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### **Implementing the Principle of Teaching Grammar as a Receptive Skill in EFL**

Although, substantial progress has been made as far as the understanding of the learning process and availability of teaching materials are concerned, all too often and forever foreign language teaching is unsuccessful either in terms of fluency or accuracy. The Lexical Approach is an attempt to provide a solution to this problem met by both teachers and learners of English. Drawing upon the theories of language acquisition and further developing the ideas of the Communicative Approach it proposes a radical change in the way we look at language and language teaching. It puts forward a revolutionary view on the place of grammar in learning a foreign language and advocates teaching grammar as a receptive skill. In the present paper the latter concept will be defined and its implementation in the EFL classroom will be described. In addition to this, the findings of a study conducted to prove the effectiveness of the procedure will be presented and discussed.

#### **Conceptualization of grammar as a receptive skill**

As it has been confirmed by results of numerous empirical studies, developing receptive skills is indispensable in the process of language learning and being a good listener and reader depends mainly on employing a range of appropriate strategies that aid comprehension. It has been also recognized that while trying to decode the meaning we depend primarily on lexis, although grammatical structure conveys information as well. It is not uncommon to come across sentences

which, despite being almost identical in terms of vocabulary communicate different messages solely due to grammatical choices. This implies that grammar co-attributes to the process of reception and that in order to become proficient foreign language users learners need to fully understand all the differences in meaning which originate from grammatical structures before being able to produce them. In this sense grammar should be acknowledged and therefore taught as a receptive skill (Lewis 1993).

The fact that the Lexical Approach assigns such a significant role to teaching the structures of language receptively arises from the general view of the learning process. According to now widely accepted theory (e.g. Rutherford 1987; Fotos 1998; Richards 2002), language learners, when exposed to language data, create hypotheses about how language works, and only eventually put their ideas into practice to find out whether they are correct. Each element of the Observe-Hypothesise-Experiment sequence should be implemented in the teaching programme and particularly the first two stages of the learning cycle should be given prominence to since, as Lewis (1993) argues, without the ability to observe language effectively, perceive its different components and form their own personal hypotheses students are not able to progress towards a more accurate production. Placing emphasis on teaching grammar as a receptive skill is to cater for the need to develop these abilities.

Apart from being embedded in the O-H-E model of the language learning the principle of teaching grammar as a receptive skill is based on a number of other assumptions. First of them is that comprehensible input is a necessary but not sufficient condition for acquisition to take place. Another element which has to be present is learner's attention. According to Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis input cannot become intake if learners do not become aware of its new linguistic features (Schmidt 1990, quoted by Leow 1997). What is more, once the form has been perceived the learner is more likely to notice the same feature in the subsequent input he is exposed to (Fotos 1998) as well as it is probable that the grammatical form will be

included in his / her productive repertoire (Richards 2002). The way to make learners notice aspects of form is consciousness-raising, which Rutherford (1987) defines as drawing the learner's attention to some features of the target language. This awareness of language forms may be developed either by instruction or by 'input enhancement', that is, by making particular forms more salient so that learners can perceive, process and internalise them (Fotos and Heinkel 2002).

Teaching grammar as a receptive skill is also a kind of consciousness-raising, since its objective is to make learners perceive how the difference in grammatical form contributes to the difference in meaning (Lewis 1993). Yet, although some advocates of C-R recommend focusing on form as an aid to learning also while producing language (Rutherford 1987; Fotos 2002), in the Lexical Approach the emphasis is laid on reception, that is, consciousness-raising through reading and listening. Production is seen not only as ineffective but even as counterproductive since it does not allow learners to concentrate on understanding and restructuring their knowledge and therefore it does not enhance language acquisition (Thornbury 1999).

#### **Planning a lesson with grammar taught receptively**

The traditional model of grammar teaching involves the presentation stage followed by productive practice which is expected to lead to successful production. However, the Lexical Approach employs quite a different procedure. First of all, the stage when students become familiar with a new structure and the practice phase are inseparably intertwined and both aim at raising students' consciousness. Secondly, although some researchers treat explanation as one of the ways of raising learners' awareness (Ellis 2002b; Fotos 2002), Lewis rejects the idea that presenting students with the rules aids language acquisition. Rather he argues that:

If our aim is the creation of effective learning conditions explanation must be replaced by student-centred exploration, a procedure where students are presented with language data and, usually in small groups to take advantage of the different cognitive

styles of different group members, students themselves describe what they 'see'. Put simply, the students 'write their own grammar rules' (1993:149).

What he in fact proposes is inductive language teaching where students presented with examples are to discover the underlying grammar principles themselves. This idea of encouraging students to analyse language data for themselves and learn through exposure and experience (Willis 1994) is consistent with the Observe-Hypothesise-Experiment cycle.

One of the consequences of adopting such a stance is the change in the role of the teacher in the language classroom. His/her responsibility is no longer providing students with ready-made rules but rather guiding them in such a way as to help them discover the patterns in the input and find their own personal answers (Batstone 1994). Furthermore, the teacher is not to interfere but merely to monitor learners' progress and, if necessary, provide them with additional, better focused questions or point to some inconsistencies in their hypotheses (Lewis 1993).

Unlike other methodological options, grammar practice in the Lexical Approach is mainly receptive and it serves exclusively as a means of raising students' awareness. The underlying precept for giving preference to the receptive component is the assumption that skills are developed through observing successful performance rather than by execution (Lewis 1993). During receptive practice students are provided with tasks which do not require them to produce target forms but only to examine and manipulate the language data. Thus, they can be asked to identify a given structure within the language sample, classify the language data according to perceived similarities and differences, discover some principle on the basis of which some elements fit together, compare two sets of contrasting data and perceive how the difference in form influences the meaning, reassemble a whole from constituent parts, or decide whether a given sentence is correct or appropriate in a given context. All these operations performed by learners are to enable them to perceive

patterns, improve their understanding of a form/function relationship and as a result help them acquire the grammatical system.

However, although within the Lexical Approach grammar practice is based predominantly on awareness-raising receptive tasks the element of production is not completely absent. Although its efficacy as an aid to learning, reinforcement, method of testing or diagnosis is uncertain, it still remains an important element of O-H-E paradigm. Production stage, which is the last phase of the cycle, provides an opportunity for students to experiment with language and test their hypotheses.

### **The study**

Despite the fact that the idea of teaching grammar as a receptive skill was introduced several years ago, the receptive component in grammar instruction, if present at all, still tends to play a marginal role. What is more, few researchers have attempted to either prove or disprove the effectiveness of this procedure. There exist, however a number of studies dealing with some aspects of grammar teaching which could be described as receptive. These include inductive teaching (Schaffer 1989) or tasks which promote noticing but involve no production of the target forms (Van Patten and Oikennon 1996). However, none of these studies were conducted in order to examine how successful the threefold procedure of exploration leading to receptive practice, and only eventually followed by productive tasks, is in the foreign language classroom.

### *Purpose*

The aim of the small scale research undertaken by the present author was to find out whether a group of students, when guided by the teacher and exposed to a set of selected teaching materials, will be able to discover patterns in the language data. Furthermore, the study sought to determine whether the exploration of language data and receptive practice, with only marginal role assigned to the productive tasks, would result in students' ability to use the target structures

productively. The question of whether identifying similarities between the structures can be helpful for students in learning grammar was also investigated. Additionally, by means of the two questionnaires the students' opinions on the role of productive and receptive skills in learning English as a foreign language were examined, their preferences as to learning grammar revealed and finally, perceptions of their ability to understand and use of a given grammatical structure reported on.

#### *Subjects*

The subjects taking part in the study were 26 students attending the fourth form of a secondary school in Lublin. Although the class was comprised of 34 learners, only 26 of them attended all the lessons included in the study. Hence the questionnaire responses and test scores of 8 learners who participated only in a part of the experiment were excluded from the final analysis.

The students were divided into two groups, each having English lessons three times a week. Although in general the learners' level of proficiency could be described as intermediate, the performance of the students in both groups revealed great discrepancies in their abilities.

#### *Materials*

Although, as already mentioned, the concept of teaching grammar as a receptive skill is not new, yet it seems to seldom be reflected in current teaching materials. Generally, only some components of the procedure, such as asking students to induce rules from examples are present. Therefore, for the purpose of the study it was necessary to collect, combine and modify materials from various sources.

As far as the preparation of the tasks used in the study was concerned, there were only a few of them which did not require any alteration; most of the materials had to be modified in some way. Occasionally the changes were minor and concerned merely turning productive tasks into receptive tasks. In the case of some activities only part of the original exercise was preserved or it was developed by

supplementing it with additional sentences. Some activities which originally aimed at one structure were adapted to introduce or practice another aspect of grammar. Sometimes only a picture, a situation or a short text were used as a basis for designing a completely new task. Finally, there were also tasks designed from scratch by the present writer.

Major source of materials used in the study constituted selected coursebooks, namely: *Opportunities Intermediate* (2000) *Inside Out Intermediate* (2000), *New Success at First Certificate* (1997) and *Format Intermediate* (2003), as well as different components accompanying the course, such as worksheets from *Reward Intermediate Resource Pack* (2002) and *Get Real 3* (2002). The second source of activities were grammar practice books. Particularly of use were *Help with Grammar 1* (1993), *Grammar Activities 1* (2002) and *Grammar Activities 2* (2002) but also *Understanding and Using English Grammar* (1992) provided some useful material.

Overall, five worksheets were prepared for the students, each for a different language aspect. Every worksheet contained tasks for introducing the target structure as well as receptive and productive activities. Furthermore, two questionnaires were designed for the purpose of the study. There were no open-ended questions included; students were only required to mark statements applicable in their situation or those they agreed with. Unlike the rest of the materials, the questionnaires were written in Polish for the convenience of both the learners and the teacher. Using the students' native language was to minimize the time spent on filling in the questionnaires and to ensure that even the weaker learners understood the questions correctly. Finally, a self-designed test was used to evaluate students' ability to produce the target forms.

#### *Design and procedure*

The study took place in a classroom setting and entailed conducting five lessons in three weeks. Although the students taking part in it had English classes three times a week, the author decided not to devote

five consecutive lessons to teaching grammar in order not to overwhelm the participants with new information and not to demotivate them. Therefore no more than two lessons a week were allotted to the study.

During the first week of the study only one lesson was conducted. The students were asked to fill in Questionnaire 1 so that some information about them, their preferences and beliefs about effective ways of learning grammar could be gathered. Both the purpose of the study and its procedure used in the experiment were explained to the students so that they knew what to expect and to assure their cooperation. Subsequently, the first structure, namely sentences with *suppose* was introduced and practised. This aspect of grammar was chosen for the initial phase of the study since students were already familiar with conditional sentences and this fact could make it easier for them to grasp its meaning and to discover the rules.

Two lessons took place in the second week of the study. They both introduced and practised ways of expressing wishes and regrets with the structures: *wish, should have* and *if only*. Additionally, the second lesson introduced sentences with *as if*.

In the third week of the study two more lessons were conducted. The first dealt with expressing preferences with *would rather* and giving advice with *it's time*. During the second lesson a written test was administered to evaluate students' ability to use the structures productively. The test was comprised of two tasks of 10 and 11 sentences respectively. Both tasks were productive, the first one required the students to supply the correct forms of the verbs in brackets, whereas the second involved pairs of sentences – completing the second sentence required that the meaning of the first was retained. Finally, Questionnaire 2 was distributed to get some feedback on the students' perception of the study as well as information about whether they thought they could understand the structures or use them in practice. The course of the study is presented in the table below.

WEEK 1	LESSON 1	Questionnaire 1 Suppose
	LESSON 2	Wish should / shouldn't have
WEEK 2	LESSON 3	Wish Should / shouldn't have If only As if
	LESSON 4	Would rather It's (high) time
WEEK 3	LESSON 5	Test Questionnaire 2

Table 1. Sequence of lessons in the study and their content

Seven structures, which share some characteristics as far as forms and functions are concerned, were focused upon. On the one hand, they involved the use of Past Simple when speaking about the present and Past Perfect to convey past meaning; on the other, most of them referred to hypothetical or unreal situations. These parallels between the forms would allow the students to connect new information with what they were already familiar with, which in turn was to foster their understanding of the forms as well as to help them discover the patterns and use the structures more successfully. Therefore, usually more than one structure was introduced during a lesson.

As far as presenting and practising structures selected for the study is concerned, consistently the same procedure consisting of three stages was followed. The first phase was always exploration when the students were presented with some language data in the form of a text or example sentences contextualized in some way and accompanied by questions guiding them through the process of discovery.

Different forms of work were used at this stage. Often it was pair work or group work favoured by the Lexical Approach, since it allowed the students to make use of their skills to come up with a solution for the problem together (Lewis 1993). What is more, it also gave the weaker and slower students a chance to participate and to notice the pattern. However, sometimes also lockstep was adopted.

During the first lesson the aim was to acquaint students with the discovery technique. In other cases the choice was dictated by task demands since for some activities lockstep seemed to be more suitable.

The exploration was always followed by the receptive practice stage during which students were involved in performing various receptive tasks whose aim was to promote noticing of the grammatical features and draw the students' attention to the relationship between form and function. Strong emphasis was also placed on the appropriacy of a given form in a given context, thus most tasks involved interpreting grammatical information correctly in order to come up with a proper answer.

Receptive tasks varied with respect to the operations the learners had to perform. Some involved matching sentences with pictures or utterances with intended meanings. Other tasks involved comparing sentences to find similarities and differences between them. The students were asked to provide possible contexts in which such utterances could be spoken. The tasks also required sorting sentences into groups, for instance, into those referring either to the past or to the present. Finally, there were judgement tasks, in which the students had to choose the correct form of the verb depending on the context.

The third stage in the case of every structure was productive practice in which students tried to use the target forms productively. Most productive tasks entailed either supplying the correct form of the verbs in brackets or writing whole sentences with the target forms used appropriately for the context. This could involve writing what a person would say in a given situation or expressing the learners' own ideas with the use of a given structure.

Generally, all the tasks in the practice sections were written. However, there were several oral tasks introduced as well, usually at the end of the sequence, so that students could test their hypotheses potentially using the target forms, although focus was rather on content not on form. Sometimes a speaking task was an introduction to the exploration phase or the subject of the lesson.

#### *Results and discussion*

At the outset of the study Questionnaire 1 was distributed to the students to obtain information about them, their preferences and beliefs as to learning English as a foreign language and learning grammar as a component of the course. The students' answers allowed the present writer to draw some conclusions about their attitudes towards the study as well as to interpret and evaluate its results better.

The students' replies to the questions revealed that they assigned greater importance to spoken language in general and appreciated productive skills more than their receptive counterparts. What is more, the learners seemed to perceive grammar as an important factor in the process of communication as well as in language learning. Finally, they expressed strong preference for traditional grammar instruction, including deductive learning and doing exercises.

The primary objective of the study was to find out whether teaching grammar as a receptive skill would be successful and more exactly, whether it would permit students to use the target structures productively. After the forms had been introduced and practised the learners' ability to use them was evaluated. However, since the students could not be expected to instantaneously embark on using the structures in question in natural spontaneous communication after only several lessons of focus on form, as the effect of instruction is believed to be delayed (Ellis 2002a), the assessment of their oral performance was not attempted. Instead a different, more controlled mode of evaluation was adopted, which on the one hand forced the students to use the target structures and on the other allowed them plenty of time to monitor their performance. The students could receive one point for each correct sentence and half of a point if their sentence was grammatically correct but contained spelling mistakes. Thus the maximum score was 21 points. In fact, several students managed to get the maximum number of points, the highest score on the test being 21 and the lowest 10 points. The number of students

who received a particular number of points is displayed in the figure below.

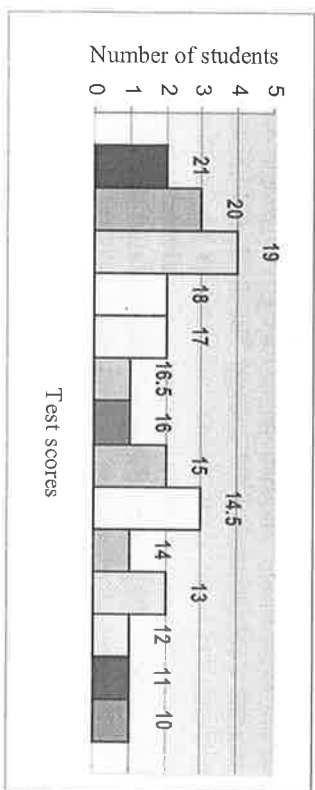


Figure 1. Distribution of the test scores

The fact that even the weakest students managed to provide at least ten correct answers indicates that they succeeded in learning at least a part of the material. A large number of high scores and a mean of 16.7 also prove that in general the students were able to use the structures productively. Thus, it is possible to say that the main objective of the study was accomplished.

After the students had written the test they were requested to fill in Questionnaire 2, which provided valuable feedback on the study. Although a number of the learners felt that some structures required more practice, it seems that the majority believed they had acquired the structure both for the receptive and productive use.

Overall, the study yielded sufficient evidence for the claim that teaching grammar as a receptive skill is feasible, although it makes heavy demands on the teacher as far as the preparation of materials is concerned. What is more, students are not always ready to take responsibility for their own learning as required by this procedure. Notwithstanding such drawbacks, the findings provided by the study confirm the claim that instruction based on reception rather than production is effective and leads to immediate ability to use the forms in controlled conditions.

### Conclusion

Since the numerous endeavours to devise an effective scheme for teaching language structure, have proved only partially successful, the innovative idea of teaching grammar as a receptive skill recommended by the Lexical Approach can be seen a promising alternative to traditional grammar instruction. On the one hand, it entails recognising grammar as an important factor in the process of comprehension. On the other hand, it calls for making learners aware of certain patterns present in the target language without asking them to produce the forms focused upon. As it was confirmed by the study presented in the article, adopting such an approach seems to be successful, resulting in students' ability to use the target structures in controlled conditions. However, further research is necessary to establish whether the effects of teaching grammar as a receptive skill endure and to what extent they influence learners' ability to employ forms they have acquired receptively in spontaneous communication.

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