

Grammar mia

**Chris Payne presents
the Inert Knowledge Problem
and sets about solving it.**

Picture this classroom scene: the students are learning a grammar structure and are using it correctly during class exercises, but then they seem to forget how to produce it in a more communicative part of the same lesson. Later, in real-time communication outside the classroom, they struggle to put into practice the grammar that they have been taught.

Way back in 1929, the English mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead described this phenomenon as the Inert Knowledge Problem (IKP). The knowledge of grammar that is gained in our language classrooms remains inactive or inert when it is required in a non-instructional setting. The IKP is undoubtedly a source of great frustration for learners, who see, all too frequently, that they cannot do anything meaningful with what they are studying. Of course, it can also be frustrating for teachers, who don't want to feel powerless to help their students. But is the IKP an insoluble problem? Before I attempt to answer this question, another question springs to mind: Should we be teaching grammar at all?

The teaching of grammar

Some researchers and teachers, such as the proponents of the Natural Approach and a strong interpretation of Task-Based Learning, argue that explicit form-focused instruction is not necessary for successful language acquisition. They suggest that if learners are exposed to sufficient comprehensible input, as they are when they acquire their L1, they will learn the language and its grammatical rules on their own. This claim is based on the premise that second language acquisition is exactly like first language acquisition.

Few of us would dispute the idea that some learners can acquire a second language without an explicit focus on form, but the theory that *all* students of a second language will achieve acquisition in this way is hard to substantiate. Merely

providing our L2 learners with abundant comprehensible input is not suited to all students, many of whom want or need to study grammatical rules. Students value the generative capacity of rules, which enables them to create and understand new language. Maybe knowing grammar rules gives students a feeling of security, even though the number of exceptions to rules might mean it is a false sense of security.

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Contrastive analysis can also help learners comprehend the differences between the target language and their L1. Research suggests that when students don't receive grammatical instruction, they may not acquire an ability to use grammar accurately. Often cited is the experience of those learners who have lived in a target language environment for a considerable length of time and yet have failed to acquire an adequate grounding in grammar.

Some degree of grammar instruction *is* necessary if we want our learners to possess effective communication skills – and essential if accuracy is the aim of our learners, which it often is.

Overcoming the IKP

Let us now return to the question of whether we can solve the Inert Knowledge Problem. It would be overly optimistic to believe that there is an easy solution to a problem that has persisted for such a long time, and expecting students simultaneously to use language both

grammatically and communicatively is a difficult goal to achieve. With this in mind, a more achievable objective is to *mitigate* the IKP – by reflecting on and reacting to *how* we teach grammar.

Perhaps some teachers are unintentionally perpetuating the IKP because of the way in which they teach grammar. Grammar is often taught as declarative knowledge (knowing rules *about* the language) rather than procedural knowledge (knowing how to use the language for meaningful communication). If we perceive grammar and communication to be completely different things, then we will teach them differently, thus placing the onus on our students to integrate the two. If they can't integrate them, they will know *about* grammar but they will be unable to put their knowledge to effective practical *use* in communication.

Here are some ideas for contending with the Inert Knowledge Problem:

Noticing grammar

One way of focusing on grammar in a communicative approach is to draw our students' attention subliminally to correct forms while they are engaged in reading a text for meaning. To do this, we can highlight grammatical structures so that students notice them. For example, if we wish to focus on instances of the present perfect in a text, we could colour all uses of the present perfect to make them more **noticeable**. Alternatively, we could **underline** and/or *italicise* words, or use **bold** and different fonts.

We can also emphasise grammatical morphemes that are difficult to notice in speech, such as the 's' at the end of verbs and nouns, although care should be taken to ensure our pronunciation doesn't become unnatural. Increasing the frequency of a particular structure to which students are exposed can also promote noticing, which in turn can lead to 'priming'. Priming is the processing of recently encountered language that is activated, resulting in the learners' tendency to produce a salient structure.

Naturally, the effectiveness of these proposals depends on students noticing the enhanced input. However, like Merrill Swain, who formulated the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis, I believe that students need to do more than notice grammar in order to acquire it. They also need to *produce* language, which forces them to pay attention to structures in language use.

Psychological authenticity

In her insightful book *Teaching Language: From Grammar to Grammaticing*, Diane Larsen-Freeman draws on research from psychology to support the theory that psychological authenticity plays an important role in helping students transfer what they learn in class to everyday use outside the classroom. She defines a practice activity as psychologically authentic when students learn something in the same way that they will use it later. Written grammar exercises have their place in language teaching, but it should not come as a surprise that students are unable to use grammar effectively in speech if they have only practised it in written form. Psychologically authentic activities do not necessarily mirror linguistically authentic communication, but they will be meaningful and have an end goal.

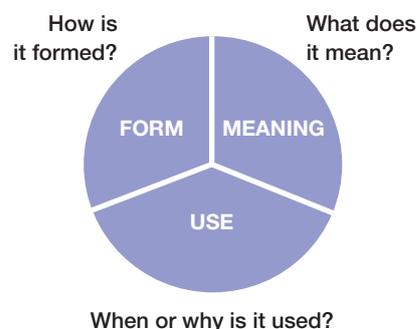
An example of such an activity is an information gap, in which one student or group of students has certain information, while another student or group has different or no information. The students practise structures by working together to find out information that they don't already know, as they would to communicate outside the classroom when they ask questions to which they need or want an answer.

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If our aim is for learners to attain communicative competence, we should recreate in the classroom some of the conditions experienced by people engaged in real-time communication. One such condition would involve giving students little or no time to prepare what they need to say, as outside the classroom they are expected to produce language promptly. Clearly, we would also have to teach students strategies so that they are able to cope with the conditions of psychological authenticity.

The dimensions of grammar

Grammar is mostly associated with rules, but it also comprises recurring patterns which are combinations of particular words. However, even knowledge of patterns and rules is not sufficient if we want to avert the Inert Knowledge Problem, as rules can lead learners to produce language that we wouldn't actually use. Grammar can be said to consist of three dimensions – form, meaning and use – which can be depicted in a pie chart that focuses attention on the interconnected but different aspects of structure:



The challenge principle

According to Diane Larsen-Freeman, one of the three dimensions of form, meaning or use usually affords the greatest long-term challenge for language learners. It is often possible to predict which dimension of a structure is likely to be the most challenging. For example:

- The learning challenge for comparative adjectives is form: eg *more boring* or 'boringer'?
- The problem that prepositions pose for learners is normally one of meaning.
- Use tends to be the main learning challenge for the passive voice and present perfect.

Teachers could draw a pie chart for a structure they are teaching, which will help them define the learning challenge for a particular class.

Although these observations will sound like common sense, we need to remember that our class time with students is limited, so identifying the learning challenge for grammar can inform our thinking about how to create optimum learning opportunities in the classroom. I do not advocate disregarding an entire dimension, as obviously students need to know about form, meaning *and* use. However, if we

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don't prioritise and select a dimension according to the challenge principle, it is easy to spend too much valuable class time on a part of grammar that is not particularly problematic.

Let us look more closely at the passive voice and the challenge of using it appropriately. The passive might be expressed by a different structure in other languages, with the result that some students will *over-* or *under-*use it in English. How can we teach the passive voice in a way that honours the challenge principle? One way is to refrain from presenting the passive as a transformed version of the active voice, and from focusing too much attention on the agent *by*. The passive voice is not derived from the active and the two are not always interchangeable; and only about 15 percent of all passive sentences include the agent.

I do not wish to give the impression that applying the challenge principle is straightforward! Occasionally, the learning challenge that we anticipate might not be the one that our learners experience, so we will need to react to their difficulties and focus on a different dimension. Or some structures need more attention in two dimensions. In the case of phrasal verbs, the *meaning* is a challenge – as it is for other vocabulary items. But as well as lexical meaning, the *form* can also be hard to learn because students have to know which phrasal verbs are inseparable and where they have to place their pronouns. It is also worth bearing in mind that the learning challenge that a structure presents can be different for different students, and that the short-term and long-term challenge may differ.

Use

Knowledge of structures is important, but acceptable language isn't just grammatical, it is also appropriate for the context. The dimension of *use* is sometimes overlooked, maybe because it is considered to be something different from grammar. But to neglect use is to contribute to the Inert Knowledge Problem. If two grammatically correct sentences have a similar meaning, the slight difference between them will be related to how speakers use them. For instance, '*It is a book*' and '*This is a book*' are both grammatically correct

sentences. *This, that, these* and *those* are demonstratives which are used to refer to near and distant things. But we don't normally use a demonstrative to answer the question '*What's this?*' Instead, usage prefers a personal pronoun:

Teacher: *What is this?*

Student: *It's a book.* (not: *This is a book.*)

Roleplays are ideal for practising use, especially if we ask the students to choose the more appropriate of two forms for a given context. An example is a job interview in which students take turns to play the role of the interviewer and the applicant. They choose between using the present perfect and the past tense to talk about past events:

Interviewer: *Have you had any experience of working in a hotel?*

Applicant: *Yes, I have worked as a receptionist since last May. Before that I worked in a hotel bar for two years.*

Other factors that influence appropriate use are the formality of the situation and if written or spoken English is required. Also, teachers ought to establish whether native-speaker use is the learners' objective. In certain situations, adhering to native-speaker conventions might be inappropriate for learners.

Choice and reasons

I mentioned earlier that many students want to be given grammar rules and to be told what is right and wrong in a language. The danger with students simply accepting that 'rules are rules' is that their learning can become more rote and mechanical. We need to make them aware of the concept of 'grammar of choice', that is, more than one structure can be correct for a context, depending on the meaning they wish to express.

In addition to teaching rules and explaining grammatical choices, we can help our students learn by enabling them to see whether there is an underlying reason why language is used in a certain way. Let us return to our previous example of phrasal verbs. We can say '*Turn off the TV*' and '*Turn the TV off*', but when 'TV' is replaced by the pronoun *it*, we can say '*Turn it off*' but not '*Turn off it*'.

Most grammar materials would say that here the pronoun can't go after *off* and that it must be placed between the verb and its particle. This rule might seem arbitrary, but it has a logical explanation. English grammar distinguishes between old information and new information.

New information is what is being introduced, while old information has already been referred to in the context.

For example:



When native speakers of English have a choice, they prefer 'end focus', which is a tendency to place new information at the end of a sentence. Thus in the example above, '*Mike is my name*' would be a less common answer because *name* is old information.

Pronouns are old information, so 'end position' is avoided when we use phrasal verbs because we have a choice of where to place them. (The same cannot be said of this last sentence, in which I had no choice but to put the pronoun *them* at the end!)



Not everyone is enthusiastic about grammar, but we are still duty-bound to teach it. Some people may even consider it to be the most boring part of learning a language, but grammar is not in itself boring: what *can* be boring is what we ask students to do with grammar in order to learn it. It can be helpful to think of grammar as something we *do* rather than just something we *know*.

We must provide our learners with grammar practice that is meaningful and engaging, and which integrates form and communication while maintaining a focus on the learning challenge. My grammar advice is to strive to build a bridge between forms and use, in order to lessen the Inert Knowledge Problem.

Larsen-Freeman, D *Teaching Language: From Grammar to Grammaticizing* Thomson Heinle 2003



Chris Payne is the owner of Paddington School of English, Linares, Spain. He is an experienced teacher and a former Cambridge English oral examiner and oral examiner trainer. He has written several published articles on ELT.

paddingtonschool@outlook.com