Language Teaching and Testing
Selected Works of Renowned Applied Linguists

Rod Ellis

语法学习与教学

LEARNING AND TEACHING GRAMMAR

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世界知名语言学家论丛
第一辑

Editorial Advisors：杨惠中　庄智象
Series Editor: Rod Ellis

Contributors to the Series:
Charles Alderson
Gaby Kasper
Paul Nation
Peter Skehan
Rod Ellis
Zoltan Dornyei

出 版 说 明

　　"世界知名语言学家论丛（第一辑）"由上海外语教育出版社约请国际知名学者、英语教育专家Rod Ellis教授担任主编。丛书作者均为国际应用语言学领域耳熟能详的权威专家。丛书中的每一本聚焦应用语言学领域的一个特定主题，收录一位在该研究领域最有建树和影响力的语言学家一生中最重要的经典文章，如：Rod Ellis:《语法学习与教学》；Paul Nation:《词汇学习与教学》；Charles Alderson:《语言测试》,等等。书中的每篇文章经由精心挑选，既有对某一领域理论主题的深入阐述，又探讨了对第二语言教学和测试颇具意义的话题；除了作者一生的代表性作品外，还有不少新作，体现了作者的思索过程和研究轨迹，也展示了应用语言学领域发展历程中理论和研究逐步完善的一个个精彩镜头。

　　相信本套丛书的出版定能为国内应用语言学研究提供一个新的平台，带来新的启示，进一步推动我国语言学研究的发展。

Preface

This book is a collection of articles for the series *Language Teaching and Testing — Selected Works of Renowned Applied Linguists*. This series collects articles written by a number of leading applied linguists. Each collection focuses on a specific area of research in applied linguistics — for example, on grammar learning and teaching (this book), vocabulary language learning and teaching, language testing, and task-based language teaching. The aim of each book is to bring together older and more recent articles to show the development of the author's work over his/her lifetime. The articles are selected to address both theoretical issues relevant to a particular area of enquiry and also to discuss issues of significance to the teaching or testing of a second language (L2). As a whole, the series provides a survey of applied linguistics as this relates to language pedagogy and testing.

Each book begins with an autobiographical introduction by the author in which he/she locates the issues that have been important in his/her lifetime's work and how this work has evolved over time. The introduction also provides an outline of the author's professional career. The rest of the book consists of chapters based on articles published over the author's lifespan.

Each book, then, will contain articles that cover the author's career (over thirty years in some cases). Not surprisingly there are likely to be shifts (and possibly contradictions) in the author's positioning on the issues addressed, reflecting the changes in theory and research focus that have occurred in the specific area of enquiry over a period of time. Thus, the

articles will not necessarily reflect a consistent theoretical perspective. There is merit in this. Readers will be able to see how theory and research have developed. In other words, each book provides a snapshot of the kinds of developments that have occurred in the applied linguistic field under consideration.

My own book gathers together various articles on grammar learning and teaching as this has figured as one of my major concerns over the course of my professional life. The articles cover a twenty-four year period. The first was originally published in 1982 and the last in 2006. In addition to the Introduction and Conclusion sections there are two major sections, one dealing with research on grammar learning and the other one teaching grammar. In just about all the articles, however, I have been concerned with the interface between researching grammar learning and teaching grammar. Throughout my perspective has been informed by work in Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

Rod Ellis
Auckland
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Contents

Section D   CONCLUSION

Section A

INTRODUCTION

A Professional Life: Teacher, Teacher Educator and Researcher

INTRODUCTION

I have worked as a language teacher, teacher educator and second language acquisition (SLA) researcher for over forty years. During this time grammar has figured large in my thinking, in part because it has traditionally been so central to language pedagogy and in part because I became fascinated with how the human mind grapples with the task of learning the grammar of a second language (L2). Throughout this period I have sought to address what I still see as the key question — How can the grammar of a second language be taught in a way that will maximize the chances of students learning it? In other words, my interest lies in the relationship between teaching and learning an L2 grammar.

In this introduction to the collection of my published articles on grammar learning and teaching, I would like to provide an autobiographical sketch of my professional work as a teacher, as a teacher

educator and as a SLA researcher. I want to use this sketch to contextualize the theoretical and pedagogical issues that I have seen as important and also to show how my own thinking about grammar has evolved over time and where it has arrived at now. I would also like to take the opportunity to identify some of the key figures in the field who have influenced me at different times during my career. Most importantly, I want to use this introduction to dispel the view, which some might hold, that I endorse a specific and fixed approach to the teaching of grammar and that this approach is reflected consistently throughout my work. My thinking has been and still is dynamic on this issue, informed as it is by both my early experience of teaching a L2 and my later efforts at researching L2 learning.

My career is characterized by three fairly well-defined stages. My first experiences were as a language teacher. Later I became a teacher educator. Later still, while continuing to work as a teacher educator, I also increasingly adopted the role of SLA researcher. I have organized this chapter accordingly.

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND/FOREIGN LANGUAGE

In 1965, when I completed my BA in English Literature at the University of Nottingham (UK), I had little idea of what career I wanted to follow and knew only that I wanted to travel. So I became a 'backpacker English teacher', taking a job at a Berlitz school in a small town in northern Spain where I received a few days' training in the 'Berlitz Method' (a version of the then popular direct method). This method, based on a structural syllabus, seeks to elicit correct grammatical sentences from students inductively (i.e. the teacher is expressly forbidden from providing metalinguistic explanations of the target structures). It aimed to achieve functional ability in English by ensuring that students developed correct grammatical 'habits'. I recall the frustration that I and my students felt when, despite my best attempts to help them produce the target structure correctly, they frequently failed to do so.

While I was in Spain, I was also a language learner. At school I had studied French and German by means of the translation method but achieved only moderate success. Now I was in a naturalistic setting where survival required that I learn at least basic communicative skills in Spanish. Interestingly, although learning Spanish 'directly', I did not follow the precept of the Berlitz method but instead often referred to a reference grammar of Spanish and attempted to memorize conjugations of the different verb classes — aping the technique I had used for learning French and German. But I also made use of other learning strategies. I visited bars and restaurants and attempted to get into conversations. I picked up some useful formulaic expressions — *me no gusta, no inteiendo, que tal, hasta la vista* — many of which have stayed with me up to today even though I have had little occasion to use Spanish since leaving Spain. I also used a transfer strategy — what Corder (1981) called 'borrowing'. I 'foreignized' Latin sounding English words (e.g. *cosmopolita*) and gambled that my interlocutors would understand. On the whole, I didn't do so badly as a learner.

Unfortunately, I did not stay long enough in Spain to become proficient in Spanish. After four months, I had had enough of my Berlitz experience and decided to return to England. However, this period was formative. I found that I enjoyed teaching (although not using the Berlitz Method) and also that learning an L2 did not necessarily entail the stultifying boredom of the translation method.

There was an interim year before I took off on my travels again. During this year I worked as a primary school teacher in a school in Dalston, London. I began as a supply teacher. My first school was an unmitigated disaster. I was faced with a class of unruly ten-year olds with little idea of what I should teach them or how to manage them. But I learned quickly and was much more successful in my next school, so much so that I was offered a fixed position there and remained there for the rest of the year. My primary school experience was invaluable. It taught me the importance of well-structured lessons and in particular the

need for effective classroom management and communication skills. My belief in these aspects of teaching has remained constant over the years.

In January 1967 I left to work in a newly established secondary school in Zambia, Africa. Zambia had only very recently achieved independence from Britain and was prioritizing secondary school education as a central element in nation-building. Kaoma Secondary School was situated some 275 miles from Lusaka (the capital), accessible only by means of a dirt road that passed, *en route*, through a game park. When I arrived at the school I found spanking new buildings, lines of houses for the teachers, all of whom, with the exception of the Zambian headmaster, were expatriates like myself. There was no electricity and few resources. But there was, in general, a highly motivated student body, and an enthusiastic group of young teachers. This proved to be an experience of a life time, one that contributed enormously to my development as a person and as a teacher of English.

The English curriculum that I and the other teachers developed was built around the two central notions that learning English involved 'skill-getting' and 'skill-using' (see Rivers and Temperley (1978) for a detailed exposition of these concepts). Although, the term 'communicative language teaching' had not yet appeared on the scene, it is clear to me that the curriculum we devised and taught in fact conformed to many of the principles of this approach. 'Skill-getting' involved helping students develop the 'knowledge' of English they needed to communicate effectively and involved the intensive practice of the sounds, vocabulary and grammar of English. 'Skill-using' involved providing opportunities for the students to use their knowledge of English to communicate orally and in writing. Our curriculum consisted of a careful balance of activities that catered to these two aspects of learning.

Grammar was central to the 'skill-getting' component. Out of the seven 40 minute English lessons per week, two or three were devoted to teaching a structural syllabus. This syllabus listed the grammatical structures to be taught in a structure-a-day approach. Although I was

not aware at the time, this was the period during which the 'language teaching controversy' (Diller, 1978) was prominent. There were those who espoused an empiricist, structural view of language (e.g. Bloomfield and Fries) and those who viewed language in rationalist terms (e.g. Chomsky). In language teaching, there were proponents of the audiolingual method (a development of the direct method I was already familiar with from my Berlitz experience) with its emphasis on mimicry, memorization and pattern drill and other proponents of the cognitive code method which emphasized the psychological reality of 'rules' and the importance of presenting these clearly and explicitly to learners.

The textbooks we experimented with reflected this controversy. We used substitution tables and drills of the kind found in Monfries' (1969) *Oral Drills in Sentence Patterns*. The following is a good example:

Simple present third person singular and plural

The teacher quickly asks the students the questions designed to elicit the use of the correct verb form:
Example:
T: What does a student do?
S: He studies.
T: What do singers do?
S: They sing.

1. What does a typist do?
2. What do typists do?
   etc.

The idea here was to prevent or eliminate common errors in our students' use of English by establishing correct 'habits'. But, at one time, we also used materials that called for a much more intellectual and analytical approach to learning grammar. Bright's (1965) *Patterns and Drills in English* presented students with highly detailed and explicit explanations of grammatical patterns and their transformations, followed

by exercises that required students to engage in conscious analysis or manipulation of sentences, as in this example:

Group of change of state or appearance patterns

These consist of a subject, a linking verb and a complement:

S	LV	CN
The lady	became	his wife
This	appeared	a good idea

Make up more examples and name the parts.

Both approaches proved problematic. There is a story I have often used in subsequent years when giving talks about grammar teaching that illustrates the kind of problem we experienced with the audiolingual approach. I was attempting to address errors involving verbs of possession such as this:

* I am having two brothers.

After extensive oral drilling during which the students successfully produced correct sentences, I set the students a written exercise and then noticed that there was one student at the back doing nothing. When I approached him and asked him why he was not working on the exercise he replied 'I am not having my exercise book'. Clearly, there had been no transfer of learning from the drill to communicative use! Some years later, when I began to study the SLA literature, I was able to understand why this might be. At the time, though, I put it down to the limitation of this particular student. Bright's textbook raised a different kind of problem. While some of the Zambian students benefitted from the systematic and detailed explicit explanations of grammar points, many did not. The emphasis on grammatical form and the analytical approach to language that this book embodied seemed to run counter to their natural inclination to treat language as a communicative tool. Thus, neither audiolingual drills nor cognitive explanations of grammar proved very