

# A third way

**Hester Lott** abandons the top and the bottom and steps firmly down a middle path.

Teaching grammar can be tricky. For many otherwise competent ELT practitioners, it is scary. Few teachers actually like grammar, or enjoy teaching it as they enjoy teaching the other 'skills'. I would suggest there are two reasons for this, one of which relates to the particular history of teachers educated in the UK. The other (and the one which concerns me here as I think it is likely to be more relevant to readers of ETp) lies, I have come to believe, in the way grammar is traditionally regarded by grammarians.

## Grammar and grammarians

In contrast with other aspects of language, grammar is commonly treated in a scientific way. By this I mean that it is treated as if it consists of a set of rules, based on abstract concepts, which must be learnt in the abstract and mechanically

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applied. As teachers, we first need to learn the terminology (eg *adverb*, *aspect*, *conjunction*, *auxiliary*, etc) and then the different types of formulae: (eg 'S + V + O + A', or 'wh + *do/does* + NP + verb + ?'), and then figure out how to communicate this knowledge to people with very little English. This approach seems to have very little to do with 'meaning' or 'communication'. No wonder grammar teaching is perceived as frightening!

## Grammar and learning

It is possible to teach a language and never have recourse to a grammar term, nor study grammar as a separate discipline at all. We all do this in acquiring our first language. However, it takes years of constant exposure to a language or, better, complete immersion. Very few students have the time or the inclination to go for this approach. So the teaching of formal grammar is a way of speeding up the learning process by giving students the tools to enable them to generate original sentences in 'correct' English by the application of a set of rules. The problem for teachers lies in how to create the same kind of positive learning conditions when teaching grammar that they routinely apply to the other language 'skills'.

There is a widely-held belief that learning happens most readily when the students are personally engaged with the material, when the subject is interesting to them or when they identify personally with the people they are reading about.

They learn from observation, imitation and repetition, all within an encouraging and supportive atmosphere, which gives them confidence to experiment and get things wrong a few times without feeling they have broken the law.

## Grammar and the syllabus

One way of looking at the problem of integrating the study of grammar into the syllabus is by drawing a comparison with methods used by theorists and researchers into the development of artificial intelligence (AI), the creation of a human-like electronic or machine 'mind'. There are two radically different schools of thought concerning the best initial approach. One is termed the 'bottom-up' and the other the 'top-down' approach.

## Bottom-up

The first group, those with the 'bottom-up' approach, start by creating a simple basic creature, rather like a slug, which has the fundamental capacities that living creatures need: it can recognise and move away from danger, and recognise and move towards objects which are safe and 'useful'. When this is achieved, the researchers try to add more sophisticated capacities, such as the ability to interact with other creatures, using tools to achieve simple tasks and so on. By adding more and more elements to the program, they hope eventually to create a kind of 'thinking mind'.

One could draw an analogy between the eclectic methods of the modern English language teacher and the 'bottom-up' approach. There is no complex rule-learning initially, but, instead, the presentation and repetition of simple phrases and words in a recognisable context, and preferably with a communicative purpose. Gradually more vocabulary is added, along with stylistic and grammatical complexity, in a steadily expanding, three-dimensional inverted pyramid of knowledge, confidence and competence.

## Top-down

At the other end of the spectrum, the 'top-down' AI scientists start by analysing the processes involved in a chosen complex, intellectual challenge, such as the game of chess, and creating an intricate (but strictly limited)



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program to deal with this. Then they may develop a separate program which can, for example, translate simple instructions from English into Japanese. Next they try to integrate the two, so an English-speaking robot can play chess with a Japanese-speaking robot. And so on, creating and combining more and more of these separate complex programs, in the hope that eventually they will end up with a kind of 'thinking mind'.

Grammarians seem to operate in a similar way to this group, the 'top-downers'. They start by looking at the language as a whole and proposing a set of complicated rules governed by a traditional terminology (or metalanguage). They then attempt to make all 'real' language fit into the appropriate, ready-made, conceptual 'boxes'. In order for them to teach this, it is necessary to teach the metalanguage to students before teaching, parrot fashion, what should go into the boxes. This process is a long way from the 'ideal' learning process we have looked at above, and from the one which children go through when they learn their mother tongue.

## A more efficient way

The dilemma for the teacher lies in how to incorporate the best practices of the ELT classroom into their grammar teaching, or, in other words, to incorporate something of the 'top-down' approach into an essentially 'bottom-up' system.

With traditional 'top-down' methods, the grammar-learning process should go something like this:

- 1 **presentation** of a grammatical structure, usually in a sentence presented without context, character or information about register or genre
- 2 **explanation** of the rule, possibly with other, equally contextless examples
- 3 **application** of the rule by the student in controlled conditions

4 **absorption** of the 'feel' of how the structure is used, and memorisation of examples of this

5 occasional mental **recourse** to the 'rule' when in difficulty

6 bypassing the rule in favour of an intuitive understanding of the way the language works and the spontaneous use of language in chunks, ie **fluency**

This can be very successful, but is not always so. The problem lies at stage 4. What is the best way to move students on from stage 3 to stage 4?

## A 'middle-out' approach

My view is that neither the bottom-up, nor the top-down approaches are maximally efficient for the effective teaching of grammar, though both may eventually achieve the same result, given continuing effort and good-will on the part of the student and the teacher. The problem is that many students will never move beyond stage 3 and fossilised errors become established, which, as the name implies, will never be corrected.

*Learning takes place most readily when the whole person is involved in the learning process*

I would suggest that a third category, the 'middle-out' approach, is the most effective. This consists of teaching, or establishing common prior knowledge of, the relevant grammatical concept and terminology, possibly even in the student's first language, thereby establishing a 'middle ground'. It is essential that the student have a deep understanding of the *meaning* behind the item or structure, which is only achieved by looking at, and ideally, listening to, how it is *actually used* by native speakers, using carefully selected examples of written or spoken English at the appropriate level. It should then be possible for the student to 'absorb' the deeper meaning. When students

have absorbed the deeper meaning, and understood the explanation, the teacher will be able to lead them to experiment confidently with the structure by expressing their own thoughts in areas which naturally lend themselves to it. Thus, by focusing on the *meaning* of a grammatical item or structure, and by looking at how it is used in real contexts, the teacher can then proceed in the same fashion he or she normally does in the other skills areas. In this way, the teaching of grammar can be rewarding and enjoyable, and can benefit students in the long term, by giving them an intuitive understanding which enables them to bypass the rule and go straight to the appropriate form, at stage 6.



I believe that the basic precepts for a good reading/writing or speaking/listening lesson should apply equally to a grammar lesson. A popular view held by educationalists is that learning takes place most readily when the whole person is involved in the learning process, and that most learners remember chunks of language according to the context in which they were heard or read. In order for people to engage emotionally with teaching texts, they should be about real people in real situations, communicating in a credible way. In order to learn, we need stories: funny and sad, real and fictional, from history and about science. These do not generally figure very prominently in grammar texts. Of course, the experienced English teacher will be adept at making grammar digestible, and will have a whole set of ready-made grammar-based lessons to deal with common problems, complete with jokes and anecdotes and real contexts appropriate to their classes. But it would be useful for new teachers to have some model on which to base their thinking. **ETP**



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