

Rules and examples: how *do* learners acquire grammar?

In any approach based on the primacy of meaning, grammar must be subsidiary to lexis.

When students travel, they don't carry grammar books, they carry dictionaries! Krashen

Grammar is about the management of text, rather than the creation of meaning. Sinclair

Rules

- 'a statement of what is allowed'
- 'a customary form or procedure'. (Collins)
- axiom, canon, criterion, guide, law, principle

In fact, 'rules' are **post-hoc summaries of known examples** (ie the 'known examples' take precedence)

Problems with 'rules'

1. Difference between declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge.

a) 'Support the voice': b) What do you think about when batting? *When I'm batting well – nothing; when I'm batting badly, everything* - inhibiting effect of declarative knowledge on acquisition of procedural knowledge.

2. Metalanguage - an example – 'speaker's synoptic conception'; (*The present simple is used when the speaker does not envisage change. The present and past simple are used when time is not relevant, precisely because the speaker does not envisage change. Present = generally true; past = was but is not now.*)

Sinclair: This is the curious terminology that we use, things like positive/negative, singular/plural, active/passive, and so on. If we look at them carefully, these terms are of course quite substantially inaccurate.' Singular' does not always mean 'one', and 'plural' does not always mean 'more than one'. 'Present' does not always refer to the time of the utterance, and 'past' certainly does not always mean some previous time. We have learned as part of our culture to suspend disbelief when we encounter these terms. (**Trust the text** Page 166)

a. state/action (*It's raining.* 'the physical or mental condition that someone or something is in')

b. arrangement/plan (1. *arrangement*: a plan or preparation made for an event.
2. plans and preparations that you must make so something can happen)

c. necessity/obligation **etc**

d. 'hypothetical'

3. The creation of 'exceptions'.

4. Processing speed for productive use

Examples

Some negative criteria

a. Not selected to exemplify a 'rule' (The present continuous is used for an action

going on at the moment of speaking: *'No thank you., I'm driving.'*)

- b. Not restricted to a narrow range eg verb forms (Willis on grammar based on choices)
- c. Not invented (some qualification here: *I live/am living in Brighton*)
- d. Not so de-contextualised as to be almost meaningless

.... if active and passive constructions are presented bereft of co-text, their similarity of meaning ("who did what to whom") is highlighted, and their differences, which show the higher organisation of the discourse, are not obvious at all. (*Trust the text* page 139)

Positive criteria

- e. Naturally occurring
- f. Written and spoken examples clearly distinguished – why? Lexical approach 'recognises written language as a secondary encodement' (Consider examples in relation to text books, grammar books and other materials in current use.)
- g. Predominance of spoken examples at all, but particularly lower levels
(*I'll get it; I'll see you tomorrow.*)
(*Where have you been? I've been waiting for you.* Ridiculous 'present relevance' 'rule'.

How do learners acquire grammar?

- h. Not sequentially, or using a short-term P-P-P methodology
- i. Not by exposure to restricted range of artificial examples (Sinclair: plastic flowers)
- j. Grammar: *the summary of all the examples you have ever met* (Hoey) Noticed? (MAL)

SO:

- k. increase the quantity of (naturally occurring) input
- l. provide learners with techniques which encourage and aid noticing – train learners to take a synchronic view of text, in particular 'new words'
- m. ensure learners' confidence despite by 'deep end' implicit in the lexical approach

Most radically of all – **approach grammar from vocabulary rather than so-called 'structures.** This means grammar will always be firmly anchored to meaning.