CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what they know and deepen their understanding of issues and interest in the ESL field.

GRAMMAR TEACHERS AS DECISION MAKERS

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PART II

Decisions Regarding How to Teacher Grammar

Various writers have examined how grammatical structures can best be taught. Although various authors advocate somewhat different components for a grammar lesson, most include the elements of presentation, practice, and assessment. In order to illustrate the various ways a grammar lesson could develop, it may be helpful to consider how lessons dealing with the use of the modal would could be developed. In terms of the initial presentation of a grammatical structure, a key decision a teacher must make is whether to present the focus point inductively or deductively. If a grammar teacher selects an inductive approach, the grammar lesson will essentially be composed of a set of examples that learners can use to formulate generalizations about the regularities of English.

If, on the other hand, the teacher decides to use a deductive approach, the teacher will present the learners with a set of rules that the learner can apply to the language. Whether a deductive or inductive approach is most conducive to learning is open to question. However, a third option a teacher has available is to make use of both deductive and inductive learning. The grammar teacher then must make a key decision as to whether or not for a particular group of learners, dealing with a specific grammatical focus, to use a primarily inductive or deductive approach. One factor that could influence the teacher's decision is the age of the learner. Some have suggested that older learners prefer a more explicit presentation of grammatical rules whereas younger learners in general prefer a more inductive approach.

The second major component of a grammar lesson involves the element of practice. Teachers must decide what type of practice will be most beneficial for their particular students. The following factors contribute to effective practice. First is the factor of volume and repetition,

that is students need to hear and produce a great deal of language in the practice phase. The second factor is success orientation which means that the practice should be structured in such a way that students can successfully complete the practice. Finally, the teacher should select the content and format of the practice so that they are interesting to the students. Whereas pedagogical grammars can provide a variety of practice exercises, it is classroom grammar teachers who are in the best position to know what type of content and format will be most appealing to their students. In addition, only they will know when the students have had sufficient practice.

One factor that may influence a teacher's decision as to what type of practice to employ is whether the focus of the lesson is on form or meaning. If the teacher is emphasizing the form of a particular structure, like <u>would</u>, then repetition drills may be highly productive. The students would be involved in simple stimulus-response learning. On the other hand, if a teacher is introducing the semantic dimensions of <u>would</u> students might be presented with a text that includes <u>would</u> in various contexts.

The final stage of a grammar lesson involves assessment. In this phase students and teachers need to determine to what extent the individual learner can use the target form correctly and appropriately. Grammar teachers must decide what is the best way to assess whether or not their students have mastered a particular target form like <u>would</u> in terms of form, semantics, and pragmatics. One important factor that can influence this decision involves which dimension of the target form is being assessed. If the teacher has dealt primarily with the form of an item like <u>would</u>, then discrete item multiple choice items may be highly productive for assessment purposes. On the other hand, if the teacher has focused on the semantic and pragmatic dimensions of <u>would,</u> then open ended items involving such things as dialogue completions would be more productive. In any case, the point of undertaking such assessment would be to determine what additional practice is needed in the class.

Decisions Regarding When to Teach a Grammar Point

The final decision a grammar teacher needs to make involves the question of how to sequence the grammatical items that are introduced. Several factors can affect the sequencing of a grammatical lesson. These include the following.

- the difficulty of the item,

- the frequency of the item,

- the needs of the learners,

- the contrast of the item with the mother tongue, and

- the weight of tradition.

By way of illustration, let us consider each of these factors in reference to the introduction of the modal <u>would</u>. In terms of difficulty of form, <u>would</u> presents few problems because it is not inflected for the third person singular. On both a semantic and pragmatic level, however, the item is quite difficult. Hence, teachers have to weigh the difficulty of a particular item in terms of the various dimensions of the structure.

The frequency of an item is often difficult to determine because frequency is closely related to issues of genre. Thus, if a group of students is involved in drafting formal letters of request, it is quite likely that the frequency of <u>would</u> would be quite high (e.g., <u>Would you kindly send us a copy of the contract under consideration</u>). Also if students were involved in reporting direct speech, it is quite likely that the target form would appear (e.g., <u>The press agent reported that the prime minister would be there</u>). Or if students are reporting on the possible effects of some type of scientific experiment (e.g., <u>If this procedure were employed, the results would be quite different</u>), the target form will likely be used. If students are involved in the use of such genres, then it is important to deal with the structure fairly soon in the curriculum.

In making decisions regarding the sequencing of grammatical items, teachers also need to consider the students' communicative and academic needs. Given that English is often used among strangers for formal exchanges, it is quite likely that <u>would</u> will be important to students in using English to make formal requests of strangers. Hence, there is an authentic need for the learners to master this form. In addition, if the item often appears in standardized tests used for gatekeeping functions, then it is important for teachers to focus on this particular structure relatively early in the curriculum.

Another factor to consider in making decisions on sequencing involves the extent to which the item contrasts with similar structures in the other languages that the students speak. If there are items in the mother tongue that have similar semantic and pragmatic coverage as <u>would</u>, then the form would be relatively easy for students to master. Finally, teachers often have to consider issues of tradition in making decisions regarding sequencing. If by tradition a school

curriculum sequences grammatical items in a particular order and modals like <u>would</u> appear late in the curriculum, it may be difficult for the individual grammar teacher to extensively alter that sequence even though other factors such as the needs of the learners or the frequency of the form may warrant a different pattern in the sequencing.

Whereas pedagogical grammarians must also address the issue of sequencing, these individuals cannot take into account several of the factors noted above. Typically they are not familiar with the specific needs of a particular group of learners; nor are they aware of the genres that the students are likely to encounter or with the assessment needs of the students. In many cases pedagogical grammarians are also not familiar with the traditional introduction of particular items in a school curriculum. Hence, these individuals are not the best individuals to make decisions as to when a particular item should be introduced. It is here that the classroom grammar teacher is a key figure in making decisions regarding sequencing.

<u>Conclusion</u>

Grammar teachers face a host of questions regarding lesson content, practice, and sequencing. Although pedagogical grammars can be valuable resources, ultimately it is classroom teachers who must make the macro and micro decisions regarding the teaching of English grammar. These decisions will be influenced by the teachers' beliefs regarding the nature of language and the nature of learning as well as by their own experience as teachers and learners. Their decisions will also be influenced by the larger social context in which they work.

The role that English plays in the particular institution will also be a factor in teachers' decision making process. Students attending English-medium schools have a much greater opportunity to practice English and a much greater need for developing their fluency in order to succeed in their academic life. This will again influence students' needs and motivation and thus affect how teachers can approach the teaching of grammar. It is teachers in other medium schools who perhaps face the greatest challenge in making English grammar relevant to the personal and academic needs of their students. I began by noting that like the elephant examined by the six blind men, grammar is an object of great magnitude and complexity. However, as I

have sought to demonstrate in this paper, no less mammoth or complex is the task that grammar teachers face in making decisions regarding grammar teaching.

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