



CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what they know and deepen their understanding of issues and interest in the ESL field.

Teacher as Decision Makers: Grammar Teachers As Decision Makers Sandra Lee McKay

PART I

In the well-known fable, “The Six Blind Men and the Elephant,” six blind men examining an elephant arrive at very different understandings of what it is they are examining. Grammarians looking at language have much in common with these men. Like the six blind men, they are examining an object of great complexity and magnitude, with each grammarian arriving at a unique interpretation of what it is he/she is “seeing.”

The definitions of grammar are many and varied. Crystal (1987), for example, distinguishes six types of grammarians - descriptive, pedagogical, prescriptive, reference, theoretical, and traditional - each with a different approach to grammar. Whereas all of these grammarians are attempting to describe the same object, the way they do so is, to a large extent, determined by the intended audience. For teachers of grammar, obviously the most helpful type of grammar is a pedagogical grammar. However, the intent of this paper is to argue that although pedagogical grammars are important resources for teachers of grammar, ultimately it is grammar classroom teachers themselves who must make decisions regarding how to best teach grammar for their particular classes.

Classroom grammar teachers, unlike pedagogical grammarians, have access to important information that can help them structure the presentation of grammar in ways that are most productive for their students. Teachers have a sense of what their students know and do not know about the structure of English. They know what motivates and interests their students. They know what examinations their students are faced with. They know how students have traditionally been presented with grammatical knowledge. For these reasons, it is classroom grammar teachers who should make decisions regarding what grammatical points to teach, how to teach them, and when to teach them. In the remainder of the paper I intend to examine key decisions that grammar teachers must make and suggest criteria they might employ in making these decisions.

To begin, I explore the literature on teachers as decision makers, highlighting factors that are often employed by teachers in making decisions. Next, I consider the decisions teachers need to make regarding what grammatical information to present to their class and examine choices grammar teachers have regarding how to present this information. Finally, I discuss on what basis teachers might determine when it is best to teach a particular grammatical structure to a specific group of learners.

Teachers as Decision Makers

The decisions teachers make in a classroom are based on beliefs they have regarding the English language, the nature of learning, the role of the teacher, and the curriculum. Hence, grammar teachers, to a large extent, structure their classes based on the beliefs they have regarding the nature of grammar in general and English grammar in particular, the beliefs they have regarding how students acquire English grammar, the beliefs they have regarding their role as grammar teachers and their beliefs regarding what type of a grammatical curriculum to follow. Teachers develop these beliefs based on their own experience as language learners in grammar classes, their experience of what works best in their own grammar classes, and the established practices in their institution and country regarding the teaching of grammar. All of these factors influence the decisions that grammar teachers make regarding what to include in their grammar classes, how to teach it, and in what sequence.

Another factor that influences teachers' decisions in the classroom is what some term *maxims* or rules for what teachers see as sensible behavior. For example, a teacher's decision may be based on the maxim of planning in which an individual teacher believes that a teacher should carefully plan his/her lesson and try to follow the plan. Or a teacher may employ the maxim of order which suggests that a teacher must maintain order and discipline throughout the lesson or the maxim of involvement that entails following the students' interests to maintain their involvement. Thus, teachers hold certain beliefs as to what is a sensible way to develop a grammar lesson.

Research on teacher decision making highlight the fact that teaching is a dynamic decision-making process in which teachers are constantly making both macrodecisions and microdecisions. Often there is a tension between teachers' decisions made before a lesson (i.e., a lesson plan) and those decision made during the lesson. What teachers plan for their grammar lesson may not in fact be what occurs in their grammar lesson. Grammar teachers then like all teachers have certain beliefs that inform their decisions both in the planning stage and in minute by minute classroom interaction. The remainder of the paper will examine the types of decisions grammar teachers need to make and emphasize that idea that it is important for teachers to be aware of on what basis they are making those decisions.

Decisions Regarding What to Teach in a Grammar Class

One factor that will influence what grammar teachers teach in their classes is whether they view the teaching of grammar as primarily a focus on form or a focus on meaning. Whereas some second/foreign language teachers operate as if the development of their students' communicative competence suggests a focus on meaning to the exclusion of a focus on form, it is important to note that grammatical competence is necessary for communicative competence. Hence, grammar teachers, if they wish to develop their students' communicative competence must give attention to both meaning and form.

There are many reasons why grammar teachers in India might decide to focus primarily on form supporting a basically structuralist theory of language in their grammar classrooms. First, there is the matter of tradition. A focus on form has dominated the teaching of English in many parts of the world. Curricula have been established based on this view and tests have been

designed and implemented to assess students' knowledge of correct forms of English grammar. In addition, many teachers hold the belief that it is their responsibility to "cover" the curriculum. Also, teachers may believe that their role as grammar teachers is primarily to provide students with models of the correct English patterns and to give them practice on these patterns. Finally, there is the matter of student expectations in which students expect the teacher of grammar to present grammar in the traditional manner.

However, if grammar teachers decide to focus on the development of their students communicative competence in their grammar classes, how might they proceed to design a lesson. After selecting a particular grammatical structure, teachers need to carefully examine three questions:

- How is the structure formed?
- What does it mean?
- When/why is it used?

An example will show how these questions might be used to develop a set of grammar lessons on the modal would. To begin, teachers would examine how the structure is formed, noting that this modal like others does not change form in the third person singular. In addition the form has a regular past tense negative formation (i.e., wouldn't). Next the teacher would address the questions: What does it mean? The teacher would note that the form has several possible meanings, the primary ones outlined by Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) as follows.

(1) Willingness	Would you excuse me?
(2) Insistence	It's your fault; you would take the baby with you.
(3) Characteristic activity In the past	Every morning he would go for a long walk. John would make a mess of it.
(4) Contingent use in the main clause of a conditional sentence	He would smoke too much if I didn't stop him.
(5) Probability	That would be him. (p. 56)

Azar (1981) characterizes the meaning of would in the following manner.

(1) polite question	Would you please pass the butter? Would you mind if I left early? Would you mind closing the door?
(2) preference	I would rather go to the park than stay home.
(3) repeated action in the past	When I was a child, I would visit my grandparents every weekend.

(4) “soft” statement

I would like a cup of coffee. (p. 176)

Finally, the teacher needs to address the question of why a speaker would select this form over another. For example, in making a request, why might a speaker select the use of would rather than another request form such as will, can, or could? What does the selection of this particular form suggest about the speakers’ relationship with his listener and with the seriousness of the request.

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