

# Methodological Options for Teaching Grammar

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## **Introduction**

The paper will begin by defining methodological options (a.k.a. macro-options) in terms of the common micro-options available in each of the four main categories: structured input, explicit instruction, production practice and negative feedback. A theoretical rationale will then be given for each macro-option. Finally, the options favored in my own teaching will be described along with the reasoning behind my methodological choices.

## **Definitions**

1) Structured input: According to Ellis (2008b), 'two common micro-options are (1) enriched input (i.e., simply exposing learners to input that has been enriched to provide many examples of the target structure and (2) enhanced input (i.e., input where the target structure has been enhanced in some way, for example by underlining it, to make it more noticeable'. An example would be where students were given many examples of a target form (pictures and sentences with the past form highlighted) and then asked to check a box next to correct similar examples on a list of both accurate and inaccurate sentences.

2) Explicit Instruction: Direct explicit instruction introduces explanations of grammatical phenomena in an oral or written form. This is the traditional 'blackboard' approach and often involves metalanguage. Indirect explicit instruction favors learner discovery of these same phenomena most often through consciousness-raising tasks and therefore doesn't involve giving students grammar instruction. It would involve: 1) exposure to the rule and an exercise (underline the target structures) 2) an exercise that organizes the structure meaningfully

(unscramble the words to make a sentence) and 3) a chance to produce a rule that explains the use of the target (perhaps brainstorming in a group). This is seen as a process of discovery.

3) Production Practice: Two micro-options are common and are often used together: text manipulation involves drills and controlled practice exercises and is, by itself, basically an audio-lingual approach while text creation requires learners to produce sentences containing the target structure on their own and could be seen as PPP (presentation, practice and production). A text manipulation exercise may ask students to read a role play and follow up with a cloze exercise of the same role play asking them to fill in the blanks. Text creation would then ask the students to write a similar role play and ask them to perform it.

4) Negative Feedback: Also known as corrective feedback (CF), this option can be seen as a style of teaching on its own—teacher responses to learner errors and the consequent actions taken up by the learner. There are six general categories: recasts (reformulating a learner's utterance in accordance with the target structure), requests for clarification (asking the learner to clarify), repetition of error (repeating the learner's error, usually in a questioning manner), direct (explicit) correction (directly providing the correct form), metalinguistic feedback (using technical language to bring attention to an error) and elicitation (to draw out a response from the learner).

One way to distinguish the various forms of CF is by determining if they are explicit or implicit in nature (Ellis 2007). As a response to learner error, implicit feedback is masked. It can be a recast (e.g., S: She go home. T: She *went* home? S: Yeah... She went home.) a request for clarification (e.g., S: She go home. T: *What?* S: I mean... She went home.) or a repetition of error (e.g., S: She go home. T: *Go* home? S: I mean... She went home.) Explicit feedback is obvious in nature and includes direct correction (e.g., S: She go home. T: She went home! S:

She went home.), explanation as a metalinguistic process (e.g., S: She go home. T: It's the past tense... S: I mean... She went home.) and elicitation (e.g., S: She go home. T: Hmm... Try again, please S: I mean... She went home.)

### **Theoretical Rationale**

1) Structured input: According to Ellis (1998) 'acquisition occurs when learners attend to the new structure in input rather than when they try to produce it'. Ellis further cites Van Patten and Cadierno in a study that compared traditional production oriented practice with oral structured-input practice where they 'suggest that whereas the production-based instruction only contributed to explicit knowledge, the comprehension-based instruction created intake that led to implicit knowledge'. Further (Ellis 2008a) puts forth the idea that learning begins by the presentation of input containing the grammatical structure. He notes that learners 'notice the structure and practice it to access short-term memory. Theoretically, the feature of grammar provided in the input may pass into long-term memory—long term memory is then seen as part of the interlanguage system'.

2) Explicit Instruction: Ellis (1993) mentions that the aim of consciousness-raising for explicit knowledge is a traditional kind of instruction found in grammar translation. The rationale for its inclusion in lessons is that 'it has been hypothesized that explicit knowledge also aids the process of intake formation by facilitating noticing and noticing-the-gap'. In Ellis (1998) he describes research that 'investigated the relative advantages of direct and indirect consciousness-raising. They 'found that both options resulted in statistically significant gains in understanding the rule for dative alternation in two groups of college-level Japanese students. Though this may be true, many researchers favor the indirect option. It can be said that when learners discover rules for themselves, it may motivate them to engage in developing a grammatical system on their own. This idea was advocated as early as 1904. Set forth by

Jespersen, the notion of "Inventional Grammar" was to encourage students to create a target language grammar to gain insight into the language (Ellis 2002). Further, metalanguage and form-function mapping can be the topic of communicative tasks. 'Learners can as well talk about grammar as talk about any other topic' (Ellis 1998).

3) Production Practice: Ellis (1998) states that 'although production practice may not enable learners to integrate entirely new grammatical structures into their interlanguages, it may help them use partially acquired structures more fluently and more accurately'. An experiment conducted by Castagnaro (1991) examined groups of Japanese university students: a control group, a text manipulation group and a text creation group. The latter group performed best on a post test, suggesting that when learners work to create their own production, they may be more successful.

4) Negative Feedback: In Ellis (2007) it is clear that corrective feedback has gained a foothold in research and pedagogy. Specific micro-options are addressed:

Long (1996; 2006) – recasts provide learners with the correct target forms in a context that establishes form-meaning connections and are non-intrusive (i.e. do not interfere with the flow of communication which Long sees as important for acquisition).

Seedhouse (1997; 2004) - direct, unmitigated repair by the teacher marks errors as unimportant and unembarassing and thus should be preferred to recasts.

Lyster (1998; 2004) - output-prompting strategies are preferable because they enable learners to increase control over linguistic forms that they have partially acquired.

Russell and Spada (2006) - a meta-analysis demonstrated that CF is effective in promoting acquisition but could not show which strategy was the most effective due to insufficient studies meeting the requirements of a meta-analysis.

Ellis, Loewen and Erlam (2006) – a traditional survey of CF studies showed that (1) both implicit and explicit CF assist acquisition and (2) explicit is generally more effective than implicit.

As can be inferred from the various viewpoints, there is some disagreement as to how CF is to be implemented, on the other hand, there seems to be an agreement that it can be an effective teaching tool.

### **Favored Options**

I will attempt to describe the options I use in my classrooms along with some theoretical rationalizations. I teach mainly elementary school beginners in an EFL context, so the following options have been specifically designed with this microcosm in mind. Most of the input is visual and includes highlighted text along with many examples of the target structure. The curriculum is online and has flexible access (one can choose specific activities and can move forward and back within a file and within a lesson). After choosing a file (e.g., past tense verbs) I pass through all the slides in the file and the students are simply asked to read the sentences related to the images. I pass through the file a second time and ask simple questions about the structure (Is this future tense? What word is the verb? Etc.) Through noticing forms in reading activities and by noticing the gap by employing short comprehension questions (using images and related target structures) my intent is to provide learners with a focus on form that promotes intake (at least to the level of short-term memory).

Regarding structured input and noticing/noticing the gap, we may consider Ellis (2002): 'It is possible that enriched input will work better than explicit instruction if acquisition is measured by means of a test that requires online processing of the target structures.' As part of an input-processing (IP) approach, both enhanced (target structures in bold red letters) and enriched (many exemplars of the same grammar feature) input are employed in my classrooms. In Ellis (2002) IP instruction 'involves attempts to alter the way learners actually process input.'

Further, learners may have 'default strategies' (such as not correctly marking verbs for tense) that can be attended to in order to encourage more accurate forms in the interlanguage.

The production aspect of the lesson involves the standard controlled to free practice using the same slides. The question: 'How much milk did he drink?' with an image of a man with a large pitcher of milk has the controlled answer: 'He drank lots of milk.' The free aspect of production follows up with an open question, for example: 'What did you drink today?'. As Ellis (1998) points out: 'To date, there is insufficient evidence to show that one kind of practice (e.g., free practice) works better than another (e.g., controlled practice)' but I believe, in the end, employing them in a controlled to free sequence can lead learners to more spontaneous production and perhaps a short conversation (a sign of a developing implicit knowledge-- which is the goal).

There is then an opportunity for corrective feedback. I am more in tune with Lyster's approach: 'output-prompting strategies are preferable because they enable learners to increase control over linguistic forms that they have partially acquired' (Ellis 2007). In fact, results from Lyster and Ranta's (1997) study of four immersion classrooms at the primary level support this approach:

The findings indicate an overwhelming tendency for teachers to use recasts in spite of the latter's ineffectiveness at eliciting student-generated repair. Four other feedback types—elicitation, metalinguistic feedback, clarification requests, and repetition—lead to student-generated repair more successfully and are thus able to initiate what the authors characterize as the negotiation of form.

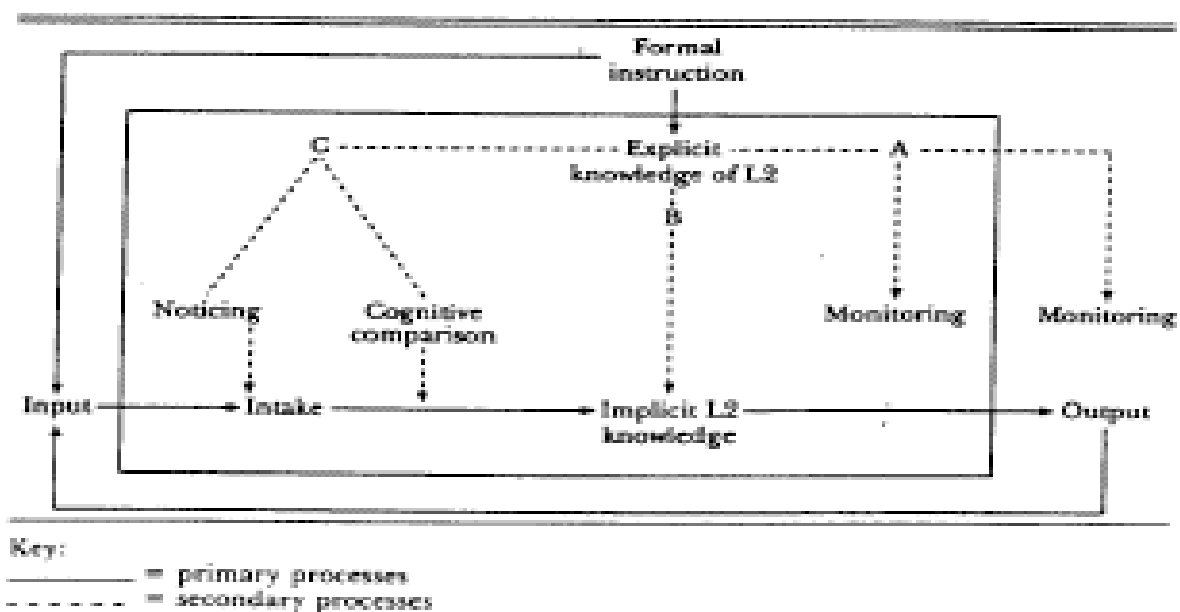
An example along these lines would be: T: What did you drink with breakfast? S: I drink juice at breakfast. T: at breakfast? S: For? T: For is O.K. Again, please. S: I...drink juice... for breakfast. T: Remember, 'past tense'... S: Ohhh... I DRANK juice at breakfast... no...for breakfast. I drank juice for breakfast. T: Good!

Along with Krashen, I believe that acquisition originates in input (Ellis 2002) but not that comprehensible input is the dominant form of intake. I believe Swain makes a strong argument when she says: 'Being 'pushed' in output...is a concept parallel to that of the  $i + 1$  of

comprehensible input. Indeed, one might call this the 'comprehensible output' hypothesis' (Swain 2007).

In Ellis' (1995) model of a weak interface position, we can see that this type of output can be monitored (through CF) and, in effect, become another form of input (perhaps with a greater chance for intake).

**FIGURE 1**  
**A Model of L2 Acquisition Incorporating a Weak Interface Position**



Finally, 'mini-grammar lessons' are employed on the basis of a 'perceived need,' where either learner performance is under par or where there is actually a knowledge gap. I would like to make this distinction between two situations in which a mini-grammar lesson is employed. Ellis (2001) sums it up nicely:

...reactive focus on form addresses a performance problem (which may or may not reflect a competence problem) whereas preemptive focus on form addresses an actual or a perceived gap in the students' knowledge. The type of discourse that arises in preemptive focus on form differs from that found in reactive focus on form. Thus, whereas the latter takes the form of sequences involving a trigger, an indicator of a problem, and a resolution (Varonis & Gass, 1985; see Example 1), the former consists typically of exchanges involving a query and response.'

Because my students are young learners at a beginner level in an EFL environment, intervention is predominantly reactive in nature (I don't get many queries). I use a white board on a side wall and attempt to 'build' the structure using input from the learner (T: What words go here... he, she and what? S: It! T: Yes, 'it.')

The resulting concept map (according to Novak (2006) graphical tools for organizing and representing knowledge) will be created more directly than indirectly (the students aren't given the chance to discover the rules) but co-building does inspire participation by some students. On this matter, time and circumstances are important factors. I have just 50 minutes, once a week with most students. Additionally, they are inundated with various grammar exercises on the other four weekdays with a NNS teacher. There is a lot of time for comprehension-based activities and discovery-type/indirect explicit instruction when I'm not present. I encourage the NNS teachers to employ these types of exercises and tasks in their lessons.

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