

## Chapter 6

### The Role of Grammar in Krashen's View

According to Krashen, the study of the structure of the language can have general educational advantages and values that high schools and colleges may want to include in their language programs. **It should be clear, however, that examining irregularity, formulating rules and teaching complex facts about the target language is not language teaching, but rather is "language appreciation" or linguistics.**

The only instance in which the teaching of grammar can result in language acquisition (and proficiency) is when the students are interested in the subject and the target language is **used as a medium of instruction**. Very often, when this occurs, **both teachers and students are convinced that the study of formal grammar is essential for second language acquisition**, and the teacher is skillful enough to present explanations in the target language so that the students understand. In other words, the teacher talk meets the requirements for comprehensible input and perhaps with the students' participation the classroom becomes an environment suitable for acquisition. Also, the filter is low in regard to the language of explanation, as the students' conscious efforts are usually on the subject matter, on what is being talked about, and not the medium.

This is a subtle point. In effect, both teachers and students are **deceiving** themselves. They believe that it is the subject matter itself, the study of grammar, that is responsible for the students' progress, but in reality their progress is coming from the medium and not the message. Any subject matter that held their interest would do just as well.

## The issue of Grammar Instruction

Many researchers agree that formal classroom instruction of certain grammatical structures (morphological inflections, functions words, and syntactic word order) can be beneficial to students. Grammar instruction raises learners' consciousness concerning the differences and similarities of L1 and L2.

**However**, grammatical structures by themselves are rather **useless**.

- 1) Grammatical structures take on **meaning** only if they are situated in a **context** and in connected discourse.
- 2) Grammatical structures will become internalized only if the learners are placed in a situation in which they need to use the structures for **communicative purposes**.

**Therefore**, an important role of the teacher is to create learning situations in which the students feel a need to exploit the grammar in order to comprehend and communicate in the target language.

- 1) Explicit/Implicit Method of Teaching Grammar
- 2) Whole Language Teaching
- 3) **Input Processing and Processing Instruction**

## The Traditional **Bottom-Up** Approach (skill-based approaches):

Historically, foreign languages have been taught in the US by means of a “**bottom-up**” approach: students learn **grammar rules and vocabulary** and then later practice using them in **communication**. This has been termed as “skill-getting” because of the various types of practice that helps the student learn grammatical formation (mechanical drills).

- (1) Primary focus on form
- (2) Focus on form, plus meaning
- (3) Focus on meaning, plus form
- (4) Primary focus on meaning

The basic dichotomy between mechanical and communicative practice has remained relatively intact in language textbooks since the eras of both the Audiolingual and the Cognitive methods. The recent focus on more meaningful, contextualized teaching has prompted some changes in the traditional bottom-up mechanical/communicative format of textbook exercise. In a review, exercises are now:

- (1) connecting exercise sentences with the same situation or theme
- (2) providing a context for the exercise in the form of information concerning people, activities, or descriptions
- (3) combining cultural aspects with language practice within the exercise.

Many of these “contextualized” exercises are **simply disguised mechanical drills** that do not require students to understand meaning in order to complete them.

## Grammar Translation Method:

The grammar-translation method of foreign language teaching is one of the most traditional methods, dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was originally used to teach 'dead' languages (and literatures) such as Latin and Greek, and this may account for its heavy bias towards written work to the virtual exclusion of oral production. The approach was generalized to teaching modern languages.

As Omaggio comments, this approach reflected "the view of faculty **psychologists** that mental discipline was essential for strengthening the powers of the mind." (Omaggio 89) Indeed, the emphasis on achieving 'correct' grammar with little regard for the free application and production of speech is at once the greatest asset and greatest drawback to this approach.

### Major characteristics:

- 1) **focus** on learning the **rules of grammar**
- 2) **focus** on learning the grammar's application in **translation** passages from one language into the other.
- 3) Vocabulary in the target language is learned through **direct translation** from the native language.
- 4) **Very little teaching is done in the target language.** Instead, readings in the target language are translated directly and then discussed in the native language, often precipitating in-depth comparisons of the two languages themselves.
- 5) **Grammar is taught with extensive explanations** in the native language, and only later applied in the production of sentences through translation from one language to the other, **e.g.**

Do you have my book? = ¿Tienes mi libro?

No sé donde está tu libro. = I don't know where your book is.

6) As Omaggio describes is, testing of the students is done almost exclusively through **translation**: "students had learned the language well if they could translate the passages well." (Omaggio 90)

### **Drawbacks** to the grammar-translation approach.

- 1) Virtually no class time is allocated to allow students to **produce their own sentences**.
- 2) Even less time is spent on **oral practice** (whether productive or reproductive).
- 3) Students may have difficulties "relating" to the language, because the classroom experience keeps them from personalizing it or developing their own style.
- 4) In addition, there is often little contextualization of the grammar -- although this of course depends upon the passages chosen and the teacher's own skills.
- 5) Culture, when discussed, is communicated through means of reading passages, but there is little direct confrontation with foreign elements.
- 6) Perhaps most seriously, as Omaggio points out, the **type of error correction** that this method requires can actually be harmful to the students' learning processes: "students are clearly in a defensive learning environment where right answers are expected." (Omaggio 91)

### **Positive traits** (yes there are in such a rigid environment!).

- 1) Many state that most early language learners learned almost entirely through the grammar-translation method including most of the "older" language professors here. Their acquisition hasn't been hampered.
- 2) For left-brained students who respond well to rules, structure and correction, the grammar-translation method can provide a challenging and even intriguing classroom environment. For those students who don't respond well to such structures, however, it is obvious that the grammar-translation method must be tempered with other approaches to create a more flexible and conducive methodology.

**In summary:** Classes are taught in the students' mother tongue, with little active use of the target language. Vocabulary is taught in the form of isolated word lists. Elaborate explanations of grammar are always provided. Grammar instruction provides the rules for putting words together; instruction often focuses on the form and inflection of words.

Reading of difficult texts is begun early in the course of study. Little attention is paid to the content of texts, which are treated as exercises in grammatical analysis. Often the only drills are exercises in translating disconnected sentences from the target language into the mother tongue, and vice versa. Little or no attention is given to pronunciation.

#### **From Brown:**

A glance back in history reveals **few if any research-based language teaching methods** prior to the twentieth century. In the Western world, “foreign” language learning in schools were synonymous with the learning of Latin or Greek. Latin, thought to promote intellectuality through “mental gymnastics”, was only until relatively recently held to be indispensable to an adequate higher education. Latin was taught by means of what was called the classical Method: focus on grammatical rules, memorization of vocabulary and of various declensions and conjugations, translation of texts, and written exercise. As other languages began to be taught in educational institutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Classical Method was adopted as the chief means for teaching foreign languages. Little thought was given at the time to teaching oral use of languages; after all, languages **were not being taught primarily to learn oral/aural communication but to learn for the sake of being “scholarly”** or, in some instances, for gaining a reading proficiency in a foreign language. Since there was little if any theoretical research on second language acquisition in general, or on the acquisition of reading proficiency, foreign languages were taught as any other skill was taught.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century the **Classical Method** came to be known as the **Grammar Translation Method**. There was little to distinguish Grammar Translation from what had gone on in the foreign language classrooms for centuries, beyond a focus on grammatical rules as the basis for translating from the second to the native language. But the Grammar Translation Method remarkably withstood attempts at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to “reform” language teaching methodology, and to this day it remains a **standard methodology** for language teaching in education institutions.

It is remarkable, in one sense, that this method has been so stalwart among many competing models. **It does virtually nothing to enhance a student's communicative ability in the language.** However, in another sense, one can understand why Grammar Translation is popular:

- 1) It requires few specialized skills on the part of teachers.
- 2) Test of grammar rules and of translations are easy to construct and can be objectively scored.
- 3) Many standardized tests of foreign languages still do not attempt to tap into communicative abilities, so students have little motivation to go beyond grammar analogies, translation, and rote exercise.

It is a method for which **there is no theory.** There is no literature that offers a rationale or justification for it or that attempts to relate it to issues in linguistics, psychology, or education theory.

Chapter 6 (L&VP): *Issues in learning and teaching grammar*; Chapter 6: TAI

**\*\* Wong & VanPatten (2003) *The evidence is IN: Drills are OUT* & both reactions: Leaver et al (2004) & Wong & VanPatten (2004).**

## Arguments against “drilling”.

Leaver et al.’s comments

Wong & VanPatten’s comments

### ARGUMENT ONE

“What we are stating in this article comes down to this: As far as acquisition is concerned, drills are simply unnecessary and at best a waste of time for the development of communicative ability (418)”

Leaver et al. were unable to show evidence that drills are *necessary*. In addition, they were unable to prove that the extensive evidence against drills is flawed and/or irrelevant.

### ARGUMENT TWO

“Our concern is in the belief that *mechanical* drills are essential for acquisition. We are less concerned about *meaningful* and *communicative* drills being viewed as essential or beneficial to acquisition. In this paper, we use the term *drill* to mean *mechanical* drills (407)”

In their counter argument Leaver et al. appear to use the term “drill” differently.

### ARGUMENT THREE

“There are two aspects of learning a language for oral communicative purposes: the creation of an underlying implicit linguistic system (that consists of rules, forms, and lexical items); and the development of the ability to use that system to express meaning....This distinction is important for the present discussion because the utility of drills in language instruction needs to be examined from two different perspectives, namely, whether drills help to develop the underlying system and whether they are useful in promoting accuracy and fluency. (404)”

We are clearly suggesting that acquisition is more than just reaching a certain level (on a proficiency scale) and that in both SLA research and theory, the conceptualization of acquisition as multiple processes and products.

**Leaver et al. do not make these distinctions. Thus they conflate the various dimensions of acquisition into a unitary phenomenon and ignore the vast literature on SLA in and out of the classroom with different languages.**

### ARGUMENT FOUR

“By claiming that drills are not necessary and in some cases can hinder acquisition, we are not saying that no focus on form is necessary or that we are against instruction of any kind. ...We are obviously advocating some

kind of focus on form, given the research we have been involved in regarding processing instruction (417-18)”

## ARGUMENT FIVE

Leaver et al. have conflated drills, focus on form, and instruction in general in their response. Any comments regarding the above argument must be careful not to confuse an argument against drills as an argument against instruction, focus on form, or anything else. Because Leaver et al. do not understand the scope of the above position, they imbue Wong and VPs claims with the promotion of certain approaches to language teaching.

Wong and VanPatten state that some language may be more difficult than others to acquire for speakers of a particular first language. They state “our point is not that instruction cannot help the learning of Russian, Japanese, or any other language. It is that the role of drills cannot change depending on language (416)”

Leaver et al. defend the difficulty of Russian. But there is no dispute over this. In addition, Leaver et al. provide no argument or citation of empirical

evidence that drills are necessary to learn these more difficult language.

They present the following:

- 1) FSI data states that it takes longer to learn Russian than French.
- 2) Greater aptitude is require for classroom learning of some languages.
- 3) Russian morphology is complex.
- 4) The interface between semantics and syntax may pose problems in Russian.

None of these points is disputed by Wong and VanPatten. However, none of these points is evidence that drills are necessary. That is “harder/more difficult” does not equate with “drills are necessary” or even “drills are useful”.

The question that needs to research is the following:

“What happens in Russian language teaching if drills are replaced by something like processing instruction?”

#### OTHER ARGUMENTS

Leaver et al. Argue that there is a difference between what is required at lower levels and what is needed at upper levels of language ability. Wong and VanPatten agree with this.

“...if our students are to attain any more sophisticated control of Russian and to use it in any more challenging contexts, they need to gain control of Russian grammar...” Here they are confusing drills with focus on form.

Wong and VanPatten do not argue against focus on form in the classroom.

Again, they argue that there is no evidence that drills are necessary. In short, “taking longer to learn a foreign language” does not equate with “drills are necessary”.

Leaver et al. state “the issue, as many have said, is not *whether* to teach grammar but rather *how* to teach it”. This is exactly the point that underlies Wong and VanPatten’s argument. They are concerned about the *how* of focus on form. Particularly the relationship between instruction and underlying processes in acquisition.

When referring to an informal study of Slavic language teachers working at high levels of proficiency in which “nearly all of the teachers taught grammar overtly and very often used drills”. Again, this is not in question. But how is this evidence that drills are necessary...or what it has to do with the issue of *how* instruction in grammar takes places. “Using drills often” does not equate with “drills are necessary”, nor does it equate with “research on the *how* of grammar teaching”.

Leaver et al. also discuss the problem of learning only through comprehensible input and state that “Wong and VanPatten promoted the ultimate fallacy when they assumed, without evidence or attempted research, that contextualized, authentic input will be comprehensible to students of Russian”. Wong and VanPatten did not make any reference, statement or implication leading to this assumption. This must mean that Leaver et al. must think that because Wong and VanPatten see no evidence for the necessity of drills that Wong and VanPatten must believe that comprehensible input takes care of everything. VanPatten and colleagues have spent the last 12 years research the effects of processing instruction, whose focus on form and not some kind of “contextualized, authentic input”. In fact, it was research on input processing and problems that learners have with authentic and contextualized input that led to processing instruction. The “nonnecessity of drills” does not equate with “learners only need comprehensible input”.

Leaver et al. refer to research in first language acquisition and associative memory as wells as research of Robert DeKeyser. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that drilling exists in first language acquisition (as they state). In fact, the opposite exists: Attempting to get young children to repeat something correctly almost always results in failure. Children’s songs, nursery rhymes, and games do NOT teach first language through what is essentially drill. There is not a single first language acquisition researcher that we know of who would suggest that language is “taught” to children. Children don’t engage in songs and rhymes to get language, *they engage in songs and rhymes because they have the necessary language to do so.*

**Memory research:** current cognitive psychology does not argue that repetition or drills are necessary for learning either anything or everything; it argues that repeated exposures or behaviors tied to deliberate intentions lead to learning (in the case of language, this means communication).

**Research on drilling and automaticity (DeKeyser):** this research does not mean that drills are necessary. Any low-level language function can be drilled to a point where people may look good at what they do. But again, is it necessary? Is it possible that there are other routes to automaticity? Cognitive psychologists think so: otherwise no human would learn anything without drilling.

**Learning only through comprehensible input causes many learners to fossilize at lower levels.** They use Higgs and Clifford's 1982 study of American soldiers abroad as evidence for the necessity of drills. However, not everyone fossilizes in untutored contexts. In addition, the evidence for fossilization (Long 2003) is largely sketchy.

Etc.

Lightbown (2004) says in a commentary on processing instruction, "VanPatten and Wong have been very clear that they do not see Processing Instruction as the best or only approach to

teaching all language features. They have also left no doubt that Processing Instruction is not proposed as the basis for taking learners all the way to spontaneous, accurate, automatized production of any language features”.