

**GRAMMAR-ORIENTED COURSE BOOKS:
THEIR ROLE IN THE CLASSROOM**

by

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Some theories of second language learning cast doubt on the 'teachability' of grammar, arguing that learning does not become acquisition, or that the learner's syllabus imposes constraints on what can be taught and learned at a given time. In spite of this, course books which aim at explicit teaching of grammar rules and structures continue to be popular. What role, if any, do you think such books have in the classroom?

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1. Introduction

First, alternative ways of treating the interrelation between *learning* and *acquisition* will be identified. A brief overview of two alternative approaches to first language acquisition - the generative and a 'probabilistic constraints' approach – will be given next. Then a connection to second language acquisition will be made and evidence of innate grammatical knowledge in second language learners will be discussed. An attempt will be made to analyze what knowing grammar means and consequently what is to be learned. With help of a comparative analysis of Presentation-Practice-Production and task-based methodological cycles possible solutions to teaching grammar in the classroom will be examined. On the basis of the analysis the role of grammar-oriented course books will be defined. The essay will be concluded with a summary of the findings.

2. Learning and First Language Acquisition (FLA)

A proposition that 'learning does not become acquisition' gives rise to a question of how the two phenomena – learning and acquisition – may be related to each other. One of the options is to treat them as interchangeable terms that are used to tag one and the same phenomenon. The following selected definitions given in Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (1993: 663, 10), for instance, suggest a little, if any, difference in the words' meaning:

Learning 1: *the act of experience of one that learns**
2: *knowledge or skill acquired by instruction or study*

***Learn** 1 a (1): *to gain knowledge or understanding of or skill in by study, instruction, or experience*
vi: *to acquire knowledge or skill*

*Acquisition 1: the act of acquiring***

2: something acquired or gained

***Acquire 1: to get as one's own:*

b: to come to have as a new or added characteristic, trait, or ability (as by sustained effort)

Another option is to view *learning* as a process the goal of which is *acquisition*. Language learning, in particular, may be viewed as a process of mainly memorizing in the course of which or as a result of which knowledge of language is acquired.

Finally, *learning* and *acquisition*, in respect to language learning, may be treated as unrelated and possibly mutually exclusive phenomena.

2.1 The generative approach vs. a ‘probabilistic constraints’ approach

The following brief overview illustrates how different ways of treating the *learning/acquisition* interrelation are reflected in alternative approaches to FLA.

The generative approach developed by Chomsky tends to treat *learning* and *acquisition* as separate phenomena and largely eradicates learning from the process of FLA. Knowledge of language is knowledge of grammar. People are born with knowledge of, what Chomsky terms, ‘Universal Grammar’ (UG). There is nothing to be learned; strictly speaking, there is nothing to be acquired, either. All people need is to unlock knowledge they already have. They do so by means of innate mechanisms. The influence of experience is considered to be minimal. Hence, the notion of the ‘poverty of the stimulus’.

Studies of very young children do provide evidence in favor of innate grammatical knowledge. For example:

despite the complexities of head-complement structures ... children learn head-complement directions at a relatively early age. ... this obviously cannot result from any conscious language learning (Shortall, 1996: 37).

However, UG is unlikely to be the sole source of FLA. As Seidenberg and MacDonald (1999: 2) point out:

for many years it (the 'poverty of the stimulus' argument) has guided researchers toward certain types of explanations for how language is acquired (e.g., UG) and away from others (e.g., learning).

Other approaches, alternative to the generative, have emerged. Seidenberg and MacDonald, for instance, propose a 'probabilistic constraints' approach, claiming that acquisition involves 'the use of multiple, simultaneous, probabilistic constraints defined over different types of linguistic and nonlinguistic information' (1999: 2). They put a strong emphasis on the available input and learning, rather than innate, mechanisms. Knowledge of language is acquired in the process of learning how to comprehend and produce utterances. Hence, *acquisition* is viewed as a goal of the process of *learning*.

3. Learning and Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

The previous section gives a glimpse of the complexity of FLA field of study. No unified approach to FLA exists and each individual approach is a hypothesis that requires testing. The same applies to SLA. The situation is further complicated by the indistinct status of FLA and SLA relation to each other:

'There is much debate about whether or not there are similarities between the way we acquire our first languages as children and any subsequent languages as adults' (Shortall, 1996: 34).

3.1 'What learners know and what they need to learn'

It may be true that 'learning is constrained by internal processes' (Skehan, 1996: 18) or the learner's syllabus. However, this does not prove that learning has no place in SLA. The point I would like to make here is as follows: if acquiring most natural first language (L1) did involve a considerable amount of learning, then there would certainly be room left for learning in SLA. This does not contradict an observation that L1 and L2 learners begin acquisition already possessing a 'wealth of language knowledge' (Shortall, 1996: 35). To be more precise, grammatical knowledge: L2 lexis is always to be learned, L2 grammar, however, may come as innate. This knowledge should definitely be accounted for and made use of in the teaching process.

The importance of identifying grammatical structures that need not be taught to L2 learners cannot be overestimated. Teaching what is innate may not only be superfluous, but also deconstructive: for instance, the overgeneralization error (*The history was a difficult subject for me*) is more likely to be committed by Japanese learners of English who have received instruction (Shortall, 1996: 39). However, research into the core linguistic features common to any language or characteristic of 'one human language' (Chomsky cited in Shortall, 1996:35) has only just begun.

3.2 Learning grammar: what is to be learned and how?

A table given below comprises the main points made in the previous sections of this essay.

Table 1

Learning (L) ⇔ Acquisition (A)		
L ⇒ A		L ≠ A
↓		
Approaches to FLA		
‘Probabilistic Constraints’: Learning Mechanisms		Generative: UG, Innate Mechanisms
↓		
SLA		
To Be Learned		Innate Knowledge
Lexis	Peripheral Grammar	Core Grammar

A course book based on a thoroughly investigated ratio of core (innate) and peripheral (to be learned) grammar is still a matter of distant future. For the time being teachers have to assume that all grammar is to be learned. A question of what in particular is to be learned still applies, but it ceases to be a question of whether grammar is innate. Rather it becomes a question of what knowing grammar means.

3.2.1 Form versus meaning

The borderline between grammar and lexis is by no means distinct, for they are in fact ‘two ways of describing the same phenomenon, language’ (Dave Willis, 1993: 83). Still, for practical purposes this crude division of language may be and is accepted. What should not be acceptable, in my opinion, is assigning *meaning* strictly to lexis and *form* to grammar. Lexis and grammar

may be separated and explored in parallel for one purpose: refinement of meaning they create together.

Grammar is not an empty vessel to be filled with lexis, grammar in itself is a source of meaning. This is not to deprive grammar of form. The point is that instead of being viewed as the essence of grammar *form* should be considered a valuable aspect of *meaning* grammar creates. As such form needs to be treated with respect. There is as much danger in underestimating form as in overemphasizing it, for what ultimately happens in both cases is distortion of meaning. Grammar based on form does function,

'But you have to pay a price: the language has to be so idealized that it bears little relation to what people actually write – and still less to what they actually say' (Halliday cited in Kilpert, 2002: 3).

The emphasis on getting messages across at the expense of form does have a price as well: inaccurate form affects meaning. The more precise is form, the more accurate is meaning communicated. As Shortall points out:

'... there is a danger that we can develop such a fixation with the teaching of communication skills that knowledge of linguistic structure is regarded as somehow irrelevant or unnecessary. We cannot afford such rejection of the teaching of grammar' (1996: 31).

The truth, probably, lies in between the two extremes: obsession with form and fixation with communication. If knowing grammar equals ability to create meaning through linguistic structure, then this is what to be learned: structure and the skill of using it.

3.2.2 From theory to practice

'In theory there is no difficulty in combining a focus on form and a focus on communication' (Dave Willis, 1996: 4).

In practice it appears to be a profoundly difficult task. An established Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) methodological cycle is accused of focusing on conformity, while an alternative task-based cycle is criticized for neglecting form and hindering long-term progress in L2 learners. It is hard to expect a unified teaching methodology when no unified approach to SLA exists. If it did exist, it is doubtful that 'the methodological formula of success' would be derived from it. There would still be many ways of implementing the same theoretical ideas.

There is definitely a need for a teaching methodology. Without one it is easy for learners and teachers alike to drown themselves in the complexities of language. This methodology, however, should always be viewed as a draft, open to constant revision and change. With that in mind I would like to take a closer look at PPP and task-based methodological cycles and see if they can work together for the purpose of teaching grammar in the classroom.

4. PPP and task-based methodological cycles compared

4.1 Non-obvious similarities

'The PPP paradigm offers a single, simple, clear, workable lesson model, but ... it is inadequate as a general proposal concerning approaches to language in the classroom' (Scrivener, 1996: 79).

This is what instantly brings together PPP and task-based methodological cycles. The main thing is that both work. Hence, neither of them should be denied the right to exist and neither of them should be viewed as ‘the way to teach’. It may well be the case that a new progressive teaching methodology will comprise the best features of both cycles. Meanwhile, they may be viewed as alternative models. Those models may vary from one classroom to another or, perhaps, be employed interchangeably within one classroom.

The monopolistic status of PPP cycle has been shaky in the recent years. It is not only the dominance of one particular methodology that is being criticized, alternative approaches claiming recognition. The most severe criticism concerns the very basics of PPP:

‘The underlying theory for a PPP approach has now been discredited. The belief that a precise focus on a particular form leads to learning and automatization (that learners will learn what is taught in the order in which it is taught) no longer carries much credibility in linguistics or psychology’ (Skehan, 1996: 18).

It seems perfectly reasonable to reexamine the behavioristic principles of PPP in light of new scientific findings. However, the categorical rejection of the whole theory underlying the approach seems premature. Even if it ‘no longer carries *much* credibility’, it still carries *some*. There is evidence in favor as long as against behaviorism in L1 and L2 acquisition. For instance, the ‘probabilistic constraints’ approach referred to above (see 2.1) is rooted in learning and in its turn does not give much credit to what is innate or non-behavioristic.

This is another similarity between PPP and task-based cycles: theoretical grounds for both approaches are still being researched. The vast field of language acquisition has only been touched by exploration. Too much

remains unknown, too many ‘processes hidden’ (Skehan, 1996: 18) for any categorical assumptions to be made.

4.2 Accuracy versus fluency

The focus of PPP is accuracy, the focus of a task-based approach is fluency. This is the primary difference between the two methodological cycles. Dave Willis (1996: 44, 45) introduces a third element – conformity – arguing that the real focus of PPP, and especially the teacher-controlled Presentation and Practice stages, is conformity rather than accuracy. I will, however, insist that the focus of PPP is accuracy and suggest that conformity is not inherent in the approach.

A transcript of a classroom interaction provided by Willis (1996: 45) may unfortunately be typical, but what it emphasizes is inadequacy of a particular teacher, not a particular approach. Any potentially successful approach may be ruined by a teacher who is neither engaged in communication nor engaging. I will attempt to show that within PPP framework a hypothetical classroom interaction may be successful or at least different from the described.

4.2.1 Accuracy or conformity?

This is the initial – Presentation – stage of a lesson. A structure being presented is probably written on the blackboard. It might appear as something like this:

{ love, enjoy, } { parent, teacher, }
to { like, dislike, } *being* a { leader, star, }
{ hate, etc. } { failure, etc. }

T: Today let us talk about parenthood, *being a parent*. I love my job, I *love being a teacher*. Sometimes, however, things go wrong and I do not *like being a teacher* very much. I wonder if it is the same with parenthood? I would like to know what parents feel about *being parents*. Those of you who have children, could you please raise your hands? Let me ask you, Sokoop, do you always *like being a father*?

S: Yes, I am. I am a father of four children.

T: Four children?! This is wonderful! This is not too common nowadays. I wonder what it feels like: *being a father of four*? It must be very difficult sometimes. Do you always *like being a father*, Sokoop?

S: I do, I love my children.

T: I am sure you do, Sokoop. Thank you. Peter, what about you, do you always *like being a father*? No, wait a second; Virginia, could you please ask Peter if he always *likes being a father*?

V: Yes. Do you always *like being a father*?

P: Yes, I do.

T: Maybe, this is it. Maybe, parents always *like being parents* no matter what. Maybe, I *love being a teacher* even when things go wrong. How about you, Virginia, what are you? What is your occupation?

V: I am an auditor.

T: Do you always *enjoy being an auditor*?

V: No, sometimes I *dislike being an auditor*.

I would like to stress again that this is a *hypothetical* classroom interaction. However, it is not perfect and this is precisely what likens it to a real life situation in a classroom. Such interaction could have taken place and on its basis it may be concluded that the focus on accuracy is an integral part of PPP approach, while the focus on conformity is a teacher's choice.

The ‘hypothetical’ teacher introduces a certain grammatical structure and when asking questions does expect a response of a particular form (just like Willis’s ‘real’ teacher). Ideally, Sokoop’s answer to *Do you always like being a father?* would be *Yes (No) I (do not) always like being a father.* However, when an accurate, but not the ‘ideal’, answer is received – *Yes, I am, I am a father of four children* – the teacher chooses to focus on accuracy (in a sense of meaningful information exchange), not conformity. Instead of saying – *Yes, listen to my question though* - and repeating the question right away, the teacher engages in communication and expresses her/his reaction to what s/he has just heard. It is only then that the original question – *Do you always like being a father?* – is repeated.

A focus on accurate form (not conformity) is never lost: throughout the interaction the teacher reintroduces the structure again and again (see *italics* in the transcript above). However, the focus on accuracy in this sense never obscures meaning: it is a meaningful structure, a structure in use, that is being presented. The structure is embedded in the communicative context, not isolated from it. Hence, what is ultimately achieved is real communication of which the structure is a means, not the goal. The structure is never forced upon the students. However, the teacher ensures that they are consistently exposed to the structure in use and gradually directed towards using it for their communicative purposes.

4.2.2 Accuracy and fluency: working together?

‘The concern for form (within PPP cycle) is achieved by encouraging students to produce language unthinkingly in accordance with stimuli provided by the teacher. There is no real communicative language use’
(Dave Willis, 1996: 44).

In the previous section, however, I attempted to show that the focus on form does not have to lead to a thoughtless drill of a particular structure. In the description of the Presentation stage of PPP cycle I repeatedly used words like: *meaningful, communication, communicative*. Hence, accuracy does not have to happen at the expense of communication or fluency. Consequently, it may be assumed that within a task-based approach the focus on fluency does not have to mean neglect of accuracy.

It appears that a distinct borderline between accuracy and fluency would be artificial, if anything it would be indistinct and ‘fuzzy’. Accuracy and fluency would overlap and blend and so would the two approaches they underlie: PPP cycle and a task-based cycle, respectively. Assuming that accuracy and fluency may indeed work together, more similarities between and more ways of combining the two approaches may be found. I will return now to the hypothetical classroom interaction described above and attempt to analyze it within a task-based framework.

The initial – Presentation – stage of this imaginary lesson appears to be similar to the initial – Pre-task – stage of a task-based cycle in a number of ways (Jane Willis, 1996: 53, 56, 60).

There is ‘Introduction to topic and task’:

‘Today let us talk about parenthood, being a parent ...I would like to know what parents feel about being parents’.

The teacher ‘uses personal experience to introduce the topic’:

‘I love my job, I love being a teacher, Sometimes, however, things go wrong ...’.

The teacher highlights (but does not pre-teach) the new structure by means of its repeated use in real communication (see *italics* in the transcript).

Exposure – one of the ‘key conditions for language learning’ – is present as well:

‘Exposure to a rich but comprehensible input of real language ... comes from teacher talk’.

Despite the similarities with a task-based approach the described classroom interaction still remains within PPP framework. The new structure is presented to the students. No clear-cut task to do in pairs or groups is given. Consequently, no particular outcome is expected to be ‘reported’ at the following stage of the cycle as it would have been within a task-based framework.

However, the two approaches do not appear to be diametrically opposed. Assuming that Practice and Production stages continue to focus on form and not conformity, more similarities with a task-based cycle may be found. Task and Language Focus stages of the latter focus mainly on use and exposure, but they do focus on accurate form as well (especially, the final stage the name of which speaks for itself – Language Focus). On the other hand, there is no reason why Practice and Production may not involve exposure to real communicative language use. Hence, PPP and task-based approaches appear to be similar, for each of them essentially aims at teaching both: accuracy and fluency.

4.3 The role of grammar-oriented course books

The identified similarities between PPP and task-based cycles emphasize the high probability of an integrated methodology comprising characteristic

features of both approaches. In practice, as I have attempted to show, the two approaches may overlap and blend. However, since PPP and task-based cycles differ in their primary focus, it appears constructive to draw a line between them for the purposes of analysis. So, crudely the process of developing the integrated methodology may be presented in the following way:

Table 2

Methodological Cycles	
⇔	
PPP ⇓	Task-based ⇓
Form Linguistic Structure Accuracy ⇓	Meaning Communicative Language Use Fluency ⇓
⇒⇐	
Integrated Methodology	

‘Integrated Methodology’ may be substituted by ‘Grammar’, for grammar comprises both: form and meaning. In teaching grammar neither of the components may be omitted. Course books which aim at explicit teaching of grammar rules and structures play an important role in the classroom, for those books focus on accuracy as one of the components of grammar. To be

effective, however, accuracy needs to be combined with fluency, real communicative language use.

Ideally, grammar-oriented books would devote equal attention to both: accuracy and fluency. In practice, 'grammar-oriented' would primarily mean 'form-oriented'. Form-oriented course books may still be helpful, but as a sole means of teaching grammar they are deficient. Teachers have to ensure that there is a constant exposure to real language. This would mean incorporating multiple sources into the process of teaching. As practice shows, that is precisely what happens. Real (not hypothetical) teachers seem to never rely on one course book solely, they would always combine several. It would, probably, remain that way; at least, until the integrated methodology is fully developed and an 'ideal' book on grammar becomes available.

4. Summary

I chose to begin this essay by examining the interrelation between learning and acquisition. Such starting point appeared to provide logical links to both FLA and SLA (see Table 1). The assumption that acquisition is the goal of the process of learning ($L \Rightarrow A$) underlies the 'probabilistic constraints' approach to FLA; whereas UG – the basic notion of the generative approach - is acquired by means of innate mechanisms, rather than through learning ($L \neq A$). Since there is evidence in favor of both approaches, it may be assumed that knowledge of L1 comprises knowledge acquired through learning as well as knowledge that is innate. The same is true for L2 knowledge. Lexis always needs to be learned. Innate knowledge is always grammatical. However, not all grammar appears to be innate. Grammar may be further subdivided into core (innate) and peripheral (to be learned).

The investigation of core linguistic features is at its initial stage, hence, for practical purposes it appears reasonable to assume that all grammar is to be learned. Knowledge of grammar is ability to communicate meaning through linguistic structure. A teaching methodology should therefore focus on both: form (linguistic structure, accuracy) and meaning (communicative language use, fluency). Such integrated methodology (see Table 2) may be developed on the basis of PPP and task-based methodological cycles compared in this essay. Course books compiled within this new integrated framework would aim to balance accuracy and fluency.

Grammar-oriented course books available now are primarily form-oriented. For that reason they may not be viewed as the sole source of teaching grammar. However, as a component of the process of teaching, form-oriented course books may still play an important role in the classroom, for they provide the focus on accuracy as an indispensable component of grammar. Teachers have to ensure that the other component – fluency – receives equal attention.

To sum up, on the way towards the integrated methodology and until a perfectly balanced course book is compiled, teachers have to combine different approaches (PPP and task-based cycles, for instance) and multiple sources (including the non-perfect form-oriented course books) for one purpose – teaching grammar.

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