

From: Ruth Wajnryb, *Classroom Observation Tasks: A resource book for language teachers and trainers*. CUP. 1992

4.4 Grammar as lesson content

BACKGROUND

There is perhaps no subject more hotly debated by language teachers than the place of grammar in language teaching (e.g. Prabhu 1987b; Rutherford 1987; Larsen-Freeman 1986; Richards and Rodgers 1986; Harmer 1987). Over the years this has swung with fashion, with the 'structural' approach replaced by the 'functional-notional' approach which itself led up to the 'communicative' era in which the focus was placed centrally on communication.

Some of the principal issues here have revolved around the teaching of form versus the teaching of meaning; the teaching of knowledge (competence) versus the teaching of skill (performance). And hovering over all of this is the question of how explicit and conscious grammar should be in the classroom learning of a foreign language.

A basic distinction in the teaching of grammar has been between the deductive and the inductive approaches. In a deductive approach, learners are taught rules and given specific information about the language, which they are then expected to apply when they use the language. In an inductive approach, such as the communicative one, learners are not taught grammatical rules directly or explicitly, but are left to induce the rules from their use of the language. The emphasis here is on the experience of the language rather than the formal presentation of language.

TASK OBJECTIVE

In this task you will be looking at the place of grammar in a lesson, what is said about it, to what sorts of uses it is put in the lesson, and what this reveals about the teacher's views of language and language learning.

PROCEDURE

BEFORE THE LESSON

Arrange to observe a lesson in which grammar will have some place. If possible, speak with the teacher in advance of the lesson, and discuss the lesson's aims in terms of its grammatical focus.

DURING THE LESSON

Keep an ethnographic record of the lesson. This means that you note down chronologically the main events in the lesson and their impact.

This will have to be brief and synoptic enough for you to keep records 'in real time'. It does not have to include scripted actual language but rather a report of what was said and done. For example:

T enters . . . greets whole class from the front of room. T announces what the lesson is going to be about today. T reminds SS how this lesson follows on from yesterday's . . . T drills new pattern . . . S asks question about the form of the verb in pattern on board . . . T explains. S seems to be satisfied but another S continues to ask similar question . . .

AFTER THE LESSON

For the purposes of the following questions, you should bear in mind your memory of the lesson and the specific contexts in which events occurred as well as your written narrative record of the lesson.

1. To what extent was an aspect of grammar the central focus of the lesson you observed?
2. Were the students consciously involved in thinking about grammar? Was a rule or rules presented to them or were they expected to work rules out for themselves? Were they helped or taught how to do this?
3. Describe the lesson in terms of the emphases on 'knowing' or 'doing': were the students finding out about how the language works or were they doing something with the language? Or both? And to what degrees?
4. If the students were at any time involved in doing something with the language, to what extent did the tasks or activities require them to make connections or inferences about the system of language?
5. Was there any evidence of a range of learning styles among the students in terms of how they reacted to a lesson involving grammar? Did these learning styles contrast with the teaching style in any way?
6. Have you any comments on the language used by the teacher to talk about language and how this facilitated access to understanding of the language?
7. Consider now any discussion about language that took place in the classroom, either among students, or involving the teacher. From the discussion, was there any evidence of learners trying to align new information with old – that is, processing recent input with their existing hypotheses about language?
8. Is it possible to summarise:
 - a) what the students might have thought the lesson's objective was?
 - b) what they came away with from the lesson?

Now contrast this with the lesson's objectives and its process.

Do you consider that it is important that students know what the lesson is going to be about and what objectives are set? Is it important that they come away from the lesson with what the teacher plans for them to come away with?

9. Considering the lesson you observed and the discussions you have had, what inferences can you draw from the lesson about (a) what language is, and (b) what language learning is to the teacher concerned? In other words, what theories (perhaps subconscious) underline the teacher's methodology? You may wish to pursue this in a discussion with the teacher.
10. In the debate about the place of grammar in teaching, one attempt to classify teaching according to the role of grammar is that proposed by Gibbons (1989) in his description of *focussed* versus *unfocussed instructional cycles*. Focussed instructional cycles have a particular language-item focus, such as a point of grammar, whereas unfocussed instructional cycles are more likely to be skills- or activity-based. You may wish to map this lesson that you have observed onto Gibbons's schemata in order to deepen your understanding of how grammar features.

REFLECTION

Generally, what place does grammar play in your teaching? What does this say about what language and language learning are for you?