Viewpoint

Trauma, triage, and treatment in the ESL grammar class

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It may seem a bit melodramatic to say so, but hospital emergency rooms and ESL grammar classes are alike in that both are engaged in triage – the process of applying immediate and expedient treatment to alleviate trauma. Obviously, the analogy can only be pushed so far, for one would hope that the pain afflicted in a grammar class is mild in comparison with the anguish most patients experience in a trauma center. Nevertheless, they call for the same kind of treatment. In the latter case it takes the form of a kind of grammatical triage: the culling of structures that are deemed to induce unnecessary and damaging trauma in students.

Contrary to popular opinion, the human mind/brain is a capacity-limited processor, and much of the work nowadays in cognitive psychology is an attempt to explain how human beings can accomplish so many remarkable achievements despite certain limitations in cognition and perception (Kellogg 1995). Thus psychologists try to account for memory constraints by positing competing models (Cowan 1997); psycholinguists debate different theories about the architecture of the internal lexicon (Carroll 2004); and researchers in second language acquisition attempt to explain apparent constraints in adult language acquisition such as fossilization (Han 2004) and the emergence of foreign accents (Major 2001). In addition to the general cognitive constraints all monolinguals experience, most adult second language learners face two additional hurdles in their attempts to acquire another tongue: as reviewed by Jiang (2000), they are the poverty of stimulus (in both quantity and quality of input) and the presence of a well-established first language system. But my purpose here is neither to survey this ample research nor to discuss these various theoretical models; rather, the focus is on the exact opposite end of the wide range of inquiry encompassing applied linguistics, and this is to discuss pedagogical practice. Because the human mind is limited in what it can process at any moment, what are the consequences of this for the way grammar is taught to intermediate level-ESL students?

Though human brains are capacity limited to begin with, based on Mac Whinney’s (2001) Competition Model the mind of a second-language learner
is additionally burdened by the interaction between the first language and
the second as well as by competition among the linguistic levels of the second
language itself (e.g. the learner cannot simultaneously focus on pronunciation,
lexical choice, morphosyntax, pragmatics, etc.). This second form of com-
petition is particularly salient in the productive skills of speaking and writing,
especially when the performance is online. The cognitive and grammatical
“trauma” arises here from the students’ frustrating attempts to attend to,
process, retain and, especially, produce many concurrent and complex target
language structures, especially the kind that are typically introduced in ESL
classrooms. Some kind of selective attention to what is immediately treatable
on the triage principle is obviously necessary.

In one sense, of course, such a proposal is not new, for the idea that
grammatical structures should be graded for relative difficulty has a long
history in language pedagogy. But what I am suggesting here is not that
certain grammatical structures should be graded for late inclusion, but that
they should be eliminated altogether so as to alleviate the enormous cognitive
and trauma-inducing demands of acquiring a new language.

Naturally, the immediate question is what criteria should determine which
structures are to be discarded and which retained as essential to the well-
being of the learner as patient. In my estimation there are two which are
crucial. One has to do with the cognitive load on the learners referred to
earlier and the other with the communicative goal of their learning. Both are
local to a particular teaching/learning situation. My own experience is of
approximately twenty years teaching a grammar review course for a low
intermediate-level ESL class of university students whose goal is to prepare
them for a series of classes designed to teach them academic composition.
Clearly, grammatical structures crucial to this goal will need to be retained.
But the vast majority of the students in this class are native speakers of a
Chinese language, and so their mother tongue is constantly competing against
certain English structures (e.g. articles, grammatical number, and tense are
all absent from their linguistic Weltanschauung). In many ways, my one-
semester class is their grammatical emergency room, so to speak, their very
last chance to acquire any accuracy in the multitude of morphosyntactic
patterns they have been struggling to learn for many years. In brief, they
have fifteen weeks with me to be cured of several life-threatening linguistic
maladies! Thus, as I decide what to foreground and what to ignore, experience
leads me to place priority first on the significant English structures for which
there are almost no correlates in the students’ mother tongue(s). But I also
need to bear in mind that that mine is a review course for ESL students in an
American university who are relatively fluent in terms of communicative
competence but lack accuracy and fluency in their academic writing, a skill
which will be the sole focus of their remaining required ESL classes at our
university.

As far as load is concerned, it is worth pointing out that the “experiential”
observations made above about the particular problems Chinese learners
encounter in acquiring certain forms in English are mirrored by a long history of “experimental” error analysis studies (Scovel 2000). As far as my goal is concerned, guidance is provided by the insights gleaned from corpus linguistics, especially from the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (LGSWE) (Biber et al. 1999) and on articles based on this or related corpora (Biber and Reppen 2002).

What my grammatical triage involves is the selective treatment of structures that are essential to the goal while avoiding those which are cognitively burdensome but inessential. Take verb tenses, for example. Because there are no tense distinctions in Chinese and many other Asian languages (the predominant native tongues of my university students), and because the contrast between past and present marks many communicative distinctions in English, I focus almost exclusively on reviewing the difference between present and past, including the so-called “present perfect” which is, of course, another form of the past. It is extremely hard for Chinese speakers to be consistently accurate in mastering this structural contrast, even in their monitored writing. I not only avoid the past perfect but actually forbid it! As indicated in the LGSWE, it is basically redundant and unused by most English speakers. It adds to the information load without providing a communicative payoff and, when employed, is often misused. So, when encountering sentences like the following in students’ written work, I simply cross out had: “When I was in high school I had climbed Mt. Halla.” After they have finished with my class and move on to advanced composition classes, my students will invariably be forced to use the past perfect, partly because language teachers love to teach and test what is hard (but not necessarily important) to learn. Nevertheless, during the fifteen weeks they are in my class, the past perfect is one less grammatical trauma my students have to worry about and, hopefully, they will have more attention to allocate to the crucial present vs. past dichotomy.

Another example of grammatical triage concerns adjective clauses. These are a popular component of any English grammar class, at least based on the amount of time teachers expend on the topic or the number of pages devoted to the subject in grammar texts; but here again, we may be seeing that teachers and textbooks enjoy dwelling on what is easy to teach and to test. Evidence from corpus linguistics (Biber and Reppen 2002) suggests that in contrast, noun phrase (NP) modification in English, especially in the written academic genre, is infrequently marked by -ing and -ed adjectival clauses but is largely done through noun compounding, a popular grammatical characteristic of Germanic languages. Again, I simply ignore the unit on adjective clauses, and I spend the little time I have to devote to NP modification in helping students to uncover the wide variety of meanings which can be found in English noun compounds (e.g. word-order contrasts like house dog vs. dog house).

Up to this point, I have been talking about the triage treatment of particular grammatical structures, describing what I believe should be excluded from a
curriculum, or, to be even more extreme, describing the unteachable and the unlearnable, at least for the students in my classroom context. But there are, of course, structures which are essential to the goal of learning and which cannot be excluded, no matter how potentially traumatic they may be to acquire. And here we need to give learners coping strategies which they can use to learn for themselves. To return to the hospital emergency room analogy, I need to dispense medications to help them survive the myriad linguistic afflictions that may beset them during their coursework with me, and afterwards.

I believe that one of my major missions as an ESL grammar teacher is not just to help my students learn English but, just as importantly, help them learn how to learn English. This objective is aptly phrased in the Chinese proverb jiao shi weile bu jiao (‘Teach so that you no longer need to teach’). Nowadays, this objective is reflected in the great interest in strategy-based instruction (SBI) (Oxford 1990; Brown 2002), but irrespective of how it is labelled or characterized, the intent is the same, and I feel that an ESL grammar review class provides an excellent forum where students can be introduced to specific language-learning strategies and where they can be encouraged to develop their own.

Consider, for example, the case of verb phrase complementation. This is a large area of English grammar that is more arbitrary and complex than complementation in Chinese and many Asian languages, and which is unavoidable and not amenable to triage. Based largely on the frequency patterns that emerge from corpus descriptions of English, I give my students the following strategies to follow when they are trying to decide which complement pattern to choose after the main verb. When in doubt, always choose the infinitive. Most students have intuitively come up with this heuristic already, but I believe it is helpful to make this strategy explicit and point out how it is a “safe” strategy even for verbs which tolerate either a gerund or an infinitive (I like to swim/I like swimming). Even though some grammarians observe that there is a subtle semantic distinction between these two patterns (Yule 1998), for my class, I make no semantic distinction whatever and encourage my students always to use the infinitive. The second strategy I share is: if the VP ends with a preposition, always use the gerund (e.g. They were accused of hacking into the human resource files.). Note that when this strategy is made explicit to students, it helps them understand sentences like The company objected to splitting their profits in half, where the to is not part of a complement infinitive but a preposition/particle tied to the main verb.

Language classes do not have to be trauma centers but can be a place of challenge, interest, and learning – but only if teachers can reduce the cognitive load and encourage students to acquire learning strategies. Of course, just as health care involves much more than simply treating pain, effective language teaching requires much more than what has been suggested here; but grammar classes which reduce trauma and provide treatment are certainly places where healthy learning can begin to transpire.
References


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