

Grammar, Power and Bottled Water

Scott Thornbury

This issue of the *IATEFL Newsletter* is about language; I have just been to a conference about language; I have even written a book about language. I *love* language. Nevertheless, I have some misgivings about the way language - or more, specifically, *grammar* - is being mythologised. The myth that concerns me here is the one in which grammar went away and then came back again. Why is this myth being disseminated? That is the question I wish to address in this article.

You may have noticed that a number of recent books seem to be celebrating, in the words of one of them, "the return of grammar to the centre stage of language teaching and learning" (Tonkyn, 1994, p.12). Yet, for as long as I have been teaching, grammar has never been anywhere *but* centre stage. As evidence, one has only to look at the contents page of any coursebook that has topped the best-seller lists over the last three decades. (Even the functional-notional courses that flowered in the late 1970s could not wholly disguise their hidden grammatical agenda).

What's more, as a professional teacher-watcher, all I have ever seen in the classes I have observed is grammar. Grammar is the engine that drives classroom practice. It is in grammatical terms that pedagogical aims are articulated; it is for linguistic purposes that texts are chosen and exploited; it is the reproduction of specific forms that motivates classroom interactions; it is their lack of accuracy that prompts teacher feedback; and it is mastery of form that is still largely the standard by which learning is evaluated. This has been the case for as long as I have been privileged to watch other people teach.

Appropriation

If grammar has been around so long, why suddenly is its "return" being trumpeted? And by whom? Or, to put it another way, whose interests are being served by trumpeting the return of grammar? A glance at the list of contributors in the "grammar revival" literature suggests that claims such as the following are not entirely disinterested:

Professional development for language teachers must be strengthened by theories of language (Burns, 1990, p. 57). [Lecturer in Linguistics at Macquarie University]

Language teaching will not make significant advances...until more teachers become convinced of the importance of grammar (Odlin, 1994, p. ix). [Associate Professor of English at Ohio State University]

Much more systematic attention to descriptive linguistics and to applied linguistics will be needed, both in all kinds of language-linked first degrees and in inservice education (Mitchell, 1994, p. 222). [University of Southampton]

Am I imagining things, or do these claims strike you as just a little self-serving? Let's ignore, for the moment, the fact that, by implying a straightforward connection between theories of language and theories of learning, the authors of such claims

appear to be ignoring the evidence of SLA research. No, what is at issue here is a question of ownership. By claiming ownership of grammar the applied linguistics departments assert their influence over the industry that trades in that commodity - and their right to muscle in on the profits as well. Teachers, construed here as being grammatically challenged, have no choice but to beat a path, cap in hand, to the grammar bank. (Language-as-commodity has recently become almost tangible - has been "embodied", even - as universities and publishers scramble to set up - and market - corpora. Note also, in the promotion of corpora, the use of banking metaphors). And speaking of corpora, grand claims, such as Sinclair's (1997), to the effect that "those who teach languages depend on those who describe them" (p. 29) not only, assert the hieratic role of linguists as guardians of the sacred mysteries, but serve to disenfranchise teachers by undervaluing the pedagogical power of their experience and intuitions. This is a clear case of the kind of dysfunctional discourse described by Clarke (1994), in which "the voices of teachers are subordinated to the voices of others who are less centrally involved in language teaching" (p. 13).

Selling grammar

Publishers, of course, want a share of the pie, too. By swearing allegiance to grammar, they are guaranteed a slice. John Soars, co-author of the phenomenally successful *Headway* series, admitted recently that the intention had been to "reinstate grammar" (*EL Gazette*, Issue 209, June 1997, p. 20). Sound familiar? Since the advent of *Headway* publishers have been falling over themselves to produce copycat courses. Despite paying lip-service to communication (Thornbury, 1996), current ELT materials are resolutely form-driven, to the point that, as Grady (1997) points out, they represent "all types of issues and all types of discourse as not requiring much thought or action beyond the decision as to the appropriate grammatical structure" (p. 9). Grammar effectively sanitises and trivialises learning. It also makes language "safe", and therefore more easily and more widely marketable.

In an article in the *ELT Journal* Allwright (1981) challenged the hegemony of coursebooks, at least in their traditional role as "teaching materials". His point was that what we now need are "learning materials" and alluded to a "general change in the conception of teacher and learner responsibilities for the management of language learning" (p. 143). How would this power shift impact on published materials? Allwright suggests that "something much less ambitious, probably locally produced, would seem preferable" (p. 142). Bang goes the global coursebook.

The sense of a devolution of power to the learner echoes Candlin's (1994) claim for task-based learning - that it "empowers learners to make meanings for themselves". While grammar-based materials work on the assumption that there is something learners *don't know*, task-based materials work on the assumption that there is something learners *can do*. Unsurprisingly, task-based learning has not been heavily marketed. The notion of localised, learner-driven lessons sits

uneasily with the concept of globalisation. Instead, by creating a dependency culture, by construing the *learner* as grammatically-challenged, grammar-based materials ensure a market. By getting learners hooked on grammar, the publishers are guaranteed not just any old market but a global one, because, after all, what is language if not grammar? Only the marketing of bottled water could be simpler. Just as consumers have been taught to trust bottled water more than tap water (despite blind-tastings that prove there is no difference [Brown, 1997]) so have learners been conned into choosing packaged language over some natural, home-grown, more eco-friendly product.

In short, and as a critical reading of university- and publisher-speak reminds us, when the need for “more grammar” is invoked it is invariably in the cause of maintaining and strengthening existing power structures. As Cameron (1995) writes, in her critique of the moral panic recurrently triggered by liberal educational reformers: “A panic about grammar is ... interpretable as the metaphorical expression of persistent conservative fears that we are losing the values that underpin civilization and sliding into chaos” (p. 95). I am not suggesting that it was moral panic that inspired John and Liz Soars to want to reinstate grammar when they wrote *Headway*. Nevertheless, grammar, order, and rules are related concepts, and in a profession that is desperately trying to project a measure of respectability, not to say academic credibility, grammar rules.

Class struggle

Grammar rules in the classroom, too. Just as grammar bolsters the hegemony of university departments and publishers, so too do teachers use grammar to prop up a benign classroom autocracy. Why have teachers - traditionally of a liberal persuasion - colluded? The answer is simple: grammar is order. From the point of view of course design, materials choice, and assessment, a discrete-item, grammatical organisation is a lot less messy than, say, a functional or a procedural or a lexical one. At the level of classroom practice, explicit attention to grammar provides structure, literally, to an otherwise potentially anarchic situation, and is one reason why teachers who lack either classroom experience or confidence in their own linguistic competence, or both, embrace grammar so eagerly. A meaning-driven (as opposed to a form-driven) pedagogy presents seemingly intractable management problems to the novice and non-native teacher, whereas explicit instruction of pre-selected de-contextualised discrete-item linguistic forms offers the teacher safe passage through the minefield.

But grammar is not just order. Grammar is power. Grammar invests EFL teachers with transmittable knowledge, thereby propping up a status that is often felt to be dodgy, to say the least. As Wright (1991) warned, “one great danger of acquiring specialist knowledge about language is the possible desire to show learners that you have this knowledge” (p. 68-9). Combined with what Curran (1972) called “the sickness to teach” (p. 114) the grammar revival legitimises lessons of excruciating boredom and irrelevance. Classroom discourse is not so much discourse as metadiscourse (Scollon & Scollon, 1995). It is talk *about* talk. It is content teaching where the only content is grammar. Real language use, if it occurs at all, occurs in the interstices and marginalia of lessons. The effect of this “overt teacher grammar display behaviour” is not only to deprive learners of valuable practice opportunities but to maintain the unequal power relationship that already exists in many classrooms.

To sum up: grammar represents the imposition of order and the maintenance of power, both at the level of the global culture of ELT, and in the culture of the ELT classroom. One final example of how these cultures are interconnected: in a response to Allwright's (1981) critique of teaching materials, O'Neill (1982) – a coursebook writer – came to the defence of coursebooks. (He would, wouldn't he?) One argument he used was the generalisability of grammar to multiple contexts. What is interesting is that he situated his arguments in a specific instance when he was teaching English in a German shipyard to “a small group of German technicians who were expecting to train a contingent of Iranians how to maintain and repair six submarines” (p. 148). He adds, without apparent irony, that “this was a few months before the downfall of the Shah” (ibid. p. 149). See how it works? COURSEBOOK WRITER USES GRAMMAR TO PROP UP AILING DICTATORSHIP!

Post-grammar

What is the alternative? What is EFL tap-water like? I'll leave you to imagine (if you don't already know) a pedagogy where grammar is deconsecrated, where learners are empowered to make their own meanings, where teachers are emboldened to subvert the dictates of non-teachers, and where teachers and learners together construct a shared discourse of possibility. As a taster, I offer this extract from Edmund White's autobiographical novel *The Farewell Symphony* (1997) in which he describes Lucrezia, his Italian teacher:

Her teaching method was clever. She invited me to gossip away in Italian as best I could, discussing what I would ordinarily discuss in English; when stumped for the next expression, I'd pause. She'd then provide the missing word. I'd write it down in a notebook I kept week after week. ... Day after day I trekked to Lucrezia's and she tore out the seams of my shoddy, ill fitting Italian and found ways to tailor it to my needs and interests.

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Scott Thornbury teaches EFL at International House, Barcelona. He also trains teachers and writes materials, including books about language.