

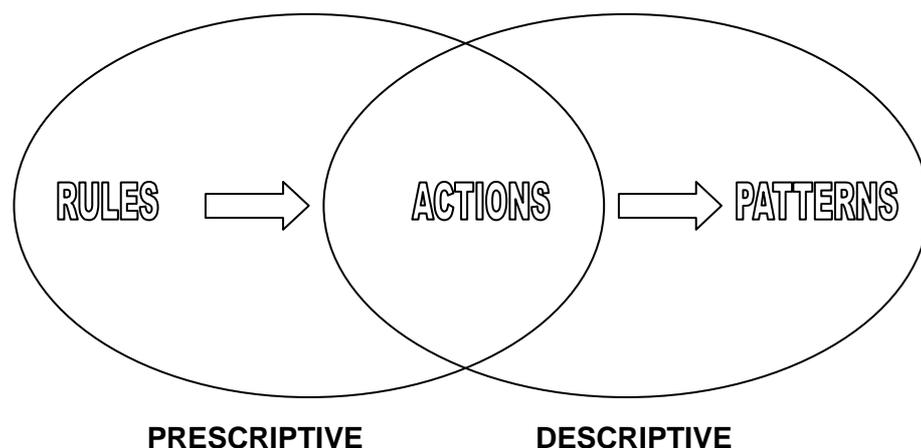
UNIT THREE: COMMENTARY

GRAMMAR AND INTRODUCING NEW LANGUAGE

1. The timing for this unit is probably a bit optimistic. It all depends how argumentative your course participants are and where they stand in their progression from a traditional academic approach towards the understanding and adoption of a more communicative approach where the emphasis is on encouraging the ability to *use* grammar effectively rather than relying on explicit teaching of grammatical knowledge.

This first small-group discussion is intended to start participants thinking about grammar and, in the follow-up discussion, to confront un-thought-out assumptions

2. Start the feedback session by plastering the board with words and phrases called out by the groups in answer to the question. You should get quite a wide range of responses. Then see if you can categorise the responses. Probable categories will include *rules*, *knowledge* and *behaviour*. You will have to play it by ear – but that is what makes this sort of activity interesting. Two likely areas of discussion include:
 - a. What do we mean by rules? Are they statements that tell you what you must do? (i.e. the traditional “Grammar” constructed by the “Grammarians” in his or her study.) Or are they attempts to construct explanations for what people do when they use the language. The former reflects the traditional “prescriptive” approach leading to the formal teaching of grammar as a body of knowledge to be learnt explicitly, while the latter view reflects the “descriptive” approach of contemporary linguistics which starts by observing what people do with the language and attempts to describe the underlying patterns that make that behaviour possible. Copy the diagram below on the board.



The left-hand circle is the Prescriptive circle in which Rules are presented in order to govern Actions (things people say or write), whereas the right-hand circle shows the Descriptive approach in which the observation of what people say and do leads to the construction of

patterns which attempt to describe what people do.

- b. What do we mean by “knowing” grammar? At this point you should distribute the handout, *The Teaching of Grammar*. Give the groups plenty of time to discuss the four quotations, but as usual, stop the group discussions while they are still going on for the feedback session.
3. The first two quotations deal with the question of the value of explicit knowledge of grammar and the question of the extent to which such knowledge contributes to the development of students’ ability to use a language effectively. It is obviously the case that most people in the world communicate perfectly adequately in one or more languages without any familiarity with any of the attempts of linguists and grammarians to describe the grammar of those languages and certainly without ever having studied any of those grammars. This provides the clearest evidence for the basic truth of Newmark’s assertion in the first quotation. It is worth reminding participants of the necessity and sufficiency criteria here. Not only is Newmark pointing out that study of grammar is not necessary in order to learn a language. He is also asserting the invalidity of an approach to language learning that suggests that it is enough to study the rules of a language’s grammar. Studying grammar suggests a process that leads to a knowledge of explicit rules of grammar or, as Widdowson puts it in the second quotation, “a knowledge of the syntactic structure of sentences”. In the still common situation where course participants are deeply influenced by a tradition of language teaching based on the explicit teaching of grammar rules I find that teachers are inclined to accept that the study of grammar is not by itself sufficient for effective language learning, but find it very hard to accept that the study of grammar is not necessary.

There is little point in taking too hard a line here. You want to introduce a few extreme statements from time to time to stimulate thinking and response, but you must not expect that you can totally change a group of teachers’ approach to language teaching and learning over the course of a short in-service training programme. All you can hope to do is stimulate your course participants to think about what they do in the classroom, give them time to re-consider why they do what they do and offer some additional techniques and activities to widen the range and increase the effectiveness of what they do. Nevertheless, you should still push them to question to what extent being able to describe the formation of the Present Continuous in English leads to students being able to ask each other what they are doing at the week-end.

The third quotation provides one explanation of why “grammar-based instruction” is so persistent. Do your course participants recognise this? In many situations where teachers’ own English language skills are limited and access to native speaker usage is restricted by lack of funds, isolation or both, following the grammar syllabus gives the teacher something solid to hold on to. If you are working in this sort of context you have to be sympathetic and focus on ways the teachers can make their classroom activities more active and more communicative, but you will achieve nothing if you kick away the prop that grammar provides.

The fact that the study and, therefore, the explicit knowledge of grammar is neither necessary nor sufficient for learning to use a language does not mean that it cannot be helpful somewhere in the language learning and teaching

programme. Your discussion should range over the questions of how much, what sort of and when

It is important to discuss what we mean by “knowing” grammar. You want your course participants to show that they understand that there is both conscious and unconscious knowledge to be considered here. Chomsky demonstrated a long time ago that our ability to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences can best be explained by our ability to operate a number of underlying rules for sentence formation. Everyone who communicates adequately in a language can understand sequences of words they have not met before and can produce sequences of words they have not produced before. Since it is clear that people cannot have separately learned all these sentences, it is difficult to explain this ability other than as some form of rule-governed behaviour. Grammars attempt to describe these rules and teachers spend a lot of time attempting to teach them. Your course participants need to consider how much of their limited classroom time should be devoted to the presentation and discussion of explicit grammatical descriptions and how much to meaningful use of language based on these rules.

You might want to show the range of attitudes to grammar teaching on a scale that goes from the academic approach of explicit teaching and learning of grammar rules at one end to the total rejection of explicit reference to grammar at the other. Depending on where you estimate your course participants to be on that scale and assuming that it is still more likely that they will be located towards the academic end, you should present your aim in these sessions as moving them a bit further towards the other end while probably not expecting- or wanting – to make it to the end.

The fourth quotation represents that shift in the direction of the “no explicit grammar” end of the scale. People have the ability to understand what similar things have in common and recognise patterns. Exposure to well-chosen examples of language can lead learners to uncover patterns of language for themselves. Studies in the psychology of learning suggest that patterns discovered in this way are retained more effectively than if they are presented as explicit statements or “rules” to be learned first before attempting to put them into practice. Once again, we are not presenting an “either/or” choice here. We are not saying that no overt reference to grammatical description is to be allowed. We are simply presenting views for consideration, which might push teachers further away from the academic end of the scale of approaches to grammar teaching.

It is most likely that your course participants will be required to follow teaching syllabuses with a sequence of grammar points at its core. This may be set out explicitly or it may be represented by the grammar sequence contained in a specified coursebook. However much we might prefer not to have lessons specifically labelled “grammar lessons” in our teaching programme, most teachers are required to plan such lessons. Accepting this leads us to the next part of this unit.

4. Now we move to practical classroom considerations. We will be dealing with overall lesson planning in the next unit. For now we want to focus on just that part of a lesson when some new language is being introduced and the question to be considered by your participants asks how the teacher should set about

preparing for that part of a lesson.

Listen to the responses from the groups in the feedback session. Discuss and assess what they say and make a list on the board of the most useful ideas. To end the discussion present the following NOT as “the way to do it”, but as a practical method of planning which makes the construction of a coherent lesson segment possible. You might be able to do it by drawing on some of the suggestions from the groups that you have put on the board.

- a. *Decide exactly what new language you want learners to acquire.*

Probably best done by listing some example exponents. For example, “the present continuous” is not precise enough. Better would be “the present continuous for planning the future” and listing exponents such as “What are you doing on Saturday?”
”We’re going to a party.”

This can help you avoid confusion by reminding you not to include other uses of “the present continuous” such as talking about what someone is doing at the moment.

- b. *Choose appropriate contexts of use.*

Students must be presented with examples of the language in use in contexts they can understand and which make the language vivid, meaningful and memorable. More work on this in a moment.

- c. *Choose the sequence in which you will introduce and practise different forms and uses as defined in (a) above.*

Following the example in (a) you might decide on a sequence such as:

- i. Simple statements:

David is going to a party.
Jane is staying at home.

- ii. “What” question and answer:

What is David doing at the week-end?
He’s going to a party.

- iii. Yes/No question with correction:

Is David staying at home?
No, he’s going to a party.

5. The feedback should include at least the following in the list of ways to create contexts in order to make the use of new language meaningful and memorable:

a. *Texts.*

The most common and traditional approach used in many school coursebooks. Unfortunately, the text is often simply the starting point for talking about grammar, rather than providing a context to talk about meaning. Many texts used in this way are too long to be effective and memorable illustrations of grammar in use. This is because of a confusion between the value of showing grammar in meaningful contexts and the convention that a textbook unit must include a topic-based text for reading practice.

b. *Pictures.*

One of the most effective ways of illustrating meaning.

c. *Objects/things. (Realia)*

Meaning and use can be illustrated by positioning and moving objects.

d. *Mime/Actions.*

Some ingenuity needed to extend use of actions to elicit a wider range of language use. For example:

Student mimes eating hungrily.

What's he doing? He's eating.

Why is he eating? He's hungry.

Why is he hungry? Because he hasn't eaten for six hours.

6. Make sure your course participants understand that you are only asking them to decide on the context they will use to start the lesson. Which of a – d above will they use? Ask groups to demonstrate then get other groups' reactions and discuss.

7. Workshop activity.

If this way of expressing language items is unfamiliar, you may have to help the participants uncover the underlying grammar.

Make sure participants understand that you are NOT asking them to plan a whole lesson. You only want them to plan the first part of the lesson where their choice of new language is introduced and first practised. It will probably be worthwhile to spend a bit of time discussing the relationship between "Introduction" and "Practice". They are not necessarily separate entities. You could suggest as your ground rule that something you can call practice, i.e. student activity, should start as soon as possible.

Put up the six-item checklist as a reminder of what we did before lunch and to assist with the creation of the lesson fragment.

During the workshop sit with the groups in turn and check that they have made coherent decisions about what bits of language they are going to deal with and that they are dealing with them in a sequence that makes sense.

Will the students understand what is going on?

How much explicit grammatical description have the groups included and is it necessary?

If, as is likely, there is a considerable dependence on substitution tables, are they constructed so that students cannot produce sentences without having to supply some meaning to what they say? For example, to get a student to produce a sentence like “John is meeting a friend on Saturday” the substitution table should look like:

John a friend

rather than:

John meeting/seeing/visiting a friend