The Role of Grammar Instruction in the EFL Classroom

recent trends from research and curricula for the topic of grammar instruction in the EFL classroom

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1. Introducing Grammar Instruction in the EFL Classroom

Grammar instruction in the EFL classroom has been a frequent topic in educational circles for decades. The aim of this paper is to examine the current role of grammar instruction, to analyse and compare publications from different fields and look at possible difficulties that arise from the topic for today’s EFL classrooms in Germany. Specifically, I will look at two major authorities that influence today’s concept of grammar instruction: educational and linguistic research on the one hand and German educational policy – manifested in curricula – on the other. A third group which will be of importance here is teachers. Ideally, all three should be dynamically interconnected and in constant exchange, so that theory and practice can benefit from one another. These relationships, their quality and suggestions for its improvement will play an important role in this essay.

Beginning with theory and research, the most important developments in the field of grammar instruction from a focus on form to a focus on meaning will be illustrated first, in order to provide a context for more recent suggestions on the topic. Subsequently, German educational policy will be examined, including its decision making processes from local curricula to nationwide standards set by the Kultusminsterkonferenz. Specific suggestions on grammar instruction in various curriculum-related publications will be analysed in order to understand what approach to grammar instruction is intended and how it comes about. As I will point out later, both researchers and curriculum writers have suggested that there is a need for more accessible material for teachers. Due to the scope of this paper, I will not be providing any specific teaching instructions or designing materials myself, however, it is an objective to point out such publications that may be useful for teachers.

2. Theory and Research

Teaching a foreign (or second) language has been a matter of debate and subject to change for centuries. In order to discuss the current situation of theory and research on grammar in the EFL classroom, I find it necessary to briefly illustrate its historical background, thereby putting recent findings into the context of their development and providing the terminology that is essential when discussing the topic of grammar instruction.

Up until the second half of the 20th century, the role of grammar was central to foreign language teaching in the Western world. Language was taught systematically by means of grammar. Reasons for this date back to philosophy and science in the Middle Ages and the central role of Latin grammar (Nassaji/Fotos 2011:2). Studying Latin grammar became “an important component of the school
system” (ibid.) and the importance of grammar instruction was maintained when other foreign languages were being taught. These were the times of explicit grammar learning, which was defined by N.C. Ellis (1994:1f.) as a “conscious operation where the individual makes and tests hypotheses in a search for structure” through “selective learning” and “via given rules”. One method that derives from the explicit approach and is still commonly used is the ‘Present-Practice-Production’ (PPP) model (Nassaji/Fotos 2011:3f.) First, the grammatical rule is presented to the learner, then the learner practices its use through various exercises in order to be able to finally produce the grammatical phenomenon fluently and spontaneously.

The counter movement to explicit teaching methods took place in the 1970s, when “developments in linguistics and sociolinguistics in Europe and North America” (Nassaji/Fotos 2011:6) changed the purpose of language learning from being able to use a language appropriately by applying grammar rules to being able to use a foreign language in meaningful communication. The ‘communicative approach’ therefore started to challenge the role of grammar instruction in the language classroom and put emphasis on the development of a communicative competence. A distinction was made by Hymes (1972) between this communicative competence on the one hand, which was directly linked to knowledge-of-language usage, and linguistic competence on the other, which was characterized as the knowledge of grammar rules. Another important distinction was established by S.D. Krashen (1981) between ‘acquisition’ and ‘learning’, as he argued that students of a language should acquire their skills unconsciously and implicitly “as a result of exposure to comprehensible input” (Nassaji/Fotos 2011:7), rather than learning the language consciously and explicitly. Implicit grammar learning, defined by Ellis (1994:1) as “a process which takes place naturally, simply and without conscious operations”, was now promoted in language classrooms, and teaching grammar explicitly gained an antiquated image and was associated with bored and demotivated students.

This shift demonstrates two main foci when it comes to foreign language teaching, which can be seen as two ends of a scale: from a 'focus on form', which pays explicit attention to grammar instruction, to a ‘focus on meaning’, which puts a large emphasis on communication and implicit grammar instruction. Just a few decades after the change to communicative approaches, there was a shift back to a ‘focus on form’, a “grammar revival” (Tonkyn 1994:1), and David Crystal famously announced that grammar was back in his radio programme. It appears that trends in language teaching continuously move up and down the scale from meaning to form.

It is also necessary to distinguish between implicit and explicit L2 knowledge on the one hand, and implicit and explicit L2 instruction on the other hand. There is much controversy among researches
when it comes to the exact definitions and concepts, and I will only provide a very brief description based on the definition of the terms by Ellis (2009). A learner’s implicit knowledge is commonly described as tacit and intuitive, procedural, available through automatic processing, whereas explicit knowledge is conscious, declarative, and accessible through controlled processing (ibid:11f). Whether explicit and implicit knowledge relate to each other as dichotomous or continuous remains a controversy among linguists (ibid. 16). Instruction is characterized by Ellis as an attempt to intervene in the development of a learner’s language and knowledge. Implicit instruction is “directed at enabling learners to infer rules without awareness […], internalizing the underlying rule / pattern without their attention being explicitly focused on it”, whereas explicit instruction involves a “metalinguistic awareness of the rule” in the learning process (ibid. 16f). It is important to note that a certain kind of instruction does not necessarily lead to the same kind of learning and knowledge, e.g. that explicit instruction does not necessarily result (only) in explicit knowledge and implicit instruction not necessarily (only) in implicit knowledge (ibid.6).

Among foreign language teachers, the myth that ‘we are not allowed to teach grammar” still persists, which may be the result of a lack of familiarity with developments in SLA research. As Nassaji and Fotos (2011:9) sum up more recent findings, there has been much evidence from “laboratory and classroom based studies [and] extensive reviews of studies on the effects of form-focused instruction over the past 30 years” that indeed puts forth arguments for form-focused instruction, such as (ibid.):

• Long (1983) says that form focused instruction “contributes importantly to language learning”
• R. Ellis (2001) N. Ellis (1995), and Long (1991) find that “instructed language learning […] has significant effects on the rate of acquisition and the attainment of accuracy”.
• Norris and Ortega (2001) conclude that a focus on form “results in substantial gain in the target structures and that the gains are sustained over time”.

An argument for (some kind of) form-focused instruction is what Chomsky (1965) describes as the ‘creative aspect’ of language, arguing that “an essential property of language is that it provides the means for expressing indefinitely many thoughts and for reacting appropriately in an indefinite range of new situations” (ibid.:6). Using language in such a flexible manner requires grammatical competence, since learning grammar necessitates learning the underlying structure of a language, which can then be applied to any given communicative context. This logic is, of course, based on the assumption that second and foreign language acquisition differ substantially from first language acquisition (Cook 2008), in which a child learns its mother tongue rapidly and unconsciously, most
commonly without any explicit instruction or explicit knowledge of grammar. Then again, grammatical competence in a second or foreign language does not rely on form-focused instruction. Krashen (1992:409f) has repeatedly argued that the effect of grammar learning is “peripheral and fragile”, and that “direct instruction on specific rules has a measurable impact on tests that focus the performer on form, but the effect is short-lived”. Here Krashen suggests “comprehensible input” as the best way of increasing grammar accuracy, and at an advanced level specifically reading. The aspect of testing is probably an important factor in this discussion, since the EFL classroom relies heavily and possibly increasingly on testing language skills, and the direct outputs of form-focused instruction are easier to test than the more long-term effects of implicit learning through comprehensible input.

The accomplishments and qualities of communicative approaches for learners of a foreign language, however, should not be neglected. Especially for learners of the English language it is, in our globalized society with English as the lingua franca, crucial to acquire solid communicative interaction skills, rather than being able to explain grammatical phenomena. A motivating and beneficial contemporary EFL classroom cannot be imagined without the principles of communicative language teaching, such as the use of authentic texts, an emphasis on student interaction and the importance of learner’s own personal experiences (Nunan 1991).

Correspondingly, linguists such as Nassaji and Fotos (2011:9) argue that a “re-evaluation of the role of grammar in second language classrooms” is necessary, and promote the incorporation of a focus on grammar into L2 communicative instruction (ibid.:14). However, they also emphasize that “no matter what current research suggests about how to integrate grammar instruction and communicative language teaching, this has minimally affected L2 pedagogy” (ibid.:vii). A major reason for this is seen in the academic style of publications on the subject (R. Ellis, 1997), therefore a main aim is to make such knowledge more accessible to teachers.

3. German education policy for EFL teachers

The curricula for EFL teachers, e.g. the Berliner Rahmenlehrpläne, are based on nationwide standards that are coordinated by the Kultusministerkonferenz (KMK). Their decisions and proposals are crucial for German education policy in its implementation. It is stated in an introductory statement of the KMK that the various bodies of the educational system (education policy, administration, teacher training and school practice) are required to take up and put into practice the standards and aims of the KMK (KMK-Bildungsstandards Abitur 2012:8). Therefore, the first step of this section
will be to examine these KMK-decisions regarding their approach to grammar in the EFL classroom. In the following step, I will have a look at how these decisions are implemented in curricula in the federal state of Berlin, looking at curricular publications such as the Rahmenlehrpläne, Fachbriefe and Handreichungen.

The educational standards ('Bildungsstandards') of the KMK for the EFL classroom are orientated towards the various levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The CEFR puts emphasis on action- and task-orientation and on the performative part of language learning, with the aim to enhance multilingualism and international cooperation for speakers and learners of modern languages. These aspects can be found in the KMK standards as well, just like the positive ‘can do’ formulations for (levels of) competences. There are competence-oriented standards for EFL for the Hauptschulabschluss (completion grade 9), the Mittlerer Schulabschluss (completion of grade 10) and for the Allgemeine Hochschulreife (high-school diploma). All three have different prioritization of competences, but next to an intercultural skill, the functional communicative competence is expressly the central one (e.g. KMK-Bildungsstandards Abitur 2012:11). This competence consists of various subcategories that either include an understanding of different kinds of authentic texts or speech production (speaking, writing, mediation). With this emphasis on the development of skills in communication, there is a very clear tendency of the standards towards a communicative approach in language teaching.

Another aspect of the functional communicative competence is having linguistic means and communicative strategies at one’s disposal (‘Verfügung über sprachliche Mittel und kommunikative Strategien’). This is where grammar comes into effect. Among linguistic means, such as vocabulary and pronunciation, grammar is mentioned here as a functional part of the language system and communication (KMK-Bildungsstandards Abitur 2012:18). Again, successful communication is at the centre of attention: grammar and the other linguistic means have a so called ‘supporting function’ (‘dienende Funktion’), students are supposed to use them in order to put into practice their communicative speaking or writing purposes (ibid.). The same applies to the standards for the ninth grade, but here some grammatical phenomena that are expected from the students are even explicitly listed (KMK-Bildungsstandards Hauptschulabschluss 2004:14), such as different clauses, negotiation, tenses, passive and active forms, etc. These ways of mentioning grammar as means of communication indicate that the KMK-standards do not utilize a communicative approach that is merely based on meaning, but that a certain focus on form is intended. Just in what way grammar should be conveyed to students didactically and methodologically is never clearly expressed in the standards. This of course leaves more freedom for the teachers, but at the same time it does not set
clear targets for their instruction. Looking at the competence of language awareness (‘Sprachbewusstheit’) that was newly introduced in the standards of 2012 for the high-school diploma, one can find a few hints for a didactic approach for grammar instruction. For linguistic awareness, students are expected to recognize and name basic shaping of the foreign (English) language system from examples (KMK-Bildungsstandards Abitur 2012:21). This can be interpreted as an inductive approach, as students detect rules by looking at examples.

These *KMK*-standards are implemented into school curricula in Berlin, so in order to find more concrete suggestions regarding grammar instruction, looking at the *Rahmenlehrpläne* and publications by the federal institute for school and media in Berlin-Brandenburg (LISUM) might be useful. Some of these simply reproduce and reformulate what the *KMK*-decisions already said about communication and competence-oriented language classrooms (e.g. LISUM Fachbrief 2014). The *Rahmenlehrplan für Sekundarstufe I* still lists specific linguistic means that are expected from the students at each grade. These grammatical elements are required to be identified and classified autonomously. In the *Rahmenlehrplan* for the more advanced grades in Sekundarstufe II from 2011, linguistic means are not mentioned in that way. The focus here is on communication, oral speech production and the ability to act in the foreign language. Contents and themes play an important role, students should engage with the topics ‘individual and society’, ‘national and cultural identity’, ‘one world - global questions’, and ‘challenges of the present day’. As new *Rahmenlehrpläne* for Sekundarstufe II were just introduced in 2014, a few changes were made that adjusted the curriculum to the current KMK-decisions: the functional communicative competence is still central, but the competences of language learning and language awareness now gain more attention.

One very useful publication that makes specific suggestions for how to teach according to these standards is the *Handreichung moderne Fremdsprachen*, published by the Federal Institute for School and Media in Berlin-Brandenburg (LISUM), which dedicated a whole issue to the topic of grammar in the competence-oriented foreign language classroom (LISUM 2011). Its main suggestions are to build up grammatical structures successively, and to use authentic texts and issues that are relevant to the reality of the students (ibid.:5). More importantly, it addresses questions such as what role grammar plays in the competence-oriented classroom, and what the ‘supporting function’ of grammar means specifically (ibid.:6). The constant emphasis on grammar’s supporting function is here accounted for by the fact that most school books still do the exact opposite: taking a grammatical structure and creating a context for it, using the traditional 'present-practice-production' method and the model of grammatical progression (ibid.:7). Thus, grammar is taught in an isolated manner in artificial textbook settings, which is more efficient in some respects, but rather outdated (ibid.).
Therefore, competence-oriented approaches emphasize the importance of communication and the use of authentic texts, shifting from a focus on grammatical forms and their appropriate use towards task-based learning with grammar in a supporting function, where real life situations are used as a starting point, and the use of grammatical phenomena is the necessary consequence when engaging in the given activity (ibid.:9). At this point, it is stated in the Handreichung that a certain focus on form needs to be integrated into task-based learning situations in inductive ways and concedes that becoming aware of grammatical structures, practicing and using them should be part of such a task (ibid.:10). A real value of this publication is that these suggestions are translated into concrete material for language classrooms. There is a detailed and extensive task for the EFL classroom (‘create a fanpage for your favourite star!’) with specific suggestions for how to best integrate grammatical phenomena in a supporting manner at each point of the task.

4. Views on grammar instruction as conveyed through research and curricula in comparison

According to the interpretation of the sources used here, the role of grammar instruction in the EFL classroom in research and in curricula seems to have undergone a rather similar development. In summary, researchers have found solid arguments for both, communicative approaches and for a focus on form, and there seems to be a tendency towards merging the two together. Naturally, such suggestions from researchers are highly theoretical and empirical and usually do not include specific didactical or methodological advice. It has also been found out that there is a big gap between the suggestions of research and the actual instruction and material used at schools (Nassaji 2011:vii), which has partly been accounted for by the lack of accessibility of research publications for teachers. Curricula and curriculum-related publications show quite a strong inclination towards communicative approaches, laying emphasis on practical communicative skills and authentic material. However, a focus on form is always detectable, either because abilities such as language awareness are mentioned, by output oriented information on which grammar skills are required, or through specific statements on the topic in publications such as the Handreichung. Therefore, the integration of a focus on form into communicative contexts that has been advocated for in research is also employed in German curricula.

Due to the fact that the curriculum-planning institutions of all federal states in Germany, such as the Senatsverwaltung für Bildung, Jugend und Wissenschaft and the LISUM in Berlin, refer to the decisions of the KMK, the parallels between research and curricula is not surprising. As already mentioned, the KMK bases its decisions on the CEFR, the descriptors of which are in turn based on
empirical research and theory, e.g. its descriptors were “produced empirically in classroom contexts, relating learner achievement in the research context (Switzerland) to the levels on the scale” (North 2010: 223). Hence, there is an established link between researchers and curriculum planners; to what extent this link is actually functional is a question that needs to be studied elsewhere. More relevant here is the question why the link between research and curricula on the one hand and L2 pedagogy as practiced in classrooms today on the other seems so weak, as this is an issue addressed both in research and in curricular publications. The answers provided in the publications that were examined here refer back to a lack of (1) research publications that are accessible to teachers and (2) accessible and useful classroom material that employs up-to-date approaches based on recent research. Moreover, as Borg’s study on Experience, Knowledge about Language and Classroom Practice in Teaching Grammar (2005) shows, a teacher’s pedagogical practices, especially concerning grammar instruction, and their selection and presentation of materials are influenced by their own “knowledge about language”. When not confident in their own grammatical knowledge, teachers may try to avoid the topic of working with grammar in the classroom, and only teach it via textbook when needed. A flexible and open mind towards grammar and a motivation to keep developing their knowledge about it is a precondition for teachers to engage in new ways of teaching grammar, use new material and to further one’s education about recent research publications on the subject that might help them improve their instruction. As Borg (ibid.338f.) notes, attitudes towards grammar are commonly developed through experience and teacher education. Thus, universities and teacher training should at the same time help prospective teachers improve their own grammar skills and, as Borg suggests, interconnect “knowledge about language and methodology courses”, which would help them “develop a qualitatively richer and pedagogically more informed sense of their [knowledge about language] and of its roles in their teaching” (ibid.:339).

5. Conclusion

Having examined current views on the role of grammar including a historical perspective, it appears that the development of theoretical and didactical approaches to grammar is ongoing. There is, of course, no single solution for the issue of grammar instruction. There are two main approaches to this issue, a focus on form and a focus on meaning, and recent publications both by researchers and curriculum planners have suggested merging the two. Linguists have posed valid arguments for this and German curricula have employed the idea of using parts of both approaches. Only the practical implementation by teachers is problematic, this has been noticed both by researchers and curriculum planners. There are two especially useful publications that address this issue. Teaching grammar in second language classrooms: integrating form-focused instruction in communicative context by
Nassaji & Fotos (2011) aims to “pull this body of new knowledge [by current research] together and make it accessible to teachers”. The second is a *Handreichung Moderne Fremdsprachen* published by LISUM (2011), which specifically discusses methods for integrating a focus on form into communicative context in the EFL classroom and provides classroom material that can be used directly by or as an inspiration for teachers. Such publications might improve the cooperation between teachers, linguistic researchers and curriculum planners and it would probably be useful to enhance these publications. Apart from this, teachers in training should be made aware of the mentioned issues, become acquainted with helpful resources, train their 'knowledge about language' (Borg 2005) and be trained to become flexible and open minded thinkers.
6. Bibliography


Irena Reinhardt, *The Role of Grammar Instruction in the EFL Classroom* 11


7. Statement of academic honesty

I hereby state that all work presented in this essay is original work, unless stated otherwise. Any passages taken from other works, such as direct or indirect quotations, summaries, paraphrases, translations and transcriptions have been adequately marked.

I confirm that this work is entirely of my own creation and no other person has played a significant role in its authorship.

I understand that the incorporation of material without formal reference will be considered plagiarism and will cause me to fail the course.

Irena Reinhardt