

# **Teaching grammar in context**

**David Nunan**

*From a grammatical perspective, many foreign language programmes and teaching materials are based on a linear model of language acquisition. This model operates on the premise that learners acquire one target language item at a time, in a sequential, step-by-step fashion. However, such a model is inconsistent with what is observed as learners go about the process of acquiring another language. In this article I argue for an alternative to the linear model which I call, for want of a better term, an organic approach to second language pedagogy. In the first part of the article I shall contrast both approaches, and look at evidence from second language acquisition and discourse analysis which supports the organic view. In the second part of the article I shall outline some of the pedagogical implications of the organic approach, illustrating them with practical ideas for the classroom.*

## **Metaphors for second language acquisition**

A strictly linear approach to language learning is based on the premise that learners acquire one grammatical item at a time, and that they should demonstrate their mastery of one thing before moving on to the next. For example, in learning English, a student should master one tense form, such as the simple present, before being introduced to other forms, such as the present continuous or the simple past. Metaphorically, learning another language by this method is like constructing a wall. The language wall is erected one linguistic 'brick' at a time. The easy grammatical bricks are laid at the bottom of the wall, providing a foundation for the more difficult ones. The task for the learner is to get the linguistic bricks in the right order: first the word bricks, and then the sentence bricks. If the bricks are not in the correct order, the wall will collapse under its own ungrammaticality.

When we observe learners as they go about the process of learning another language, we see that, by and large, they do not acquire language in the step-by-step, building block fashion suggested by the linear model. It is simply not the case that language learners acquire target items perfectly, one at a time. Kellerman (1983), for example, notes the 'u-shaped behavior' of certain linguistic items in learners' interlanguage development. Accuracy does not increase in a linear fashion, from 20% to 40% to 100%; at times, it actually decreases. It appears that, rather than being isolated bricks, the various elements of language interact with, and are affected by, other elements to which they are closely related in a functional sense. This interrelationship accounts for the fact that a learner's mastery of a particular language item is unstable, appearing to increase and decrease at different times during the learning process. For example, mastery of the simple present deteriorates (temporarily) at the point when learners are beginning to

acquire the present continuous. Rutherford (1987) describes this process as a kind of linguistic metamorphosis.

The adoption of an 'organic' perspective can greatly enrich our understanding of language acquisition and use. Without this perspective, our understanding of other dimensions of language such as the notion of 'grammaticality' will be piecemeal and incomplete, as will any attempt at understanding and interpreting utterances in isolation from the contexts in which they occur. The organic metaphor sees second language acquisition more like growing a garden than building a wall. From such a perspective, learners do not learn one thing perfectly, one item at a time, but numerous things simultaneously (and imperfectly). The linguistic flowers do not all appear at the same time, nor do they all grow at the same rate. Some even appear to wilt, for a time, before renewing their growth. The rate of growth is determined by a complex interplay of factors related to speech processing constraints (Pienemann and Johnston 1987), pedagogical interventions (Pica 1985), acquisitional processes (Johnston 1987), and the influence of the discursial environment in which the items occur (Nunan 1993). For comprehensive reviews of work in second language acquisition, see Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) and Ellis (1994).

### **Language in context**

In textbooks, grammar is very often presented out of context. Learners are given isolated sentences, which they are expected to internalize through exercises involving repetition, manipulation, and grammatical transformation. These exercises are designed to provide learners with formal, declarative mastery, but unless they provide opportunities for learners to explore grammatical structures in context, they make the task of developing procedural skill—being able to use the language for communication—more difficult than it needs to be, because learners are denied the opportunity of seeing the systematic relationships that exist between form, meaning, and use.

As teachers, we need to help learners see that effective communication involves achieving harmony between functional interpretation and formal appropriacy (Halliday 1985) by giving them tasks that dramatize the relationship between grammatical items and the discursial contexts in which they occur. In genuine communication beyond the classroom, grammar and context are often so closely related that appropriate grammatical choices can only be made with reference to the context and purpose of the communication. In addition, as Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (forthcoming) point out, only a handful of grammatical rules are free from discursial constraints. This, by the way, is one of the reasons why it is often difficult to answer learners' questions about grammatical appropriacy: in many instances, the answer is that it depends on the attitude or orientation that the speaker wants to take towards the events he or she wishes to report.

If learners are not given opportunities to explore grammar in context, it will be difficult for them to see how and why alternative forms exist to

express different communicative meanings. For example, getting learners to read a set of sentences in the active voice, and then transform these into passives following a model, is a standard way of introducing the passive voice. However, it needs to be supplemented by tasks which give learners opportunities to explore when it is communicatively appropriate to use the passive rather than the active voice. (One of my favourite textbook instructions is an injunction to students, in a book which shall remain nameless, that 'the passive should be avoided if at all possible'.)

We need to supplement form-focused exercises with an approach that dramatizes for learners the fact that different forms enable them to express different meanings; that grammar allows them to make meanings of increasingly sophisticated kinds, to escape from the tyranny of the here and now, not only to report events and states of affairs, but to editorialize, and to communicate their own attitudes towards these events and affairs. Unfortunately, many courses fail to make clear the relationship between form and function. Learners are taught about the forms, but not how to use them to communicate meaning. For example, through exercises such as the one referred to in the preceding paragraph, they are taught how to transform sentences from the active voice into the passive, and back into the active voice; however, they are not shown that passive forms have evolved to achieve certain communicative ends—to enable the speaker or writer to place the communicative focus on the action rather than on the performer of the action, to avoid referring to the performer of the action. If the communicative value of alternative grammatical forms is not made clear to learners, they come away from the classroom with the impression that the alternative forms exist merely to make things difficult for them. We need an approach through which they learn how to form structures correctly, and also how to use them to communicate meaning. Such a methodology will show learners how to use grammar to get things done, socialize, obtain goods and services, and express their personality through language. In other words, it will show them how to achieve their communicative ends through the appropriate deployment of grammatical resources.

### **Some practical implications**

In the rest of this article I shall focus on the implications of an organic approach to language teaching. Such an approach offers exciting opportunities for teachers and students to look at language in a new way—as a vehicle for taking voyages of pedagogical exploration in the classroom and beyond.

There are many different ways of activating organic learning, and many 'traditional' exercise types can, with a slight twist, be brought into harmony with this approach, particularly if they are introduced into the classroom as exploratory and collaborative tasks. (For examples, see Wajnryb's (1990) 'grammar dictation' tasks, and Woods' (1995) gap and cloze exercises.)

In my own classroom, I try to activate an organic approach by:

- teaching language as a set of choices;
- providing opportunities for learners to explore grammatical and discursal relationships in authentic data;
- teaching language in ways that make form/function relationships transparent;
- encouraging learners to become active explorers of language;
- encouraging learners to explore relationships between grammar and discourse.

**Teaching language as a set of choices**

As indicated in the preceding section, one of the reasons why it is difficult to give learners hard-and-fast grammatical rules is that, in many instances, once grammar is pressed into communicative service, decisions about which forms to use will be determined by the meanings learners themselves wish to make. For example, if learners wish to give equal weight to two pieces of information, they can present the information in a single sentence, using co-ordination. If they wish to give one of these pieces of information greater weight, they can use subordination.

In order to help learners see that alternative grammatical realizations exist in order to enable them to make different kinds of meanings, and that ultimately it is up to them to decide exactly what they wish to convey, I often begin my language courses with ‘ice-breaker’ tasks such as Example 1. In completing this task, learners come to fashion their own understanding of the functional distinctions between contrasting forms. They also come to appreciate the fact that in many instances it is only the speaker or writer who can decide which of the contrasting forms is the appropriate one.

**Example 1**

In groups of 3 or 4, study the following conversational extracts. Focus in particular on the parts of the conversation in italics. What is the difference between what Person A says and what Person B says? When would you use one form, and when would you use the other?

- 1 A: *I've seen Romeo and Juliet twice.*  
B: Me too. *I saw it last Tuesday, and again on the weekend.*
- 2 A: Want to go to the movies?  
B: No. *I'm going to study tonight.* We have an exam tomorrow, you know.  
A: Oh, in that case, *I'll study as well.*
- 3 A: Looks wet outside. I'm supposed to go to Central, but I don't have an umbrella. *If I went out without one, I'd get wet.*  
B: Yes, I went out a while ago. *If I'd gone out without an umbrella, I'd have got wet.*
- 4 A: *I finished my essay* just before the deadline for submission.  
B: Yes, *mine was finished* just in time as well.
- 5 A: *My brother, who lives in New York, is visiting me here in Hong Kong.*  
B: What a coincidence! *My brother, who is visiting me in Hong Kong, lives in New York, too.*

- 6 A: I need you to look after the kids. You'll be home early tonight, *won't you?*  
 B: Oh, you'll be late tonight, *will you?*
- 7 A: I won *a prize* in the English-speaking competition.  
 B: Yeah? I won *the prize* in the poetry competition.
- 8 A: *The baby was sleeping* when I got home.  
 B: So, *he'll be sleeping* when I get home, then?
- 9 A: Are you hungry?  
 B: No, *I've already eaten.*  
 A: Well, *I'll have already eaten* by the time you get home.

Compare explanations with another group. What similarities and differences are there in your explanations?

*Providing opportunities for learners to explore grammatical and discursal relationships in authentic data*

Non-authentic texts are meant to make language easier to comprehend, but an unvarying diet of such texts can make language learning more, not less, difficult for learners. Authentic language shows how grammatical forms operate in the 'real world', rather than in the mind of a textbook writer; it allows learners to encounter target language items—such as the comparative adjectives and adverbs in Example 2—in interaction with other closely related grammatical and discursal elements. What learners need is a balanced diet of both types of text.

### Example 2

Study the following extracts. One is a piece of genuine conversation, the other is taken from a language teaching textbook. Which is which? What differences can you see between the two extracts? What language do you think the non-authentic conversation is trying to teach? What grammar would you need in order to take part in the authentic conversation?

#### Text A<sup>1</sup>

- A: Excuse me, please. Do you know where the nearest bank is?
- B: Well, the City Bank isn't far from here. Do you know where the main post office is?
- A: No, not really. I'm just passing through.
- B: Well, first go down this street to the traffic light.
- A: OK.
- B: Then turn left and go west on Sunset Boulevard for about two blocks. The bank is on your right, just past the post office.
- A: All right. Thanks!
- B: You're welcome.

#### Text B<sup>2</sup>

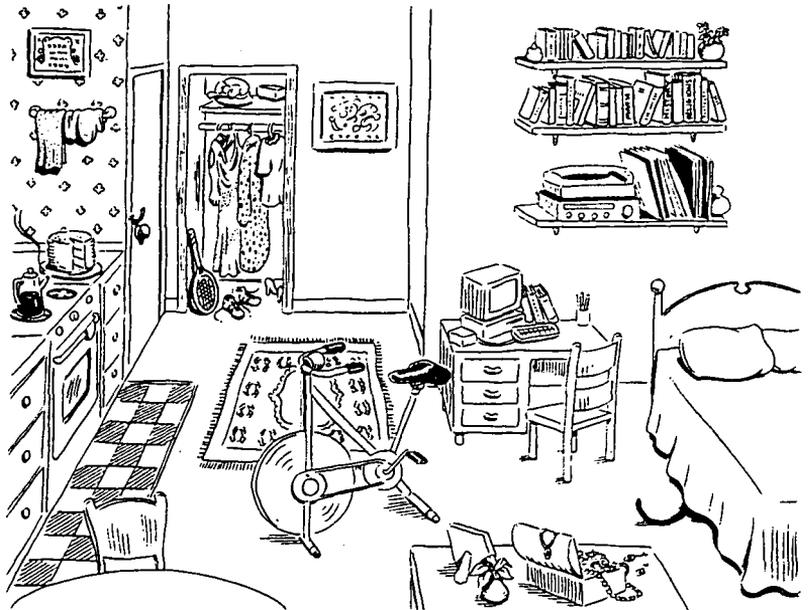
- A: How do I get to Kensington Road?
- B: Well you go down Fullarton Road . . .
- A: . . . what, down Old Belair, and around . . . ?
- B: Yeah. And then you go straight . . .
- A: . . . past the hospital?
- B: Yeah, keep going straight, past the racecourse to the roundabout. You know the big roundabout?
- A: Yeah.
- B: And Kensington Road's off to the right.
- A: What, off the roundabout?
- B: Yeah.
- A: Right.

*Teaching language in ways that make form/function relationships transparent*

This principle can be activated by creating pedagogical tasks in which learners structure and restructure their own understanding of form/function relationships through inductive and deductive tasks. Example 3, taken from Badalamenti and Henner-Stanchina (1993: 105), is useful for exploring a range of structures, including 'there + be', articles, yes/no questions, and conjunctions. The teacher can determine which form/function relationships are focused on by giving the learners certain types of prompts, for example: Whose apartment is this? How much can you tell about the person who lives here? Is the person poor? Why is the person fit?

**Example 3**

Look at the picture. Whose apartment is this? Make guesses about the person who lives here. Circle your guesses and then explain them by circling the clues in the picture.



1. The person is a man / a woman
2. The person has a baby / doesn't have a baby
3. The person has a pet / doesn't have a pet
4. The person is athletic / not athletic
5. The person is a coffee drinker / not a coffee drinker
6. The person is well-educated / not well-educated
7. The person is a smoker / not a smoker
8. The person is middle class / poor
9. The person is a music lover / not a music lover
10. The person is on a diet / not on a diet

*Encouraging learners to become active explorers of language*

By exploiting this principle, teachers can encourage their students to take greater responsibility for their own learning. (A striking example of this principle, in an ESL setting, can be found in Heath (1992).) Students can bring samples of language into class, and work together to formulate

their own hypotheses about language structures and functions. I sometimes give my students a Polaroid camera, and get them to walk around the campus taking photographs, either of signs and public notices which they believe are ungrammatical, or of signs which they think are interesting, or puzzling, or which contain language they would like to know more about. The photographs then become the raw material for our next language lesson. In fact, the last time I did this, the lesson culminated in the students writing a letter to the university estates office pointing out the errors and suggesting amendments.

Classrooms where the principle of active exploration has been activated will be characterized by an inductive approach to learning in which learners are given access to data and provided with structured opportunities to work out rules, principles, and applications for themselves. The idea here is that information will be more deeply processed and stored if learners are given an opportunity to work things out for themselves, rather than simply being given the principle or rule. (For numerous practical examples, see Woods 1995.)

*Encouraging learners to explore relationships between grammar and discourse*

Tasks exploiting this principle show learners that grammar and discourse are inextricably interlinked, and that grammatical choices (for example, whether to combine two pieces of information using co-ordination or subordination) will be determined by considerations of context and purpose. Such tasks help learners to explore the functioning of grammar in context, and assist them in deploying their developing grammatical competence in the creation of coherent discourse.

**Example 4**

Consider the following pieces of information about nursing.

The nursing process is a systematic method.

The nursing process is a rational method.

The method involves planning nursing care.

The method involves providing nursing care.

These can be 'packaged' into a single sentence by using grammatical resources of various kinds:

The nursing process is a systematic and rational method of planning and providing nursing care.

*Task 1* Using the above sentence as the topic sentence in a paragraph, produce a coherent paragraph incorporating the following information. (You can rearrange the order in which the information is presented.)

The goal of the nursing process is to identify a client's health status.

The goal of the nursing process is to identify a client's health care problems.

A client's health care problems may be actual or potential.

The goal of the nursing process is to establish plans to meet a client's health care needs.

The goal of the nursing process is to deliver specific nursing interventions.

Nursing interventions are designed to meet a client's health care needs.

The nurse must collaborate with the client to carry out the nursing process effectively.

The nurse must collaborate with the client to individualize approaches to each person's particular needs.

The nurse must collaborate with other members of the health care team to carry out the nursing process effectively.

The nurse must collaborate with other members of the health care team to individualize approaches to each person's particular needs.

*Task 2* Compare your text with that written by another student. Make a note of similarities and differences. Can you explain the differences? Do different ways of combining information lead to differences of meaning?

*Task 3* Now revise your text and compare it with the original. [This is supplied separately to the students.]

(Adapted from D. Nunan. 1996.)

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I have argued that we need to go beyond linear approaches and traditional form-focused methodological practices in the grammar class, and that while such practices might be necessary, they do not go far enough in preparing learners to press their grammatical resources into communicative use. I have suggested that grammar instruction will be more effective in classrooms where:

- learners are exposed to authentic samples of language so that the grammatical features being taught are encountered in a range of different linguistic and experiential contexts;
- it is not assumed that once learners have been drilled in a particular form they have acquired it, and drilling is seen only as a first step towards eventual mastery;
- there are opportunities for recycling of language forms, and learners are engaged in tasks designed to make transparent the links between form, meaning, and use;
- learners are given opportunities to develop their own understandings of the grammatical principles of English by progressively structuring and restructuring the language through inductive learning experiences which encourage them to explore the functioning of grammar in context;
- over time, learners encounter target language items in an increasingly diverse and complex range of linguistic and experiential environments.

In making a case for a more organic approach to grammar teaching, I hope that I have not given the impression that specially written texts and dialogues, drills, and deductive presentations by the teacher, have no

place in the grammar class. What we need is an appropriate balance between exercises that help learners come to grips with grammatical forms, and tasks for exploring the use of those forms to communicate effectively.

In seeking to explore alternative ways of achieving our pedagogical goals, it is important not to overstate the case for one viewpoint rather than another, or to discount factors such as cognitive style, learning strategy preferences, prior learning experiences, and the cultural contexts in which the language is being taught and learnt. However, while there are some grammatical structures that may be acquired in a linear way, it seems clear from a rapidly growing body of research that the majority of structures are acquired in complex, non-linear ways.

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### Notes

- 1 I have not acknowledged the source of this extract, because I do not wish to appear to be criticizing the text from which it was taken. It is cited here for contrastive purposes only.
- 2 Source: D. Nunan (1993).

### Acknowledgement

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