The Grammar Lesson: Practicing Again What I Had Preached

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ABSTRACT: What happens when a former ELT teacher trainer in Asia returns to a North American classroom situation similar to her former students? What happens to all the grammar-teaching best practices she had so enthusiastically preached? This paper describes one teacher's transition from preaching best-practice grammar pedagogy in Asia to her current community college English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classroom. It begins with a description of the Asian ELT context and the core, preached underpinnings of the grammar pedagogy course. This is followed by concrete examples of how these best practices have been transferred into current practice and how the reader may use these as guidelines to inform their own classroom decisions in the US.

Keywords: EAP, grammar instruction, grammar teaching principles, writing, SFG

Introduction

I began my teaching career in the US, but I have spent most of my time in Asia. A better portion of that career has been as a pre- and in-service teacher trainer at a university in Hong Kong (Education University of Hong Kong, EDUHK). There, I designed the curriculum, wrote materials, and taught lessons focusing on grammar as a subject and as pedagogy. The Asian teaching context presented some unique challenges to the English language grammar teacher as the local curriculum tended to be quite rigid, typically with teachers in lockstep with one another and anchored to the textbook –which may or may not have provided grammar instruction grounded in any clear theory or principles. My job, then, was to provide students with an understanding of English grammar as a subject as well as guidelines and principles upon which to make informed classroom grammar decisions (pedagogy). In other words, I had to find a way to help my students use their assigned, commercially published ELT textbook in a way that reflected the best grammar-teaching practices.

Fast forward to a few years later to my return to the US. I took up a post in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) division at a local community college. I was more than a little amused to find myself in a situation very similar to my previous students. I was assigned a commercially published ELT textbook—the first one I had used in decades. This was my golden opportunity to re-apply what I had been teaching for years—and is the subject of this paper.

This paper begins with a description of the beliefs, principles, and guidelines that underpinned the grammar pedagogy courses that I taught and then continues with an application of these underpinnings to my current teaching situation: practicing what I preached.

The Grammar Course: Grammar as Subject

At EDUHK, grammar as a subject adopted Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) model (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). In this model, grammar is viewed as a choice rather than as a "mechanism to avoid error" (Myhill, 2021, p. 14). Language choices are dependent on one's purpose for communication to a particular audience and are analyzed in terms of levels of meaning. Writers are asked, "What meaning is made by these language choices?" For example, language choices made for a piece of writing about "dogs" would vary vastly if the purpose was a narrative text-type for a young audience versus an academic descriptive text-type written for an adult audience. These differences might include vocabulary choices: doggies versus canines (ideational meaning), pronoun choices: you/we versus people/ one (interpersonal meaning), and active versus passive voice (textual level of meaning). Students are also shown that language choices impact the reader. The learner-writer may choose a faulty grammatical structure such as "I no come to class." This structure communicates a message that may be acceptable in informal texts. But for other purposes and audiences, this would be unacceptable. There is a choice to be made.

Pedagogical Grammar Lesson Structure: Input and Output

The grammar pedagogy course argued that the grammar lesson structure should include carefully planned *input* and opportunities for *output*. *Input* introduces the grammar item and includes multiple examples of the form from which students can **notice** the language in context (Schmidt, 1990; Schmidt & Robinson, 2001). As Hinkel (2020) argues, the initial goal of grammar instruction is to "develop learners' awareness and noticing," the grammar form in academic texts (p.51). The focus is on the meaning, not just the rules of use. Input activities should include both inductive (where rules are discovered) and deductive (where rules are given) (see Norris and Ortega, 2000). In this way, learning styles and preferences can be accommodated.

The grammar lesson should also include opportunities for practice. This language *output* should offer the learner a variety of contextualized activities for practice. Output activities *may* include sentence-level practice but only insofar as they require cognitive engagement (and a choice of plausible answers). Ideally, grammar-focused lessons should offer *pushed-output* practice activities (Swain, 1985). These activities require effort from the learner to engage with the language point slightly above their current ability. This is similar to Krashen's input hypothesis *i+1* (Krashen, 1982): input plus the next step forward.

Principles of Grammar Instruction

The pedagogical grammar course at EDUHK also included principles upon which pre and in-service teachers could make informed classroom decisions. These fundamental principles are as follows:

Principle: Grammar must be taught in context.

Celce-Murcia (2016) has argued that few grammar rules are context-free (p.121). She argues that without context, grammatical choices are unclear. For example, a typical fill-in-the-blank grammar textbook exercise may look like this:

He _____ his teeth every morning. (brush)

Students are then required to fill in the blank with the correct form of the verb, *brush*. However, without proper context, two answers are possible:

> He **brushes** his teeth every morning.
>
> He **brushed** his teeth every morning.

More context is required to make meaning. Many textbooks and online sources provide sentence-level fill-in-the-blank exercises for the English language learner, which seem to "fish" for specific grammar forms when multiple answers are possible. This is especially true for verb tense exercises.

Principle: Grammar must be meaningful and engaging.

As Larsen-Freeman (2003) has argued, grammar activities must be "independently motivating [and] seen by students as worth doing" (p.117). This goes well beyond mechanical and accuracy-focused drills and fill-in-the-blank found in grammar textbooks*,* aka "drill and kill*,*" so prevalent in Asian settings (Quoang, 2011).

Principle: Grammar is a choice.

Again, citing Larsen-Freeman (2003), grammar is not a "linguistic straitjacket" (p. 68) but a means of communicating intended meaning. "It is students who must and will decide how they wish to position themselves" when they communicate in English (ibid, p.61). Students have a choice in how they want to communicate. The role of the teacher is to explain the meanings made by the various choices. For example, in some Englishes, the use of a double modal is acceptable: I *might could* help you. In formal, standard English, this would be considered a faulty verb group. Another example is the understanding of plural or singular nouns such as "family." In British English, "family" is conceived as plural, producing a sentence such as "My family are coming to see me this weekend." In American English, this subject-verb agreement would be faulty as "family" is conceived as a singular noun (for a further discussion, see Larsen-Freeman, 2002). Grammar as a choice is also one of the main tenets of SFG and genre-based writing instruction used at EDUHK.

Grammar Activity Guidelines

In addition to the beliefs and principles that underpinned the core of the grammar pedagogy course, the pre and in-service teachers were also provided with guidelines to assist in developing grammar activities. The following list developed by Ur (2016, pp. 119-121) was used to help EDUHK pre-service teachers evaluate an ELT textbook's handling of grammar and design alternative, supplemental activities as needed.

Ur's (2016) list is as follows:

- Quantity: opportunities for practice. The more opportunities for practice, the better, but with the stipulation that these opportunities are not merely time-wasting busy-work.
- Heterogeneity: different types of activities. A variety of activities should be provided to accommodate learners at different levels.
- Interest: to capture students' attention. Ur (year) argues that a grammar activity of interest to students should include the following features:
  Meaningful, not merely activities "fishing" for the one right answer, which is similar to Larsen-Freeman (2003) above.

  Visual: the activity should provide pictures and/or graphics.

  Open-ended: choices of answers. There should be more than one answer allowable rather than pre-determined answers which would produce parroting.

Personalization. Personalizing activities acknowledge students' own opinions, tastes, and culture.

Higher-order thinking. This requires students to think critically and not just recall regurgitate from memory.

Game-like activity. This includes interactive team competitions, or some similar online activities such as Kahoot.

Ur's list above also seems to fall under Krashen's (2014) criteria for "compelling input"—input that is of such interest that the learner is "hardly aware that [the input] is in a different language" (Krashen & Bland, 2014, p. 2).

For their final project, my pedagogical grammar students used the guidelines above to demonstrate their understanding of the above principles by evaluating a grammar lesson in a local ELT textbook and offering adaptations to those lessons to align with best practices.

It was with all the above influences, practices, and beliefs that I returned to teach in the US.

Back in the US: Initial Assumptions and Expectations

When I returned to the US ELT classroom, I came across? some assumptions and expectations. I expected to find a more text-based, contextualized approach to the teaching of grammar in the writing process with grammar as a tool used to communicate in writing. I was surprised, then, at a conversation early in my return to the US context. A younger, more recent TESOL graduate asked another colleague and me for advice on teaching the present progressive form. My answer was, "What text-type are you teaching? How is this form used in that context and that genre? Use a text to help students see how the form is used." My other colleague offered, "I have a worksheet here." My younger colleague took the worksheet—a set of fill-in-the-blank sentences. I realized then that my approach to grammar instruction may be dissimilar to my colleagues' approach.

Practicing what I had Preached

This final section of this paper will provide the reader with some of the ways I have applied the beliefs and principles that I taught in Asia to my US ELT context—a community college. I will show that these principles are not restricted to an Asian contest but are universal.

For this discussion, I will use an example from the course English for Academic Purposes: Grammar and Writing Level 2. This course uses the book, *Developing Composition Skills* (3rd Edition) by Mary Ruetten. A separate grammar book is also assigned for this course, but I do not use it because 1) it does not seem to be grounded in any language learning theory, and 2) it does not directly apply to the language choices required in the writing assignment. The second unit of this book is entitled "Narrative: Memorable Events." Narrative text types are not particularly academic, but at Level 2, this focus is appropriate as it offers a means to analyze language choices at a lighter "learning burden" (Nation, 2013). In other words, students can access their own experiences for writing and thereby free up more space to focus on language needed to communicate meaning.

Of particular interest in this unit was the grammar focus: *to review past tense for narrating; to review used to and would;* and *to review adverbial clauses of time.* I was curious about the presentation of the language forms, *used to* and *would*. The "Developing Grammar Skills" section of the unit lists the following "rules" for *used to* and *would* (page 41).

Use **used to** and **would** for habitual actions in the past that are no longer true.

I **used to** exercise every day, but now I don't.

When I was a child, I **would** often spend time alone.

These rules are incomplete. As Celce-Murcia has argued (2016), there is no principled way to distinguish the difference of *used to* and *would* at the sentence level. A context or discourse must be provided. Discourse frames show that *used to* introduces or frames the event, while *would* is used to elaborate it. Clearly, this language point needed to be contextualized. The grammar rules provided in the textbook do not comply with best practices as I knew them and had taught them.

The following provides examples from my grammar lesson for Unit 2. I first describe the steps taken in presenting (input) the form as well as activities for practicing (output). [The input is presented as a worksheet to the students plus PowerPoint slides].

The Grammar Lesson

Input: Meaning of the form at the sentence level.

I provide students with examples at the sentence level and ask questions about what meaning is made.

1. She *used to* be in my class, but she dropped out. Question: *Is she still in the class?*
2. I *used to* play the cello when I was young. Question: *Do I still play the cello?*

Induced rule: *Used to* = _____ in the past (habit)

Used to shows that something was _____ in the past, but not true _____.

The above is meant to help students *induce* the rule from the meaning that is made in the examples. Student feedback on an inductive approach has been positively revealed in their comments to me. They like that it "makes [them] think." Still, others have preferred rules-first instruction. Thus, to accommodate various learning preferences, I do offer some rules-first instruction from time to time, thus adhering to Ur's principle of Heterogeneity.

Input: Noticing the form at the text level

I give students three model texts of varying lengths from which they can notice the language form in use. The sample text below has been rewritten from the textbook Exercise 12, pages 41-42, where it appears as individual sentences.

Directions: Find and highlight in a different color the forms, *used to* and *would + verb*

> I used to work in my father's grocery story every afternoon when I was young. I would get off the school bus, walk to the store, and work until dinner. Then my father would drive me home. I felt tired, but I was happy after working with my father.

Using colors for different language forms makes the pattern clearly visible. I also ask students to notice and underline the main lexical verb that follows the modal "would."

Inducing the rules. I next ask students to answer the questions about what they discovered from the three model texts.

1. In a paragraph about past habits, when will you use "used to" and when will you use "would +verb"?

   Use "used to" at the _____ of the paragraph, and then use _____.

[Answers: beginning; would +verb]

2. What do you notice about the verb that follows "used to" and "would"?

   Verbs that follow "used to" and "would" are in _____ form. They are not verb tenses.

   [Answer: base]

3. If the time frame is past in the first part of the sentence, what time frame but be chosen in the rest of the sentence? Students understand that a "time frame" captures more than one tense name. A past time frame includes simple past, past progressive, and past perfect.

   If past tense is used at the beginning of the sentence, then _____ must be chosen for the rest.

   [Answer: past]

I am careful here to use words that enforce the idea that language forms are "chosen" for a particular reason in keeping with the principle of *grammar as* a *choice.*

Input/Output: Noticing the correct or incorrect forms.

After presenting a grammar form, I typically offer some type of practice with that form. One frequent method I use is to have students find and fix common errors. Students know that a sentence with * indicates that there is a problem.

Directions: Find and fix the problems. These are excerpts. I usually provide 5-6 sentences.

1. **When I am young, I used to rode my bicycle everywhere.

   Answer: When I **was** young, I used to **ride** my bicycle everywhere.

2. * Every day, I would got on my bike and ride around my neighborhood.

   Answer: Every day, I would **get** on my bike and ride around my neighborhood.

3. * I would rode for hours and hours.

   Answer: I would **ride** for hours and hours.

One intention in the above "find and fix" exercise is to get students accustomed to looking carefully at language forms in the hopes of transferring this skill to their own writing. I can also refer to the lesson when giving feedback on writing by asking questions such as "What tense should you use in this when time clause?"

At this point in the lesson, I offer a review of all the key points thus far—a summary. I do this before I launch into the output for the lesson.

Output: Dictogloss.

A Dictogloss (Wajnryb, 1988) is a teaching procedure in which students listen to a short, dense text several times, taking notes either after or during the reading. They then work with others to reconstruct the text as closely to the original as possible. The teacher can create a text that focuses on a particular grammar point, thus requiring students to produce the form in a written text. My method for this procedure is as follows (presented to students on a PowerPoint slide).

I hand out a worksheet for note-taking and writing. The format looks like this:

Step 1: listen

Step 2: Take notes

Step 3: Take more notes

Step 4: WRITE

+++++fold under +++++++++

The folded-under portion on the worksheet contains the original text in a smaller font which students will refer to in the final step: checking answers.

Introduction to the Dictogloss: I provide some visuals to help prepare students for the text.

I then proceed with the following steps:

Step 1: Listen. I read the text at a normal rate of speed.

Step 2: Listen and take notes. I read the text again, and students take notes. They need to be reminded that this is not a dictation and that they should focus on the keywords.

Step 3: Listen and take a few more notes with help with keywords provided.

younger trail exercise Nike breakfast

jump out put on shower begin near my house

Step 4: Work with a partner. Use your notes to WRITE the short text exactly as you heard it.

In Step 4, students use their notes to share answers and reconstruct the text.

Step 5: Compare your writing with the original. Students unfold the bottom portion of the worksheet to reveal the original text from which they can check their answers, paying attention to the language forms.

The original is printed in small font at the bottom of the worksheet and folded under.

Original:

When I was younger, I used to exercise every day. I would jump out of bed each morning at 4:30. I would put on my Nikes and go for a run. I ran for about an hour on the trail near my house. When I got back, I would take a shower and eat breakfast. It was a great way to begin the day.

Students unfold the bottom portion of the worksheet and note the differences between their writing and the original. I ask students to pay particular attention to the adverb clauses of time (when + s+ verb) and the use of "used to" and "would + verb in the base form." Students have found the Dictogloss to be challenging but engaging. It also provides opportunities for pair and group work, which student feedback shows that they enjoy.

The text above focuses on the language/grammar needed to write a short narrative text—their next writing assignment. To further prepare students for their narrative writing assignment, I provide them with a longer model narrative text for analysis as homework for the next lesson. [See below]

Input: Text-Type for text analysis.

The point of the input thus far has been to give students the language forms required for their writing assignment for this unit. As the textbook does not provide a clear narrative text type for analysis, I wrote the narrative "Dancing with a Broken Arm." I give students a copy of this narrative text and ask them to do an analysis of the text paying attention to and noticing the following by highlighting, underlining, or circling:

simple past	Used to	Would + verb	signal words/phrases
contrast words	dependent time clauses (when + s+ v)		

For example, students should find all examples of the simple past and highlight them in a particular color. "Use to" should be highlighted in a different color, etc. The worksheet format also includes a sidebar that focuses on text organization: how a narrative text type is organized. This is the model text that I use:

Dancing with a Broken Arm

[1]I had a very memorable experience when I was about 10 years old. I used to take ballet lessons. [2]Once a week, I would happily go to these lessons after school. [3]I would put on my leotards and my ballet shoes and take my place at the barre with my class. [4]Every Spring there was a big ballet recital. [5]Each class would prepare a dance routine to perform in front of an audience. [6]We would all practice extra hard for these recitals. [7]I loved dancing in these recitals and always looked forward to them. [8]One year, however, I had some bad luck. [9]One weekend, I went to a roller-skating party, and I fell and broke my arm! [10]It was awful and even worse, this happened just before my big ballet recital. [11]I thought, "I can't dance with my arm in a cast!" [12] I felt so very sad and disappointed. [13]However, my dance teacher said, "Why not dance anyway?" [14]So, my mom made a special black sling for my arm to match my ballet costume and I performed in the recital. [15]I will never forget the time I danced with a broken arm.

During the following class, we look at the patterns that were revealed by noticing and highlighting the language forms. We also look at the overall organization of this narrative text type. The focus on language choices and text structure is very much in keeping with the genre-based writing approach founded in SFG. This is color-coded on the PowerPoint slide to reveal the distinctive organizational patterns. For example, sentence 1 is the introduction, which is highlighted for clarity. It uses a "when time clause" to situate the narrative at a specific time in the past. Sentences 2-7 describe the routine or habit in the past using the grammar forms "used to" and "would + verb." Sentence 8 alerts the reader to a specific event using, "one time." Finally, sentences 8-14 describe the event followed by a personal comment/reflection on the past event (sentence 15).[1] What I have found with this text-type analysis is that students eagerly engage in highlighting, circling, or underlining. It is a means of maintaining student focus on any grammar form or structure of a particular genre.

The input above then leads to the final output: the writing assignment.

Output: The Writing Assignment.

Students are now given their writing assignment for this unit. Their instructions are as follows:

Assignment: Describe a memorable event from your life.

Introduction:

Tell the reader when the event occurred. Use a *when* time clause.

Background:

[1] This follows a "text-type" approach to writing based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). See Myhill (2021) and Caplan (2022) for a description of the use of this approach in the classroom.

Give the reader some background information about the event you are going to describe. This can be something you used to do; a place you used to go etc.

The event:

Describe the memorable event in detail. Include a signal word to alert the reader that your description will begin.

Conclusion:

Add a personal comment

Aim to write at least 100 words. Follow the model text provided (*Dancing with a Broken Arm*). Refer to the Assessment Rubric for grading. I give assessment rubrics for each writing assignment and adapt it frequently. I have found these rubrics are an excellent way to check that my classroom input more closely matches my expectation in writing output.

The assessment rubric I use for this assignment is as follows:

NARRATIVE ASSESSMENT RUBRIC

	Excellent 10 9	Very good 8 7	Good 6 5	Needs work 4 3 2 1
Topic Sentence	There is a clear topic sentence and clear controlling idea that prepares the reader. The TS/CI is interesting.	There is a topic sentence and controlling idea. It prepares the reader for the ideas that follow.	There is a topic sentence but it may not include a controlling idea.	There is no topic sentence or controlling idea or the TS/CI is inappropriate or confusing.
Support	The supporting details are directly related to the topic sentence. The ideas are presented in a clear and logical way. Many transition/ signal words are used which help the flow of the ideas.	The supporting details are related to the topic sentence but the ideas are not always presented in an organized way. Transition/signal words are used (more than one).	The supporting details are not always related to the topic sentence. The organization of the ideas may cause confusion. One transition/signal word is used.	The supporting details may be missing or unrelated to the topic sentence. The organization causes confusion to the reader. No evidence of transition/signal words.
Org.	Closely follows the model text: Introduction, clearly described background of the event, clear details of the event, comment (conclusion). The writer adds an interesting personal comment to conclude. No new ideas are included in the conclusion.	Somewhat follows the model text: Introduction, a background of the event, some details of the event, an adequate comment (conclusion). No new ideas are included in the concluding sentence. The writer adds a personal comment.	The organization misses one of the following: introduction, background, the event, conclusion. No personal comment is included or the conclusion may be missing.	There is no clear organization of the event; limited details. The conclusion is confusing or missing.
Grammar	Evidence of one complex sentence (using while/when). When time clause is used accurately. Accurate verb tenses are chosen consistently. *Used to* and *would* are both used appropriately. Punctuation: Capital letters, full-stops.	There is evidence of a complex sentence. Mostly accurate tenses are chosen. Either used to or would is used. Punctuation: Some capital letters may be missing; a full-stop may be missing.	There is an attempt at a complex sentence. Some problems with verb tense. No evidence of used to or would. Punctuation problems: capital letters; full-stops	There is no evidence of complex sentences. The tenses are not correct or the form is not correct. There are many problems with punctuation.

For every writing assignment, I offer feedback on the student document itself, including written comments and meaning made by faulty grammar choices as well as an assessment rubric. This way, students can clearly see why they got the grade that they did. If students are not happy with their assessment, they have the option of revising their paper based on the feedback and resubmitting it for a higher grade, which most students do. This option provides motivation for students to rewrite and, ideally, learn from their errors.

With this final writing assignment output, the teaching unit is complete.

Conclusion

When I first stepped back into the ELT classroom as a non-teacher trainer, I was more than a little curious to see what principles and prescribed methodology would stick and what would work in this US context. I have discovered that my current classroom decisions do align with the principles and guidelines that I once enthusiastically preached. The approach and methods I have been using in class—the very ones I recommended and demonstrated in Asia—work well in my new context. End-of-course evaluations show that the students have responded positively to the course instruction with an average of 4.9 out of 5.0. Recent students' comments reveal that they found the materials to be "helpful," "interesting," "super-fun," "good worksheets," and "always learning something new." While only anecdotal, these comments (and ratings) show that I'm doing something right. Even with this positive feedback, my teaching practice is, as always, a work in progress. I continue to research and update my understanding of grammar instruction and language learning to inform my classroom practice. I regularly reflect upon my grammar lessons and compare them with what I understand to be best practices. I offer the ELT practitioner the reflective questions that I ask myself:

- Did the grammar instruction provide enough engaging **input**?
- Was the **input** appropriate for the students? What changes should be made?
- Was there a **variety** of **instruction/practice** to accommodate different learning styles and preferences? If not, what changes should be made?
- Were there enough opportunities for meaningful, pushed **output**? If not, what changes need to be made?

Answers to these questions will ideally keep grammar instruction as effective as possible. The end goal is for students to become confident language learners beyond the four walls of the ELT classroom.

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