

To Teach or not to Teach Grammar

Arjen de Korte*

Driestar Educatief University, Gouda, the Netherlands

Abstract:

In my presentation I will deal with the situation of grammar instruction to learners of English in Dutch secondary education. After years in which skills training was the norm and grammar instruction was not considered helpful for learners of a second language, the pendulum is swinging back and explicit grammar teaching has returned to the Dutch classrooms (Van Wijk 2012). However, the rationale behind this is not always clear. Do teachers simply follow their course books, or do they rely on their intuition that grammar instruction must somehow work in the long term? There is clearly an enormous gap between the technical knowledge generated by scientific experiments and the practical knowledge teachers rely on in class. Moreover, research [Krashen (1985), Ellis (2006), Westhoff (2011)] shows that (traditional) grammar teaching is not that effective, which can be demonstrated by a handful of test papers which I will discuss in my presentation. More research is clearly needed into promising examples (Van Patten) of grammar teaching.

Key-words: SLA, explicit grammar teaching, meaningful input, grammar instruction, interventions

To Teach or not to Teach Grammar

I would like to start my lecture with an anecdote I once heard from a German teacher. He told how he had met a businessman who had asked him about his job. When he told him that he was a German teacher the businessman replied in awe: "Really, you teach German? That was always my worst subject at school." And he went on to explain how useless and frustrating the German grammar had always been for him, with all its rules and exceptions. The lecturer did not believe him at first, because the businessman often travelled to Germany for his work. So, he asked him how he always managed to make himself understood during his business trips. "In Germany?," the businessman replied. "In Germany I simply speak German." That this German might have something to do with the rules and exceptions he had encountered at the secondary school had obviously never occurred to him.....

* Arjen de Korte is Senior Lecturer and Head of the English Department at Driestar Educatief University, Gouda, the Netherlands. He studied English at Utrecht University and has been involved in secondary education and teacher education for more than 20 years. Currently he is doing research into the role of explicit grammar instruction in second language acquisition at the University of Reading (UK). He is also working on "Early English", a project which stimulates the development and implementation of a curriculum of playful, interactive and authentic English at Dutch primary schools. Email: a.j.dekorte@driestar-educatief.nl

This brings me to the subject I would like to deal with today. The question which the anecdote raises is the relevance of grammar rules for the businessman. I would like to change the matter into the following question: How useful is grammar teaching in language acquisition? This question is an interesting issue worldwide, but also relevant for the Dutch language teaching context and probably for the whole European teaching scene. In my lecture I will deal with the current situation in language teaching divided over the following four subjects:

1. Language teaching: More dilemmas than clear goals.
2. Research into grammar teaching.
3. Classroom practice
4. A short grammar test carried out with Dutch learners of English (A2 level).

Generally speaking Dutch language teachers work hard. So do their students. This lecture is not about the endemic complaint that teachers are slaving away in their classrooms while students sit back, relax and vegetate. In my practice of teacher training I have encountered many lessons with hardworking enthusiastic teachers surrounded by involved and diligent students. In those lessons books are read, skills are practised and grammar is dealt with. The last element turns out to be a puzzling dilemma. How is it possible that teachers explain grammar, that students understand the rules, practice extra material, fill in exercises and pass tests, and then fail to implement any of these rules in free production? That brings me nicely to my first point.

1. Language Teaching: More dilemmas than clear goals

Grammar is popular again in English lessons at Dutch schools. More than 95% of Dutch teachers teach grammar (Van Wijk 2012). One out of five teachers devote more than 50% of their teaching time to grammar instruction. When asked why grammar instruction is so important in their lessons teachers invariably answer by saying that they consider grammar vital for the students' proficiency and that grammar provides structure to their curriculum and lessons. Other reasons for the popularity of grammar teaching are simply that it is included in course books and the tests, and that students consider grammar

important. This is underlined by Van Wijk's research: Around 70% per cent of students agree with the statement that knowledge of grammar rules leads to better language skills.

According to Michael Swan, there are at least bad seven reasons for the popularity of grammar teaching (Swan 2002). First of all, grammar is included in most course books. Teachers assume that the grammar is there for a reason and do not want to skip vital elements. Secondly, grammar teaching provides structure. Grammar is seen as the stable point in a fluid language lesson. Thirdly, grammar is relatively easy to test. Teachers are happy that they can teach something that is testable and quantifiable. Students are satisfied if the tests ask what they have studied. The fourth motive is the idea that grammar provides a safety zone for teachers: The teacher's position is clear. Knowledge is measurable. Every teacher knows what has been dealt with and what is left to be taught. In the fifth place Swan mentions the intuitive feeling of many teachers, that they have also learnt the language themselves because of explicit grammar teaching. Thus it is the teacher's duty to teach pupils how he or she mastered the second language years ago. This fact is underlined by Clark and Peterson (1986) who claim that the most resilient teachers' beliefs are formed on the basis of teachers' own schooling as young students while observing teachers who taught them. Subsequent teacher education appears not to disturb these early beliefs, not least, perhaps, because it rarely addresses them. The sixth reason given by Swan is the idea that many teachers consider grammar the backbone of the language curriculum. If pupils want to communicate effectively, they will have to master grammar completely in order to do so. Finally, knowledge and teaching of grammar grants teachers a feeling of authority. They are in control, they know the rules and exemptions and offer their knowledge to their students.

Most teachers are aware that the reasons above are no examples of good practice. They also realise that grammar was 'out' during the periods of communicative teaching and task based language learning. However, teachers are aware of the fact that linguists' views on grammar teaching have changed over the past decade. The pendulum has swung back and as a result grammar teaching is back in the classrooms. Still, it may not be easy for teachers to decide what their position is.

Another complicating factor for teachers is finding the balance in classroom activities where grammar and skills training are involved. How much time should grammar teaching take in comparison with skills training? Should grammar be dealt with first, before the student integrates this grammar element in skills training? Or, should skills be trained first

after which grammar not yet mastered by the students has to be taught? Another cause for debate is the question whether or not skills training without grammar tuition is sufficient to improve a student's performance in L2. Although Krashen (1981) claimed that learned grammar knowledge cannot become acquired knowledge which can be used in free speech, other linguists do not agree [Sharwood Smith (1993), Ellis (1995) and DeKeyser (1998)] that grammar teaching plays no role at all in language learning. Ellis concedes that meaningful input might be the key to language learning: L2 classroom acquisition occurs when learners participate in interaction that affords comprehensible input and output. However, linguists also recognise that higher levels of grammatical competence require direct intervention. Lynne Cameron (2001) points out that without grammar teaching learners will not achieve the same levels of accuracy as natives do and learners' problems with basic structures may continue. Westhoff (2006), on the other hand, does recognise a role for explicit language instruction, but only for language learners beyond A2/B1 level.

Again, it is not easy for the individual hard working teacher to find a solid position. What is he or she to do in the face of so many differing opinions among scholars? An attractive option might simply be to follow the course book.

2. Research into grammar teaching

Lots of research has been carried out into language teaching worldwide. It is a booming business in which researchers and university staff meet each other at conferences like these on a regular basis. Lively exchanges of information and opinions take place and experiments and tests are presented and discussed.

It would therefore be logical to expect that quite a few studies can be pointed at in which researchers present an unequivocal and unambiguous case for 'focus on forms' grammar teaching. Worldwide language teachers teach grammar, so there should be plenty of evidence that grammar tuition works. However, there are not much research which clearly favours explicit grammar teaching in the classroom.

Andrews and other authors of this comprehensive international review (2006) are outspoken. They describe the effectiveness of explicit grammar instruction on writing and conclude that a hundred years of research has not yielded much tangible result. According to them teachers should continue to ask whether the teaching of formal grammar is helpful, as

there is not much evidence supporting the view that grammar teaching leads to students becoming more proficient in writing. In their review Helge Bonset and Mariëtte Hoogeveen (2010) describe many experiments in which the influence of grammar teaching on writing is studied (Van Gelderen en Oostdam, Bienfait, Andringa, Ellis, Hafkenscheid and others), but they conclude that it is doubtful to believe that traditional explicit grammar tuition has added value for written output.

This lack of such positive results is one of the reasons why linguists have looked into different ways of presenting grammar in the classrooms. Where traditional grammar teaching has been carried out by means of classroom activities that require pupils to produce structures and sentences with the target structure expecting that making learners produce the language correctly helps them acquire the correct grammar, a different approach has been introduced by linguists such as Bill VanPatten and Rod Ellis. Teachers using this method design activities that do not focus on the production of language (output), but on the language input. They attempt to steer the learners' attention to a structure that they can identify and understand. The pupils are given tasks with these structures, in which the emphasis is put on understanding, interpretation of meaning and raising awareness instead of on the production of correct utterances. A good example of this is the Total Physical Response (TPR) method, in which (young) learners learn by listening, understanding and paying attention to spoken language. According to Lynne Cameron (2011) TPR is probably the best way for young learners to learn a language without explicit language teaching. Many variants can be constructed for grammar and vocabulary learning, as has been done by linguists like Doughty, VanPatten and Cadierno. Ellis (1995) describes their experiments adding that research is suggesting that comprehension based instruction results in greater overall proficiency and enables learners to acquire specific grammatical structures. Of course, although there is still much to research and discover, this approach seems to be an interesting direction. Part of my research will concentrate on this input theory.

3. Classroom practice

As said before, grammar is popular. There is a large amount of grammar to be found in lessons, lectures, course books, courses and tests. Dutch teachers spend much valuable

lesson time on grammar, and on the basis of my research, study visits and talks with colleagues I have no reason to believe that statistics about the role of grammar in language teaching are significantly different in other parts of the world. The important question is why grammar teaching plays such a prominent role in SLA, while conclusive research data to support this role are hard to find. Why do so many teachers stick to grammar?

First of all teachers teach grammar because it is in their course books. Michael Swan: 'Asked why he tried to climb Everest, George Mallory famously replied, 'because it is there'. Some teachers take this attitude to the mountain of grammar in their books: It's there, so it has to be climbed. But the grammar points in the course book may not all be equally important for a particular class'. In this way the course book conditions the teachers. Publishers insert a certain amount of grammar in their course books. Schools buy these books and as a result the teachers teach the grammar that the publisher has included in the book and the accompanying tests. The Dutch linguist Erik Kwakernaak (2008) wonders on what basis publishers select grammar for their course books. Who decides what grammar is included in the books, in what order is it presented and in what way should it be taught? Kwakernaak pleads for more research into the grammatical acquisition process and the way this filters through toward the text books.

Helge Bonset (2011) describes the automatism with which a whole group of experts uncritically and intuitively embraces grammar tuition. Teachers teach grammar on the basis that it has always been done in that way, that somehow grammar teaching must be effective, otherwise it would have been abandoned long ago. He concludes that the last 40 years of language teaching has shown much intuition and emotion, but little empirical research.

There may be three more reasons for teachers to cling to grammar instead of broadening the range of language activities in their classrooms. They provide intriguing challenges for universities and teacher training colleges to change the mind sets of their student teachers. Bonset points at the enormous gap between language research and the classroom practice. Conferences like these are a world apart from everyday life in the classroom. It should be our aim to make research data available and translate them into useful instructions for teachers, policy makers in the Ministries of Education, publishers and, last but not least the teacher training colleges. Our information should filter through to the new generation of teachers, who might not be aware of possible shortcomings of explicit grammar instruction.

Another motive for the persistence of grammar teaching is the fact that a smaller or larger group of teachers can be found in every school who are very determined not to change practice in spite of concrete evidence that traditional grammar teaching is not that effective. In his book about teacher training Ken Bain (2004) refers to the same phenomenon, where college students held firm to mistaken beliefs even when confronted with phenomena that contradicted those beliefs. A final reason for some teachers to stick to grammar is the fact that safety and survival in front of a group of youngsters is more important in the short run than open mindedness and an experimental attitude. Innovation is always beyond the safety zone. Ellis (1998) describes new teachers leaning heavily on their practical knowledge of teaching instead of applying technical knowledge about language learning: 'New teachers need to survive in the classroom, and they often reject technical knowledge and instead rely on their practical knowledge. They know certain scientific findings, but fail to apply this knowledge in the classroom'. My fear is that by the time they have learnt to cope with the ups and downs of life in the classroom they will have adopted the traditional style of grammar teaching and continue to do so until their retirement..... Unless they are forced, or rather, challenged to look beyond their common practice.

4. A grammar test carried out with Dutch students

In order to verify claims that effects of traditional grammar teaching are questionable I have conducted a test with 48 pupils aged 13 and 14, who were at the end of their second year. The test was carried out in their last month of the school year and concentrated on the four most important grammar elements that had explicitly been dealt with in that particular school year, e.i. the present tense, the past tense, questions and negatives, and word order. The present tense had also been trained during their first year at school. Therefore, in this presentation I will only concentrate on the present tense data.

Present tense

Ex. 1 – Fill in the correct form of the verb. Use the present tense.

1. My friendsin a big house. (live)
2. Sandra in London. (work)
3. Ton and Joe a new car. (have)

4. John..... this book very much. (like)
5. Yes, he the questions. (understand)

Les 2 – Read the questions below. Write down an answer. Use the words between brackets.

1. What is James doing? He(wash) the car.
2. What are you doing? I.....(work) in the garden.
3. What is your sister doing? She.....(read) a book.
4. What are Liz and Tom doing? They.....(send) a mail.
5. What are you doing? We.....(make) this test.

In this part of the test (instructions in the sample above have been translated for this conference, but were originally in Dutch) students had to fill in the right forms in 10 affirmative sentences. This was a way of testing they were familiar with. Five gaps had to be filled in with the present simple and the other five were present continuous forms. However, realizing that language learning is also or mainly about expressing meaning, I have decided that a mix of a simple present form in a present continuous context (and vice versa) is considered correct. So, when asked *What are Liz and Tom doing?* an answer like *They send a mail* was seen as a correct option. Even with this lenient approach results confirmed skepticism about traditional grammar teaching. Of the 240 possible answers in the simple present exercise (48 students x 5 items) only 101 were correct. Of the 240 answers given in the present continuous exercise 108 were correct.

It is my aim to continue this kind of research with an experimental group and a control group. In this way traditional explicit grammar teaching can be compared to a different approach such as more implicit grammar teaching along the lines of the input theory. Obviously, I will share these data with you over time. To be continued.

This is a challenging and an intriguing area of language learning. I have already spoken of the different roles of teachers and language researchers. However, there is one similarity. In both jobs which I happily combine, there is never a dull moment!

Works Cited:

Andrews, R. "The effect of grammar teaching on writing development." *British Educational Research Journal*, 32, 2006, 39 – 55.

- Bain, K. *What the best college teachers do*. Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Bonset, H & Hoogeveen, M. *Taalbeschouwing, een inventarisatie van empirisch onderzoek in basis- en voortgezet onderwijs*. Enschede: SLO, 2010.
- Bonset, H. "Taalkundeonderwijs: Veel geloof, weinig empirie." *Levende Talen*, 2011 (2), 13 – 16.
- Cameron, L. *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Clark, C.M., and P.Peterson. "Teachers' thought processes." In M. Wittrock (ed.), *Handbook of research on Teaching*.^{3rd} ed. New York: Macmillan, 1986.
- DeKeyser, R. "Beyond focus on form: Cognitive perspectives on learning and practicing second language grammar." In C. Doughty & J. Williams, *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition* (pp. 42 – 63). New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Ellis, R. "Interpretation tasks for grammar teaching." *TESOL Quarterly*, 29, 1995, 87 – 106.
- Ellis, R. "Teaching and Research: Options in Grammar Teaching." *TESOL Quarterly*, 32, 1998, 39 - 60.
- Krashen, S. *Second Language acquisition and second language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- Kwakernaak, E. "Wetenschappelijk Trend en Grammatica Verwerving." *Levende Talen*, 2008 (4), 2008, 5- 8.
- Sharwood Smith, M. "Input enhancement in instructed SLA: Theoretical bases." *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 15, 1993, 165 – 179.
- Swan, M. "Seven Bad Reasons for Teaching Grammar – and Two Good One." In: Richards J.C. & W.A. Renandya. *Methodology in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Westhoff, G. "Eigen inhoud eerst." In G. Westhoff a.o, *De zin en onzin van grammatical onderwijs*. (pp. 9 – 21). Enschede: Nationaal Bureau Vreemde Talen, 2006.
- Wijk, J. van. *De Zijden*. Gouda: Driestar Educatief, lectoraat Engels, 2012.