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Attitudes to grammar

In 1622 a certain Joseph Webbe, schoolmaster and textbook writer, wrote: 'No man can run speedily to the mark of language that is shackled ... with grammar precepts.' He maintained that grammar could be picked up through simply communicating: 'By exercise of reading, writing, and speaking ... all things belonging to Grammar, will without labour, and whether we will or no, thrust themselves upon us.'

Webbe was one of the earliest educators to question the value of grammar instruction, but certainly not the last. In fact, no other issue has so preoccupied theorists and practitioners as the grammar debate, and the history of language teaching is essentially the history of the claims and counterclaims for and against the teaching of grammar. Differences in attitude to the role of grammar underpin differences between methods, between teachers, and between learners. It is a subject that everyone involved in language teaching and learning has an opinion on. And these opinions are often strongly and uncompromisingly stated. Here, for example, are a number of recent statements on the subject:

'There is no doubt that a knowledge – implicit or explicit – of grammatical rules is essential for the mastery of a language.'

(Penny Ur, a teacher trainer, and author of *Grammar Practice Activities*)

'The effects of grammar teaching ... appear to be peripheral and fragile.'

(Stephen Krashen, an influential, if controversial, applied linguist)

'A sound knowledge of grammar is essential if pupils are going to use English creatively.'

(Tom Hutchinson, a coursebook writer)

'Grammar is not very important: The majority of languages have a very complex grammar. English has little grammar and consequently it is not very important to understand it.'

(From the publicity of a London language school)

‘Grammar is not the basis of language acquisition, and the balance of linguistic research clearly invalidates any view to the contrary.’

(Michael Lewis, a popular writer on teaching methods)

Since so little is known (still!) about how languages are acquired, this book will try to avoid taking an entrenched position on the issue. Rather, by sifting the arguments for and against, it is hoped that readers will be in a better position to make up their own minds. Let’s first look at the case for grammar.

The case for grammar

There are many arguments for putting grammar in the foreground in second language teaching. Here are seven of them:

The sentence-machine argument

Part of the process of language learning must be what is sometimes called **item-learning** – that is the memorisation of individual items such as words and phrases. However, there is a limit to the number of items a person can both retain and retrieve. Even travellers’ phrase books have limited usefulness – good for a three-week holiday, but there comes a point where we need to learn some patterns or rules to enable us to generate new sentences. That is to say, grammar. Grammar, after all, is a description of the regularities in a language, and knowledge of these regularities provides the learner with the means to generate a potentially enormous number of original sentences. The number of possible new sentences is constrained only by the vocabulary at the learner’s command and his or her creativity. Grammar is a kind of **‘sentence-making machine’**. It follows that the teaching of grammar offers the learner the means for potentially limitless linguistic creativity.

The fine-tuning argument

As we saw in Chapter 1, the purpose of grammar seems to be to allow for greater subtlety of meaning than a merely lexical system can cater for. While it is possible to get a lot of communicative mileage out of simply stringing words and phrases together, there comes a point where ‘Me Tarzan, you Jane’-type language fails to deliver, both in terms of intelligibility and in terms of appropriacy. This is particularly the case for written language, which generally needs to be more explicit than spoken language. For example, the following errors are likely to confuse the reader:

Last Monday night I was boring in my house.

After speaking a lot time with him I thought that him attracted me.

We took a wrong plane and when I saw it was very later because the plane took up.

Five years ago I would want to go to India but in that time anybody of my friends didn’t want to go.

The teaching of grammar, it is argued, serves as a corrective against the kind of ambiguity represented in these examples.

The fossilisation argument

It is possible for highly motivated learners with a particular aptitude for languages to achieve amazing levels of proficiency without any formal study. But more often ‘pick it up as you go along’ learners reach a language plateau beyond which it is very difficult to progress. To put it technically, their linguistic competence **fossilises**. Research suggests that learners who receive no instruction seem to be at risk of fossilising sooner than those who do receive instruction. Of course, this doesn’t necessarily mean taking formal lessons – the grammar study can be self-directed, as in this case (from Christopher Isherwood’s autobiographical novel *Christopher and his Kind*):

Humphrey said suddenly, ‘You speak German so well – tell me, why don’t you ever use the subjunctive mood?’ Christopher had to admit that he didn’t know how to. In the days when he had studied German, he had left the subjunctive to be dealt with later, since it wasn’t absolutely essential and he was in a hurry. By this time he could hop through the language without its aid, like an agile man with only one leg. But now Christopher set himself to master the subjunctive. Very soon, he had done so. Proud of this accomplishment, he began showing off whenever he talked: ‘had it not been for him, I should never have asked myself what I would do if they were to ... etc, etc.’ Humphrey was much amused.

The advance-organiser argument

Grammar instruction might also have a delayed effect. The researcher Richard Schmidt kept a diary of his experience learning Portuguese in Brazil. Initially he had enrolled in formal language classes where there was a heavy emphasis on grammar. When he subsequently left these classes to travel in Brazil his Portuguese made good progress, a fact he attributed to the use he was making of it. However, as he interacted naturally with Brazilians he was aware that certain features of the talk – certain grammatical items – seemed to catch his attention. He **noticed** them. It so happened that these items were also items he had studied in his classes. What’s more, being more noticeable, these items seemed to stick. Schmidt concluded that **noticing** is a prerequisite for acquisition. The grammar teaching he had received previously, while insufficient in itself to turn him into a fluent Portuguese speaker, had primed him to notice what might otherwise have gone unnoticed, and hence had indirectly influenced his learning. It had acted as a kind of **advance organiser** for his later acquisition of the language.

The discrete item argument

Language – any language – seen from ‘outside’, can seem to be a gigantic, shapeless mass, presenting an insuperable challenge for the learner. Because grammar consists of an apparently finite set of rules, it can help to reduce the apparent enormity of the language learning task for both teachers and students. By tidying language up and organising it into neat categories (sometimes called **discrete items**), grammarians make language digestible.

A discrete item is any unit of the grammar system that is sufficiently narrowly defined to form the focus of a lesson or an exercise: e.g. *the present continuous*, *the definite article*, *possessive pronouns*. *Verbs*, on the other hand, or *sentences* are not categories that are sufficiently discrete for teaching purposes, since they allow for further sub-categories. Each discrete item can be isolated from the language that normally envelops it. It can then be slotted into a syllabus of other discrete items, and targeted for individual attention and testing. Other ways of packaging language for teaching purposes are less easily organised into a syllabus. For example, communicative functions, such as *asking favours*, *making requests*, *expressing regrets*, and text type categories, such as *narratives*, *instructions*, *phone conversations*, are often thought to be too large and unruly for the purposes of lesson design.

The rule-of-law argument

It follows from the discrete-item argument that, since grammar is a system of learnable rules, it lends itself to a view of teaching and learning known as **transmission**. A transmission view sees the role of education as the transfer of a body of knowledge (typically in the form of facts and rules) from those that have the knowledge to those that do not. Such a view is typically associated with the kind of institutionalised learning where rules, order, and discipline are highly valued. The need for rules, order and discipline is particularly acute in large classes of unruly and unmotivated teenagers – a situation that many teachers of English are confronted with daily. In this sort of situation grammar offers the teacher a structured system that can be taught and tested in methodical steps. The alternative – allowing learners simply to experience the language through communication – may simply be out of the question.

The learner expectations argument (1)

Regardless of the theoretical and ideological arguments for or against grammar teaching, many learners come to language classes with fairly fixed expectations as to what they will do there. These expectations may derive from previous classroom experience of language learning. They may also derive from experience of classrooms in general where (traditionally, at least) teaching is of the transmission kind mentioned above. On the other hand, their expectations that teaching will be grammar-focused may stem from frustration experienced at trying to pick up a second language in a non-classroom setting, such as through self-study, or through immersion in the target language culture. Such students may have enrolled in language classes specifically to ensure that the learning experience is made more efficient and systematic. The teacher who ignores this expectation by encouraging learners simply to experience language is likely to frustrate and alienate them.

**The case
against
grammar**

Just as arguments have been marshalled in favour of grammar teaching, likewise several cases have been made against it. Here are the main ones:

The knowledge-how argument

I know what is involved in riding a bike: keeping your balance, pedalling, steering by means of the handlebars and so on. This does not mean to say that I know how to ride a bike. The same analogy applies to language learning. It can be viewed as a body of knowledge – such as vocabulary and grammar. Or it can be viewed as a skill (or a complex set of skills). If you take the language-is-skill point of view, then it follows that, like bike riding, you learn it by doing it, not by studying it. Learning-by-doing is what is called **experiential** learning. Much of the bad press associated with intellectual approaches to language learning – through the learning of copious grammar rules, for example – stems from the failure on the part of the learner to translate rules into skills. It is a failure that accounts for this observation by Jerome K. Jerome, writing in *Three Men on the Bummel* about a typical English schoolboy's French:

He may be able to tell the time, or make a few guarded observations concerning the weather. No doubt he could repeat a goodly number of irregular verbs by heart ... [But] when the proud parent takes his son to Dieppe merely to discover that the lad does not know enough to call a cab, he abuses not the system but the innocent victim.

Proponents of the 'knowledge-how' view might argue that what the boy needed was not so much grammar as classroom experience that simulated the kind of conditions in which he would eventually use his French.

The communication argument

There is more to knowing a language than knowing its grammar. It is one thing to know that *Do you drink?* is a present simple question. It is another thing to know that it can function as an offer. This simple observation is at the heart of what is now called the **Communicative Approach**, or **Communicative Language Teaching** (CLT). From the 1970s on, theorists have been arguing that grammatical knowledge (linguistic competence) is merely one component of what they call **communicative competence**. Communicative competence involves knowing how to use the grammar and vocabulary of the language to achieve communicative goals, and knowing how to do this in a socially appropriate way.

Two schools of thought emerged as to the best means of achieving the objectives of this communicative approach. Both schools placed a high premium on putting the language to communicative use. But they differed as to when you should do this. The first – or shallow-end approach – might be summed up as the view that you learn a language in order to use it. That is: learn the rules and then apply them in life-like communication. The more radical line, however, is that you use a language in order to learn it. Proponents of this deep-end approach take an experiential view of learning: you learn to communicate by communicating. They argue that, by means of activities that engage the learner in life-like communication, the grammar

will be acquired virtually unconsciously. Studying the rules of grammar is simply a waste of valuable time.

The acquisition argument

The fact that we all learned our first language without being taught grammar rules has not escaped theorists. If it works for the first, why shouldn't it work for the second? This is an argument that has been around at least since Joseph Webbe's day (see page 14). It received a new impetus in the 1970s through the work of the applied linguist Stephen Krashen. Krashen makes the distinction between learning, on the one hand, and acquisition, on the other. Learning, according to Krashen, results from formal instruction, typically in grammar, and is of limited use for real communication. Acquisition, however, is a natural process: it is the process by which the first language is picked up, and by which other languages are picked up solely through contact with speakers of those languages. Acquisition occurs (according to Krashen) when the learner is exposed to the right input in a stress-free environment so that innate learning capacities are triggered. Success in a second language is due to acquisition, not learning, he argues. Moreover, he claims that learnt knowledge can never become acquired knowledge.

Krashen's theory had an important influence on language teaching practices, especially with teachers who were disenchanted with the 'drill-and-repeat' type methodology that prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s. Rejection of the formal study of grammar is central to Krashen's 'Natural Approach'.

The natural order argument

Krashen's acquisition/learning hypothesis drew heavily on studies that suggest there is a natural order of acquisition of grammatical items, irrespective of the order in which they are taught (see page 10). This view derives partly from the work of the linguist Noam Chomsky. Chomsky argues that humans are 'hard-wired' to learn languages: that is, there are universal principles of grammar that we are born with. The idea of an innate **universal grammar** helps explain similarities in the developmental order in first language acquisition as well as in second language acquisition. It explains why English children, Thai teenagers and Saudi adults all go through a *I no like fish* stage before progressing to *I don't like fish*. It also suggests that attempts to subvert the natural order by sticking rigidly to a traditional grammar syllabus and insisting on immediate accuracy are foredoomed. In short, the natural order argument insists that a textbook grammar is not, nor can ever become, a mental grammar.

The lexical chunks argument

We have already noted the fact that language learning seems to involve an element of item-learning. Vocabulary learning is largely **item-learning**. So too is the retention of whole phrases, idioms, social formulae etc. in the form of what are sometimes called **chunks** of language. Chunks are larger than words but often less than sentences. Here are some common examples:

excuse me?
so far so good
what on earth?
have a nice day
be that as it may
if you ask me
not on your life
here you are

Acquiring chunks of language not only saves the learner planning time in the cut-and-thrust of real interaction, but seems to play a role in language development too. It has been argued that many of the expressions that young children pick up, like *all-gone*, or *gimme* (as in *gimme the ball*), are learned as chunks and only later unpacked into their component parts. Once unpacked, new combinations, such as *give her the ball* start to emerge. It has been argued that this process of analysing previously stored chunks plays an important role in first language acquisition.

How much of second language acquisition involves item-learning as opposed to rule-learning is still an open question. Nevertheless, in recent years there has been a growing recognition of the importance of word- and chunk-learning, such that some writers have proposed a **lexical approach** to teaching, in contrast to the traditional emphasis on sentence grammar. Among other things, a lexical approach promotes the learning of frequently used and fairly formulaic expressions (*Have you ever been ... ? Would you like a ... ?*) rather than the study of rather abstract grammatical categories such as the present perfect or conditionals.

The learner expectations argument (2)

While many learners come to language classes in the expectation that at least some of the time they will be studying the grammar of the language, there are many others who may already have had years of grammar study at school and are urgently in need of a chance to put this knowledge to work. Questionnaires of adult students in general English courses almost invariably identify 'conversation' as a high priority, and these statements (from *Looking at Language Classrooms*, Cambridge University Press) by a range of EFL students studying in Britain are typical:

'In Germany there's more homework, grammar exercises, and things like that. Here, I think you've got more chance to speak and therefore learn the language.'

'Sometimes, speaking and things like that help a lot, because if you don't speak English, and just do writing exercises, it's no good.'

'I like having conversations because, yes, grammar is important, but it's not much fun ...'

The learner expectation argument cuts both ways: some learners demand grammar, others just want to talk. It's the teacher's job to respond sensitively to these expectations, to provide a balance where possible, and even to negotiate a compromise.

Before attempting to bring the grammar debate up to date, and to draw some conclusions from recent research evidence, it may pay to briefly sketch in the way attitudes to grammar teaching have influenced the ebb and flow of different teaching methods.

Grammar and methods

In the last century the architects of language teaching methods have been preoccupied with two basic design decisions concerning grammar:

- Should the method adhere to a grammar syllabus?
- Should the rules of grammar be made explicit?

The various ways they answered these questions help distinguish the different methods from each other. What follows is a potted history of methods in the light of their approach to these issues.

Grammar-Translation, as its name suggests, took grammar as the starting point for instruction. Grammar-Translation courses followed a grammar syllabus and lessons typically began with an explicit statement of the rule, followed by exercises involving translation into and out of the mother tongue.

The **Direct Method**, which emerged in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, challenged the way that Grammar-Translation focused exclusively on the written language. By claiming to be a 'natural' method, the Direct Method prioritised oral skills, and, while following a syllabus of grammar structures, rejected explicit grammar teaching. The learners, it was supposed, picked up the grammar in much the same way as children pick up the grammar of their mother tongue, simply by being immersed in language.

Audiolingualism, a largely North American invention, stayed faithful to the Direct Method belief in the primacy of speech, but was even more strict in its rejection of grammar teaching. Audiolingualism derived its theoretical base from behaviourist psychology, which considered language as simply a form of behaviour, to be learned through the formation of correct habits. Habit formation was a process in which the application of rules played no part. The Audiolingual syllabus consisted of a graded list of sentence patterns, which, although not necessarily labelled as such, were grammatical in origin. These patterns formed the basis of pattern-practice **drills**, the distinguishing feature of Audiolingual classroom practice.

Noam Chomsky's claim, in the late 1950s, that language ability is not habituated behaviour but an innate human capacity, prompted a reassessment of drill-and-repeat type teaching practices. The view that we are equipped at birth for language acquisition led, as we saw on page 19, to Krashen's belief that formal instruction was unnecessary. His **Natural Approach** does away with both a grammar syllabus and explicit rule-giving. Instead, learners are exposed to large doses of **comprehensible input**. Innate processes convert this input into output, in time. Like the Direct Method, the Natural Approach attempts to replicate the conditions of first language acquisition. Grammar, according to this scenario, is irrelevant.

The development, in the 1970s, of **Communicative Language Teaching** (CLT) was motivated by developments in the new science of socio-linguistics, and the belief that communicative competence consists of more than simply the knowledge of the rules of grammar (see above, page 18). Nevertheless, CLT, in its shallow-end version at least, did not reject grammar teaching out of hand. In fact, grammar was still the main component of the syllabus of CLT courses, even if it was dressed up in **functional** labels: *asking the way, talking about yourself, making future plans* etc. Explicit attention to grammar rules was not incompatible with communicative practice, either. Chomsky, after all, had claimed that language was rule-governed, and this seemed to suggest to theorists that explicit rule-giving may have a place after all. This belief was around at about the time that CLT was being developed, and was readily absorbed into it. Grammar rules reappeared in coursebooks, and grammar teaching re-emerged in classrooms, often, it must be said, at the expense of communicative practice.

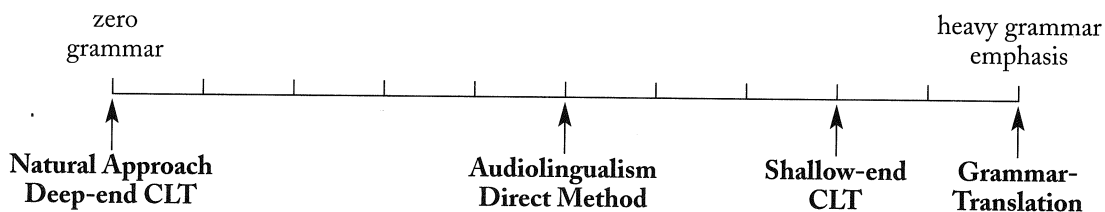
Deep-end CLT, on the other hand, rejected both grammar-based syllabuses and grammar instruction. A leading proponent of this view was N.S. Prabhu, a teacher of English in southern India. In his **Bangalore Project**, he attempted to replicate natural acquisition processes by having students work through a syllabus of **tasks** for which no formal grammar instruction was supposedly needed nor provided. Successful completion of the task – for example, following a map – was the lesson objective, rather than successful application of a rule of grammar. The Bangalore Project was the predecessor of what is now known as **task-based learning**. Task-based learning has more recently relaxed its approach to grammar, largely through recognition of the value of a **focus on form** (see below, page 24).

To summarise the story so far: to the first of the questions posed above (*Should the method adhere to a grammatical syllabus?*) most approaches to language teaching up until the 1970s have answered firmly *Yes*. The actual form of the syllabus differed considerably from method to method, but, until such organising categories as **functions** or **tasks** were proposed, syllabuses were essentially grammar-based.

On the question of the explicitness of rule teaching there is a clear divide between those methods that seek to mirror the processes of first language acquisition – such as the Direct Method and the Natural Approach – and those – such as Grammar-Translation – that see second language acquisition as a more intellectual process. The former methods reject grammar instruction, while the latter accept a role for conscious rule-learning.

Finally, even in methods where rules are made explicit, there may be a different emphasis with regard to the way the learner arrives at these rules. In some approaches, such as Grammar-Translation, the rules are simply presented to the learner, who then goes on to apply them through the study and manipulation of examples (a **deductive** approach: see Chapter 3). Other approaches, including the shallow-end form of the communicative approach, often require the learners first to study examples and work the rules out for themselves (an **inductive** approach: see Chapter 4).

At the risk of over-simplifying matters, the following chart indicates the relative importance these methods attach to the teaching of grammar:



Grammar now

What, then, is the status of grammar now? What is common practice with regard to the teaching of grammar, and what directions for future practice are suggested by recent and current research?

Firstly, it is important to establish the fact that 'grammar teaching' can mean different things to different people. It may mean simply teaching to a grammar syllabus but otherwise not making any reference to grammar in the classroom at all (as was the case with Audiolingualism). On the other hand it may mean teaching to a communicative syllabus (e.g. of functions or of tasks) but dealing with grammar questions that arise in the course of doing communicative activities. This is sometimes called **covert** grammar teaching. More typically, grammar teaching means teaching to a grammar syllabus and explicitly presenting the rules of grammar, using grammar terminology. This is known as **overt** grammar teaching.

Lately, a good deal has been written about a grammar revival. There is a widespread belief that, with the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching, attention to grammar was eclipsed by an emphasis on experiential learning and purely communicative goals. This is only partly true: syllabuses did appear in the 1970s that appeared to marginalise grammar in favour of functions. But, as was pointed out in the previous section, a closer look at these syllabuses shows that they often had a strong grammar basis. And a glance at so-called communicative coursebooks confirms that grammar explanations are much more conspicuous now than they were, say, in the heyday of either the Direct Method or Audiolingualism.

The view that CLT deposed grammar may also stem from a tendency to equate grammar with **accuracy**. It is true that, in comparison with Audiolingualism, CLT has tended to place more weight on being intelligible than on being correct. Such an emphasis need not be at the expense of attention to the rules of grammar, however. Relaxing on accuracy simply acknowledges the fact that the rules of grammar take a long time to establish themselves, and that, in the meantime, the learners' wish to communicate should not be needlessly frustrated.

It is also true that the deep-end version of CLT, as promoted by Prabhu (see page 22), was hostile to explicit grammar teaching. But this was relatively short-lived, and, while of enormous interest from a theoretical perspective, it seems to have had little or no influence on global classroom practice. If grammar ever went away, it was only very briefly and not very far.

The sense that we are experiencing a grammar revival has been underlined by the emergence of two influential theoretical concepts:

- focus on form
- consciousness-raising

Both concepts owe something to the work of Stephen Krashen, even if only as a reaction to his claim that classroom teaching is a waste of time. You will remember that Krashen distinguishes between acquisition and learning. Grammar teaching – that is, attention to the forms of the language – lies in the domain of learning and, says Krashen, has little or no influence on language acquisition. More recently, research suggests that without some attention to **form**, learners run the risk of **fossilisation**. A **focus on form** does not necessarily mean a return to drill-and-repeat type methods of teaching. Nor does it mean the use of an off-the-shelf grammar syllabus. A focus on form may simply mean correcting a mistake. In this sense, a focus on form is compatible with a task-based approach.

Related to the notion of focus on form is the notion of **consciousness-raising**. Krashen argued that acquisition is a largely unconscious process. All that is needed to trigger it are large doses of comprehensible input. Other theorists have argued that the learner's role is perhaps less passive than Krashen implies, and that acquisition involves conscious processes, of which the most fundamental is **attention**. We have seen how Schmidt (see page 16) concluded that **noticing** spoken language items in Brazil helped his Portuguese. It follows that helping learners attend to language items may help them acquire them. Pointing out features of the grammatical system is thus a form of consciousness-raising. It may not lead directly and instantly to the acquisition of the item in question. But it may nevertheless trigger a train of mental processes that in time will result in accurate and appropriate production.

It might seem that we have come full circle, and that grammar consciousness-raising is simply a smart term for what was once called grammar **presentation**. But presentation is usually paired with **practice**, implying immediate – and accurate – output. Consciousness-raising, on the other hand, does not necessarily entail production: it may simply exist at the level of understanding. And remembering. In fact, put simply, that's what raised consciousness is: the state of remembering, having understood something.

To sum up: if the teacher uses techniques that direct the learner's attention to form, and if the teacher provides activities that promote awareness of grammar, learning seems to result. We need, therefore, to add to the pro-grammar position the arguments for a **focus on form** and for **consciousness-raising**. Together they comprise the **paying-attention-to-form argument**. That is to say, learning seems to be enhanced when the learner's attention is directed to getting the forms right, and when the learner's attention is directed to features of the grammatical system.

These would seem to tip the balance in favour of grammar. While the 'anti-grammar' position is strongly and even fiercely argued, it tends to depend on one basic assumption, that is, that the processes of second

language acquisition mirror those of first language acquisition. This is an assumption that is hotly debated. While there are certainly cases of adult learners who have reached near-native levels of proficiency in a second language simply through immersion in the second language culture, these tend to be exceptions rather than the rule. On the other hand, there are compelling arguments to support the view that without attention to form, including grammatical form, the learner is unlikely to progress beyond the most basic level of communication.

But this doesn't mean that grammar should be the goal of teaching, nor that a focus on form alone is sufficient. The goal of the communicative movement – communicative competence – embraces more than just grammar, and implies a focus on **meaning** as well. It may be that communicative competence is best achieved through communicating, through making meanings, and that grammar is a way of tidying these meanings up. If so, the teacher's energies should be directed mainly at providing opportunities for authentic language use, employing grammar as a resource rather than as an end in itself. As Leibniz is supposed to have said: 'A language is acquired through practice; it is merely perfected through grammar.'

Basic principles for grammar teaching

We have looked at the arguments for and against incorporating grammar into language teaching, and concluded that, on balance, there is a convincing case for a role for grammar. The remainder of the book will explore how this role can be realised in the classroom. It will be useful at this stage to draw up some basic rules of thumb for grammar teaching – rules of thumb which will serve as the criteria for evaluating the practical approaches that follow.

The E-Factor: Efficiency = economy, ease, and efficacy

Given that dealing with grammar is only a part of a teacher's activities, and given that classroom time is very limited, it would seem imperative that whatever grammar teaching is done is done as **efficiently** as possible. If, as has been suggested, the teacher's energies should be at least partly directed at getting learners to communicate, prolonged attention to grammar is difficult to justify. Likewise, if a grammar activity requires a great deal of time to set up or a lot of materials, is it the most efficient deployment of the teacher's limited time, energy and resources? When considering an activity for the presentation or practice of grammar the first question to ask, is: *How efficient is it?* Efficiency, in turn, can be broken down into three factors: **economy, ease, and efficacy.**

When presenting grammar, a sound rule of thumb is: the shorter the better. It has been shown that **economy** is a key factor in the training of technical skills: when learning how to drive a car or operate a computer, a little prior teaching seems to be more effective than a lot. The more the instructor piles on instructions, the more confused the trainee is likely to become. The same would seem to apply in language teaching: be economical.

Be economical, too, in terms of planning and resources. The **ease** factor recognises the fact that most teachers lead busy lives, have many classes, and simply cannot afford to sacrifice valuable free time preparing elaborate classroom materials. Of course, the investment of time and energy in the preparation of materials is often accompanied by a commitment on the part of the teacher to making them work. But, realistically, painstaking preparation is not always going to be possible. Generally speaking, the easier an activity is to set up, the better it is.

Finally, and most importantly: will it work? That is to say, what is its **efficacy**? This factor is the least easy to evaluate. We have to operate more on hunch than on hard data. Learning, like language, resists measurement. Of course, there are tests, and these can provide feedback to the teacher on the efficacy of the teaching/learning process. Nevertheless, testing is notoriously problematic (see Chapter 9 for a discussion on this). Moreover, there is much greater scepticism nowadays as to the extent that teaching causes learning. This need not undermine our faith in the classroom as a good place for language learning. We now know a lot more about what constitute the best conditions for learning. If teachers can't directly cause learning, they can at least provide the optimal conditions for it.

As we have seen (page 24), a prerequisite for learning is **attention**. So the efficacy of a grammar activity can be partly measured by the degree of attention it arouses. This means trying to exclude from the focus of the learner's attention any distracting or irrelevant details. Attention without **understanding**, however, is probably a waste of time, so efficacy will in part depend on the amount and quality of contextual information, explanation and checking. Finally, understanding without **memory** would seem to be equally ineffective, and so the efficacy of a presentation will also depend on how memorable it is.

None of these conditions, however, will be sufficient if there is a lack of **motivation** and, in the absence of some external motivational factor (for example, an examination, or the anticipation of opportunities to use the language), it is the teacher's job to choose tasks and materials that engage the learners. Tasks and materials that are involving, that are relevant to their needs, that have an achievable outcome, and that have an element of challenge while providing the necessary support, are more likely to be motivating than those that do not have these qualities.

Efficiency, then, can be defined as the optimal setting of three related factors: economy, ease, and efficacy. To put it simply: are the time and resources spent on preparing and executing a grammar task justified in terms of its probable learning outcome?

The A-factor: Appropriacy

No class of learners is the same: not only are their needs, interests, level and goals going to vary, but their beliefs, attitudes and values will be different too. Thus, an activity that works for one group of learners – i.e. that fulfils the E-factor criteria – is not necessarily going to work for another. It may simply not be **appropriate**. Hence, any classroom activity must be evaluated not only according to criteria of efficiency, but also of appropriacy. Factors to consider when determining appropriacy include:

- the age of the learners
- their level
- the size of the group
- the constitution of the group, e.g. monolingual or multilingual
- what their needs are, e.g. to pass a public examination
- the learners' interests
- the available materials and resources
- the learners' previous learning experience and hence present expectations
- any cultural factors that might affect attitudes, e.g. their perception of the role and status of the teacher
- the educational context, e.g. private school or state school, at home or abroad

Activities that fail to take the above factors into account are unlikely to work. The age of the learners is very important. Research suggests that children are more disposed to language learning activities that incline towards acquisition rather than towards learning. That is, they are better at picking up language implicitly, rather than learning it as a system of explicit rules. Adult learners, on the other hand, may do better at activities which involve analysis and memorisation.

Cultural factors, too, will determine the success of classroom activities. Recently there have been a number of writers who have queried the appropriacy of indiscriminately and uncritically applying methodologies in contexts for which they were never designed. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been a particular target of these criticisms. CLT values, among other things, **learner-centredness**, that is, giving the learners more responsibility and involvement in the learning process. This is often achieved through **discovery learning** activities (for example, where learners work out rules themselves) and through **group work** as opposed to the traditional **teacher-fronted** lesson. CLT also takes a relatively relaxed attitude towards accuracy, in the belief that meaning takes precedence over form. Finally, CLT has inherited the humanist view that language is an expression of personal meaning, rather than an expression of a common culture. Such notions, it is argued, derive from very Western beliefs about education and language. Its critics argue that CLT is an inappropriate methodology in those cultural contexts where the teacher is regarded as a fount of wisdom, and where accuracy is valued more highly than fluency.

Of course, no learning situation is static, and, with the right combination of consultation, negotiation, and learner training, even the most entrenched attitudes are susceptible to change. The teacher is therefore encouraged to be both adventurous as well as critical, when considering the activities in the chapters that follow.

Conclusions In answer to the question 'Why teach grammar?' the following reasons were advanced:

- the sentence-machine argument
- the fine-tuning argument
- the fossilisation argument
- the advance-organiser argument
- the discrete item argument
- the rule-of-law argument
- the learner expectations argument

There are some compelling reasons why not to teach grammar:

- the 'knowledge-how' argument
- the communication argument
- the acquisition argument
- the natural order argument
- the lexical chunks argument
- the learner expectations argument

To the arguments in favour should be added two more recent insights from second language acquisition research. These are the notions of focus on form and of grammar consciousness-raising. Together they comprise:

- the paying-attention-to-form argument

On balance, the evidence suggests that there is a good case for a role for grammar-focused teaching.

Grammar presentation and practice activities should be evaluated according to:

- how efficient they are (the E-factor)
 - how appropriate they are (the A-factor)
- The efficiency of an activity is gauged by determining:
- its economy – how time-efficient is it?
 - its ease – how easy is it to set up?
 - its efficacy – is it consistent with good learning principles?

The appropriacy of an activity takes into account:

- learners' needs and interests
- learners' attitudes and expectations

It is these twin aims – efficiency and appropriacy – which underscore the description and evaluation of the techniques outlined in the rest of the book.

Looking ahead The two chapters that follow look at contrasting ways that grammar can be presented. The first of these is concerned with deductive approaches, where the starting point is the grammar rule. The second looks at inductive approaches, where the starting point is language data.