

Ellis, Rod. “Grammar Teaching—Practice or Consciousness-Raising?” *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice*. Ed. Jack C. Richards and Willy A. Renandya. Cambridge University Press, 2002. pp. 167–174.

Betty’s comments:

There are those who say that extensive practice of target structures doesn’t work and base this opinion on studies that show students do not immediately acquire structures they have practiced. [See [The Final -S Problem](#).] Rod Ellis is one of those who agrees with that and argues in favor of teaching grammar “as consciousness-raising.”

I agree with Ellis’ major contention “that formal grammar teaching has a delayed rather than instant effect” (p. 167), but disagree with his theoretical stance on the role of practice.

I disagree with his premise that “the goal of practice activities is to develop the kind of automatic control of grammatical structures that will enable learners to use them productively and spontaneously.” (p. 171) Those of us who use a grammar-based approach do not presume to know exactly when or how a structure is internalized by any particular student. We do NOT expect immediate mastery. That is not our principal reason for providing practice. We understand that the acquisition process is far more complicated in language learning than in, say, learning arithmetic.

The Purposes of Practice in Grammar-Based Teaching

The purposes of the widely varied and extensive practice opportunities we provide in Grammar-Based Teaching are multifaceted. Here are some of them:

- to engage both inductive and deductive cognitive skills in helping students to clarify and deepen understandings of grammar concepts and the interrelationships of grammar structures;
- to move quickly from a focus on form and manipulation of form and meaning to extensive practice with ways of communicating meaning through varied types of practice, including interactive, communicative activities involving creative language use;
- to raise students’ comfort level in using English structures that are new to them by providing repeated and varied opportunities for students to experiment with how to say what they mean, take risks, and gain confidence;
- to encourage successful communication experiences through interaction with classmates and the teacher based on structures and vocabulary students are now familiar with;
- to help students improve their self-monitoring skills.

I would like to look at an example of a focus-on-form consciousness-raising task as described by Ellis in his article and compare it with a Grammar-Based Teaching approach. The topic in both lessons is the use of *since* vs. *for*.

A Consciousness-Raising Task: Since vs. For

I would consider the example Ellis gives of a consciousness-raising problem-solving task to contain not much that is new to those of us who teach from grammar-based materials. Here's his suggestion for a "consciousness-raising task," which he distinguishes as different from grammar practice.

- First, he asks students to look at four sentences, two with *for* and two with *since*, and asks them to notice differences in how each is used.
- Then he gives them four sentences with grammatical errors in *for* vs. *since* and asks them to correct them.
- Then he asks them to make up a rule about *for* vs. *since*.
- And then he asks them to make up one sentence about themselves using *for* and one sentence using *since*.

Ellis says his goal in this kind of task is to promote explicit knowledge of the target structure. He asks students to produce only two sentences related to themselves, saying that that production is not intended "to 'practise' the rule" but "to promote its storage as explicit knowledge" and that production is limited to two sentences so that there is "no insistence on automatic processing." (p. 172)

I do not believe that when we ask students to repeatedly practice using a structure in sentences about themselves that we are insisting on automatic processing. That's not even part of the equation, at least not my equation. As a teacher, I neither expect nor "insist on" automatic processing when I engage students in practice.

It appears to me that neither academics nor practitioners know when and how automaticity of language production occurs. Somehow, somewhere along the way, it happens for successful language learners; others never get beyond an interlanguage stage.

But even if practice helps a student develop only an interlanguage facility (and no automaticity is immediately expected or actually results) through practice, the practice is worthwhile. By "interlanguage facility," I mean the ability to deliberately construct what one wants to say in a second language, for example, to draw upon explicit knowledge to form an information question in order to communicate what one wants to communicate. Interlanguage facility is an important goal of practice, and the multifaceted purposes and effects of practice go beyond mere "storage of explicit knowledge."

It seems clear to me that no one knows exactly how languages are acquired, how automaticity occurs in terms of brain function. Until the day when we do know how this process actually works, we need to continue to explore and employ methods that many students find helpful in creating their interlanguage — and in my experience and observation, one of those methods is grammar-based practice aimed at developing all language skills.

A Grammar-Based Teaching Approach: Since vs. For

Compare in the following how *for* and *since* are practiced in *Fundamentals of English Grammar, third edition* (pp. 94-97). First it should be noted that *since vs. for* comes within a larger concept area: expressing time from past to present in English through use of the present perfect and present perfect progressive. The goal of the larger conceptual unit is understanding how these verb forms express meaning, not on avoiding mistakes in the use of *since* and *for*. Explicit rule knowledge is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The goal does not stop with avoidance of errors, but expands to gaining experience with how to express certain ideas about time.

In the *since vs. for* lesson that follows, notice the varied ways provided for students to arrive at explicit knowledge and then, more importantly, the repetitive but varied ways in which they can gain experience with the structure using meaningful information about their own lives.

- First the students are given a list of time expressions that complete the sentence “I have been here . . .” and are asked to supply *for* or *since* (*I have been here _____ two months. I have been here _____ September. Etc.*). During this kind of preview exercise, students can call on previous knowledge and can learn from classmates. The teacher can lead students to inductive understandings and supply explicit information. Students can begin to formulate their own understandings.
- Next the students can look at a chart containing explicit information to see how it stacks up against what they’ve already discovered about the structure during class discussion of the preview exercise.
- Next they apply their understandings by completing sentences about their own lives and their present reality (*I’ve been in this building since . . . I’ve been in this building for . . .*).
- After that they do an interactive listening-speaking exercise, again based on information about their real lives (*How long have you had this grammar book?*).
- That is followed by an exercise that focuses attention on *since* as a subordinate conjunction in an adverb clause of time (the text does not use that terminology) and on verb form usage in these sentences. This is an area of difficulty for many students (e.g., ~~I meet many people since I came here.~~).
- Then the students are given topics relating to who they are as real people and are asked to describe themselves using the present perfect and *for, since, or never*.
- For review, *for* and *since* are incorporated into an error correction exercise ten pages later.

Conclusion

It appears to me that “consciousness-raising,” as explained by Ellis, is simply part and parcel of a Grammar-Based Teaching approach, but that we who use this approach don’t stop simply at awareness of explicit information about a structure (which almost seems to have echoes of Grammar

Translation). In Grammar-Based Teaching, we advantageously use the grammar base for students to practice using English structures in meaningful, effective and productive ways.

We don't expect immediate mastery nor insist on automaticity. That will happen when and if it happens. But we do expect that during the course of practice, the students will have successful communication experiences, working from a grammar base, that will contribute to the development of both fluency and accuracy in their interlanguage. As Ellis says, mastery or automaticity can be expected to come only as "a delayed effect." And none of us quite yet knows exactly how that works in second language acquisition, so we rely on pragmatically proven methods that we perceive to work for our own particular students, and for many teachers, that includes grammar-based practice, not simply a brief focus on form.

What are your thoughts, reactions and experiences? Please share them with us on [Teacher Talk](#).