

# Professional Development

## From Grammar to Grammmaring

Kayo Ozawa

*Kyoritsu Women's College*

In this paper, I would like to write a personal reflection on how my views of language teaching have changed since taking a course on pedagogical grammar over a three--month period. First, I would like to give some relevant details of my teaching background and the transition in my English teaching career; second, I want to summarize the reasons why I chose the particular course; third, I will tell how the course met my new needs, or changed my views in ways that I didn't expect; and last but not the least, I want to discuss further issues to consider.

### Introduction

I have been teaching in a fairly "fixed" style for twenty years. Immersion has been the main method used in the particular private co-ed high school in which I taught full-time until March, 2008, and where I still teach just one class. Authentic literary texts are used, and the main goal of the literature classes has been the maintenance of reading and writing fluency. Writing is also taught in these classes where students write essays about the literary text. Some specific essay styles we have studied are essays on cause-effect, character analysis, point-of-view, and setting.

This April, however, I made a major career change, and I am presently teaching a TOEIC class and a current events class at a women's college in addition to the above-mentioned literature class.

## **Reasons for taking the course**

One of the reasons that I decided to go back to the institution where I got my master's degree ten years ago and take a course in grammar was because I realized that teaching these two courses at university would be a totally different type of teaching from teaching the returnees I taught at high school. Returnees are Japanese students who have resided in foreign countries for a number of years during compulsory education. Some have lived abroad in English-speaking countries for up to fifteen years, and they have been taught in English classes with native speakers prior to their return to Japan. The TOEIC class has a section on grammar, and the students at university have mainly been taught using the grammar-translation method, not immersion.

Secondly, my own child's acquisition of English seems to be different from mine. I was placed mostly in immersion settings. My son, on the other hand, is studying English in the grammar-translation method. My big question has been how students at the junior high school level can possibly understand such authentic texts as Roald Dahl's *The Sound Machine* by breaking it into grammatical structures, memorizing these structures, and translating each of these sentences in to Japanese.

Such gaps in my education have raised my awareness of the need to study grammar.

## **How the course addressed these changes**

Next, I will list the assumptions that I had about grammar before I took this course, and describe how the belief that grammar is "a static

product that consists of forms that are rule-governed, sentence-level, absolute, and constitute a closed system” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 142) was deconstructed.

### **1. Grammar is acquired naturally; it doesn't have to be taught.**

This is what some returnees seem to think, especially if their L1, until their return to Japan, was English, and they have lived all or most of their lives abroad. If the grammar is taught by a non-native English-speaking teacher, the student may feel, in his/her confusion of adjusting, that part of his/her background (linguistic ability) has been negated. The grammar course made me realize that underlying this belief is the *reflex fallacy* (Larsen-Freeman, 1995), or questionable assumption that:

What works well in natural environments is what should be adhered to in the language classroom. The assumption is that it is our job to recreate in our classrooms the natural conditions of acquisition present in the external environment...instead, what we want to do as a language teacher...is to improve upon natural acquisition, not emulate it...[and to] accelerate natural learning.

(Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 20)

Furthermore, research shows that French immersion students in Canada had ample opportunity to receive comprehensible input in French, but committed basic morphosyntactic errors (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 91). Higgs and Clifford (1982) claim that unmonitored practice of inaccurate language forms can cause fossilization. Learners acquire certain ungrammatical forms in their interlanguage that are very difficult to alter.

## **2. The teacher should use the same approach to teach grammar for all levels.**

According to Larsen-Freeman (2003), there are two types of errors: errors of commission and errors of omission (p. 128). Moreover, “Teaching activities do not ride the tail of development but instead blaze the trail for development to follow” (Dunn & Lantolf, 1998, p. 419). This Vygotskyan idea of trailblazing shows that there are two approaches to teaching grammar: the building-up approaches vs. the organic, responsive (breaking down) approaches. Aliston Petro, a teacher at Larsen-Freeman’s TESOL Summer Institute course expresses her feelings about teaching two extreme levels, and this overlaps with my discovery in teaching EFL at a women’s college in contrast to teaching the returnees.

I had a revelation about why the process of teaching beginners and teaching high intermediate/advanced students is so different for me. With beginners, the process is that of building up form, meaning and use. The teacher should control and choose input carefully. It should be meaningful, useful, and challenging. Meaningful drills and grammar lessons have their place as long as there is also a place for communication. With high intermediate or advanced learners, the process is that of breaking down their fossilized systems and trying to rebuild by focusing on careful noticing of form, meaning, and use. In this case, teachers should be building sensitivity and working on students’ noticing skills.

(Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 146)

How have my own noticing skills been sharpened? One of the things I’ve noticed while studying phrase structure rules is that word order is not to be taken for granted, as it differs tremendously according to language. Another is the difficulty for EFL learners to understand

phrasal verbs. For example, when one says, “She turns him on,” “turns on,” which means, “attracts,” may have nothing to do with “turn” and “on.” Distinguishing phrasal verbs from verb + preposition sequences must also be a puzzle since their surface forms are similar (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, pp. 429-430, pp. 432-433). One way to help learners is to introduce phrasal verbs in context. One university textbook which does this is Masuko Miyahara and Alison Stewart’s (2008) *Real Life Reading: Strategies and Skills for Improving Comprehension and Critical Reading*.

Alternatively, the instructor could introduce a “phrasal verb wall” on a long piece of paper. Whenever the students discover a new phrasal verb, someone should write the phrasal verb on a chart and indicate whether it is transitive/intransitive, separable/inseparable. Illustrations and sentences can be added onto the phrasal verb (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 437). For instance, a French-speaking peer came up with the phrasal verb “lohas up,” which means something like “enjoying the slow life.”

As for building sensitivity towards grammar when teaching students of higher levels, I’ve incorporated grammar questions when teaching literature (Appendix A).

### **3. When we say something is grammatical, we mean that it is accurate.**

Grammar is not simply about form but about meaning, and there are three dimensions applied to language in communication: form, meaning, and semantics. For beginners, grammar is one of the clues to deciphering the target language, so it is important to get students to see that language is something they can use, not only memorize.

### **4. Grammar means memorizing rules.**

Students in my college TOEIC class are used to referring to long lists of verbs that take infinitive complements, verbs that take gerund complements, and verbs that take both types of complements and

are then told to memorize the lists. However, in the grammar course textbook, *The Grammar Book* (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999), there is a list and then a rationale, or reason given for the differentiation.

“Some degree of correlation exists between the choice of infinitives with events that are hypothetical, future, unfulfilled” and the choice of gerunds with events that are “real, vivid, fulfilled.” An example would be the difference between “Peter tried to go to Oxford” and “Peter tried going to Oxford” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 648-649). “Innovation, as opposed to imitation, will also be facilitated if our students are grammatically aware—not only of rules, but also, importantly, of reasons. The rules and reasons may not need to be stated in meta-linguistic terms, but they should always inform the nature of the pedagogical activity” (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 143).

### **5. Small group activities are limited to communicative activities.**

Each class in the grammar course we were asked to refresh our memories of grammatical terminology in small groups. The instructor would come in with strips of paper with grammar terminology on them, and distribute them before our challenging quizzes.

### **6. Grammar is boring.**

To change the notion that grammar is static, creative methods were used in the course. Fun resources like crossword puzzle websites and the book *Teaching Grammar Creatively* (Gerngross, Puchta, & Thornbury, 2006) were introduced.

## **Future Directions**

In conclusion, doing a course, even for no credit, can be so refreshing after routine teaching for many years, and is recommendable for veteran teachers. Although I feel a bit more confident about teaching grammar after taking this course, there are still gaps in my knowledge.

I am a teacher who has learned grammar by breaking it down teaching Japanese students who have learnt grammar by building from given rules, and who are all expected to know the same grammatical structures if they studied and prepared for the Japanese university entrance exams. Students may expect me to know the particular grammatical structures taught in Japanese as well as their sequencing because I am Japanese.

I remind myself that *The Grammar Book* is only one system of grammar. On the other hand, *Sogo Eigo: Forest* (Ishiguro, 2006) is a popular entrance exam-oriented Japanese grammar textbook. It would be interesting to compare and contrast the sequencing of grammatical patterns in these books versus *The Grammar Book*, and the reasons behind the sequencing. (Appendix B)

**Kayo Ozawa** received her M.A. (TESOL) from Teachers' College, Columbia University. She has been teaching at the high school level in Japan for over 20 years, and recently at the tertiary level. Her research interests include the teaching of literature and writing, the teaching of grammar in these two areas, and the teaching of vocabulary using contextual clues. She can be contacted at [kayo@ta2.so-net.ne.jp](mailto:kayo@ta2.so-net.ne.jp)

## References

- Celce-Murcia, M. & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1999). *The grammar book* (2nd Ed.). Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Dunn, W., & Lantolf, J. (1998). Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and Krashen's I+1: Incommensurable constructs; incommensurable theories. *Language Learning* 8(2): 237-259.
- Gerngross, G., Puchta, H., & Thornbury S. (2006). *Teaching grammar creatively*. Cambridge: Helbling Languages.

- Higgs, T., & Clifford, R. (1982). The push toward communication. In T. Higgs (Ed.), *Curriculum, competence and the foreign language teacher*. Skokie, IL: National Textbook Co. 51-79.
- Ishiguro, A. (2006). *Sogo eigo: forest* (5th Ed.) Tokyo: Kiriara Shoten.
- Knowles, P. L. (1979). Predicate markers: a new look at the English predicate system. *Cross Currents* 6(2), 21-36.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (1995). On the teaching and learning of grammar: Challenging the myths. In F. Eckman, D. Highland, P. Lee, J. Mileham, & R. Rutkowski Weber (Eds.), *Second language acquisition theory and pedagogy* (pp. 131-150). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2003). *Teaching language: From grammar to grammaring*. Boston: Thomson-Heinle.
- McCourt, F. (1996) Limerick homecoming. In Verburg, C. J. (Ed.), *Ourselves among others: Readings from home and abroad* (4th ed.) (pp. 136-145). Bedford, UK: St. Martin's.
- Miyahara, M., & Stewart, A. (2008). *Real life reading: Strategies and skills for improving comprehension and critical reading*. Tokyo: Nanun-do Phoenix.

## Appendix A

Grammar Lesson on Frank McCourt's *Limerick Homecoming*,  
(The short story on which "Angela's Ashes" is based.)

Questions: At what points in *Limerick Homecoming* does McCourt write in the present tense? In the past tense? How does the essay's effect change when he changes tense?

In *The Grammar Book*, the present tense is used in the following circumstances:

- a. Present speech acts (where the action is accomplished in the speaking of it).



Example: I resign from the commission.

- b. Conversational historical present used to refer to certain past events in narration.

Example: So he stands up in the boat and waves his arms to catch our attention.

In *Limerick Homecoming*, the present tense and present continuous tenses are used in the following contexts:

- (1) Dialogue, especially tending and caring for Oliver, giving him onions for medication (p. 141). To highlight his critical illness and sudden death. Also the description of his fever (p. 140), the need for coal, the description of cold weather are in the present tense.
- (2) The interaction of the family with Grandma at Limerick. Notice no quotation marks are used for dialogue here.
- (3) The description of the River Shannon vs. the Hudson River in the present tense. Vivid description and scenes come alive.
- (4) The description of Mam and Dad in response to Oliver's death is in the present tense. Shows that Oliver's death caused by Dad's irresponsible drinking habits as well as his parents back then are still vivid in the narrator's memory.
  - (a) "Mam is slumped on the edge of the bed, making small crying sounds like a bird." (p. 142)
  - (b) "Grandma is pulling on her shawl." (p. 142)
  - (c) "*Dad frightens me with his 'och, och, och,' and Mam frightens me with her small bird sounds, and I don't know what to do.*" (p. 142).
- (5) Conversation between Dad and Uncle Pa at the bar is in the present tense. Like (2), this is dialogue, and also what remains shocking to the narrator.
  - (a) "*Uncle Pa says, Frankie, this is the pint. This is the staff of life. This is the best thing for nursing mothers and for those who are long weaned.*" (p. 143)
  - (b) "*Dad wants to go to another place for a pint but Uncle Pa says he has no more money. Dad says he'll tell everyone his sorrows and they'll give him pints. Uncle Pa says that's a disgraceful thing to do and Dad cries on his*

*shoulder. You're a good friend, he tells Uncle Pa. It's terrible, terrible, says Uncle Pa, but you'll get over this in time. Dad straightens up and looks at him. Never he says. Never."* (p. 143).

On the other hand, the following are in the past tense. The past tense is used for remote past events, and adds a sense of "remoteness" (Knowles, 1979, cited in Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 113).

- (1) Meeting Grandma at Limerick and moving in, having his luggage carried. (p. 137)
- (2) Aunt Aggie's background; why she is living with Grandma (p. 138)
- (3) Taking Oliver to the graveyard and burying him. (p. 143)
- (4) Waiting for Dad to come home (p. 144).

## Appendix B

A list of sequencing of grammatical forms in *The Grammar Book* vs. *Forest*.

Sequencing: "Even the most carefully considered sequence will always be decontextualized, and unless it is created with a particular group of students in mind, it will not necessarily take into account particular learners' needs or learning readiness. Pedagogical sequences are linear; the learning of grammar is not (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 144).

\*Linguistic simplicity to linguistic complexity

\*Structures needed to form complete sentences.

\*Communicative utility of the structures

\*Taking into account discourse organization.

Chapters	<i>The Grammar Book</i>	<i>Forest</i>
1	The copula (be) and SVA	Types of sentences
2	Phrase structure and phrase structure rules	Five sentence patterns: SV/SVC/SVO/SVOO/SVOC
3	Tense and aspect	Verbs and tense and aspect.

4	Modal auxiliaries	Present perfect tense/past perfect tense, subject verb agreement
5	Negation	Auxiliary verbs
6.	Yes/No questions	Voice: active and passive
7	Imperatives	Infinitive
8	Wh- questions	Gerunds
9	Articles	Participles
10	Reference and possession	Comparatives
11	Partitives, collectives, and quantifiers	Relatives
12	The passive voice	Mood: indicative and subjunctive
13	Sentences with indirect objects	Interrogatives
14	Adjectives	Negation
15	Prepositions	Direct and Indirect speech
16	Phrasal Verbs	Nouns: nominative case and possessive case
17	Non-referential <i>it</i> and <i>there</i> as Subjects	Focus and emphasis / ellipsis / inversion / parenthesis.
18	Coordinating conjunction	Nouns
19	Adverbials	Articles
20	Logical connectors	Pronouns
21	Conditional sentences	Adjectives
22	Relative clauses	Adverbs
23	Focus and emphasis	Prepositions
24	Complementization and embedded clauses	Conjunctions
25	Reported speech and writing	
26	Degree: comparatives and equatives	
27	Degree: comparatives and superlatives	