The Structural Syllabus and Grammar Teaching:
Implications for the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of the structural syllabus in EFL settings, particularly EFL classes in Iran. The paper starts with an overview of what the structural syllabus is. Afterwards, the shortcomings of the structural syllabus are reviewed. Next the role of formal grammar instruction is discussed in depth. Finally it is suggested that because of the crucial role that grammar instruction plays in EFL settings, the structural syllabus can serve these classes better than other syllabus types. The structural syllabus advocated in this paper has two qualities. First, it is compatible with learners' internal syllabus. Second, it benefits from innovative tasks such as consciousness-raising activities and communicative activities.

Keywords: Structural Syllabus, Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Consciousness Raising.

Introduction

The structural or grammatical syllabus has been defined as one which consists a list of grammatical items selected and graded in terms of simplicity and complexity (Nunan, 1988). The structures are generally presented one by one usually but not always, in contrasting pairs, e.g. simple present versus simple past or singular nouns versus plural nouns (Long and Crookes, 1993). In his seminal work *Notional Syllabuses*, Wilkins (1976) defines this kind of approach to syllabus design as synthetic.

A synthetic language teaching strategy is one in which the different parts of language are taught separately and step-by-step so that acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of the parts until the whole structure of the language has been

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built up. (p.2)

The above definition provided by Wilkins suggests that in a structural syllabus, anguage is broken down into smaller units (e.g. grammatical items plus a word list) and then it is taught piece by piece. This view as Wilkins observes exposes learners to limited samples of language in that each lesson in the syllabus centers on one particular grammatical feature. This is based on the assumption that language rules are learned in an additive fashion, which refers to the complete mastery of each item before a new one is introduced (Nunan, 1988). Thus it is the learner's task to put these items next to one another and re-synthesize the language that has been presented to him in a broken fashion (Wilkins, 1976). Once the learner manages to do this, he could be said to have mastered the target language.

The structural syllabus forms the backbone of many well-known textbooks which were widely used until a few years ago (e.g. *English 900* or *Modern American English*). The table of contents on page 3 taken from Dixon's *Modern American English: Book 2* (1977) (see Appendix 1) clearly illustrates how a structural syllabus is developed.

As can be viewed, each lesson addresses a specific grammatical point together with a number of vocabulary items. Lesson 2, for instance, deals with present con-tinuous, negative contractions of *isn't* and *aren't* plus the related vocabulary for the seasons of the year. There are also a number of review lessons to ensure that the mate-rials taught are consolidated.

An important question which might be raised here is concerned with the criteria by which grammatical and lexical items are selected in the structural syllabus. These criteria are discussed in the following sections.

Vocabulary Selection

According to Mackey (1965) cited in White (1988, pp. 49-50), the lexical items taught in a structural syllabus

are selected on the basis of a number of criteria, the most important of which in clude:

- Frequency, which deals with the total number of occurrences of an item in a specific corpus of language.
- Coverage, which deals with the number of things which can be said by a given item.
- Availability, which deals with the ease with which a lexical item is remembered and used by native speakers of language.
- Learnability, which deals with factors such as clarity, brevity, regularity, learning load and similarity of an L2 word to its L1 equivalent.

Thus, based on the above criteria the English word *mother* is a good choice to be included in the first lessons of a structural course because it has a lot of cognates in many other languages such as *mutter* in Germany and *madre* in Spanish. Similarly, the word *go* is again another good word to be included in the early lessons of any structural syllabus because it can be used instead of some other words such as *travel*, *move*, *walk*, etc. It should be noted, however, that today thanks to the works of Jane and Dave Willis (e.g. Willis, 1990; Willis, 1996) there is a new approach to syllabus design known as the lexical syllabus, which identifies a target vocabulary arranged to be taught according to levels such as the first 500, 1,000, 1,500 and 2,000 words. These lexical items derive from computer-based analysis of incredibly huge corpuses of written and spoken English. Thus, the criteria listed by Mackey seems to be a bit old-fashioned now.

Structure Selection

Mackey (1965 cited in Wilkins 1976, p.6) suggests that the following criteria be taken into consideration in selecting and grading grammatical structures.

- Simplicity, which means that simpler rules and structures should be taught before more com-

plex ones.

- Regularity, which means that the most productive linguistic structures should be taught before those which have low productivity.
- Frequency, which means that grammatical forms which are rarely used should be taught at later stages of language learning.
- Contrastive difficulty, which means that the early stages of language learning should be devoted to practicing language forms which are most similar between L1 and L2.

As can be seen, the criteria listed above were not based on any scienctific experiments rather determining the degree of simplicity, complexity, regularity, etc. was left to the common sense judgments of language teachers and syllabus designers. This issue, as will be addressed in the next section, is one of the major problems with the structural syllabus.

Shortcomings of the Structural Syllabus

A number of problems have been identified with the structural syllabus, the most important of which will be addressed below.

The first problem is related to the concept of Corder's (1967) "built-in syllabus", which suggests that learners acquire different grammatical features on the basis of a natural order. This proposal was later supported by various experimental studies reported by Hyltenstam and Pienemann (1985). The results of all these studies suggest that learning difficulty is not caused by grammatical complexity of a structure. Rather, it is quite possible for a structure to be simple yet hard to acquire. A good example to support this claim is the acquisition of third person "s" morpheme. Needless to say, this item can be easily explained to the learners.

Nevertheless, it is not fully acquired until learners have arrived at final stages of interlingual development. The conclusion which can be drawn from this discussion

is that the acquisition of grammatical forms has to do with the psycholinguistic readiness of the learners, rather than their simplicity or complexity. This is a fact which was unknown to those who designed structural courses on the assumption that simple structures should be taught first.

The second major drawback of the structural syllabus lies in its ignorance of language functions. The structural syllabus is a powerful device for enabling language learners to master grammatical rules; however, it is not that powerful as far as socio-linguistic rules of appropriacy are concerned. In other works, it is capable of preparing learners who are grammatically competent but communicatively incompetent (Johnson, 1982). A learner who in response to "Do you mind if I open the window?" says, "Yes, I do," is typical of someone whose knowledge of English grammar might be perfect yet does not know how to give socially appropriate replies. Seen in another light, the structural syllabus, at its best, trains learners to produce instances of language *usage* rather than language *use* (Widdowson, 1978).

Finally, the structural syllabus lays too much emphasis on syntagmatic relations, i.e. the relations which exist between items present in a structure, rather than paradigmatic relations (Yalden,1983). "No reference to relations which may exist between items in a structure and items that are *not* in the structure is made and so the learner is not taught anything about such relations" (p.28).

The Structural Syllabus and Grammar Teaching

In spite of the criticism sharpened against the structural syllabus, it is a useful channel through which formal grammar instruction can be implemented. A continuing controversy in second language pedagogy over the last two decades has been whether grammar should be taught or not. On the one hand, there are some scholars who have adopted an anti-grammarian position and maintain that the teaching of grammar has only a minimal effect on the acquisition of linguistic competence (Krashen, 1982; Krashen and Terrel, 1983; Prabhu, 1987). There are, on the other hand, some other scholars who have adopted a pro-grammarian position and contend that formal grammar instruction plays an important role in the development of L2 learners' interlanguage (Rutherford, 1987; Ellis, 1990, 1993). In this part of the paper, I would like to adopt a pro-grammarian position and review the arguments which have been made in favor of formal grammar instruction.

The first argument derives from immersion programs in Canada. In recent years, many English L1 students have received their education through French. These students have been exposed to a lot of meaning-focused input in French and their progress have been carefully studied. The results of these studies (e.g. Swain, 1985; Swain and Lapkin, 1995) indicate that although the majority of these students have achieved native-like comprehension skills, their productive skills are still far from native-like norms, suggesting that meaning-focused instruction devoid of any grammar teaching is likely to result in fossilization.

The second argument in favor of formal grammar instruction comes from studies which suggest that adult L2 learners do not have complete access to the same acquisitional mechanisms as do children acquiring their L1. These mechanisms operate on the basis of positive evidence and since adult learners have partial access to them, they need to benefit from negative evidence, i.e. formal instruction and corrective feedback to compensate for this lack (Felix, 1985; White, 1987; Schachter, 1989). White (1987, p.105), for instance, argues that French learners of English as an L2 tend to make sentences like *John drank slowly his coffee (Jean a bu lentement son café), which are ungrammatical in English, but acceptable in French. Francophone learners of English who only receive positive evidence may

never discover that there are constraints on adverb placement in English unless they receive formal grammar instruction on this point. This suggests that grammar teaching, at times, plays a crucial role in some aspects of L2 acquisition.

Third, there are Ellis's (1990, 1993) arguments, which maintain that formal grammar instruction works by developing explicit knowledge of grammatical features which, in turn, helps learners to acquire implicit knowledge. Ellis (1993, p. 98) argues that the explicit knowledge gained through grammar instruction helps learners in three ways. First, it helps them monitor their utterances before and after they are produced. As Terrell (1991) rightly observes, "monitoring can apparently interact with acquisition, resulting in learners acquiring their own output" (p. 61). Second, it helps learners notice certain features in the input. "For example, if learners know that plural nouns have an –s, they are more likely to notice the –s on the ends of nouns they hear or read in input and also more likely to associate the –s morpheme with the meaning more than one". (Ellis, 1993, p. 98). Third, explicit knowledge helps learners notice the gaps in their output. Thus if, for example, they know that verbs like *enjoy, avoid, deny*, etc. are followed by gerund, they are more likely to notice the difference between the presence of this feature in the input and its absence in their output. Therefore, becoming aware of this gap is likely to result in the production of more accurate utterances in their subsequent performance.

Another strong argument comes from Celce-Murica (1991, pp. 467-468) who believes that grammar instruction can serve as *meaning, social function*, and *discourse*. As an example of grammar in the service of meaning, Celce-Murcia refers to the different spatial meanings represented by the prepositions *in* and *on*. If learners are provided with good instruction, they will "find it useful to know quite explicitly that *in* favors the placement of objects in three-dimensional containers and *on* favors the placement of objects on two-dimensional flat surfaces" (p. 467). As an example of grammar in the service of social functions, Celce-Murcia refers to the use of different modal auxiliaries to express polite requests. She argues that both EFL and ESL students need some formal instruction to become aware of the difference between "Can you open the window?" and "Could you open the window?" Finally, the link between grammar and discourse is illustrated by the fact that ESL/EFL composition students need to have a good command over English grammar to write accurately. For instance, they must possess a good knowledge of cohesion to create well-connected sentences.

One more argument to support grammar instruction comes from Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988) who believe that ESL/EFL students need to know grammar because many of them are expected to take part in widely used international examinations such as the TOEFL and the IELTS.

Let us now turn to a very practical argument in favor of teaching grammar, namely that many ESL/EFL students are required to pass a standardized national or international exam in order to proceed with their plans. These exams can determine their acceptance to a university or affect their professional or vocational advancement. These exams may even decide which professions are open to them. In other words, to one degree or another, their futures can be determined by their performance on an exam. Typically, a major component of such exams is grammar. Therefore, to give these students an incomplete grounding in grammar, regardless of one's conviction

about teaching it, is to do them a great disservice. Students have to know and apply the rules of English grammar in order to do well on such tests. (p. 4)

Last but not the least, there is a recent argument put forward by Ellis (2001) who contends that it is wrong to assume that the inclusion of foreign languages in the school curriculum is entirely motivated by the desire to promote communication between speakers of different languages. Studying foreign languages has always pursued a more valuable goal, i.e. fostering intellectual development. Thus it is quite obvious that Ellis views foreign language learning as a tool to develop cognitive skills. "*Grammar* [italics added] embodies a corpus of knowledge, the study of which can be expected to contribute to students' cognitive skills. It constitutes a serious content and, as such, contrasts with the trivial content of many modern textbooks" (Ellis 2001, p.172).

It was previously mentioned that throughout this article, I will be adopting a pro-grammarian position and argue in favor of grammar instruction. All the preceding arguments seem convincing enough to claim that grammar teaching should be an inseparable part of ESL/EFL classes. By assuming that grammar should not abandon second/foreign language classes, we are in a better position to support the structural syllabus. There is perhaps no better syllabus than this often-harshly-attacked syllabus which paves the way for grammar instruction. This, however, does not mean that we should return to traditional ways of language teaching such as audiolingual and grammar-translation methods. It is my firm conviction that the reason why these methods fell out of favor was not because of following a structural syllabus. They simply failed because, among many other reasons, they overemphasized grammar teaching through a lot of boring drills. Therefore, the audiolingual method died because students had to spend a long time repeating innumerable strings of words-

sometimes not being aware of what they are saying. Now is it right to say that grammar instruction and the grammatical syllabus should be abolished simply because of inadequacies of audiolingual or grammar-translation methods? The answer is "No". The structural syllabus can still be safely used, especially in EFL settings, provided that it is accompanied by interesting tasks. This issue will be examined in the next section of the article.

Grammar Teaching and the EFL Classroom

There are some fundamental differences which distinguish between English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL). EFL and ESL students differ from each other in that as they are in different learning conditions (Stern, 1983, pp. 339-340). For example, ESL students learn the target language in a supportive environment. In other works, they benefit more from exposure to the target language in its natural setting. This is a big advantage that EFL students are usually deprived of. Even the need and motivation for learning the target language is different in these two groups. ESL students are more pressed to communicate with foreigners than EFL students, so their learning needs are definitely not one and the same. It was previously mentioned that the majority of EFL students learn English for the sake of passing national or international exams. As Fotos (1998) rightly observes, in many EFL environments the educational system is controlled by a central agency which determines the general curriculum and the cotents of courses.

In Japan, for example, when EFL teaching commences in the first years of middle school, the primary goal is to master specific vocabulary items, translation skills, and grammar structures, which will be tested in the final years as part of an examination system determining entry

into high schools. At high school as well, the teaching of EFL is test-driven, aimed at preparing learners for university entrance examinations (Fotos, 1998, p. 303).

The same story is valid in the EFL setting of our own country. EFL students in Iranian high schools are also expected to learn specific vocabulary and grammatical items without any attempt to use them communicatively. Some of these students-only those who wish to pursue higher education-try to master the contents of their textbooks to get a good score on the English sub-test of the university entrance exams. Now taking these circumstances into consideration, we can cogently argue why grammar instruction should be an important component of the ELT curriculum in EFL settings, and this can be best achieved through the structural syllabus.

The Structural Syllabus: Revisited

I may now be accused of sounding a bit traditional as far as my language teaching attitudes are concerned, but I am not really advocating a return to traditional methods of grammar teaching. What I am suggesting here is that it is possible to have a structural syllabus which efficiently works in our EFL classrooms. This can be achieved in two ways: first, by building a syllabus which is compatible with the learners' psycholinguistic reality, and second by incorporating more innovative language learning activities into it.

According to the findings of second language acquisition (SLA) studies, learners of a second language in acquiring both syntax and grammatical morphemes pass through certain transitional stages (Van Patten, 1992). This suggests that there is an internal syllabus in the mind of language learners, based on which syntactic and morphological features are acquired in a fixed order. This claim was strongly supported by Pienemann (1985), who proposed that a structure cannot be used correctly and spontaneously unless the learner is psycholinguistically ready to acquire it. The implication of this finding is that the external syllabus in our textbooks should be built in such a way that it matches the learners' internal syllabus. In this case the structural syllabus will be extricated from one of its most important inadequacies.

It is equally possible to improve the structural syllabus through more innovative exercise types. It was previously argued that traditional methods of language teaching failed not because they followed a structural syllabus but because they employed mechanical drills. In my opinion, our so-called revisited structural syllabus for the EFL classrooms in Iran will work successfully through two task types: consciousness-raising activities and communicative activities. The former aims at developing explicit knowledge and the latter aims at developing the implicit knowledge of grammatical structures (Ellis, 2001).

Ellis (1993) defines consciousness-raising as "a deliberate attempt on the part of the teacher to make the learners aware of specific features of the L2" (p.109). The following activity taken from Ellis (2001, p.173) is a simple example of a consciousness-raising (CR) task designed to make learners aware of the grammatical difference between the prepositions *for* and *since*.

Now imagine that the above activity is followed by a communicative task in which students can freely talk either in pairs with their classmates or with the classroom teacher. This communicative activity would, for sure, help learners internalize the given structure and use it in everyday communication. To further illustrate this issue, let's suppose that students are encouraged to do the following activity to practice implicitly what they have explicitly learned about *for* and *since*. This activity is adapted from *Headway: Pre-Intermediate* (Soars and Soars, 1991).

Ask and answer questions beginning How long …? about where you and your partner

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AN EXAMPLE OF A CR PROBLEM-SOLVING TASK

1. Here is some information about when three people joined the company they now work for and how long they have been working there.

Name	Date Joined	Length of Time
Ms Regan	1945	45 yrs
Mr Bush	1970	20 yrs
Ms Thatcher	1989	9 mths
Mr Baker	1990 (Feb)	10 days

2. Study these sentences about these people. When is "for" used and when is "since" used?

   a. Ms Regan has been working for her company *for* most of her life.

   b. Mr Bush has been working for his company *since* 1970.

   c. Ms Thatcher has been working for her company *for* 9 months.

   d. Mr Baker has been working for his company *since* February.

3. Which of the following sentences are ungrammatical? Why?

   a. Ms Regan has been working for her company for 1945.

   b. Mr Bush has been working for his company for 20 years.

   c. Ms Thatcher has been working for her company since 1989.

   d. Mr Baker has been working for his company since 10 days.

4. Try and make up a rule to explain when "for" and "since" are used.

5. Make up one sentence about when you started to learn English and one sentence about how long you have been studying English. Use "for" and "since".

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live, study, and about some of your possessions. Then try to get some more information.

   How long have you lived in …?

   How long have you studied in …?

   How long have you had your …?

Conclusion

This papar was an attempt to argue that the structural syllabus, in spite of the rush of criticism levelled at it, is still alive and can safely be used in EFL contexts, particularly in our own country. Previously, it was stated that the majority of EFL students in Iran must get a reasonably high score on the English sub-test of the university entrance exams. This requires them to master a number of grammatical structures as well as lexical items. It is suggested that no syllabus can serve this purpose as efficiently as the structural syllabus does. This, however, should not be interpreted as a return to old-fashioned grammar-translation practices. What is proposed here is two-fold: first, building an external syllabus which matches the internal syllabus of the learners, and second fleshing the skeleton of this newly-built syllabus with more innovative learning tasks such as consciousness-raising activities followed by communicative activities. It is hoped that the

recommendations made above would breathe new life into the dead body of the structural syllabus.

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