

A Grammar Recipe for ELT

박남식
(국제영어대학원대학교)

Mr. President. Fellow teachers of English. Ladies and gentlemen. I am greatly honored to be here today, addressing my distinguished colleagues from all over Korea. I am doubly honored to be back at Chonnam National University, my beloved alma mater, where I obtained my bachelor's degree in English language and literature way back in 1963.

My presentation today focuses on some do's and don'ts of EFL grammar pedagogy, based mostly on my experience as a teacher of English over the past four decades. My so-called grammar recipe here is thus a list of largely subjective pointers on how to teach English grammar in the EFL context. Be warned, however, that it is by no means intended as an authoritative prescription.

My first suggestion for EFL grammar teaching today is that points of grammar be thoroughly contextualized at every stage of instruction. I propose that they be embedded in chunks of natural discourse, i.e., in authentic samples of spoken and/or written English.

Points of grammar may be embedded in various ways. Now then, let me take a few concrete examples of contextualization.

(A) Passivization and reflexivization embedded in arithmetical calculations..

- a. 3 times 3 is 9: 3 multiplied by 3 is 9. → 3 multiplied by itself is 9.
- b. 3 into 3 is 1: 3 divided by 3 is 1. → 3 divided by itself is 1.

(B) Reflexivization and passivization embedded in alphabetical order.

- a. C follows B, and B follows A. → C follows B, which (in turn) follows A.
→ A is followed by B, and B is followed by C. → A is followed by B, which (in turn) is followed by C.
- b. X precedes Y, and Y precedes Z. → X precedes Y, which (in turn) precedes Z. → Z is preceded by Y, and Y is preceded by X. → Z is preceded by Y, which in turn is preceded by X.

Parenthetically, it is strongly recommended that points of grammar here be kept

below the threshold of consciousness. We can do so by getting attention focused on the communicative message of the embedding discourse, not the points of grammar themselves. This is designed to make the student experience and internalize the grammar points in questions subliminally much as native-language learners apparently do.

My second suggestion for EFL grammar pedagogy is that instruction be strictly localized to points of grammar relevant to a specific context. We should deal with only the absolute minimum of grammar involved in the context in question, always making sure that contextually extraneous points of grammar do not stand in the way.

When dealing with the article "the" in "There is one law for the rich and another for the poor," for example, we should confine our attention to the generalizing function of the definite article resorted to in the proverb here. We should not, in this context, bring up any other irrelevant functions of "the," no matter how tempting it may be to show off our grammatical expertise.

Incidentally, we would do well to remind ourselves here of the lesson implicit in the proverb that says, "He teaches ill, who teaches all." Grammar instruction should always be strictly context-specific. Keeping from succumbing to the temptation to be overly inclusive here can keep the fatigue factor to a minimum and keep the instructional focus on grammar points of contextual relevance only. This will hopefully help maximize pedagogic effect.

My third piece of advice on grammar pedagogy is that grammar acquisition be treated as a matter of habit formation, rather than as a matter of rationalization. To this end, we need to expose learners to plenty of inductive data. The exposure here should ideally be sufficiently intensive and sustained if the learners are to acquire grammar as a matter of habit by actually living and experiencing it.

We should familiarize our students with grammar by getting them to use it in a wide variety of lively encounters with English. We should keep from imposing on them any deliberate analysis of grammar. Grammar is not something to be analyzed and explained. Rather it is something habitually and subconsciously put to use in actual communication. The corollary commandment here is: Use grammar and learn grammar, not the other way around.

My fourth pedagogic pointer is that grammar is a good servant but a bad master. Some teachers think of grammar as the be-all and end-all of ELT, bestowing upon it pride of place in the entire pedagogic process. However, excessive preoccupation with fine points of grammar is often counter-productive in that it interferes with the natural flow of communication. Grammar-dominant pedagogy seldom conduces to fluency, as is amply demonstrated by our frustrating careers as ELT practitioners in Korea. We all know from experience that grammar is more often than not a bad master.

Admittedly, however, grammar can sometimes be a valuable pedagogic aid, say, in clarifying meaning. Word order, for one, can serve as a semantic guidepost. Two sentences composed of identical words may differ in meaning if the words are differently ordered. For example, "Mozart is nice to play on this violin" may have a slightly different meaning than does "This violin is nice to play Mozart on." To the extent that grammar can shed light on such meaning differences, it can be a good servant.

Such exceptional utility of grammar notwithstanding, my advice here is: Drive your grammar; do not let it drive you. Never let your communicative competence choke on an overdose of grammar. Never catch at the shadow of grammar and lose the substance of communication. The corollary commandment here is: Thou shalt not worship too much at the altar of grammar.

My fifth suggestion for EFL grammar pedagogy is that points of grammar be presented in functional chunks of authentic language, rather than in microscopically analyzed units. This principle should be observed, especially strictly, for beginning and intermediate students. Functional chunks of the sort under discussion here are communication-friendly in that they represent ready-made blocks of language of immediate utility to communication. Exposure to functional chunks of language arguably also affords the added advantage of facilitating acquisition of grammar as a matter of habit.

In dealing with the to-infinitive, for example, we should begin by exposing our students to such chunks as the following.

Wanna eat? /Wanna come with us? / Wanna join us?

Gotta go? / Gotta sleep? / Gotta see her?

I'm gonna leave today. / I'm gonna quit. / I'm gonna talk to him.

Whatever awareness of grammatical structure that arises here should ideally result

from incremental and gradual self-realization by learners exposed to sufficient amounts of functional chunks of language. However, intermediate to advanced learners may sometimes be encouraged to do a conscious analysis of grammatical structure and thereby raise their grammar awareness. Such an analysis would, among other things, show that *wanna*, *gotta*, and *gonna* here have the underlying infinitive-marker in common.

The final point I would like to make today is that serious and deliberate grammatical rationalization belongs only in highly advanced EFL classes. Such grammatical rationalization does seem to have a role to play in EFL courses that put a special premium on accuracy of expression for articulation of ideas. Cases in point include courses in English for academic and other professional purposes.

Thank you.