

The Return of the 'G' Word

When I first started my training as a teacher over 15 years ago mentioning any affinity for grammar in one's teaching was a pretty sure way of inviting ridicule and charges of obsolescence. But even while the pendulum of "communicative teaching" swung to extreme lengths teachers still could never entirely escape the 'G' word. Teachers often spoke in hushed tones of including elements of grammar teaching in their lesson plans, the pertinent questions not being whether they should or not but rather how, where and what features should be taught. Not surprisingly then today the 'G' word has made a dramatic and welcome comeback, but like many retro-movements these days, it has come back in post-modern clothing.

To explain what I mean perhaps I should briefly describe some of the concerns that teachers have been trying to balance over the last decade.

First, teaching practice moved away from teacher-centered models to learner-centered ones. As a result, explicit grammar teaching came to be seen as a form of teacher dominance, or at least, interference.

Teachers also began to understand that grammar was (or should be) descriptive as opposed to prescriptive. As a description, grammar was thus seen as somewhat post-hoc to the language learning process, much as we can understand the physiology of walking only long after we've learned how to walk. Moreover, knowing the physiology would be very unlikely in helping an infant to actually walk.

Presenting explicit grammatical points in the classroom was thus considered to be a form of teacher-centered prescriptivism.

Research into SLA also showed how learner internalization of structures tended to bypass traditional grammatical models, meaning that the notion of a pedagogical grammar was tenuous at best. Moreover, new teachers became rapidly aware that grammar was far more complex, with infinitely more rules and

exceptions to those rules, than they had ever thought.

What has changed since then is neither the language nor the learner but rather our understanding as to what grammar really is. If grammar really is a description of the language, it is only one kind of description and in various circumstances other descriptions may be more pertinent and accurate.

But if it is a description, which corpus studies now allow us to interpret in the search for norms, it would seem that the resulting discovery of grammatical 'norms' offers

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some PRESCRIPTION as to how language is actually being deployed. In short, description implies a certain amount of prescription, just not in terms of hard, immutable rules.

Recent scholarly and popular grammar references have noted this (often with the aid of hefty corpus studies) and, as a result, textbook writers are now far more aware of applying these features of language into their dialogues and 'target forms' than they used to be. But what makes up these 'new forms'? Well, first it seems we have a better understanding of what grammar actually is than before. Newer grammars tend to be more flexible in terms of identifying hard-bound rules, instead noting habits and tendencies. This allows us to note shifting norms according to who the speakers are, what the communicative goal is, tex-

tual environment, topic and/or genre, whether they are speaking or writing (of absolute importance!) and other external factors that will affect the grammatical forms used. The extrinsic functions of communication determine the grammar and not the other way around.

As such, grammar has become further removed from syntax, which tends to be much more mechanical and rigid in its observance of 'rules'. Now, grammar is seen by many scholars and educators as connected more closely to more nebulous, flexible elements of language such as lexis and pragmatics. Let me give an example of the latter.

It used to be that the 'unreal conditional' would be considered a grammatical feature with certain set properties and the word 'would' was considered a single word that makes up the grammar. What grammarians now note is that certain lexical items grammaticalize text rather than the other way round. That is, if we understand the lexical properties of 'would' accurately, its function in expressing unreal conditionals can be absorbed, which indirectly would allow the related structure to be similarly absorbed as a kind of 'set unit' or 'chunk'. In short, by understanding lexis we can come to understand grammar.

What this says to me is that a certain amount of teacher-centeredness in the classroom is justified. Learners should be made aware of helpful content in an explicit manner, not as the singular backbone of language acquisition but as a kind of text-lead consciousness-raising or sensibility-training exercise. That is, the choice of a certain text or task should be influenced by the type of functions and related grammar forms likely to be contained or deployed therein, with the teacher ready and able to point out and comment upon these to the learner, perhaps necessitating an extended exercise with these forms as explicit task targets. Popular notions such as learner autonomy function

better only after having gone through such a pedagogical process. In doing so we will have moved from a somewhat tired learner-centered approach to a learnING-centered one. But to achieve this successfully what is required is that teachers themselves be aware of the tendencies and norms of grammar forms, that is,

how differing communicative functions inform different structures.

We can no longer think of ourselves as being progressive if we merely take a passive, facilitating role. Rather the teacher must learn to master these new notions of grammar not only for choosing the content of his/her classes but to help

provide the learner with the most expedient way of internalizing them.

I welcome this new, balanced, and flexible approach to grammar and consider it to be one of, if not THE most, productive developments of the past decade in terms of a practical classroom application of theory. At least, that's so In My Humble Opinion.

Responses to the previous IMHO

Mr. William Matheny writes:

With "Can teaching culture be harmful?", Mike Guest initiated a valuable discussion. Anyone who finds him or herself involved with EFL in Japan is going to have to grapple with "the culture thing" in some manner or other.

As Mr Guest tells us, "No sensible person would deny that cultural differences exist." However, some EFL instructors — those aiming to produce dramatic results, for example — may find culture-related issues a digression and a waste of time. We might presume that such teachers are primarily interested in the shortest distance between two points — that is, the most direct and efficient way for students to acquire ability with the target language.

Thus, cut out the pansy culture crap and get on with the business at hand: learn to speak English. You know, "just do it."

It's probably safe to say that Mr Guest isn't all that interested in "culture" issues. That's entirely okay. However, there are others in the ranks of EFL teachers who might well climb up on their professional soapbox and blare, "Hey, bud, language IS culture! You can't have one without the other!"

As in any debate, there are extremes and there is middle ground.

Regardless of where Mr Guest resides on the spectrum, he makes some points that, to my ear, ring true.

An emphasis, Guest tells us, on "static, monolithic mass cultural models is not well-suited to our classroom situations." Hear, hear! I think it might be a question of proximity and experience. We experience our native culture from birth and over a literal lifetime. Our experience of another culture, however, is necessarily limited by both time and distance. At the

beginning, we seem to see another culture as through a telescope: We see only broad outlines and patterns — those generalities upon which culture models are constructed. Over time, as we become more familiar with a foreign culture, we come to see much more detail and perceive differences on an individual basis. We can see individual human personality where before we saw only a mass.

Cultural models have utility in some situations, but in the classroom, generalizations can taint our perceptions of individuals.

The "unfortunate reinforcement of stereotypes" that Mr Guest refers to is something I have perceived in my work as a middle school ALT.

Ironically, the programs that put native speakers in secondary school classrooms are often focused on cultural exchange more than language learning. So, the clumsy mass cultural models come into play. Even though the ALT is in the same room, the very limited amount of time students and local teachers have spent with native speakers means they may still be viewing foreigners and the world abroad as through a telescope. The supposed "solution" to a problem thus sometimes ends up compounding it. The only remedy I see is time and patience.

Researchers have their particular reasons for addressing culture-related phenomena and only individual readers or listeners of research presentations can assess the intent of an author or presenter. EFL students, however, are in a rather different predicament. One source of the desire to dwell on cultural differences may be the sense of territoriality lurking in students' unconscious. In Japan, EFL students are territorial insiders in a very real sense — they are definite-

ly on their own turf. Outsiders can only wonder at the depth of the territorial claim Japanese people have on their homeland and on the unconscious sense that foreigners here are violating that territory.

Similarly, foreigners resident in the islands of East Asia must guess at the unconscious perceptions and reactions a foreigner triggers in students' minds. It's that darn black box, isn't it — the inscrutable human heart.

One thing, however, can be said with some assurance. EFL students who choose to spend time focusing on how they differ from native English speakers are consciously or unconsciously removing one of the well-acknowledged motivations for language learning.

As may be clear by now, I'm on the bus with Mr Guest — but not without some reservations. One has to question the validity of Guest's claims regarding EFL/ESL research and presentations as he gives no examples of what he finds disturbing. Making a claim without citing examples is like trying to convict someone of a crime without presenting any evidence. Guilty until proven innocent.

Hats off to Mike Guest for stepping out onto the "potentially explosive" minefield of culture. It's slippery, to say the least. Can exploring our attitudes and values as EFL instructors be fruitful and beneficial? I'd say it can be — IMHO.

Mike responds—I'd like to thank Mr. Matheny for his comments. He makes many valid points which balance some of the more provocative comments that I had written.

I'd like to make two points however.

I am not disinterested in culture as Mr. Matheny implies. I do recognize culture's connections to language

but would argue that these are often exaggerated and serve to reinforce pre-existing stereotypes. I believe that culture is best understood NOT when taught explicitly but subsumed under the rubric of language, indirectly, and therefore will be less likely to lead to some of the dangers inherent in a 'discrete culture point' approach.

Secondly, Mr. Matheny is quite right when he points out that my comments regarding ESL/EFL research and presentations are lacking evidence.

Unfortunately the article was intended not as a research article but more along the lines of an editorial, as the title attests to. I currently have an article expected to be published in England's *ELTJ* in April 2002 that will hopefully provide sufficient evidence to back my claims.

A second, very different, response came from **Mr. Kevin Sawatzky**:

To answer Mike Guest's question, "Can teaching culture be harmful?" (*ETJ Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1), IMHO, no. I do not teach culture, per se, "in some abstract total," nor do I believe it can be taught. We are, as he rightly points out, primarily English language teachers. This does not mean, obviously, that elements of our culture should never enter the classroom.

Because language and cultural patterns of interaction are interwoven it is impossible not to clarify aspects of culture as the need arises.

Before illustrating with two experiences I must provide some relevant background information. I was born with congenital cataracts in both eyes.

Medical technology in the late 1960s not being what it is today, I was left blind in my right eye after an unsuccessful operation. Naturally I was teased a lot as a kid (the 'difference is bad' mentality so commonly attributed to our Japanese students.). I admit to overreaction which often turned vio-

lent. I have simmered down (at least I don't stick pencils in bullies arms anymore) but I still fume inwardly when people make comments about my eyes or eyesight. The legacy of a second operation, on my left eye in early adulthood, is a pair of thick lenses complete with bifocals.

A few months ago I was working at a school I had never been at before.

As I was entering a class of four lower-intermediate students the following exchange took place:

S1: "Big eyes."

I took my seat and removed my glasses: "Is this OK?"

(The other three observed us closely, appalled looks on their faces.)

I put my 'big eyes' back on, trying to proceed with the lesson.

S1: "Thick glasses."

Me: Raising my voice, "You're very rude."

(The other students are starting to giggle. S1 cannot understand, so I tell him in very direct Japanese.)

When I told other teachers about this exchange they told me he has frequently made inappropriate remarks about other teachers and students.

Until that point no-one had challenged his behaviour. The student did apologize, and we got on with the class.

A second incident took place a few weeks ago in my school's conversation lounge. A high-intermediate student made some remark about the thickness of my glasses, and I chose to handle the situation differently.

When I asked her if she would ever say the same thing to a Japanese she had only just met the student said "No, of course not." Without raising my voice or showing agitation I asked what had prompted her to make such a remark in the first place. She couldn't say. I explained that as part of language study we must know what is culturally appropriate, and a good rule of thumb is "Never say anything to anyone you wouldn't want them to say to you." I then explained about learning "The

Golden Rule" as a child.

By using two different approaches, one a gut reaction the other carefully thought out from previous experience, I was able to demonstrate two ways of dealing with a stressful situation. While I admit to being hurt by the first student's remarks, and not handling him as well as I could have, that exchange prompted reflection as to what kind of culture "teaching," or at least modelling, I had been doing. It is important to use such "teachable moments" for students' benefit. After all, I wouldn't want them to be knifed if they said the wrong thing to the wrong person at the wrong time and place. If we emphasize our sameness, as Mr. Guest advocates, these kinds of unfortunate events will not occur.

Mike responds:

I thank Mr. Sawatzky for his response. What it emphasizes to me is an unpleasant occurrence that I have often seen appear in intercultural settings, arising (IMHO) from an inordinate focus upon cultural 'differences'. That is, when we automatically assume that foreigners have different values from us there may well occur a sudden ignoring of common-sense decency. For example, the student admitted to Mr. Sawatzky that she would not have made the same comments about a Japanese teacher.

Perhaps, and I realize that this is speculation, Mr. Sawatzky was not afforded the politeness a Japanese teacher would have received because, after all, "foreigners have different values", which presumably would include different ideas about politeness. Thus it may be believed that they (foreigners) need not be treated with the social courtesies that would be automatic with a cultural 'insider'.

Something to think about.

In My Humble Opinion

That might be so—IMHO, but what do you think? Send your responses to this issue's IMHO column as well as your own original opinion pieces to Mike at: <michael@post1.miyazaki-med.ac.jp>. Selected responses will be published in subsequent issues of the *ETJ Journal*.