

Some things that matter in grammar teaching, and some things that don't

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Introduction

Having studied Modern Languages at Oxford University, Michael Swan then spent the next twenty years working in English Language teaching. He now cites his main occupation as a writer and publisher of related teaching and reference material. Proving that "even grammarians have souls", Swan also writes poetry and has celebrated the publication of two of his collections, 'When They Come For You' and 'The Shape of Things'.

Swan's seminar sought to analyse the nature of grammar instruction within the modern ELT classroom and address the concerns of tutors who doubt the effectiveness of their classroom approach. Should grammar be taught implicitly or explicitly? It depends, Swan said, on the context.

Swan believes that tutors ultimately fall into one of two camps; they either think they teach too much grammar or not enough.

Why do teachers teach too much grammar?

It is likely that tutors who teach too much grammar have in their heads two conflicting ideas. On the one side, they think it is their responsibility to create English speakers who reproduce the language in a manner as close to native speakers as possible; an unrealistic aspiration, Swan claims.

Yet tutors continue along this path anyway, even though the other half of the teacher's head knows this will not happen, simply due to time constraints if nothing else. This, Swan lamented, is the cause of so much ineffective language teaching. This pursuit of perfection will kill students' self-confidence and ultimately do them a lot of harm.

Why do teachers teach too little grammar?

This, Swan suggested, may be down to the sheer ignorance of the tutor! Alternatively, it may be representative of how the emphasis in ELT is now placed on the using-end of language rather than its forms, and the particular belief that just 'doing things' with language will in itself teach it.

It is true, Swan acknowledged, that this communicative revolution has undeniably produced students who can confidently use the language, but not always necessarily in the way that it should! Grammar is gradually being downgraded, slowly disappearing from tick-box lists of what should be taught.

There is a prevailing feeling that holistic language instruction is good and that breaking it down into structures is not. This, Swan intimated, is as foolish as suggesting doctors treat the whole body of their patient rather than pinpoint the infected area.

Finding a middle ground

Good grammar will, of course, positively enhance comprehensibility and social/professional acceptability. Tutors who make a conscious effort to focus on grammar are able to teach those facets that cannot be picked up through mere exposure.

Is it a battle worth fighting? Does grammar knowledge really make a difference? It is, Swan averred, more useful to look at aspects of grammar rather than grammar overall.

To broadly illustrate the argument, Swan then displayed a list of nine sentences containing likely errors an English language student might make:

1. Yesterday, I have seen an English film.
2. I like the most music, but not the jazz.
3. By next June, I have been studying English for five years.
4. He always talk a lot.
5. I helped cook my wife on Saturday.
6. May I have your sign, Sir?
7. Excuse me. Please tell me the time.
8. How long are you here for? 'Since March.'
9. They have three childs.

The gathered audience were invited to rank these faults in order of severity, attributing a '1' to those mistakes that do not really matter and a '5' to those that signal the end of civilisation as we know it!

As the audience offered responses, it became apparent that most were slips that did little to disrupt the communicative flow of a conversation. Yet through Sentence No. 7, Swan aimed to capture the debate between comprehensibility and acceptability. It marked, in his opinion, a blunder that was actually rude and likely to put people's backs up. We don't, of course, make requests by using imperatives and this is an instance where sound knowledge of grammar is vital.

Swan conceded that attempting to correct everything is a big mistake. It becomes important to develop strategies that are able to isolate the most serious inaccuracies. Tutors can only teach a limited amount. What they do teach, therefore, needs to be of the highest importance. Swan regarded the most valuable piece of advice he had to impart as being the supposition that tutors should teach less but do more with it. They should not spread it too thin. Rather, teachers should make sure their students are able to confidently use what they have.

Conducting grammar teaching in the classroom

Much consideration should be given to the nature and design of the materials used in grammar instruction. Swan explained the challenge that this presents, given that grammar itself is widely regarded (by students and teachers) as pretty grey and not very alluring.

Tutors are charged with the responsibility of transforming this perception and injecting the necessary glitz. Grammar should be accompanied by fireworks!

To meet this objective, Swan outlined how it is useful to divide grammar teaching into three parts, something he referred to as 'The 3 Xs':

1. **Explanations** (which translates as teacher input)
2. **Examples** (again, translating as teacher input)
3. **Exercises** (which translates as student output)

In terms of classroom time, the more economic teachers can be with explanations and examples the better, ideally arriving at a teacher/student split of 25%-75%. The aim is to maximize students' output through exercises.

Swan amplified explanations behind these '3 Xs' as follows:

Explanations

The teacher should strive to ensure that these are sparing, short and simple. The classroom, Swan professed, is no place for a completion neurosis! Teachers do not have to tell the whole truth. Their aim is to build a bridge between A and B. If that bridge becomes too long, it is likely to collapse.

Explanations should also be clear. Much of the terminology teachers use is fuzzier than they realise.

Colour and visual support are two things that aid explanations, not just for the purpose of making things look pretty, but to highlight structural patterns and contrasts inherent in the language.

The current vogue is to give students examples of grammar and invite them to establish the rules as opposed to actually 'teaching' it. This, Swan alleged, is useful up to a point. However, he was also of the belief that if a class of students are only given examples, twenty-five students will come up with twenty-five different rules! Learners need to be supported.

Counter to much received wisdom on the issue, Swan stated how explanations should also be provided in the student's mother tongue. Swan exposed what he saw as an ancient dogma surrounding this issue, one that has no theoretical credibility at all. An adherence to L1 means that students get their explanations less thoroughly. Suppose you have signed up for a course to learn Mongolian. Do you really, Swan probed, want explanations of grammar not to be in English?!

Examples

Again, there needs to be economy in example presentation. Importantly, they should be cogent and realistic, born of common scenarios and contexts that learners would find themselves in.

Swan delighted in furnishing the audience with a list of inappropriate examples he has encountered in language books- "Birds fly high", "The oxen are steeping on my feet", "Those people have lost their teeth" and "Come down from that tree so that I might kiss you" to quote but a few! Sentences are an effective way of exemplifying structure. Texts similarly offer abundant opportunities to present a range of tenses in authentic use.

One note that Swan added regarding the use of texts in the classroom is that the teacher should not always feel saddled with the duty of coupling them with a comprehension exercise.

We are surrounded by grammar, a fact that a walk down any street will attest. Swan recounted how he went on a 'Determiners' hunting mission as he photographed a variety of signs to help illustrate their use.

Swan also recommended caption bubbles in cartoon strips as an entertaining way of presenting grammar forms. Quotations, additionally, are effective because they tend to stick in the mind of the learner, as do poems.

Exercises

Swan defended the often-criticised mechanical word-fill exercise and confronted the accusations that they are stale, ineffective and not communicative enough with the view that they do have a role to play in grammar instruction.

Swan submitted his judgment that, though English language teachers are generally very good at communicative language practice, this ability does not always spill over to grammar practice. The challenge practitioners face is to facilitate this transition and make it equally colourful.

Now commonly recognized as a significant learning tool in the classroom, Swan encouraged tutors to set students Internet-related tasks, even to use the web's capabilities to certify what their teachers were telling them!

Grammar and ...

Swan concluded with a selection of further nuggets in which he briefly sketched grammar's relationship with...

... vocabulary

Vocabulary cannot be taught systematically in the classroom but it can be successfully mixed with grammar instruction to aid its acquisition.

... speaking

Speech has its own distinct grammatical features and students should be afforded opportunities to practice this in class.

... pronunciation

Any work on grammar must also take into account the significantly related importance of pronunciation. Pronunciation, Swan contended, is an issue that runs in two directions. There is the problem of teachers not understating what their students say and there is the problem faced by learners who encounter tutors who talk too fast and do not articulate their words properly. Any work on grammar must acknowledge its symbiotic relationship with pronunciation.

Final thoughts

The mere word 'grammar' is enough to send chills down the spine of many students and tutors. The sad fact is that, for many, it has associations with learning that is lifeless and intrinsically dull. Yet Swans' seminar was a challenge to this estimation par excellence.

Although grammar may be destined to engage in an eternal struggle to shake its prosaic reputation and fully chip away its grey veneer, Swan's presentation undoubtedly went a long way to overhaul its image and galvanise those practitioners who believe passionately in the need to reassert and reaffirm its integral place in the classroom.

Swan should be congratulated for superbly conveying how it is possible to teach grammar in such a way as to light a Catherine wheel and create an experience students can enjoy in glorious Technicolor.