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The Forum

Approaching Grammar Instruction with a Form-Meaning-Function Perspective

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Why should second and foreign language teachers tune into instructed second language acquisition (ISLA)? There are many reasons, several of which have already been addressed in this forum. This paper examines one important benefit of keeping abreast of the field, namely, the opportunity for classroom instructors to extract pedagogical insights from ISLA research and apply them in a meaningful way to their teaching.

One significant insight gleaned from the research is the importance of adopting a contextualized form-meaning-function (FMF) approach to grammar instruction (Williams, 2007). Fundamental to this approach is the concept that language form, meaning, and function (i.e., use) are inextricably linked—a concept that was absent in older, more "mechanical" approaches to language teaching (2007) such as audiolingualism and grammar translation. As Han (2013) notes:

> Four decades of SLA research have increasingly brought the awareness that learning an L2 entails more than wrestling with the surface forms of a new language; it requires the learner to develop the ability to map form-meaning-function (FMF) relations and to do so in real-time spontaneous communication. (p. 138)

Marianne Celce-Murcia and Diane Larsen-Freeman (1999), proponents of a tri-dimensional approach and co-authors of the seminal grammar text, *The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teachers Course*, agree: "Grammar is not merely a collection of forms but rather involves the three dimensions of (morpho)syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Grammatical structures not only have a morphosyntactic form, they are also used to express meaning (semantics) in context-appropriate use (pragmatics)" (p. 109). Hence, it is essential for L2 grammar instruction and materials to include all three dimensions.

Over the years, empirical support for a tri-dimensional framework (e.g., Doughty, 2003; Han & Lew, 2012; Larsen-Freeman, 2006; Nunan, 1998; Van Patten, 2004) has secured its place among pedagogically sound approaches to grammar instruction. However, this was not always the case. Traditional grammar instruction focused on morphosyntactic form and canonical meaning, and very little, if any, consideration was given to pragmatic function or *use*. Here "use" can be defined as "the ways in which particular grammatical phenomena are closely associated in discourse with specific discourse purposes," particularly when there are is a clear-cut choice between two grammatical structures that share "the same semantic meaning but have different pragmatic effects" (Williams, 2007, n.p.). Take the English definite article, for example. Although learners are likely to know the form of the definite article (*the*) and its canonical meaning, they may not be aware of its appropriate use in different discourse conditions. While learners may know that it is possible to say "the dog" in English, they may not be able to tell when "the dog" refers to a specific entity (e.g., *The dog in the picture is a golden retriever*) and when it is being used generically (e.g., *The dog is a faithful animal*). Moreover, they may also be unaware that the generic pattern THE + SINGULAR NOUN (e.g., *The dog is a faithful animal*) conveys a more formal register in English than does the generic pattern ∅ + PLURAL NOUN (e.g., *Dogs are faithful animals*).

Nowadays, lessons about the pragmatic functions of grammatical structures can be found in many popular ESL grammar texts, and many (e.g., Elbaum's *Grammar in Context*, Azar's *Understanding and using English Grammar*, Pavlik and Bland's *Grammar Sense*) teach grammar from a FMF perspective. These textbooks all include a wealth of readings, explanations, graphic representations (e.g., illustrations, time-line diagrams, tables, charts), as well as written, oral, and aural exercises and opportunities for individual, pair, and group activities (Williams, 2007). But textbooks may not be enough. I would argue that in order to teach grammar effectively, instructors need to be aware of the interconnectedness of language form, meaning, and function and teach their students to be aware of it as well. In doing so, they can exploit opportunities for learning that might otherwise go unnoticed, as the following example reveals.

I recently reviewed a grammar exercise with my advanced ESL writing students, a congenial group of twenty men and women of various linguistic backgrounds, including a deaf student and her American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter, Professor Jennifer Wilkinson. This exercise required students to find and correct errors in a four-paragraph passage consisting of 27 identified verb phrases. The grammatical focus of the lesson was the English present perfect and present perfect progressive tenses. The subject of the passage was the writer's very active and much-admired uncle, a 68-year-old history and language teacher. Although the class as a whole did well on the exercise, nearly all had difficulty with the following sentence, reprinted from Elbaum's *Grammar in Context*, Book 3A (2016, p. 71): "Some people think he's old and should retire. But he *has never been thinking* about retiring" (*The italicized area indicates an error*).

Most students had erroneously marked the sentence 'correct,' so we stopped for an impromptu review of the form, meaning, and use of the perfect and perfect progressive aspects that included time-line diagrams, detailed explanations, and numerous examples. Despite my best efforts, however, they were still confused. Although the students were familiar with the form of the present perfect and present perfect progressive, their respective meanings were not as clear to them, and very few were able to discern the subtle differences in their use.

As one student reread the troublesome sentence ("He has never been thinking about retiring") aloud, my attention was drawn to the ASL interpreter, Professor Wilkinson, who was signing it to the deaf student in the class. She began with what appeared to be a 'time' sign (both index fingers touching the right shoulder and then moving forward away from the body in a downward arc) indicating an event that had begun in the past and continued into the present. Following that, she made the sign for 'thinking' (a continuous circular movement with the fingers of the right hand against the side of the head). To my surprise, the ASL translation of the verb phrase in the 'incorrect' option, "He *has* never *been thinking* about retiring" so perfectly captured the continuous meaning of the phrase – and hence its inappropriateness for that particular discourse context – that I asked the interpreter to sign for me the 'correct' alternative, ("He *has* never *thought* about retiring") as well. Once again I was struck by how effectively her gestures (the 'time' sign followed by a single tap to the head with the index finger of the right hand) illustrated the meaning of the verb phrase. See ASL video here (TESOL/AL Web Journal, 2015).

When I asked the interpreter to simultaneously vocalize and sign both phrases for the benefit of the students, there was a brief silence. Then the class, as one, responded with spontaneous, enthusiastic affirmations of understanding: "Oh! I get it!" "Now I understand!" "Yes, I see it!" Many began speaking the verb phrases aloud, using the appropriate signs for "has never been thinking about" and "has never thought about" as they did. It was clear that this visual-gestural representation of the perfect and progressive aspects had resonated with the

students, allowing them not only to grasp the meaning of the tenses, but also to assess their suitability for a particular discourse context.

It is hard to describe the current of excitement that rippled through the room at that moment. Had I not been aware of the importance of approaching grammar instruction from a form-meaning-function perspective, this 'teachable moment' might never have happened, and my class would still be in the dark. Thankfully, it did, and it was nothing short of an epiphany—one that would not have been possible from a lesson that focused solely on forms.

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