

The Utter Hopelessness of Explicit Grammar Teaching

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It is common knowledge that every normal person above the age of six or so has acquired the grammar of his native language without explicit instruction and uses it without conscious attention. It is also common knowledge that normal people find it extremely difficult to understand or learn technical information about the grammar of any language, whether their own or any other. Nevertheless, many common approaches to teaching a second or foreign language continue to assume that explicit grammar teaching is necessary and effective.

Why does this delusion continue to exert such a powerful influence on education?

One reason is that the practice of teaching grammar is an entrenched habit, one that is accepted by both the student and the teacher. The more natural approach, with little or no grammar focus, is suspect.

Another reason may be that true language acquisition takes a lot of time. It is an incremental process consisting of a very long series of very small, often imperceptible steps, creating the discouraging impression that “nothing’s happening.” People may turn to grammar for the same reason that people in some societies and times have turned to magic: they hope that the impossible can happen if only they say the right words.

Yet another reason for the continued dominance of explicit grammar teaching may be the common belief that language grammars are thoroughly and accurately described in grammar textbooks. If this were true, then one might suppose that teachers can use these textbooks to teach the rules of grammar, just as chemistry teachers use their textbooks to teach the principles of chemistry.

If a chemist picks up a chemistry textbook, he’ll see familiar facts and terminology that he uses in his work. But if a person fluent in English (but not acquainted with grammatical analysis) picks up one of the popular grammar books intended for ESL/EFL students, he’ll see unfamiliar terms and explanations which may seem more confusing than enlightening. This is a clue that whatever the grammar textbooks are teaching, it is not anything that normal speakers know or use.

The examples we’ll provide in following paragraphs demonstrate that grammar textbooks do not even begin to describe real grammar accurately or completely. If chemistry textbooks were no better than the currently available grammar textbooks, alchemy would still reign supreme. Beyond this, though, we argue that no reasonable solution to the inadequacy of grammar textbooks is possible, because the actual facts of grammar are too abstract and complex to be

explicitly taught, learned, or used by ordinary people operating in ordinary educational environments.

All our examples are drawn from Azar (1999), which we have chosen because her grammar textbooks are widely regarded as state-of-the-art. Page numbers given below refer to Azar unless otherwise indicated.

On page 132, we are told that “A pronoun is used in place of a noun.”

This, however, is not true. Pronouns are used in place of noun phrases, as any good grammatical description makes clear (e.g. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1983, p. 122). According to Azar’s rule, we should be able to say either “The old man is asleep” or “The old he is asleep.” Obviously, the pronoun he should replace the entire noun phrase the old man.

Also on page 132, Azar states that, “A singular pronoun is used to refer to a singular noun. . . . A plural pronoun is used to refer to a plural noun.” When considering the singular/plural distinction, it becomes clear (once again) that most pronouns replace or refer to noun phrases, not nouns. Consider the sentence, “John, Mary, Alice, and Fred are playing tennis.” Since there are no plural nouns in that sentence, Azar’s rule does not allow them to be used to replace the subject. Instead, her rule would produce, “He, she, she, and he are playing tennis.”

Again on page 132, Azar tells us that “Possessive adjectives [“her” “your”] are followed immediately by a noun; they do not stand alone” and that “Possessive pronouns [“hers” “yours”] are not followed immediately by a noun; they stand alone.” The assumption is that possessive adjectives are, in fact, adjectives. If this were so, the possessive adjective my (like any other adjective) could be preceded by a determiner [“a” “the”], which would result in a construction such as “the my pen.” Another function of a true adjective is that it can appear in the predicate position in a sentence, which would give us the non-

standard usage, “The pen is my.”

What Azar calls “possessive adjectives” and “possessive pronouns” are actually two types of possessive pronouns, each referring to a different level of noun phrase. To illustrate: the possessive

pronoun her in “her hat” corresponds to the possessive noun phrase “the girl’s” that is part of the larger noun phrase “the girl’s hat.” Her refers to the possessor but not to the thing possessed. On the other hand, the possessive pronoun hers in “This thing on my head is hers,” corresponds to the larger level of noun phrase

“the girl’s hat.” Hers refers to the possessor AND the thing possessed. The distinction between the two types of possessive pronouns resides in the different levels of noun-phrase construction, a matter which is not brought to the attention of Azar’s readers.

Another example involves the use of gerunds. On page 297, Azar states that “A gerund is the –ing form of a verb used as a noun. A gerund is used in the same way as a noun, i.e. as a subject or as an object.” This works sometimes, but consider the sentence, “Singing the national anthem respectfully is always appropriate.” The gerund here functions as a verb, taking a direct object and an adverb, which a noun cannot do. Nor is the gerund the subject of the sentence; rather, the subject is a reduced sentence functioning as the noun phrase, “singing the national anthem respectfully.” Azar’s gerund rule fails here because her grammatical framework lacks the technical concepts and terms needed to explain such structures.

What is the real problem with such pared-down approaches to teaching grammar? What adverse effect will this have on students?

The gaps in the textbook writers’ approach to teaching grammar are there because they are attempting to make the material simple enough to be teachable. But if students learn such rules and apply them, they’ll

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eventually produce incorrect forms. They may then find they're better off ignoring the learned rules, which would mean that the textbooks and, in fact, the whole grammar-teaching approach were unnecessary.

On the other hand, if grammar-textbook writers were to attempt to state rules of grammar completely and accurately, learning the requisite concepts and terminology would take up massive amounts of students' time and mental energy. Not inconsequentially, the more rigorous the study of grammar becomes, the more remote the language learning process would be from the way that people actually acquire language.

The conundrum for the textbook writer -- and the paradox of teaching grammar at all -- is that if the grammar is simple enough to teach, it's inaccurate; yet if it is complex enough to be accurate, it's impractical to teach. So we are compelled to conclude that natural language acquisition, for which the human brain is adapted through ages of evolution, is the only practical way for anyone to gain proficiency in a language. (See Hastings and Murphy 2004 for additional discussion).

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References:

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Celce-Murcia, M. and Larsen-Freeman, D. (1983) *The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher's Course*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers, Inc.

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