

The Theoretical Underpinnings of Effective Grammar Instruction

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The goal of language teaching today is for learners to achieve communicative competence within a learner-centered classroom environment. Few would dispute the idea that, therefore, the goal of *grammar* teaching is to prepare learners for real life communication situations. As teachers, we want our learners to be able to engage in interactions spontaneously and fluently, without constantly having to hesitate to recall how a particular grammar structure is formed.

This implies that grammar instruction needs to achieve more than students' ability to produce well-formed, accurate sentences; it also implies that grammar instruction enables students to produce appropriate language within ongoing discourse – thus to produce oral or written language that connects logically and meaningfully to what comes before and after in either conversation or written text. The focus in the classroom is shifted from a teacher who *tells* and *explains* to a teacher who sets up discovery and practice opportunities in which learners take center stage, make observations about language, and practice language.

This goal has implications for the way we should teach grammar, supported by much current research on grammar teaching and learning. Thus, effective grammar teaching and practice within a learner-centered classroom have the following characteristics:

- meaningful and purposeful language production
- authentic contexts for language production
- needs-based teaching
- focus on form
- form-function connection
- noticing and patterning
- inductive learning
- contextualized language practice
- interactive communicative exchanges
- task-based learning
- negotiation of meaning

However, few researchers have actually proposed an approach to the teaching of grammar structures in which all of these concepts are realized and find application. The approach to grammar teaching we are outlining here guides learners through grammar structures, contextualized in meaningful contexts and based on the real life communicative needs of these learners to active engagement in discovering structure and rule, to carefully sequenced practice activities (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2003; Biesenbach-Lucas, Couper, Leite, Woerner & Yancey, 2005). This approach has come to be known as the Hourglass Model (Figure 1) in the TESOL Program at American University.¹ Here

¹ The lesson sequence for grammar teaching ("grammar lesson blueprint") was developed by Sigrun Biesenbach-Lucas at American University, and the term "Hourglass Model" was coined by Brock Brady at American University to represent this model. See <http://www.american.edu/tesol/Lessonplans.htm>.

we will review some theoretical grounding with respect to each phase of the grammar lesson blueprint, the Hourglass Model.

Figure 1. The Hourglass Model.



In the **language presentation phase**, the lesson target structure is presented in several short dialogs, which closely resemble each other except for different instantiations of the target feature, and which are relevant to situations our learners are likely to find themselves in. Dialogs are based on authentic, observed interactions, which learners first simply process for comprehension (Van Patten, 1996, 2003). In this way, language structures are presented in meaningful, realistic contexts showing speakers engaging in purposeful interaction (Brown, 2001; Celce-Murcia, 2005; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; Larsen-Freeman, 2003) instead of in isolated sentences which often defy any real life connection. Meaningful language presentation is a prerequisite for learning to occur (Ausubel, 1963), and for structures to be integrated with already existing knowledge about the world and other grammar structures in long-term memory.

The purpose of the **highlighting phase** is to provide a focus on form (Doughty & Williams, 1998), and to engage learners actively and inductively in a discovery of the target structure of the lesson and in a formation of its rule. In addition, the form-function connection (i.e. how the grammar structure realizes a real life communicative purpose) is made transparent (Nunan, 1999). Through teacher's scaffolding questions, learners' awareness is raised of target sentences containing target structures in the language presentation dialogs; learners themselves *highlight*, or underline, the target sentences in the dialogs and transfer these into a grid/visual organizer prepared by the teacher based on the target structure and dialogs (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2004). The grid helps learners see a pattern in the sentences they have transferred from the dialogs, and this in turn enables learners to infer how the target structure is formed and to see regularities in English grammar overall (Schmitt, 2005). It also helps learners draw conclusions about which communicative function the target grammar structures serves in the dialogs (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). It is recommended that learners complete these steps with a partner (underlining, transferring sentences, inferring rule from patterning) since their active engagement and metalinguistic communication about grammar can significantly raise their awareness and enable noticing of the target structure as well as its formation and use (Fotos & Ellis, 1991; Schmidt, 1995; Swain, 2004). Thus, pair work becomes relevant not only for practice of language use and negotiation of meaning as we have learned from the Interactionist Hypothesis (Long, 1983), but also for talking *about* language, the value of which is often underestimated as learners' language skills are assumed to be too low to use metalanguage.

Once learners have developed a good picture about the target structure through dialog presentation and discovery of how the structure is formed and used, it is time for practice.

In many classrooms, we often see either an over-reliance on controlled, mechanical exercises where only one answer is correct, or a jump to role-plays that learners are not ready for yet. The Hourglass Model, in contrast, suggests a series of three major types of practice activities, which differ in amount of scaffolding provided and in output guidance and options learners have in each activity. Moreover, all practice activities closely resemble the language presentation dialogs as well as each other for continuity of the form-function connection highlighted in the lesson. Key concepts again in all practice activities are meaningful, contextualized, and authentic production (Brown, 2001).

In a **controlled activity**, learners are focused on the correct production of the target structure in dialog format. Learners complete the activity in pairs, again not only to practice meaningful interaction, but also to allow each other to discuss answer choices and thus to continue to raise their awareness of the target structure through meta-talk (Fotos & Ellis, 1991; Swain, 2004). While there is only one correct answer, learners nevertheless have to process the items semantically to produce an answer that is not only grammatically correct, but also semantically plausible (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; Larsen-Freeman, 2003). In all too many controlled textbook activities, learners merely engage in mechanical transformations of the targeted grammar structure, which they can manipulate without even understanding the sentences. This may enable learners to perform superbly on tests/quizzes administered directly after a lesson has been “taught”, but it rarely enables learners to apply the same structure to real communicative contexts outside the classroom.

An important follow-up activity is a **semi-controlled activity** where learners are given some options in completing the task (Nunan, 1989, 1999). As in the controlled activity, the semi-controlled activity mirrors the language presentation dialogs and engages learners in interactive communicative exchanges that are meaningful and authentic. This is a necessary activity before the final communicative activity as learners are given more opportunity to develop automaticity in using the target structure (Brown, 2001; McLaughlin, 1990) while at the same time exercising greater choice and independence in completion of activity dialogs.

As a last step in the Hourglass Model sequence, learners engage in a **communicative activity** where they role-play freely the dialogs they have been practicing throughout the lesson (Crookes & Chaudron, 2001). Finally the learners are able to use the target structure in authentic conversations, without the written scaffold that guided them in the controlled and semi-controlled activities. By the time learners begin the final communicative activity, they have had sufficient practice with the target structure in meaningful contexts relevant to their real life needs, they have recycled vocabulary needed to complete dialogs, and they have thus reached a stage of automaticity in their access and production of the target structure. Moreover, it is the learners who have been at the center of the classroom activities from beginning to end (Nunan, 1988).

Yes, this approach *looks* like it is more time-consuming than the quick “here’s-the-rule-now-let’s-do-a-quick-transformation-exercise” approach found so frequently in ESL classes. However, the benefits and ultimate long-term acquisition of grammar taught

following the Hourglass Model approach will outperform rushed textbook exercises that leave learners with short-term grammar knowledge, but with no long-term acquisition, mastery, and automaticity (cf. Chechueva, 2005, and Weidner & Yancey, 2005, for studies on the benefits of lessons following the Hourglass Model approach). In fact, careful sequencing and active engagement of learners in meaningful, relevant activities will preempt their errors and frequent teacher re-explanations of abstract grammar rules.

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