

Teaching Grammar: What Do Employers at the Postsecondary Level Expect?

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As the only advisor in a small MATESL degree program, I was pleased to write a strong letter of recommendation for one of my recent graduates for a teaching position in a summer intensive program. To her credit she obtained the job. At the end of the summer she called to tell me how much she enjoyed teaching but confessed that she had “really goofed up” on the first day of class when a student asked her to explain the difference between *lie* and *lay*, and she was not able to do so because she had forgotten that *lie* is intransitive and *lay* is transitive. She recovered her credibility with the student the next day by checking her grammar book and returning to class with the answer well in hand. Since I was not only her advisor but also her instructor in the required course “Structure of American English,” I began to wonder if I had somehow failed my student. I was fairly certain I had taught that point. I always do, but it seems to be so minor that I never spend much time on it. In retrospect, I wish she had been able to respond to her student’s question immediately. But I also feel I did the right thing by giving her the tools she needed to obtain the answer in a timely fashion.

This incident has caused me to think about what we, the instructors in MA programs in TESL, ought to include in the grammar component of the curriculum. While I would never argue for across-the-board standardization, it seems that there could be some common features one might expect to find in such a course.

Over the years the profession has embraced several different points of view with regard to instruction in grammar, beginning with the very structured approach of audiolingual methodology and the explicit teaching of grammatical patterns. Later Krashen and Terrell (1983) promoted the natural approach, in which formal instruction in the explicit details

of grammar was discouraged. They argued that such instruction might be detrimental since students monitor themselves with regard to the minutiae of grammatical rules and forms, becoming overly concerned with linguistic detail and thus less able to express themselves in a communicatively effective manner.

More recently the field has seen a move away from Krashen and Terrell's acquisition model, particularly at the postsecondary level, to more explicit grammatical instruction. This change might be viewed as parallel to the trend in L1 reading instruction, where emphasis has moved away from the exclusive use of whole language instruction back to whole language plus phonics instruction. In ESL, the shift is supported by research in form-focused instruction which examines the efficacy of approaches such as the structured input option, explicit instruction, production practice, and negative feedback. A brief discussion of this research can be found in Ellis (1998).

The focus of this paper is to determine how employers at the postsecondary level regard the teaching of grammar. In view of the wide range of theoretical approaches, what do they expect a new teacher to know and be able to do with respect to the teaching of grammar?

To that end I contacted six individuals in postsecondary institutions who are in a position to either hire new teachers or make recommendations about hiring and retention of faculty. Five agreed to participate in my research which consisted of responding to the following e-mail question: "As an individual who hires or recommends ESL instructors for appointment, how do you attempt to ascertain an applicant's knowledge of and ability to teach grammar? Feel free to add any comments you feel are related to this topic." Each responded by e-mail and then read and approved this manuscript. All agreed to be identified. They are:

- Johnnie Johnson Hafernik, Department of English as a Second Language, University of San Francisco.
- Martha Lynch, Center for International Women, Mills College.
- Sedique Popal, Department of English as a Second Language, College of Alameda.
- Jane Rice, English Language Program, University of California, San Francisco Extension.
- Steve Thewlis, American Language Program, California State University, Hayward.

From their messages, several common themes emerged. The first and most basic was the need for a pedagogically based grammar course. Other themes included the need for teacher educators:

- to deal with the grammar phobia of MA TESL students.
- to emphasize specific grammatical points, especially verbs.
- to help future teachers adjust their instruction to the level of the students and the type of curriculum the program endorses.

All of the informants stressed the need for a pedagogically based grammar course, maintaining that many MATESL-trained teachers seem to have never had such a course. Lynch writes, "...if an applicant is a recent graduate of an MATEFL program and an inexperienced teacher...I can assume the applicant has little knowledge of grammar for the ESL classroom." Four informants ask specific grammar questions at the time they interview applicants. From the answers that applicants give, they conclude that many new teachers have had very little instruction in English grammar. Rice writes, "You would be surprised to know how many interviewees cannot tell you what the present perfect is and how it works." She states that when applicants are asked the difference between *will* and *be going to*, it is surprising "how many candidates fake an answer and go on and on."

Not providing our future teachers with a grammar course is no service to them. Knowledge of the kinds of grammatical patterns English language learners need to know is one of the factors separating a qualified ESL/EFL instructor from one who simply happens to be a native speaker of English in the right place at the right time. Students themselves, while perhaps not eager to study grammar, seem to recognize its importance for their future work. In a survey of student needs, Wenzell, Hedgpeth, and Rightmire (1994) found that a course in the structure of English ranked second in importance after a course in second language acquisition. One informant, Thewlis, writes,

MA programs are failing in preparing teachers to handle grammatical questions from learners. Here is a parallel: While it is possible for someone to be a natural musician and to play by ear without being able to read music...if one wishes to teach in a conservatory, one must have the basic concepts and meta-language to talk about and communicate how music is structured to students.

Another informant, Popal, observes that some theoreticians "belittle the role of grammar in language acquisition. Teachers like what they hear...because a great majority of them...do not have the explicit knowledge to teach English grammar." It is thus clear that my informants expect

their teachers to have a thorough grounding in the direct elements of English grammar and are dismayed if they do not.

The operative term here is *English grammar*. We must be careful not to interpret this term as synonymous with theoretical linguistics. Modern linguistics asks questions about the nature of human language. When theoretical linguist Noam Chomsky (1965) brought these questions into the mainstream of linguistic thought, it was quite revolutionary. Many of the constructs of linguistic theory should ground our work in grammar, but we cannot lose sight of a student's need to know how English, in particular, functions. Thus, in conceptualizing a grammar course for future ESL instructors, we must remember to focus more on English and perhaps less on theoretical linguistics. Lynch writes, "The graduate schools tend to offer students courses in theoretical grammar, linguistics, etc., but not the practical grammar required of the ESL teacher."

However, this is not to suggest that all theoretical linguistic concepts be discarded. While much of theoretical linguistics may not be necessary for future ESL instructors, several constructs probably ought to inform instruction.

For example, one construct from linguistics that I find extremely useful is linguistic universals. When I suggest to students that all languages might, in some sense, be the same, they look at me in disbelief. I ask the question, "How is it possible for a baby to acquire whatever language it is exposed to?" Students then inevitably ask for examples of linguistic universals. "Well," I begin, "as far as we know every language has a way to make utterances negative." Negation is an abstraction. When asked to draw a picture of the sentence, *An apple is on the table*, one can do it very easily. When asked to draw a picture of the sentence, *An apple isn't on the table*, one finds the task impossible. But when we teach English negation to nonnative speakers, we simply assume that this abstraction is already in place in their native languages and all we have to do is show them how to accomplish the same thing in English. When future teachers contrast this task with the task of teaching the definite and indefinite article system in English to students whose native language does not utilize such a system, the task is much more difficult. They are now faced with teaching the abstract concept behind the pattern as well as the pattern itself.

Once we suggest that there are linguistic universals, the constructs of deep structure and surface structure fall into place naturally, since it is quite evident that English and Chinese do not look at all alike, yet both undoubtedly share common underlying characteristics. Do we then need phrase structure trees to illustrate these concepts? Probably not. Yet parts of current linguistic theory can be very helpful for future ESL/EFL teachers.

Teacher educators need to determine just how much theoretical linguistics should support a pedagogical grammar class. Rice writes, "I find interviewees who have studied other languages and have a linguistics background to be better on grammar questions generally."

Having established that a pedagogically based grammar course including selected constructs from theoretical linguistics is essential in the education of ESL instructors, we can now ask what features might characterize an ideal grammar class for future ESL instructors?

A pedagogically based grammar course must first help future teachers deal with grammar phobia. Math phobia is a well known phenomenon in education. It seems that we must also recognize grammar phobia. As mentioned previously, future ESL instructors know they need a good foundation in grammar, but even after completing their degree program, employers find that many applicants still are afraid of grammar. Rice states, "Some people are forthcoming about their dislike for grammar." Hafernik writes,

If a candidate tells me that s/he does not like teaching grammar (it is surprising how many say this), then I say "Why don't you like teaching grammar?"...some individuals seem to fear grammar and these people make me nervous.

Of course, fear of grammar relates directly back to a lack of training, discussed earlier. But, as teacher educators, we must apply what we know about good teaching to our grammar classes just as we would any other class. We need to make grammar interesting and even fun. Hafernik, for example, notes the subtle and interesting difference in the sentences:

- (a) *Because I was late, I couldn't find a parking space.*
- (b) *I was late because I couldn't find a parking space.*

In English, word order can completely change meaning.

People who enjoy grammar enjoy such examples, and these are the types of puzzles teacher educators could use to pique the interest of the students. However, we will simply instill more fear of grammar if we then spend three class periods and six phrase structure trees analyzing these utterances. Just as we want our teachers to be able to distill the important points of a lesson to present to their students, we must model the same skills. In addition we must be supportive and encouraging. This is not the arena to demonstrate how smart we are. We want our students to develop their own confidence and competence. We know that these strategies work

on the K–12 level. It is important to remember that they also work for graduate students.

A pedagogically based grammar course must also include a great deal of instruction in the specific points of English grammar. This relates to the trend toward more form-focused instruction. Employers may ask job applicants specific points of English grammar at the job interview. From the data, it is apparent that verbs are especially important. This probably legitimately reflects the importance of the verb system in the English language. The present perfect seems to be a favorite, perhaps because it is one where students first have to deal with more subtle features of the language.

Hafernik suggests the following sample question for job applicants: How would you introduce the present perfect in relationship to the past to a low-intermediate class? Rice provides the following example of an interview question:

Assume you have an intermediate level class...ready to have its first presentation of the present perfect. How do you present this, what examples do you show and how do you tie your presentation into a follow-up set of activities that reinforce your specific presentation?

The informants each provided several more sample questions. Although there were a few about nouns and relative clauses, the majority focused on verbs. Any TESL job applicant approaching an interview would be wise to review the English verb tense system.

What employers do not ask is also important. They do not ask about linguistic theory or the underlying nature of syntax. Clearly they are concerned about specific, practical grammar issues in English, and our teacher education practices should reflect their concerns.

Yet another issue for employers is how well applicants can adjust their teaching to the level of the students. In terms of gauging what students can handle, Hafernik notes,

I'm not sure how to get at this—how to find out if a potential teacher is good at this—but a good ESL teacher must have a radar for how much explanation and specificity students can handle. For example, low level students don't need to know the subtle difference between "I will go tomorrow" and "I am going to go tomorrow."...The teacher should know the differences, however...The teacher always needs to ask, "What do

the students have to know to use this structure appropriately most of the time?"

Teacher educators can easily remember to indicate to students the level at which a particular grammatical point is usually taught. When students present in-class teaching demonstrations in the area of grammar, a discussion of the intended level should always be included.

Coupled with the concern for the ability to adjust instruction to the level of the students, employers are concerned with the extent to which applicants realize the importance of grammar in a communicative curriculum. Rice writes, "In our program we emphasize the communicative approach to using grammar...so I look closely at the range of activities the interviewee has at his or her command which would allow students to practice grammar points orally." Hafernik states, "I generally ask a question or two about how the candidate would handle grammatical questions in classes other than grammar." Thewlis also emphasizes these views when he states that during the employment interview, he would ask a candidate about the role of grammar in a grammar class, in a writing class, and in a speaking class. He is interested in how these different contexts would cause them to modify their approach.

Teacher educators need to be explicit about the central role of grammar in all second language teaching. Hafernik states, "Every ESL...teacher is a grammar teacher." Applicants cannot accept an assignment in a speaking class thinking that they have somehow avoided grammar.

In conclusion, there was remarkable agreement among the informants about the importance of grammatical knowledge and teaching skill for new ESL teachers. All seemed to agree that grammar instruction has been neglected in our teacher education programs. This conclusion is based on their encounters with job applicants who cannot answer basic grammatical questions or who readily admit fear and dislike of the subject.

Although the small number of informants may not be representative of all employers, they seem to reflect much of the current thinking in the field. They clearly want teachers who know the fine points of English grammar: its forms, terminology and meaning. At the same time they do not endorse a return to the rigid approaches of audio-lingualism, but rather, they expect a good deal more. They expect teachers to have explicit knowledge of English grammar and an ability to integrate that knowledge into communicative approaches to instruction.

The implications for teacher education are clear. MA candidates need at least one course in pedagogical grammar that does not overemphasize theoretical linguistics but instead highlights the specifics of English gram-

mar for ESL students. Such a course should include some work in pedagogy because the ability to name and give examples of each English verb tense, for example, is no guarantee of an ability to teach these tenses and how they are used to someone else. Thus, the pedagogical grammar class and the methodology class might, from time to time, overlap. Certainly they should supplement each other, and the instructors should be in constant dialogue with each other.

Here I return to the story of my student who could not explain the difference between *lie* and *lay* on the first day of class. If she had been asked such a question on her job interview and had she been unable to answer it then, would she have been denied the job? Obviously, my informants do not determine employment on the basis of one question. Sometimes it may be more important to look at how a candidate handles a question s/he does not know the answer to, as this will certainly happen in class at some point. ESL students expect their teachers to know everything. Future teachers expect their teacher educators to know everything. Obviously this is impossible. But what we learned from this research project is that grammar cannot be neglected. We must pay careful attention to (a) the practical details of English grammar, (b) the level at which it is appropriate to teach them, and (c) their integration throughout the curriculum. If we cannot give future ESL teachers all the answers, we can give them the tools to find the answer for themselves and the interest to pursue learning more about grammatical issues on behalf of their language learners.

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