131)

Images from Gerngross et al. (2006, p. 131)
However, I believe that there is enough evidence from practical classroom research that encourages the use of short noticing tasks in tandem with brief form drills. No doubt more research is needed to substantiate this claim.

**Restructuring and output-focused activities**

Based on careful analysis of various studies, Nassaji (2004) examines the outcomes of textual enhancement on the development of grammar and in particular the question of whether ‘frequent exposure to target items enhances their saliency and hence results in noticing their forms’, and comes to the conclusion that mere visual enhancements (e.g., highlighting or bolding certain structures in a text) does not produce ‘gains in accuracy using the target form’ (p. 140). However, output-focused activities seem to have a greater impact on the development of the learners’ grammar than enhanced input. Concerning the quality of output-focused activities, there seems to be evidence that process-oriented output tasks (as opposed to just product-oriented output) that involve learners in collectively and accurately reproducing language forms are important (ibid., p. 131). From a similar viewpoint, Bland (2015, p. 161) has observed that exposing children to poems and engaging them in cognitive play with the linguistic patterns presented in them can lead to the acquisition of grammatical categories as templates for future language use.

Here is an example aimed at practising third person singular/doesn’t.

The teacher engages the learners in a dictogloss activity. She tells her students that she is going to read out a poem. She tells them that when she has finished reading out the poem, students should pick up pen and paper and try to reconstruct the poem as accurately as possible. They then get together with a partner, compare what they have got and improve their texts together. Finally, the teacher asks the students to dictate back to her the whole poem, word for word, while the teacher writes it on the board. Whenever the students ‘make a mistake’, the teacher does not immediately correct it, but tries to elicit the correct form from the group until the board shows the poem the teacher had initially dictated.

She likes chocolate
she likes music
she likes good movies
but
she doesn’t like
two things:
unfair people and lies.

The teacher now engages the class in a gradual deletion activity, erasing individual words from the poem and frequently getting students to reconstruct the whole text orally, so that eventually only the following prompts can be seen on the board:

```markdown
___________________________
___________________________
___________________________
but
___________________________
___________________________
and ______________________.
```
The teacher now gets students to think of a person they know well. They first need to think of three things the person likes and two things they don’t like. They then write their own poem about the person, following the structure set out by the prompts on the board. Later, the teacher ‘edits’ the learners’ texts and gets them to read the texts out, or display them on the walls of the classroom.

**Anticipatory form introduction**

While the activities above are aimed at practising grammar forms that have already been introduced, the purpose of the ideas presented here is to introduce a grammar form before it is formally introduced. That is, in the lessons before the formal introduction, the teacher occasionally uses a structure she knows she will teach in one of the next few lessons in such a way that students can understand – with guidance from the teacher – the meaning of the structure.

Here is an example of how to pre-introduce pronouns *this, that, these and those* (for deixis):

Before the lesson, the teacher places various pairs of objects in various locations in the classroom, e.g., two boxes on her desk, one closer to where she usually stands and one clearly further away. During the lesson, the teacher incidentally asks one student, e.g., ‘Maria, can you give me the box, please?’, pointing vaguely at her desk. When Maria reaches for the box closer to the teacher, the teacher can say, ‘No, not *this* box. I mean *that* box, there!’ It is advisable not to go into explaining the structure or giving any rules at all at this point of time, but classroom experience seems to indicate that if students get pre-exposed to a new structure several times before the teacher formally introduces it, they have in some ways already ‘been there’ before and so find it much easier to understand and learn.

**Future directions**

More research is needed to shed light on teachers’ beliefs, perceptions and practices of teaching grammar to young learners. We need to find out, for example, how familiar teachers are with concepts such as noticing, and what they actually do to initiate and maintain such processes in their classrooms. We need more narrative accounts of best-practice grammar teaching to young learners, including examples of student utterances and teacher-student or student – student interaction.

Collins and Marsden (2016, p. 289) stress the importance of repetitive practice and the lack of research into this area: ‘Fluent, automatic use of language is the result of considerable practice, and repetition clearly plays a role in the process.’ Given the time constraints that many teachers of young learners are subjected to (at least in state schools), we can assume that indeed very little time (if any at all) is spent on repetitive practice.

Finally, we need more research to find out how the materials available for teaching grammar to young learners are in line with latest insights into the cognitive processes of how children learn grammar. And finally, as discussed above, further research is needed to find out more about the possible advantages and constraints of using formulaic language with young learners, and the role of output-oriented activities in the process.

**Further reading**


An edited collection of research papers and pedagogical themes containing thought-provoking articles on the use of formulaic language and poetry in teaching grammar to young learners.


4 Shintani, N. (2015). The incidental grammar acquisition in focus on form and focus on forms instruction for young beginner learners. *Tesol Quarterly*, 49, 115–140. This paper reports a study of children’s incidental grammar acquisition of two grammatical features in two types of instruction – focus on form and focus on forms.

**Related topics**

Vocabulary, assessment, languages in the young learner classroom, materials

**References**


Teaching grammar to young learners


Shintani, N. (2015). The incidental grammar acquisition in focus on form and focus on forms instruction for young beginner learners. TESOL Quarterly, 49, 115–140.


