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The Grammar of Choice[1]

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INTRODUCTION

Many teachers (and students) believe grammar to be a linguistic straitjacket. They think that grammar consists of arbitrary rules of a language, to which speakers must adhere or risk the penalty of being misunderstood or of being stigmatized as speaking an inferior or inadequate form of the target language. It is easy to understand why grammar is viewed in this manner. Many of us have felt the despair of receiving a paper back from a language teacher filled with red marks related to the form of what we had written, not to the content that we had worked so hard to express. Also, speaking the standard dialect of a language accurately does provide speakers with access to opportunities they might otherwise be denied. I recall the late Carlos Yorio's sharing with me his challenge in helping his students, many of whom were New Yorkers and spoke English fluently, learn to speak Standard English accurately so that they would have more options for employment. Indeed, grammar does relate to formal accuracy, and there is a cost to those who fail to adhere to it.

However, there is another side to grammar, a side to which I seem much called upon to draw attention these days. I no doubt have accepted this mission in part because some of my professional interests lie in better

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understanding grammar and finding ways to help teachers do the same. As we know, teachers teach subject matter the way that they conceptualize it. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to challenge the common misconception that grammar has to do solely with formal accuracy (Larsen-Freeman, 1995). I do believe that if grammar were better understood, not only would it be taught and learned better, but also the rich potential of its system would be admired, thus enhancing attitudes toward grammar. Teachers and their students would appreciate how inextricably bound up with being human grammar is. For rather than being a linguistic straitjacket, grammar affords speakers of a particular language a great deal of flexibility in the ways they can express propositional, or notional, meaning and how they present themselves in the world.

For this volume, then, I am not going to discuss views of grammar from a theoretical linguistics or a second language acquisition research perspective. I have recently written about these matters elsewhere (Larsen-Freeman, forthcoming a, 2001b). Instead, in this chapter, I will first examine and then define grammar in a way that reflects a different orientation from what grammar normally takes in the minds and materials of English as a second language/English as a foreign language (ESL/EFL) teachers. Second, I will provide a number of examples that illustrate the flexibility of the system. Finally, I will address pedagogical concerns.

A DEFINITION

As I have already suggested, it is true that grammar relates to linguistic form, about which speakers have little choice. As we see in Example 1, when using the verb *be,* English speakers need to use *am* for first person singular subjects and *are* for first person plural subjects. *Children* is the irregular plural form of *child.* Attributive adjectives precede nouns in English, so we say *a fragrant meadow,* not *a meadow fragrant.*

1. I am → We are

   one child → two children

   A fragrant meadow → *A meadow fragrant

There are, however, two departures from the usual way of thinking about grammar that I want to encourage in this chapter. First, the rules illustrated in Example 1 constitute a very minimal set, concerning such things as the form of the verb so that it agrees with its subject, the form of a plural common count noun, and adjective-noun word order. Second, even

within this restricted set of rules, a choice exists. A speaker or writer must decide when to use these forms. Another way to say this is that grammar not only consists of rules governing form; grammatical knowledge consists of knowing when to use the forms to convey meanings that match our intentions in particular contexts.

Let me return to the three common examples of grammar rules shown in Example 1 to demonstrate that even at this very basic level, we have a choice of forms to use. Consider the contrast between *I am* and *We are.* This distinction seems straightforward enough; however, even while holding the propositional meaning constant, there is still room for choice, depending on how I, as the speaker, want to position myself vis-à-vis my audience:

2. I am speaking about the grammar of choice this afternoon.

   We are speaking about the grammar of choice this afternoon.

Either of these statements would be acceptable if I were addressing an audience on the topic of a grammar of choice. With the first option, I would be reflecting my agency in the act of speaking. With the second option, I would still be doing the speaking; however, my choice of the second option would signal my intention to make my audience feel more included in the event, perhaps to promote solidarity between us.

Sometimes, even with the same subject, a choice of verb form exists. I could say:

3. My family *is* coming over for dinner on Sunday.

Or some dialects of English, British English, for example, will permit the plural form of the *be* verb with the subject *family*:

4. My family *are* coming over for dinner on Sunday.

The choice between a singular or plural verb will indicate that the speaker is thinking of *family* either as a particular unit of people (Example 3), or as a collection of individuals that comprise the unit (Example 4). The duality of number property is a feature of a certain category of nouns, called collective nouns, of which the noun *family* is a member.

Now, how about the example having to do with plural formation? Well, it is hard to imagine when I might choose *children* over *child* other than to express the notional meaning of plurality, but suppose that I had chosen an informal synonym for the word *child.* What if I had said *kid,* for instance?

5. One kid → Two kids

   ?My kid is home sick from school today.

   My kids are home sick from school today.

Many English speakers are uncomfortable referring to a single child as *kid* but find *kids* to be perfectly acceptable for talking about more than one child. They feel that *kid* has a pejorative connotation that *kids* does not. When needing to talk about one child, they would avoid using the term *kid* by finding a more acceptable alternative such as *son* or *daughter*. Although admittedly this oddity might be an idiosyncracy of this particular noun, it does illustrate my point that our choice of grammar structure makes a difference in more than simple accuracy of form.

What then about the rule of grammar that says in English an attributive adjective precedes the noun? Actually, it is in fact possible for attributive adjectives to follow a noun in English when they are clausally derived:

6. That meadow fragrant with the smell of newly mown hay reminds me of my youth.

Such a position can ascribe a different quality to the adjective from when it is in prenominal position, however. Bolinger (1967) points out that prenominal adjectives tend to reflect more permanent characteristics of a noun, whereas adjectives in postnominal position reflect temporary characteristics. Thus, if I talk about *that fragrant meadow*, I am speaking of a characteristic of the meadow, whereas in Example 6, when the adjective follows the noun, I am relating the feature of fragrance to a specific event (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

For the purpose of this chapter, I will treat only choices of the sort illustrated in Examples 2 and 5. Although Examples 3 and 6 also reflect choices, the choices they offer have to do with a choice of meaning—am I conceiving of a collective noun as a whole unit or as a unit comprised of a number of individuals? Am I conceiving of a noun as having a permanent attribute or only a temporary one? The choice of grammatical form clearly signals a difference in notional meaning in these examples. This is the sort of choice that exists among the various verb tense-aspect combinations, the choice of article, preposition, phrasal verb, and so forth. Learning which forms express the meaning they intend clearly represents a formidable challenge for ESL/EFL students and must be dealt with in a systematic fashion (Larsen-Freeman, 1990, 1991, 1994). But this type of challenge is also more commonly recognized. And thus, for the remainder of this chapter, I want instead to deal with the sort of choice represented by Examples 2 and 5. In

these examples the propositional content, or what is sometimes called the notional or representational meaning, remains the same no matter which option I select. There is a difference, though, and the difference to me is a difference in the pragmatic meaning or use.

Our students will be judged for the way they say something as much as the forms they use and the propositional meaning they express. And as listeners our students will have to learn to draw inferences as to a speaker's intentions based on the forms the speaker chooses to use. I am not suggesting that we judge our students' performance against native speaker norms (Cook, 1999), and it does not make sense for all students to aspire to such norms. I do believe, however, that it is the students who must (and will) decide how they wish to position themselves as speakers of English and that we should help them understand the linguistic options before them in order to do so. Thus, an understanding of when or why to use a particular grammatical form should be part of an ESL/EFL teacher's understanding of grammar so as to avoid the teacher's giving students easy answers in the moment that contribute to confusion later on and so that students understand that they have a choice and what the consequences are of making a particular choice.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to talk about a grammar of choice.[2] A more complete definition of grammar requires that we see that it is what enables our students to use the language accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately (Larsen-Freeman, 1991). This understanding entails by necessity our recognition that grammar consists of forms that have meaning and use. It is the use dimension, the one that includes what linguists refer to as pragmatics or discourse factors, that I wish to explore for the remainder of this chapter.[3]

CHOICE OF GRAMMAR STRUCTURES

Although I will by no means exhaust the inventory of choices I can make with regard to the social use of grammatical structures, for the purpose of illustration, I will treat three broad categories—attitude, power, and identity—and

[2]After I submitted my abstract, I discovered that R. A. Close (1992) also discussed the idea of there being choice in grammar. Although his notion and mine stem from the common concern that grammar needs to be seen as much more than a body of static rules about form, the main difference between our two positions is that he uses the term "Grammar as Choice" to deal mainly, although not exclusively, with choices of what I am calling propositional meaning, where I am using the term "a grammar of choice" to refer to the choices of pragmatic use.

[3]It is important to recognize that what I am dealing with in this is only one type of use challenge, one involving social-functional factors. There is another type of use challenge, concerning the appropriate use of grammar structures in discourse (see Celce-Murcia, 1991; 1992; Hughes & McCarthy, 1998; Larsen-Freeman, 1992).

list a number of sometimes overlapping subcategories within each. Let me (us?) now look briefly at each to appreciate the grammatical choices we have as speakers of English, even when the propositional meaning is more or less held constant.

Attitude

***Psychological** Distance.* Consider the following example from Riddle (1986):

7. Anne: Jane just bought a Volvo.

   John: Maureen *has* one.

   Anne: John, you've got to quit talking about Maureen as if you were still going together. You broke up three months ago.

Anne chides John for his continued attachment to Maureen. She infers that John still feels psychologically close to Maureen because he has reported her ownership of a Volvo using the simple present tense. Notice that John could have stated the same propositional content using the past tense even though Maureen's ownership of the Volvo still obtains (i.e., *Maureen had one*). If he had in fact done so, he might have avoided the rebuke from Anne.

Of course, attitudes can be signaled not only by psychological proximity but also by psychological distance. For example, a speaker "may wish to mark something that is physically close (for example, a perfume being sniffed by the speaker) as psychologically distant" (Yule, 1996, p. 13):

8. I don't like *that.*

In this analysis, the demonstrative pronoun *that* does not convey physical distance; in fact, contrary to what ESL/EFL students are often taught, the referent for *that* is physically proximate. Nevertheless, the speaker wishes to establish psychological distance and thus selects *that* presumably to indicate disapproval.

Assessment. Closely related to the subcategory of psychological distance is one of assessment. It is an old trick of academic discourse that one can "distance" oneself from the claims of others by employing certain lexical forms (e.g., *so-called; allegedly*). Grammatical forms can be used in this way as well. The following example is taken from Batstone (1995, p. 197):

9. Smith (1980) *argued* that Britain *was* no longer a country in which freedom of speech *was* seriously *maintained.* Johnson (1983), though, *argues* that Britain *remains a* citadel of individual liberty.

Batstone points out that the past tense in this example is used to assess Smith's argument as being no longer worthy of current interest, whereas Johnson's argument is held to be of real and continuing relevance (hence the present tense). The contrast in tenses, then, is being used to express the writer's assessment of the respective arguments. As I have just mentioned, assessment can also, of course, be conveyed lexically. As Batstone acknowledges, had the writer used the verb *demonstrated* rather than *argued* to report Smith's position, our perception of the writer's viewpoint might have been different.

Politeness. While we are illustrating the various subtle "social uses" of the present and past tenses, we should treat the matter of politeness. It is well known that with the social-interactional use of the modal verbs, when a choice exists, the modal that was historically marked for past tense (e.g., *could*) is considered more polite than the historical present tense form (e.g., *can*).

10. Could you help me with my homework?

    Can you help me with my homework?

However, the use of the past tense for politeness extends beyond the use of modal verbs:

Did you want something to eat?

is considered a more polite offer than

Do you want something to eat?

Much to the chagrin of many an ESL/EFL teacher left to explain to perplexed students why the past tense is being used for a present time offer—and is the offer really meant to be sincere when it is couched in the past? The past tense is not being used for past time, of course, but rather to indicate some distance, to make the offer less direct, and therefore more polite.

A parallel opposition exists for the choice between the two determiners *some* and *any* in an offer:

11. Would you like some cake?

    Would you like any cake?

The use of *some* is more polite because its use is more likely when an affirmative answer is anticipated (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Close, 1992).

Of course, the association of a positive attitude with *some* and a negative attitude with *any* contributes to use more than simply making an offer more or less polite. Green (1989, p. 135) claims that the first sentence in Example 12 could be a bribe, whereas the second could be a threat:

12. If you eat some bread, I'll cook hamburgers all week.

    If you eat any bread, I'll cook hamburgers all week.

Moderation. Third person indefinite forms can be used to moderate potential accusations in a way that second person forms cannot because of the latters' directness. Compare the definite second and the indefinite third person forms in this example from Yule (1996, p. 11):

13. You didn't clean up.

    Somebody didn't clean up.

The speaker of both sentences may well have known who made the mess, but the use of the third person indefinite pronoun *somebody* makes the issue somehow more impersonal and therefore less direct/more moderated.

Tact. Another way to show tact involves the use of negative equatives. In general, when making comparisons it is considered more tactful to use negative equatives rather than comparatives when the adjective has negative polarity. For example, in Example 14, the negative polarity adjective *dumb* is very rude in the comparative, whereas its positive polarity counterpart in a negative equative is considered more indirect and less rude (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

14. Moe is dumber than Curly.

    Moe is not as intelligent as Curly.

Deference. Again, closely related to this discussion is the question of deference signaled grammatically. Close (1992) offers the following minimal pair:

15. I hope you will come and have lunch with me.

    I am hoping you will come and have lunch with me.

Close (1992) notes:

> Both are right but they are not equal in the effect they might have on the hearer. . . . My own explanation is that a busy self-important man might feel [the first one] to be too presumptuous, and refuse the invitation, but [the second] flatteringly deferential and accept; while someone else to whom the invitation was given might feel that [the first] was definitely meant, and accept with pleasure, but [the second] to be uncertain and not sufficiently pressing. The speaker's attitude—dictatorial or deferential, positive or uncertain—can certainly be an important factor in these cases. (p. 64)

Power

Close says that it is the speaker's attitude that conditions the choice between the two sentences in Example 15. The issue of showing deference to another might just as easily fit into the second category I have created, one that I call power. Critical discourse analysis is concerned with issues of power imbalances in society, and analysts who practice it examine discourse for the subtle yet influential way in which power can be conferred on certain participants at the expense of others. Stubbs (1990, as cited in Batstone [1995]), for example, finds it significant that in South African newspaper accounts dealing with events surrounding the release of Nelson Mandela, agency is often ascribed to Blacks by making them the subject of the clause, when reporting acts of violence. Here is an example from a newspaper report:

16. "Jubilant Blacks clashed with police. . . ."

The same propositional content could have been conveyed if the roles of the subject and object had been reversed (i.e., *Police clashed with jubilant Blacks*). Since such texts are not ideologically neutral, it seems that the order chosen was intended to assign responsibility to Blacks.

Importance. While I am dealing with the issue of the conferral of agency/subjecthood, it is worth bringing up the case of the so-called symmetrical predicates. Contrary to some linguists' claims, it has been found that the two versions of symmetrical predicates are not in fact equivalent—that depending on the importance of the noun phrases, one form over another is preferred.

Here is an example of a test item from Sher (1975, as reported in Celce-Murcia, 1980) that demonstrates the nonequivalency:

> Suppose it was discovered that Shakespeare did not write his plays alone. Someone named Smith helped him, although the real genius did come from Shakespeare. How would you describe the relationship?

17. a. Shakespeare wrote with Smith.

    b. Smith wrote with Shakespeare.

    c. No preference

Sher found that a statistically significant number of respondents chose b, fewer chose a, and even fewer chose c—the answer if the predicates were truly symmetrical. It seems that most respondents favor the option that would afford the more important agent end-focus position.

Gender. Relevant to a discussion of power imbalances is the well-attested difference between the speech of men and women. One of the ways the difference manifests itself is in the use of intensifiers. Sargent (1997) speculates that women make more use of intensifiers than men out of a concern that they are not going to be heeded. Thus, Example 18 is more likely to be uttered by a woman than by a man.

18. It's really a very nice spot.

Assertiveness. Another issue related to power has to do with how assertively someone voices his or her opinons. Consider the following from Green (1989, p. 134):

19. I don't think Sandy will arrive until Monday.

    I think Sandy won't arrive until Monday.

The first sentence illustrates what has been called the negative transportation construction (Lakoff, 1969; Horn, 1971, 1978 [cited in Green, 1989]), in which the negative has been transported from the clause it conversationally negates, as depicted in the second sentence in Example 19. The "transportation" of the negative can occur with a certain class of verbs and adjectives. Although both sentences communicate the same propositional meaning, sentences such as the first, with the transported negative, are hedged, that is, "they represent weaker claims, apparently by implicating rather than asserting the relevant negative proposition" (Green, 1989, pp. 134–135).

Presumptuousness. Then, too, certain forms in the language carry with them certain presuppositions. For example, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) point out that one use of uninverted questions is when the speaker expects confirmation of a presupposition. Using an uninverted question thus suggests that the person asking the question knows the other person well enough to predict the other's answer.

20. Worker to supervisor: You're going to the dance?

Although in all likelihood the question in Example 20 is an innocent comprehension check, the use of the uninverted form carries with it an affirmative presupposition—i.e., that the answer will be "yes." As such, the use

of a question with this form suggests that the person asking the question knows the other person well enough to anticipate the listener's answer. If such intimacy does not exist, wording a question in this way may seem presumptuous.

Conviction. Green (1989) states the following, which supports my main premise in this chapter:

> In fact there are truth-conditionally equivalent alternatives to practically every describable condition, and to the extent that this is true, the alternatives will tend to have different pragmatic values. It would not be too surprising to discover that even constructions such as the [ones in Example 21] (Bolinger 1972) differ systematically in their use, reflecting different assumptions of the speakers, for example, that [the second member of the pair] implies a stronger conviction on the part of the subject. (p. 139)

21. I know that it's raining.

    I know it's raining.

Thus, although the *that* complementizer is syntactically optional, Green suggests it has a pragmatic role to play.

Identity

Henry Widdowson (1996) wrote that "although individuals are constrained by conventions of the code and its use, they exploit the potential differently on different occasions for different purposes. . . . The patterning of a person's use of language is as naturally distinctive as a fingerprint" (pp. 20–21). Widdowson's observation relates to how we use language to establish and maintain personal identity. There are a number of contributing factors to identity development that I have included in this broad category.

Personality. In interesting doctoral dissertation research, Roger Putzel (1976) administered the Myers-Briggs personality indicator to a group of male graduate students. He also interviewed each student at the time of the text. He later transcribed the interview and correlated the patterns of language used with the results of the personality test. Putzel found a number of significant correlations between the grammar the students used and their personality types. To offer just one example, here is the usage pattern for English auxiliary verbs Putzel found.

22.

Sensing,	*Thinking,*	*Judging*	*Introverts*	*Intuitive, Feeling*	*Extroverts*
I could	I might	I would	I should	I will	I am going to

Putzel explains his data as follows:

> (1) STJ's [students who were categorized as sensing, thinking, judging personality types] create hypothetical or uncertain situations [thus they use a lot of modal verbs], (2) introverts express a sense of obligation (presumably internally generated) [thus they use *should* a lot], and (3) NFP's [intuitive, feeling personality types] are concerned with getting on to the future [thus they often use *will*]. The correlation of *I am going to* with Extraversion further testifies to the NFP's future orientation because extroverts are nearer to NFPs than introverts. (p. 134)

Putzel sums up these findings by noting that words suggesting caution, restraint, and control are associated with the Thinking and Sensing personality. Words evincing impulse and divergence correlate with the Intuiting and Feeling personality (p. xi). Our grammar shows even when we are unaware of it!

Age. It is well known that language use is age-graded. Adolescents in particular are known to adopt a special argot to distinguish themselves from the adults they have not yet become. Most obviously these are lexical items—*cool* springs readily to mind. But there are other linguistic markers that give one's age away. Languages change, and younger speakers may adopt innovations in speech that older people resist. These include grammar structures. For example, I still say that

23. Someone graduates from high school.

But among younger speakers, I often hear:

Someone graduates high school.

Then, too, *babysit* is for me an intransitive verb. Younger speakers, however, use it transitively:

I am going to babysit this weekend. (intransitive)

I am going to babysit him this weekend. (transitive)

Origin. Speakers are born into dialect communities. Particular pronunciation, word choices, and even grammatical patterns are associated with particular dialects. I'll never forget when I learned of the existence of the modal sequence in Example 24, a characteristic of a particular dialect of North American English spoken in the southern part of the United States. The sequence seemed to violate all rules of acceptable modal verb syntax that I had ever learned. It made semantic sense though, certainly as much as my modal plus phrasal modal sequence *I might be able to.*

24. I might could go.

Of course, the converse also applies. People can choose not to use their native dialect features in order to avoid identifying themselves with a particular dialect. Many speakers become bidialectal, switching between the two depending on with whom they are interacting and for what purpose.

Status. Certain speech norms have a higher social status than others. These norms sometimes have to do with the use of particular grammatical forms. Stalker (1989) cites the hapless native English speakers who tend to forget the high-status norms, which they are apt to use infrequently, or they grow confused about what is "right." "We know that there is a right way and a wrong way to use *like* and *as*," Stalker affirms, "but we cannot remember which is which" (p. 188).

25. It tastes good like/as it should.

Such confusion breeds linguistic insecurity, which in turn inclines many to avoid any syntactic frame that might call for us to choose between two forms. Others, of course, conform to the prescriptive rules for English, taking pride in speaking English "properly" and in the status they garner for doing so.

Group Membership and Discourse Communities. Just as young people adopt a special age-graded argot to make themselves distinctive and to achieve solidarity with others of the same age, so do all speakers enter into different groups and discourse communities quite readily, and with each, take on a new identity kit (Gee, 1990). We learn to speak as members of our discourse community. Within each discourse community, there are certain norms about what constitutes appropriate ways of speaking or writing. To illustrate the point, here is a parody of an educational administrator and a teacher describing the same pheonomenon (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). An administrator might say:

26. Prior to the administration of the assessment instrument, a skills-level analysis must be conducted to ascertain the critical level of preparedness of the target population.

Whereas a classroom teacher might say:

Before we give the test, we'd better find out if these particular students are ready for it.

As I indicated at the outset of this chapter, I have chosen only some of the ways that grammar patterns vary in their use. I certainly also should point out that many of the other systems of language play roles here. Certainly phonological factors contribute to dialects, particular lexical choices mark membership in different discourse/speech communities, and there are many other ways of conveying attitudes besides the use of grammar structures. Sometimes what is not said is as indicative of attitude as what is said. For example, a teacher who writes a letter of recommendation for a student in which the teacher's highest praise is for the student's penmanship leaves the recipient of the letter to infer a great deal about the individual for whom the letter was written, not all of it favorable.

PEDAGOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

Before making some brief comments on the specific pedagogical implications for the grammar of choice, it is important that readers appreciate that although some of what I have discussed in this chapter relates to subtleties that might only be considered potential items for an advanced-level syllabus, I have tried to make the case that there is very little givenness in language—that choices abound.[4] Indeed, every grammatical structure we produce in language has both a meaning and a use. Every time I speak, I am attempting to match my meaning or pragmatic intention with particular language forms for particular reasons. At the risk of repetitiveness, I should say that when we think of grammar, we should think of three dimensions: form, meaning, and use. In what follows, however, I will confine my remarks only to the use dimension.[5]

First of all, I think it bears saying that the old teacher standby "It depends" in answer to a student's question of "Should I say A or B?" is a very legitimate response. Students who are seeking a decisive answer are understandably dissatisfied with this one. However, such a response is an honest attempt to reflect the fact that the choice of a particular structure is dependent both on the intended meaning and on how the speaker construes the situation at the moment of speaking. As Close's interpretation of Example 15 demonstrates, multiple interpretations are possible. Of course,

[4]Of course, there may be a large inventory of fixed and semifixed lexicalized items that native speakers draw on for the sake of fluency (e.g., Pawley & Syder, 1983), so it is not true to say that at every juncture I have a choice. However, no matter what the size of the linguistic unit, these same dimensions of form, meaning, and use will apply.

[5]The pedagogical consequences of a grammar of choice are more fully illustrated in the ESL student series *Grammar Dimensions* (forthcoming) and the ESL teacher text *The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher's Course* (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

I should hasten to add that the teacher should not leave the student's question at that. The student should be helped to see as clearly as possible and in a level-appropriate manner what each option entails. Often teachers and students think that questions about grammar should have one right answer. This is, however, certainly not the case.

Not all of these distinctions should be taught, of course. We can inform our students that a particular form is associated with a particular dialect without teaching it for production. Nevertheless, there are distinctions among these I have illustrated that do enable students to express meaning in the way they choose, and which would therefore be candidates for instruction. Much of the initial instruction might be of the consciousness-raising sort, without any explicit output practice. Students might be asked to engage in a consciousness-raising task in which they make a choice about which of two or three forms they might use on a given occasion, questions of the type illustrated by Example 17 from Sher. Their options should be accurate grammatical forms conveying similar propositional meaning. Subsequently, students should receive feedback on their choices. Later, during more communicative practice, students can be given situations in freer activities, such as role plays, and asked to use the grammar appropriate to the occasion and to the way that they would position themselves in that role. In this way, little by little, students will begin to understand the choices that are available to them and to learn the consequences of their choices.

In conclusion, far from being a linguistic straitjacket, grammar is a flexible, incredibly rich, system that enables proficient spreakers to express meaning in a way appropriate to the context, to how they wish to present themselves, and to the particular perspective they wish to contribute. Although accuracy is an issue in grammar, so is meaningfulness and appropriateness of use. A better way to conceive of grammar for pedagogical purposes, then, might be as a grammar of choice.

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7

Why It Makes Sense to Teach Grammar in Context and Through Discourse

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INTRODUCTION

All naturalistic learning of first and second languages takes place in context and at the level of discourse rather than the abstract sentence level. When learners can comprehend and reproduce an utterance such as *I'm hungry,* the contextual meaning generally involves much more than the literal meaning of the sentence (see Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). If a child utters this to his mother on coming home from school, it is a request for food. If the same child utters it after having completed his lunch, the utterance is a complaint and a request for additional food. A beggar uttering these words in the street is requesting money rather than food. If a guest says these words on arriving for dinner, it may well signal an indirect compliment, "I've eaten very little today in anticipation of a wonderful meal," in addition to conveying the literal meaning of the utterance.

These differing interpretations of one surface utterance demonstrate that knowing the literal and decontextualized meaning of an utterance and being able to produce it with grammatical accuracy are only a part (some would say a small part) of being able to use the utterance appropriately in a variety of communicative contexts. One needs contextual knowledge (pragmatic knowledge regarding participants, purpose, topic, etc.) in addition to knowledge of grammar and lexis to be able to do this.