Bicycles or boiling water: changing how learners see grammar

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NOTE: This is (more or less) the text of the slides from the presentation, followed by a reference list. They may not be very clear to someone who did not attent the presentation.

Outline
- How important is grammar for learners?
- Teaching grammar explicitly: theory and evidence
- What grammar, how much and to whom?
- Inductive or deductive?
- The three Es in grammar teaching: explanations, examples and exercises
- Planning inductive grammar activities

What I am not saying
- Not saying that grammar is the only aspect of language that's important
- Not saying that great amounts of time should be spent teaching grammar

How important is grammar for learners?
It depends on the learner, and it depends on the context.

Grammar: true or false?
1. If people learn enough vocabulary, they'll acquire the grammar of the language. True... but they won't learn enough vocabulary in instructed EFL for this to happen.
2. The best way to teach grammar is to wait until the need for a specific grammar point emerges, and then teach it. Probably true... but this isn't possible in most instructed language situations.:
- Individual differences: different students' needs will emerge at different times ↛ problems in a classroom situation
- Coverage: tasks won't necessarily provide stimulus for all the grammar that learners need
- Classroom affordances: can you as a teacher improvise rules reliably and consistently?
3. The best way to teach grammar is via tasks. False
4. There is evidence that teaching grammar rules works. True

Current theoretical views
- *Input-interaction-output* says conscious knowledge
    a) can help noticing
    b) can encourage comparison of noticed input with learner's own output
    c) can convert directly into unconscious knowledge
    d) can provide negative feedback
- *Task-based instruction*: a place for pre-planned grammar instruction
- *Skills approach*: 'declarative crutches'

Explicit grammar teaching : evidence
- Norris & Ortega (2000): *meta-analysis*: explicit teaching is better than implicit teaching, effects of explicit teaching last
- Gass & Selinker (2008): *review*: after early childhood, acquiring complex forms requires meaningful input <u>and</u> explicit grammar focus

- Spada & Tomita (2010): *meta-analysis*: explicit teaching is more effective
- than implicit teaching for both simple and complex features, and the effects are lasting
- Spada & Lightbown (2008): explicit teaching of rules, combined with communicative practice, leads to conscious <u>and unconscious</u> knowledge that lasts over time
- Spada & Tomita (2010): teaching rules separately from communicative practice is just as good as integrating it for <u>conscious and unconscious</u> grammar knowledge that lasts over time.
- So: good to teach grammar (but let's do it efficiently)

How can we prioritise which grammar rules to teach?
Hulstijn says you need to balance two features:
- Scope (How much of the language does the rule apply to?)
- Frequency (How often is the rule used in the language the learner needs?)

How much explicit grammar teaching?
Nation (2009): four strands: one quarter of time in language-focused learning

Should we teach grammar explicitly to *all* learners?
Jan Hulstijn (1995) excludes some learners:
- Those on 'survival' courses
- Adults whose lack of academic background hasn't prepared them for analysis at this level

I would also exclude *very* young children; but Nunes & Bryant (2006) have taught L1 grammar explicitly with benefit to children as young as 6. In Catalunya, Fontich (2014) has done some interesting L1 work with children too. '

NB: 'rule': There are two kinds of rule:
1. No bicycles, whether ridden or not
   (*Sign in Oxford University Parks*)
2. Pure water at sea level boils at 100º Celsius.
- The 'bicycle' rule is imposed by an authority.
- The 'boiling water' rule is a statement of observed regularity.
- Grammar rules are 'boiling water' rules, but too often they are presented as 'bicycle' rules

What kind of explicit grammar teaching? Inductive?
- Terminology: *inductive, consciousness raising, structured input*)
- Theoretically, how might it work? →→ Deeper processing
- Demonstrates that grammar rules are boiling–water rules
- Empirical evidence that it works as well as deductive (e.g. VanPatten & Oikkenon, 1996; Chan & Li, 2002; Ming & Maarof, 2010)
- However, evidence that relying on learners to derive rules without help doesn't work (Erlam, 2003)

Inductive teaching: ingredients:
- A good clear rule to aim at
- Samples of the grammar feature (quantity, quality)
- Clear guidance for the learners

The three Es of grammar teaching
- Explanations (rules) , Examples, Exercises
- Deductive teaching: explanations, examples, exercises
- Inductive teaching: examples, explanations, exercises

What kind of explicit grammar teaching?
- Deductive or inductive?
- Inductive ↛ deeper processing?
- Inductive ↛ demonstrates that grammar rules are boiling---water rules
- Empirical evidence (e.g. VanPatten & Oikkenon, 1996; Chan & Li, 2002; Ming & Maarof, 2010): teaching inductively is at least as good as teaching deductively

The 3 Es: (1) Explanations
- See Swan (1994)
- Note: in inductive grammar teaching, examples come first for the learner, but the explanation has to come first for the teacher. There is evidence that relying on learners to derive rules without help doesn't work (Erlam, 2003). You have to know the rule that you are aiming for.
- All good grammar rules should
  - be true
  - show what the limits are on the use of a given form
  - be clear
- Good grammar rules for <u>learners</u> should also
  - be as simple as possible without sacrificing too much of the truth
  - make use of the grammatical notions that the learner already has
  - be relevant (answer – only – the question the learner's grammar is asking

The three Es: (2) Examples
Qualities of examples:
- Prototypical
- Natural-sounding
- Not containing irrelevant difficulties (e.g. above-level vocabulary, potentially unknown cultural references)
- Implications for corpus use

Quantity of examples:
- Goldilocks principle
- (and usually more examples needed for inductive teaching than for deductive teaching)

The three Es: (3): Exercises
- Nothing wrong with exercises. In fact…
  - Working memory limitations
  - Opportunity to develop fluency

- There's clear evidence that focus on one or two language features leads to effective learning in a way that focus on a range of language features doesn't
- Exercises are the most important of the three Es, and should get the most time
- Ideal exercise combines quantity and quality of practice in a short time (depth of processing)

Planning inductive grammar activities

- Before you begin: choose appropriate grammar explanations for learners
- Start with the explanation that you want the learners to finish with
- Guide the learners towards the rule
- A middle option: in cases where learners are distinguishing between different forms or meanings, give the explanations and ask them to sort the examples
- Aim for exercises that combine quantity and quality of practice so that learners can develop fluency as well as accuracy

Kinds of inductive grammar learning activities
(for examples, see the *Oxford English Grammar Course* and *Navigate*)

- Matching examples to rules
- Add examples from text
- Sorting concepts (e.g. which concepts go with *this/these* and which concepts with *that/those*?)
- Matching parts of rules (give beginnings; find ends)
- Put rules in order
- Gap filling
- Alternatives
- Multiple choice:
- Structured questioning

Take-home messages

- Some learners need grammar accuracy and fluency
- It works to teach grammar explicitly, for many learners
- Inductive grammar teaching can be a way of making grammar more cognitively engaging; but it needs to be carefully designed.
- Good grammar teaching requires good rules, good and Goldilocks examples and good exercises
- This presentation has dealt in details with inductive rule learning; but the exercises are the most important part of the process

References and further reading

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For concrete examples of inductive grammar teaching activities, see *The Oxford English Grammar Course* ('Do It Yourself' activities) and the *Navigate* course series.