Formal Grammar Instruction: Theoretical Aspects to Contemplate Its Teaching

Instrucción formal de la gramática: aspectos teóricos para considerar su enseñanza

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With the rise of new tendencies and methodologies in the English as a foreign language field, formal grammar instruction has become unnecessary during the last few years. Institutions and educators have made serious decisions in order to promote a language production which is fluent and coherent. Thus, grammar instruction has been partially relegated and new trends have occupied its place. However, based on personal teaching practices, I have realized that some learners are producing the foreign language in a fluid, but sometimes inaccurate form. The present reflection is aimed at presenting some insights for educators that may help them consider the possibility of teaching formal grammar as part of the curriculum.

Key words: Explicit grammar instruction, grammar instruction, implicit grammar instruction.

Con el crecimiento de nuevas tendencias y metodologías en la enseñanza del inglés, la instrucción formal de la gramática se ha vuelto innecesaria durante las últimas décadas. Instituciones y educadores han tomado serias decisiones con el fin de promover una producción fluida y coherente de la lengua extranjera, lo que ha generado que la enseñanza formal de la gramática sea relegada de manera parcial y nuevas tendencias ocupen su lugar. Con base en mis propias experiencias dentro del aula de clase, he observado que algunos de mis estudiantes se comunican fluidamente en la lengua extranjera, pero en ocasiones, de manera incorrecta. En este artículo de reflexión se presentan algunos elementos teóricos que podrían ayudar a educadores de lengua extranjera a considerar la posibilidad de incluir la enseñanza formal de la gramática en el currículo.

Palabras clave: enseñanza de la gramática, enseñanza explícita de la gramática, enseñanza implícita de la gramática.

Introduction

The teaching of explicit grammar as part of the foreign language learning process is an aspect that has been debated for so many years. Schulz (2001) affirms that "foreign language educators and applied linguists examining the effectiveness of various approaches for FL teaching are not all in agreement about whether explicit grammar instruction . . . is essential or even helpful in learning a new language" (p. 245). In addition, authors like Terrell (1991), Norris and Ortega (2002), and Ellis (2006), to mention some, have considered and supported the idea of Explicit Grammar Instruction (EGI) in the foreign language class, whereas theoreticians such as Krashen (2003) have defended the idea of avoiding EGI since it may interfere with a natural acquisition process.

Thus, the approaches implemented in the language class have varied throughout the years and educators are still looking for the best option to guarantee an optimal learning process. In the United States for example, educators have applied current teaching tendencies to achieve the previously mentioned goal. Terrell (1991) explains this language teaching evolution by stating:

> The role of English Grammar Instruction in a second/foreign language class in the United States has changed drastically in the last forty years as the favored methodology changed from grammar-translation to audio-lingual, then from audio-lingual to cognitive, and finally from cognitive to communicative approaches. (p. 53)

However, this phenomenon has not only occurred in developed countries such as the United States. Colombian education has also changed in the last few years and English Foreign Language (EFL) teaching has not been the exception to this phenomenon. Language teachers and researchers have been looking for the specific criteria, methodology, and appropriate approaches that would help them enhance English teaching. Some decades ago, Colombian teachers used

to place emphasis on the teaching of grammatical forms but, interestingly, some educators have recently claimed that this methodology was not helpful for producing spontaneous and authentic language since its main focus was related to the production of accurate linguistic forms where communication or interactional situations did not play a primary role. Nassaji and Fotos (2004) support the previous statement by explaining that "with the rise of communicative methodology in the late 1970s, the role of grammar instruction in second language learning was downplayed, and it was even suggested that teaching grammar was not only unhelpful but might actually be detrimental" (p. 126). Nonetheless, it is relevant to bear in mind that the teaching of explicit grammar forms has not been completely relegated and is still taking place in many EFL settings. Nowadays, some educators still believe that the formal teaching of linguistic forms is significant in the development of a foreign language and they also may implement this practice as a complement to teaching the language as a whole.

Similar to the language teaching evolution lived in the United States (Terrell, 1991), new forms to teach a foreign language started to grow in Colombian classrooms and, apparently, these started becoming effective. Thus, by moving from audio-lingual and grammar-based methods to more communicative approaches, language educators have evidenced that learning a language is a process that requires constant update in order to achieve the expected goals and necessities of their populations.

Bearing in mind the aforesaid teaching development, Colombian educators are regularly looking for methods to promote the most appropriate language teaching methodologies that help educators create bilingual individuals who may be able to produce an accurate and fluid foreign language. Consequently, some institutions are attempting to implement new bilingual methodologies or approaches such as task— or content—based programs with the purpose of

providing learners with a wider range of opportunities to experience and learn a foreign language in more authentic or meaningful ways.

In general, I would assert that Colombian education is moving forward to become an outstanding bilingual model; however, even though the above-mentioned approaches are expected to be successful, I personally believe that learning a foreign language is a process that not only requires natural and bilingual models, but also needs the development of linguistic accuracy that will allow learners to produce the language in a standard and coherent form.

Even though language teachers and institutions have made a big effort to move from traditional to more communicative and meaningful approaches in the EFL field, and although there has been a constant evolution in the methodologies implemented in this area, some populations are still not achieving the final aim: producing the language with fluency and accuracy. This is evidenced by a study carried out by the Ministry of Education in 2005, whose final results showed that only "6.4% of students finishing high school performed in English at an intermediate level, whereas an overwhelming 93.6% did so at a basic. No students were found to perform at an advanced

level" (Macías, 2011). Equally, the results obtained in ICFES exams in the last seven years not only evidenced low performance from learners but also a minimal increase in this area (see Figure 1).

The data in Figure 1 evidences that even though a variety of methodological changes have been implemented to enhance the results obtained in a teaching-language process, Colombian students are still having difficulty in this area. Thus, a personal question arises: If new trends and approaches are implemented every day in order to help learners become bilingual, why are Colombian students still not achieving the expected goals?

From my personal teaching perspective while working with young adults, I have realized that sometimes linguistic forms are not promoted explicitly since they may restrict the production of fluent and real language (Krashen, 2003). Likewise, I have faced classroom situations in which learners are able to communicate fluently in the foreign language, however their accuracy is not without its flaws. Considering language learning theories, a foreign language is expected to be learned following the same process of the first language and formal grammar instruction should be kept away (Krashen, 2003), but

Figure 1. ICFES Results in English Test 2005-2011

20051	
CRITERIO	**PROMEDIO**
EGRESADO	43.71
ESTUDIANTE	44.08

20061	
CRITERIO	**PROMEDIO**
EGRESADO	43.49
ESTUDIANTE	43.29

20071	
CRITERIO	**PROMEDIO**
EGRESADO	44.36
ESTUDIANTE	43.93

20081	
CRITERIO	**PROMEDIO**
EGRESADO	44.69
ESTUDIANTE	44.76

20091	
CRITERIO	**PROMEDIO**
EGRESADO	45.45
ESTUDIANTE	44.23

20101	
CRITERIO	**PROMEDIO**
EGRESADO	46.66
ESTUDIANTE	49.96

20111	
CRITERIO	**PROMEDIO**
EGRESADO	45.70
ESTUDIANTE	50.63

is it the best way to help our students, who may need to use L2 for professional purposes, become bilingual individuals?

The two previous questions made me reflect on the possibility of including formal grammar instruction in the foreign language class as part of a process in which language should be seen as whole and used with fluency and, most importantly, with accuracy. In the following section, I present a theoretical overview in which not only the teaching of linguistic forms is suggested, but also presents the most appropriate time and techniques in which it should be incorporated into the EFL curriculum.

Formal Grammar Instruction: A Theoretical Overview

The most recent approaches for second and foreign language teaching have principally been focused on meaning and the way language is developed naturally and as a whole. Considering my experience as a foreign language teacher, I have observed educators who have decided to employ more communicative and authentic approaches in order to help individuals develop competences in order to be able to use the second or foreign language in real and spontaneous forms. Interestingly, these approaches have replaced the teaching of explicit grammar for an implicit method in which accuracy is learned naturally with no pressure or excluding formal instruction. This idea is supported by the second language acquisition theory (Krashen, 2003), which explains that formal instruction of grammatical structures should not be taken into account in language acquisition considering the fact that human beings learn to understand and produce their first language through natural and informal communicative contexts.

Krashen (2003) argues that grammar instruction has no role in second language acquisition. The author explains that language is acquired as a subconscious process, and he states that conscious learning can only

be considered as a monitor device to correct sentences when the individual has already produced them. Krashen's theory not only places emphasis on self-correction but also suggests that formal instruction does not contribute to fluency: "While monitoring can make a small contribution to accuracy, the research indicates that acquisition makes a major contribution. Thus, acquisition is responsible for both fluency and most of our accuracy" (Krashen, 2003, p. 2). Clearly, Krashen's theory is not in accordance with the teaching of explicit grammar in second language acquisition, but there are other theoreticians and linguists who have defended opposite ideas.

Even though I personally am a devoted follower of communicative approaches and virtual environments due to their innovation and realistic form to focus on language teaching, I have regularly wondered about a missing ingredient to help my students use the language not only fluently but also accurately. As a result of my personal teaching disquiet, I found other perspectives regarding formal and explicit grammar instruction which provided me with a positive view and therefore helped me change my viewpoints about grammar as an antiquated teaching practice.

Ellis (2006), for example, resorts to various researchers including Long (1983) and Norris and Ortega (2002) to support his idea of the importance of including explicit grammar in a second language acquisition process. The author explains that grammatical deficiencies may cause a breakdown in communication and interfere with an intended message, therefore, it is understood that language learners need to speak fluently, but they also need to speak accurately. Similarly, and based on the importance of speaking a standard language which is clear and coherent to the recipient, it can be suggested that explicit grammar instruction is essential in second language acquisition.

Correspondingly, Richards (2002) affirms that grammar-based methodologies have been replaced

by communicative approaches which give more importance to fluency than to accuracy. Due to this phenomenon, the teaching of grammar has been isolated from language acquisition and is causing a major issue. Students who are encouraged to speak for communicative purposes focus their speech on meaning regardless of grammatical accuracy. Nevertheless, there are grammatical mistakes that can change meanings and consequently interfere with communication. Richards (2002) explains that there is a grammar-gap problem in the development of linguistic competence and he affirms that "what has been observed in language classrooms during fluency work is communication marked by low levels of linguistic accuracy" (p. 38). Considering linguistic competences, some feel that language is supposed to be used naturally, but natural approaches promote students' participation in communicative tasks that may have resulted in "communication that is heavily dependent on vocabulary and memorized chunks of language" (Richards, 2002, p. 39).

The teaching of linguistic forms is not only supported by theory but also by studies recently conducted. For instance, Norris and Ortega (2002) have analyzed different studies in which it is demonstrated that teaching grammar is appropriate and that it may make a difference in the results obtained in the language learning process. Based on the study conducted by these authors, Ellis (2002) explains that "not only did Form Focused Instruction make a difference but also that it made a very considerable difference" (p. 223) and concludes that there is "ample evidence to show that form-focused instruction (FFI) has a positive effect on second lan-guage (SL) acquisition" (p. 223).

The assumptions presented above are not the only ones that contradict Krashen's view towards grammar instruction. For instance, Long and Robinson (1998) are certainly in favor of teaching grammar stating that "formal instruction helps to promote more rapid

L2 acquisition and also contributes to higher levels of ultimate achievement" (p. 18). They theorize that grammar not only contributes to the development of accuracy, but it also has a beneficial effect on acquisition of L2. Equally, Ellis and Fotos (1999) argue that formal grammar instruction can have a positive impact on acquisition when grammatical structures are shown in context. The authors state: "formal instruction may work best in promoting acquisition when it is linked with opportunities for natural communication" (p. 20).

Furthermore, Ellis (2006) has resorted to previous research in language acquisition in order to find a clear answer related to grammar teaching. He explains that "some researchers have concluded that teaching grammar is beneficial, but to be effective it needs to be taught in a way that is compatible with the natural processes of acquisition" (p. 85). In this way, it is evident that there is sufficient relevant research to indicate that grammar is worth teaching, but the natural order in which learners acquire it should be respected.

In brief, and based on the theory previously presented, it is clear that grammar instruction can be implemented in foreign language classes but a major recommendation is to bear in mind specific factors or variables such as students' age, proficiency level, or needs and goals they may have (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004). Accordingly, the following section includes some important aspects to consider when making the decision of including grammar instruction when planning foreign language lessons.

Formal Grammar Instruction: How, Where, and When

In the previous section, the importance and relevance of including grammar in the foreign language class were discussed and it was concluded that the teaching of grammar forms are worth teaching. However, educators might need to make decisions regarding the most effective techniques and moments

to include this aspect in their lessons. Before starting to answer questions regarding the how, where, and when of incorporating linguistic forms in the foreign language class, it is relevant to take a closer look at the definitions or expectations regarding grammar teaching. Ellis (2006) presents an interesting definition in which he asserts that it "involves any instructional technique that draws learners' attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps them either to understand it meta-linguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they can internalize it" (p. 84). Similarly, Celce-Murcia (1991) explains that "if learners are presented with many fully illustrated and well-demonstrated examples and then asked to describe other similar situations, they have a basis for understanding and practicing the correct use of these forms" (p. 467).

Bearing in mind the previous characteristics which can be considered when presenting linguistic forms in a foreign language environment, one can be state that EGI can be implemented in language classes by taking into account, as previously suggested, its significance and usefulness to learners.

How Should Grammar Be Presented?

Besides the concern about the use of formal grammar instruction in foreign language learning, it is also relevant to be acquainted with the most appropriate grammar techniques in order to present grammatical structures to language learners. Many educators may have been concerned with the idea of teaching grammar explicitly in their classes since they could acquire a teacher-centered perspective where students do not have an active participation. For instance, Blaauw-Hara (2006) explains that grammar teaching is visualized as a negative technique where "the teacher lectures on grammatical concepts, diagrams sentences on the board, or gives a quiz" (p. 166) and unfortunately, many foreign language educators share this same viewpoint and they may see

grammar as a boring and meaningless process where learners acquire isolated grammar forms that are rarely produced in authentic conversations.

However, grammar instruction can be presented from different perspectives in which learners play a more dynamic role and become active participants of their language learning process. To begin with, using guessing or discovery techniques is an opportunity for students to identify and understand linguistic forms on their own that can be used later in context; secondly, applying practice activities allows participants to put the language learned into practice; and lastly, using presentational techniques in which practice is not required but the full attention of learners is necessary (Ellis, 2006). In addition, Brown (2007, p. 421), who has summarized the research of various linguists, explains that grammar can be included in the language class if the appropriate techniques are used. The author summarizes five important characteristics as follows:

- forms that are embedded in meaningful, communicative contexts,
- forms that contribute positively to communicative goals,
- forms that promote accuracy within fluent, communicative language,
- forms that do not overwhelm students with linguistic terminology, and
- forms that are as lively and intrinsically motivating as possible.

In addition, there is a wide range of possibilities in which to present grammar. For instance, Brown (2007) proposes charts as a useful tool for clarification, the use of authentic objects to engage learners, maps and drawings used as visual aids, dialogues for students to practice linguistic forms in context, and written texts to process selected forms.

Considering the previously mentioned aspects, teachers can propose a variety of activities and techniques in order to present explicit forms which, according to linguists such as Fotos (1994), Celce-

Murcia (1991), and Ellis (2006), if used and presented appropriately, become essential to the learning process. In general, grammar can be seen as an aspect that can be included and presented in a variety of forms in which students are expected to use the language in context and with the intention of developing an accurate production.

When Should Grammar Be Presented?

The second question regarding the most appropriate time to present linguistic forms in the language class is related to the proficiency level of the learner. Brown (2007), for example, explains that grammar focus at beginning levels may block acquisition or fluency skills and asserts that "research agrees that at the intermediate to advanced levels, a more explicit focus on form is less likely to disturb communicative fluency, and can assist learners in developing accuracy" (p. 422). Likewise, Ellis (2006), who has evaluated the most influential theories concerning the teaching of grammar in second language acquisition, proposes grammar instruction to those individuals who have already acquired an intermediate level of English. He explains that it is recommended to "emphasize meaning-focused instruction to begin with and introduce grammar teaching later, when learners have already begun to form their interlanguages" (p. 90).

Ellis (2006) bases this assumption on previous research in immersion programs where students are able to develop both fluent and proficient communication without formal instruction. The results suggest that grammar should be presented later in order to develop grammatical accuracy. In general, the author proposes to teach "explicit grammatical knowledge as a means of assisting subsequent acquisition of implicit knowledge" (p. 102). In the same vein, Lightbown (2004) agrees with Ellis' suggestion explaining that "some linguistic features

are acquired incidentally without intentional effort, conscious awareness or teacher's guidance" (p. 75). This statement refers to the teaching of grammar as a mechanism to enhance features that need to be developed with formal instruction. In consideration to the explanations offered before, it can be concluded that grammar should certainly be incorporated in language curriculum, but it is advisable to be presented to those individuals who need or are prepared to receive formal grammatical instruction in the second or foreign language.

What Kind of Grammar Instruction?

Thus, the final question regarding EGI is related to the most appropriate manner for incorporating it into the foreign language class. First, it is relevant to identify the differences between extensive and intensive grammar teaching; the former refers to the teaching of a specific grammatical structure during a continued period of time, whereas the latter refers to a variety of grammatical structures that are presented in a shorter term. Once again, Ellis (2006) provides relevant information to compare these two types of instruction. The main characteristic of intensive grammar instruction is the opportunity that is given to the learner to put into practice what s/he has learned. Therefore, this type of instruction is presented with drills and task opportunities to practice the target structure. Conversely, extensive grammar teaching should be developed within learning activities that may be focused either on form or meaning. Finally, the author provides a definite answer about these types of grammar teaching: "Learning grammar is best conducted using a mixture of implicit and explicit feedback types that are both input based and output based" (p. 102).

Besides an extensive and intensive focus, explicit and implicit instruction can be considered. The former refers to a conscious mental process learners need to overcome in order to internalize grammar rules and

later put into practice. Ellis (2010) explains that through explicit grammar instruction learners are:

> Encouraged to develop metalinguistic awareness of the rule. This can be achieved deductively, as when a rule is given to the learners or inductively as when the learners are asked to work out a rule for themselves from an array of data illustrating the rule. (p. 4)

On the contrary, implicit instruction is aimed at promoting a further thinking process where learners infer and deduce the rules and accurate use of the language. Thus, Ellis (2010) explains that "implicit instruction is directed at enabling learners to infer rules without awareness. Thus it contrasts with explicit instruction in that there is no intention to develop any understanding of what is being learned" (p. 4).

Additionally, Housen and Pierrard (2005) present a clear differentiation between explicit and implicit instruction (see Table 1).

Table 1 offers an interesting perspective that can be considered when making decisions regarding the most appropriate type of instruction to present grammar. However, it is important to bear in mind that educators need to have a clear focus and intention when deciding on the type of instruction to be implemented since students respond to the instructions accordingly (Ellis, 2010).

Decisions on whether to use an implicit or an explicit focus have also been a controversial issue. Some educators prefer to use an implicit methodology since it invites students to deduce grammar uses and structures on their own whereas others prefer the idea of being explicit and help learners to develop awareness on the uses of linguistic forms. Norris and Ortega (2002) offer an explicit answer by stating "that focused L2 instruction results in large target-oriented gains, that explicit types of instruction are more effective than implicit types, and that Focus on Form and Focus on Forms interventions result in equivalent and large effects" (p. 417).

In addition to the types of instruction discussed previously, Long and Robinson (1998) present two main options to be considered in language teaching: focus on forms and focus on meaning. The authors explain focus on meaning as an incidental or implicit learning that is sufficient for successful second or foreign language acquisition. Analytic approaches such as natural, communicative, and immersion are the best representation for this method. On the contrary, synthetic methods such as audiolingual, grammar translation, and total physical response give specific emphasis to grammatical structures that are not usually presented in context; it means these

Table 1. Implicit and Explicit Forms of Form-Focused Instruction (Based on Housen & Pierrard, 2005, p. 10)

Implicit FFI	Explicit FFI
– *Attracts* attention to target form	– Directs attention to target form
– Is delivered *spontaneously* (e.g., in an otherwise communication-oriented activity)	– Is *predetermined* and *planned* (e.g., as the main focus and goal of a teaching activity)
– Is unobtrusive (minimal interruption of communication of meaning)	– Is obtrusive (interruption of communicative meaning)
– Presents target forms in context	– Presents target forms in isolation
– Makes no use of metalanguage	– Uses metalinguistic terminology (e.g., rule explanation)
– Encourages free use of the target form.	– Involves controlled practice of target language.

approaches are mainly focused on forms. The decision about how grammar should be taught in language teaching should be made based on learners' needs. However, taking into account previous research, neither fluency nor accuracy must be separated, but should be integrated and developed concurrently.

Conclusions

Founded on relevant research and theory, a final conclusion about the teaching of formal grammar instruction can be provided. Certainly, language acquisition is a process that requires informal and natural input (Krashen, 2003), but research has demonstrated the significance of grammar instruction in foreign language learning and second language acquisition that serves not only to develop a fluent, but also an accurate use of language. Consequently, it has been corroborated that explicit grammar instruction can be presented to learners who have already acquired an intermediate level of language by integrating extensive and intensive approaches that can be focused either on form or meaning. Finally, language should be considered as a vehicle of social and educational communication that needs to be used in formal and informal settings, but it is relevant to bear in mind that the decision about where, when, and how to use it is primarily made by speakers. Thus, language teachers are encouraged to provide students with the necessary tools to produce not only fluid speech in certain contexts, but also to produce standard and coherent statements in formal and informal settings.

Certainly, it is not the intention of this paper to disapprove teaching approaches which have demonstrated success for years or acquisition theories that have enhanced the teaching practice of many educators, but the objective was definitely to learn what theory and research had to say regarding accuracy in language teaching. I personally believe that it is unnecessary to qualify or disqualify teaching trends, but identifying the most significant characteristics of

each method might be an interesting eclectic process to be considered for further teaching practices in which an accurate, fluent, and communicative-authentic language can be promoted concurrently.

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