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## Grammar Instruction for Adult English Language Learners: A Task-Based Learning Framework

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### Abstract

Over the past few decades, grammar instruction has moved from its central position in traditional language teaching approaches to playing virtually no role in communicative approaches. This article first gives a historical perspective of grammar instruction. Then it outlines the 10 principles of instructed language learning formulated by Ellis and shows how using Willis' Task-Based Learning Framework in grammar instruction for adults responds to many of the 10 principles. Sample task-based lesson outlines that incorporate the framework to teach specific grammatical features are also provided.

### Introduction

Over the past few decades, grammar instruction has moved from its central position in traditional language teaching approaches to playing virtually no role in communicative approaches. Although recent studies have suggested that some form of grammar teaching is necessary in second language classrooms (Ellis, 2006), there is considerable controversy as to whether grammar teaching should be based on the traditional grammar teaching approach or on a focus on form approach where linguistic forms are addressed in a communicative language teaching context.

### Traditional Language Teaching Approaches

For centuries, language teaching was dominated by theories and practices that put grammar in the center of

language learning. This was evident in the Grammar-Translation Method and the Audiolingual Method. The Grammar-Translation Method was first used in the teaching of the classical languages such as Latin and Greek. The major characteristics of the method include explicit teaching of grammatical rules, memorization of vocabulary lists, and translation of passages from one language to the other. The Grammar-Translation Method produced students with extensive knowledge of grammatical rules but little communicative ability.

The Audiolingual Method was developed as a reaction against the Grammar-Translation Method, with a focus on the development of spoken language. Nonetheless, spoken language was still presented in highly structured sequences of forms. Classroom techniques usually include repetition of models and memorization of dialogues. The goal of these teaching techniques is for students to produce the target language

accurately. Learners' errors were viewed as bad habits that would be hard to break if they became established. Therefore, all errors were immediately corrected as they occurred (Celce-Murcia, 1991).

### Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as a language teaching approach arose in the 1970s as a reaction against the view of language as a set of structures. Proponents of CLT claim that the goal of second language acquisition should be communication rather than memorization of a system of rules (e.g., Widdowson, 1978). In CLT classrooms, students are encouraged to use the language in unrehearsed contexts where learners negotiate meaning through interaction with others (Omaggio, 2001). Innovative activities such as information gap, role plays, and games aim to engage learners and sustain learner motivation. The learner-centered and communication-centered approach made CLT popular among language teachers (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

Krashen's Monitor Model of the 1970s and 1980s greatly influenced the rise of Communicative Language Teaching (Hinkel & Fotos, 2002). Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1981) posited that the learning of a second language depends on comprehensible input, that is, input slightly above the level of full understanding ('i + 1'). Comprehensible input is essential and sufficient for language acquisition. Thus, the instruction of linguistic forms is not needed in the communicative method of second language teaching. Instead, learners would arrive at intuitive "correctness" (Krashen & Terrell, 1983, p. 58) of their language as long as they have access to comprehensible input.

Careful examination of the effectiveness of purely meaning-focused CLT revealed that when second language learning is entirely meaning-focused, second language learners do not acquire high levels of grammatical and sociolinguistic competence (Doughty & Williams, 1998). As Brown (2006) pointed out, grammatical competence is essential for communication, but it cannot be attained solely through exposure to comprehensible input. Interaction and

output play important roles in learners' language acquisition.

### Focus on Form and Form-Focused Instruction

In response to the limitations of purely communicative methodology, a number of linguists have proposed a new approach to grammar instruction called *focus on form*. Despite the name, *focus on form* is not a return to the traditional approach to teaching grammar based on explicit explanations and drills. Instead, *focus on form*, as Long (1991) defines it, is a teaching approach in which the primary focus is on meaning and communication with the learner's attention being drawn to linguistic elements incidentally and only when there is a breakdown in meaning during interaction.

Long's definition of *focus on form* and Krashen's Monitor Model have some similarities. They both propose implicit language instruction with a primary focus on meanings and no overt attention to forms. A major difference is that Long's *focus on form* temporarily and incidentally shifts students' attention to specific forms when a communication breakdown occurs.

*Focus on form* represents one approach in what has come to be called form-focused instruction (FFI). Ellis (2001) defines FFI as "any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form" (p. 1). In the same vein, Spade (1997) defines FFI as "any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learners' attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly" (p. 73).

Implied in these definitions are the various options in FFI: from explicit, more traditional grammar instruction to implicit, incidental references to form; from planned focus on pre-selected grammatical features to spontaneous focus on form. A well-known form-focused approach is often referred to as PPP (Presentation → Practice → Production). PPP begins by highlighting one or two new forms and introducing their meaning. It then moves to more controlled practice such

as filling in blanks and writing sentences with the target forms. The controlled practice is gradually relaxed until finally the learner is offered opportunities to use the target forms in more communicative tasks.

Numerous research studies exist on the effects of FFI (Norris and Ortega's meta-analysis published in 2000 identifies 79 studies). However, the research and theories do not give definite answers on what types of instruction can best facilitate language learning (Ellis, 2005). There is considerable controversy as to whether instruction should be based on the well-known PPP approach or the *focus on form* approach with temporary and incidental attention to grammatical features in communicative contexts (Ellis, 2005). Although reflecting the complexity of second language acquisition, these controversies pose serious problems for teachers who may need a set of principles to follow when teaching adult second language learners.

### **Principles of Instructed Learning**

Drawing from a variety of theoretical perspectives, Ellis (2005) outlines 10 principles of instructed learning. Taken together, these principles are guidelines that help provide appropriate conditions for adult second language learners. Although they are open to discussion and argument, these principles offer teachers direction for teaching grammar to adult learners. The following is a summary of the ten principles.

*Principle 1: Instruction needs to ensure that learners develop a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence.*

The pre-fabricated patterns and expressions provide an ideal foundation for early language acquisition and fluency. A complete language curriculum should also cater to accuracy in the development of rule-based knowledge.

*Principle 2: Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning.*

“Meaning”, according to Ellis (2005), refers to both

the semantic meaning (i.e., the meanings of lexical items and specific grammatical features) and pragmatic meaning (i.e., the highly contextualized meanings that arise in acts of communication). Learners should have opportunities to focus on both types of meanings with the pragmatic meaning being more crucial to language acquisition.

*Principle 3: Instruction needs to ensure that learners also focus on form.*

Focus on form may include both intensive and extensive instruction. Intensive grammar teaching refers to the traditional grammar instruction that focuses on a single or a few forms over a sustained period of time. Extensive grammar teaching refers to incidental instruction concerning a whole range of structures within a short period of time in the form of corrective feedback or in task-based lessons. Arguably, both intensive and extensive grammar teaching need to be incorporated in instruction.

*Principle 4: Instruction needs to be predominantly directed at developing implicit knowledge of the second language but should not neglect explicit knowledge.*

Implicit knowledge is held unconsciously and is internalized by the learner. Explicit knowledge is held consciously by the learner. Competence in a second language is primarily achieved through implicit knowledge because it allows learners to use the language without thinking about it. Explicit knowledge may help learners to notice the target forms in the input and eventually acquire these forms. This principle posits that both kinds of knowledge should be focused on instruction with priority given to implicit knowledge.

*Principle 5: Instruction needs to take account of the learner's built-in syllabusing.*

Learners acquire a second language following a built-in syllabus. Whether the learners acquire a second language through instructed or uninstructed settings,

they seem to follow the same natural order of acquisition. However, instructed learners generally achieve higher levels of grammatical competence than uninstructed learners.

*Principle 6: Successful instructed language learning requires extensive second language input.*

Although researchers may not agree with Krashen that comprehensible input is all that is required for successful language acquisition, there is no doubt that learners need extensive second language input in order to acquire the language.

*Principle 7: Successful instructed language learning also requires opportunities for output.*

Both input and output are necessary for second language acquisition. During output, learners have the opportunity to produce the language, test their hypotheses about grammar, and make their knowledge of grammar automatic.

*Principle 8: The opportunity to interact in the second language is central to developing second language proficiency.*

Social interactions occur when input and output take place. Group work where learners have opportunity to use language and negotiate meaning with one another is essential.

*Principle 9: Instruction needs to take account of individual differences in learners.*

Although it is difficult to match instruction with learners' individual learning styles, teachers can adopt a flexible teaching approach involving a variety of learning activities. Teachers can also employ teaching strategies that activate learners' intrinsic motivation.

*Principle 10: When assessing learners' second language proficiency it is important to examine free as well as controlled production.*

Although free response is the best measure of communicative competence, relatively closed tasks such as multiple choice or gap-filling exercise can assess directly the outcomes of instruction.

These 10 principles of instructed learning offer guidelines in grammar instruction for teachers of adult English language learners. Task-based learning, especially Willis' model for task-based learning, effectively addresses many of these principles and facilitates adult learners in their English language learning.

### **Task-Based Language Teaching and Task-Based Learning Framework**

Task-based language teaching has been considered by many as a manifestation of CLT and has emerged as a major focal point of language teaching practice (Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 2003). Skehan (1998) defines a task as an activity in which meaning is primary, there is a problem to solve, there is a relationship to the real-world, and where there is an objective that can be assessed in terms of an outcome (p. 95). It can be determined whether or not an activity is a task by asking these questions: (a) Is there a primary focus on meaning? (b) Does the activity relate to real-world activities? (c) Is there a problem to solve? and (d) Can it be assessed in terms of outcome?

In task-based language teaching, the focus is on the completion of the task. A well-designed task with qualities mentioned above has the potential to fulfill many of the instructed learning principles outlined by Ellis (2005). In particular, tasks are usually performed in pairs or small groups so they provide opportunities for interaction (Principle 8) and for the learners' active use of the language (Principle 7). To complete the task successfully, the focus is on understanding and communicating meanings (Principle 2). All tasks must have a measurable outcome. An outcome that is intrinsically engaging is more likely to develop and maintain learners' intrinsic motivation (Principle 9). An important feature of a task is it also ensures that learners focus on form through a closer study of some of the specific language features at the end of the task

(Principle 3).

Willis' Task-Based Learning Framework (Willis, 1996) offers teachers a practical guide for conducting tasks in the classroom. This framework consists of three phases: the pre-task phase, the task cycle, and language focus. At the pre-task phase, the teacher highlights useful words and phrases, helps students understand directions for the task, and prepares them for the task. The task cycle includes three components: (a) *task*: students work in pairs or small groups and the teacher monitors from a distance; (b) *planning*: students prepare to report to the whole class orally or in writing how they did the task and what they decided or discovered; and (c) *report*: some groups present their reports to the class or exchange written reports, and then they compare results. During the task cycle, students may also hear a recording or read a text about a similar task and compare how they did it. Finally, the language focus phase can be further divided into two components: (a) *analysis*: students examine and discuss specific features of the text or transcript of the recording; and (b) *practice*: teacher conducts practice of new words, phrases, and patterns occurring in the data either during or after the analysis.

In the pre-task stage, students are introduced to the topic and are prepared to cope with the task in a variety of ways. Examples of the pre-task activities are pre-teaching key linguistic items, establishing the task outcome, or performing a similar task (see Willis, 1996, for more examples). Next, the task cycle offers students the chance to use the language they already know and to improve the language under teacher guidance. Students gain fluency and confidence during the task stage. They then improve the language during the planning stage with access to the teacher's help when they need it. The report stage gives students motivation to improve upon the language they use. At the end of the task cycle, students are provided with recordings or texts which provide familiar contexts for the teaching of grammar. The language focus stage leads naturally out of the task cycle. Students have opportunities to see grammar rules in use, learn the rules explicitly, and practice the target forms.

Having a language focus phase at the end of the task

rather than at the beginning distinguishes the task-based learning framework from the well-known form-focused PPP approach (Presentation→Practice→Production) approach. In the PPP approach, learners have been conditioned to focus on the particular forms before they are asked to use the forms in communicative activities. This may appear that both form and meaning are focused on, but it is very difficult for learners to think about both form and meaning at the same time, particularly for learners of lower language proficiency (Willis, 2007). Another drawback of the traditional PPP approach resides in language acquisition research. According to research (for example, Pienemann, 1988), language development takes time and goes through stages that are not controlled by the learner. If learners are not developmentally ready, they cannot successfully learn what is taught. They can only learn certain language features according to their own internal schedule.

The task-based learning framework is flexible (Willis, 1996). The various components of the framework can be weighted differently according to learners' needs. For example, the report component can be eliminated or simplified for beginners. This framework can work well with existing course materials. A good course text usually contains many of the activities that are suitable for the different components of the framework. The teacher may only need to change the order of activities. For example, if the course textbook follows a PPP cycle, a free communicative activity can be conducted first, introduced by a pre-task activity, and followed by language focus work afterwards. Teachers could also design their own task or plan to supplement what is in the course textbook. If this is the case, more preparation is needed, for example, finding suitable pictures and text.

### **Two Sample Task-Based Grammar Lesson Outlines**

The tasks listed in Table 1 and Table 2 are designed following Willis' task-based learning framework. Although tasks designed following this framework are

not the only way to teach grammar to adults, tasks designed using this framework address many of Ellis's 10 principles of instructed learning.

### **Conclusion**

Over the past few decades, the focal attention of classroom instruction has shifted from grammar forms as in the Grammar-Translation Method and Audio lingual Method to functional language within communicative contexts (Brown, 2006). Motivated by research findings that “natural” language learning does not lead to high levels of grammatical and sociolinguistic competence (Ellis, 2002), the role and place of grammar in a communicative context is

becoming more and more important. However, what is the best approach to the teaching of grammar remains controversial.

In light of the 10 instructed learning principles summarized by Ellis (2005), Willis' task-based learning framework offers a promising grammar-teaching approach to adult second language learners. Different from the well-known form-focused approach of PPP (Presentation → Practice → Production), this framework encourages a holistic use of language by focusing predominantly on meaning and then offering learners opportunities to focus on form. Although this framework is not the only way to teach grammar to adult learners, tasks designed using this framework provide the kind of opportunities and practices that fulfill many of the 10 principles of instructed learning.

Table 1: Outline for Teaching *Used To* and *Didn't Use To*

<p><b>Preparation:</b> Prepare a short text about how things used to be before the invention of the cell phone. In the text include 2-3 examples using <i>used to</i> and <i>didn't use to</i>.</p>	
<p><b>Pre-task</b></p>	<p>Ask students to brainstorm a list of important inventions. You might get things like airplane, iPod, cell phone, car, washing machine, the Internet, and computer. Take the cell-phone as an example and ask students what things were like before the invention of the cell phone. Ask them also to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the invention. For example, before the cell phone, people could only call and receive calls from home or offices. Now people can call and receive calls from virtually anywhere. You can carry the phone with you so you do not miss important calls. It can be dangerous when people use cell phones while driving.</p>
<p><b>Task Cycle</b></p>	<p><b>Task.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Ask students to work in small groups of three and have each group choose one invention. Ask them to come up with three things that people did differently when the invention did not exist.</li> <li>(b) Ask them to discuss at least two advantages and two disadvantages of the invention.</li> </ul> <p><b>Planning.</b> After the task ends, have each group work together to prepare a summary of their discussion to report to the whole class.</p> <p><b>Report and Listening.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Each group can designate one member to report the group's summary to the whole class. Ask the class to listen to each group's report carefully and decide which invention has changed people's lives the most.</li> <li>(b) Ask the students to listen to you doing the same task: reporting the way things used to be before the invention of the cell phone using <i>used to</i>, <i>didn't used to</i>.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Language Focus</b></p>	<p><b>Analysis.</b> After you read your text two times, choose two or three sentences from the text with the target forms: "used to", "didn't use to" and write them on the board. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) People used to call from the home or office.</li> <li>(b) People didn't use to call so much.</li> <li>(c) Long distance calls used to be expensive.</li> </ul> <p>Explain the rules of form for <i>used to</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) used to + infinitive, and didn't use to + infinitive</li> <li>(b) <i>used to</i> is for past habits or customs. It is not for an action that happened once or a few times.</li> <li>(c) The <i>d</i> in <i>used to</i> is not pronounced.</li> </ul> <p><b>Practice.</b> You now ask each group to rewrite their summary using <i>used to</i> and <i>didn't used to</i>. Ask a few students to report back to the class and correct language mistakes using the target forms.</p>

Table 2: Outline for Teaching Modal Verbs of *Must, Have To, Does Not Have To, May, Can*

<p><b>Preparation:</b> Locate or prepare a text with the target forms. For this example, a text on apartment leases will be used.</p>	
<p><b>Pre-task</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask students the following questions:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you live in an apartment?</li> <li>Do you have a lease?</li> <li>Did you understand the lease when you signed it?</li> </ol> </li> <li>Pre-teach vocabulary that students might be unfamiliar. For example, lease, landlord, renter, rental, rent, terms of the lease, security deposit, smoke detector, damage, and 30-day notice.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Task Cycle</b></p>	<p><b>Task.</b> Read the text to the students (see below for the text <i>An Apartment Lease</i>) twice at normal speed. The first time through, ask the students to listen and focus on the general meaning of what the text is about. The second time, ask them to write down key words.</p> <p><b>Planning.</b> Ask students to work in groups of three and try to reconstruct the text.</p> <p><b>Reporting.</b> Ask one member from each group to read their reconstructed text.</p>
<p><b>Language Focus</b></p>	<p><b>Analysis.</b> Explain forms, meaning, and use</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Must, can, should + infinitives</li> <li>Have to + infinitives</li> <li>Can't, shouldn't, mustn't + infinitives</li> <li>Explain meaning and use of the form</li> </ol> <p>Give each group the original text and ask them to underline all the modal verbs.</p> <p><b>Practice.</b> Ask each group to compare their reconstructed text with the original and correct mistakes.</p>

### An Apartment Lease

When people rent an apartment, they often have to sign a lease. A lease is an agreement between the owner (landlord) and the renter (tenant). A lease states rules the renter must follow. Some leases contain the following rules: (1) Renters must not have a waterbed. (2) Renters must not have a pet; and (3) Renters must pay a security deposit. The renter does not have to agree to all the terms of the lease. He can ask for changes before he signs.

Owners also have to follow rules. They must provide heat during the winter months. In most cities, they must put a smoke detector in each apartment and in the halls.

Many owners ask the renter to pay a security deposit,

in case there are damages. When the renter moves out, the owner is supposed to return the deposit plus interest if the apartment is in good condition. If there is damage, the owner can use part or all of the money to repair the damage. However, he may not keep the renter's money for normal use of the apartment.

When the lease is up, the owner can offer the renter a new lease or he can ask the renter to leave. The owner is supposed to give the renter notice (usually at least 30 days) if he wants the renter to leave.

An owner can't refuse to rent to a person because of sex, race, religion, nationality, or disability.

(Adapted: *Elbaum Grammar In Context 2, Lesson 8, p. 210*)

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