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Conceptions of L2 Grammar: Theoretical Approaches and their Application in the L2 Classroom

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Introduction

Stacey L. Katz and Johanna Watzinger-Tharp

The term “grammar” invokes a number of different notions that are critical to second language (L2) learning and teaching. L2 learners usually understand grammar to mean the formal rules of structure that the textbook presents to them. Grammar rules that have been selected and sequenced for the purpose of L2 instruction are commonly referred to as a *pedagogical grammar*, which Odlin (1994) defines as “the types of grammatical analysis and instruction designed for the need of second language students” (p. 1). The construction of a pedagogical grammar, or a pedagogical norm, requires the consideration of both *descriptive and prescriptive grammars*. The L2 curriculum should expose learners to variant features inherent in all languages. At the same time, a pedagogical grammatical syllabus should place greater emphasis on highly valued forms rather than stigmatized forms, even if the latter show greater frequency of use (Valdman, 2002, p. 63).

“Grammar” also denotes the internalized system of rules that directs the comprehension and production of language, as well as the way in which linguists choose to depict it. Chomsky labels this abstract, or ideal, knowledge of grammar as *grammatical competence*. He considers it to be not merely different from, but also inadequately manifested by, actual performance. In contrast, the model of communicative competence proposed by Hymes (1971) suggests that language users draw on their knowledge of grammatical rules and their understanding of what is appropriate within a speech community and a particular social and situational context. Here, grammar denotes sentence- and discourse-level formal patterns, as well as the choices that speakers make as they apply grammar rules to actual use.

This brief overview suggests that L2 professionals, as they formulate their understanding of grammar and the teaching practices that flow from it, face a complex web of conceptualizations. Scholars in the foreign language field (e.g., in applied linguistics, L2 acquisition, and teacher education) are unlikely to reach an agreement on how best to promote the acquisition of grammar. The ensuing debates are neither unexpected nor necessarily negative. As this volume demonstrates, different approaches to grammar instruction continue to generate useful research and engage scholars in a dialogue on issues such as the following:

- Should grammar be taught explicitly?
- Are drills ever useful, or are there better techniques?
- How do we integrate grammar teaching into the communicative classroom?
- How do we teach grammar that reflects actual language use?
- How do we train teaching assistants (TAs) to teach grammar when their own learning experience often took place in communicative classes where grammar was not stressed?

- How do we help TAs acquire a metalinguistic understanding of grammar?
- How do we apply research in the fields of applied linguistics and SLA to the classroom?

The 2008 volume of the AAUSC series *Issues in Language Program Direction* tackles the issue of L2 grammar with the assumption that foreign language professionals, and in particular language program directors, no longer debate *whether* they should teach grammar, but rather *how* they should do so. Foreign language teachers generally agree that effective grammar instruction requires both a sophisticated understanding of an L2's linguistic features and the ability to employ a variety of methods to promote those features' acquisition by the learner. This volume, entitled *Conceptions of L2 Grammar: Theoretical Approaches and their Application in the Classroom*, seeks to support the attainment of such expertise by providing chapters whose perspectives range from comprehensive, state-of-the-art descriptions to experimental studies on specific grammar instruction models and techniques.

This volume is intended to serve the profession on three different levels:

- To provide insights into cutting-edge research that may transform, or at least inform, how the teaching of grammar may progress over the next few decades.
- To help language program directors develop strategies for educating their TAs about the teaching of grammar.
- To offer a resource for instructors of departmental L2 methodology and pedagogy courses as well as for scholars conducting research in the field.

The 2008 volume is divided into four sections. The first section, entitled *Defining the Issue*, contains the chapter, "What Is Grammar?," which is an updated and less French-focused version of Chapter 2 of Katz and Blyth's *Teaching French Grammar in Context: Theory and Practice* (2007). It introduces the main ideas and controversies in the domain of grammar teaching: whether grammar should be taught explicitly, which methods work best, and what scholars, teachers, and students mean (or think they mean) when they use the term "grammar."

Part Two, entitled *Overview of the Research*, provides up-to-date, critical assessments of the recent research literature in the domain of grammar teaching. Taken together, these three chapters (2-4) give readers a critical overview of some of the burgeoning research in L2 grammar.

In Chapter 2, "Input Enhancement and L2 Grammatical Development: What the Research Reveals," Ronald P. Leow sheds light on conflicting results related to the role of input enhancement by dividing studies into two types: those conducted under the strand of textual *enhancement* (which isolate enhancement from other variables) and those that combine enhancement with another instructional intervention, such as feedback, and are conducted under the strand of *focus on form* and *input instruction*. Leow's critical evaluation of the research provides teachers with a basis for making informed decisions about instructional strategies that involve input enhancement.

In Chapter 3, “A Grammar of L2 Pragmatics: Issues in Learning and Teaching,” Dale A. Koike calls for the integration of a grammar of L2 pragmatics in the teaching of L2 grammar, focusing on a usage-based, contextualized approach. As Koike explains: “What is lacking is a model of a L2 learning system that guides learners from the discrete elements of language to their functional use in shorter to longer utterances, to their use in dialogue.” Conceiving of grammar as connected discourse instead of decontextualized sentences is an important first step in updating teaching methods and materials.

In Chapter 4, “Conceptions of L2 Phonology: Integrating Cognitive and Sociolinguistic Approaches to Research and Teaching,” Alene Moyer identifies points of convergence in the two major L2 phonology research strands that can help bridge the persistent gap between theory and practice. Acknowledging the complexity of issues related to the L2 learner’s phonological knowledge and use, Moyer guides practitioners toward three themes for setting goals in L2 phonology instruction: (1) age and experience and their relationship to phonological ability; (2) the classroom as a site for phonological practice and sociolinguistic awareness; and (3) the role of technological advances for enhancing perception and production abilities.

Part Three, entitled *Empirical Studies*, focuses on experiments that have been conducted recently in the domain of L2 grammar. It includes Chapters 5–7.

In Chapter 5, “Rethinking a Focus on Grammar: From Drills to Processing Instruction—Data from the French Subjunctive,” Wynne Wong demonstrates the merits of processing instruction in teaching the French subjunctive. Wong provides a detailed description of the emergence of input-based methods for teaching grammar, showing the deficiencies of drill-based, traditional approaches and advocating raising students’ consciousness of grammatical forms and leading them to make form–meaning connections.

Processing instruction also provides the framework for Chapter 6, “Structured Input and Textual Enhancement: Impacts on L2 Production in French.” Andrew P. Farley, Silvia Peart, and Erica Enns first provide a useful assessment of previous research on two interventions that are central to processing instruction: structured input, which is typically applied at the sentence level, and textual enhancement, which occurs at the discourse level. Their experimental study confirms the beneficial effects of structured input on students’ ability to produce the third-person singular French *imparfait* at the sentence level and demonstrates an even greater benefit when structured input is combined with textual enhancement.

In Chapter 7, “Socio-Pragmatic Competence in Russian: How Input Is Not Enough,” Jane F. Hacking reports on a study in which native speakers of Russian rated how well advanced Russian students performed on a discourse completion task that involved three speech acts: apology, refusal, and request. Although equipped with extensive in-country experience, these students are shown to be limited in their ability to employ linguistic features that are appropriate in a

particular social and situational context. To address the lack of socio-pragmatic competence, Hacking proposes a series of classroom activities that prompt students to notice and articulate socio-pragmatic features of the target language, while at the same time focusing on how these features differ from their English equivalents.

Part Four, entitled *New Approaches to Grammar Instruction*, contains articles that introduce innovative ways of conceptualizing and teaching grammar. It includes Chapters 8–10.

In Chapter 8, “Applications of Corpus-Based Linguistics to Second Language Instruction: Lexical Grammar and Data-Driven Learning,” Betsy J. Kerr explains that corpus linguistics is not only a tool, but also a framework for understanding grammar via induction (by pattern recognition and matching). Through a lexically-based approach, students act as researchers, discovering for themselves how grammar functions in discourse.

In Chapter 9, “A Conceptual Approach to Promoting L2 Grammatical Development: Implications for Language Program Directors,” Eduardo Negueruela shows how systemic–theoretical instruction reframes grammar instruction in terms of cognitive concepts (in the Vygotskian sense). Thus, instead of teaching formal properties of grammatical constructions, instructors are urged to focus on leading students to decipher the underlying concepts.

In Chapter 10, “Developing Advanced Formal Language Abilities along a Genre-Based Continuum,” Hiram Maxim argues that the development of advanced language abilities proceeds along a narrative–argumentative continuum, which in turn guides the selection and sequencing of genres in the curriculum. Maxim then applies his model to redesigning an upper-level German course.

Thus the goal of this volume is three-fold. First, it presents important, current research in the field of grammar pedagogy. It encourages readers to go beyond thinking about grammar at the syntactic level and to include pragmatic and phonological elements in a definition of L2 grammar. Second, this volume contains new empirical studies that are based on theories of L2 grammars, all of which stress the importance of providing students with input and raising their consciousness of how grammar functions in discourse. Third, it introduces readers to promising innovations in grammar instruction that require them to expand their conception of grammar itself and its role in the L2 classroom. The authors highlight the great need for additional research in all these areas.

As TA trainers, we have both the opportunity and the responsibility to inform and reform the way languages are taught at the college level in the United States. We hope that this volume will stimulate interest among colleagues to think about and update their strategies for teaching their TAs to teach grammar.

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