

# Harmonising the teaching and learning of grammar: a Cognitive+Communicative approach<sup>1</sup>

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In diesem Artikel wird dargelegt, wie Methoden des Grammatikunterrichts, die auf Erkenntnissen der Kognitiven Linguistik und auf dem Kommunikativen Ansatz (Kognitive+Kommunikative Grammatik) beruhen, Anwendungen finden, die mit einer lernerzentrierten Orientierung kompatibel sind. Zuerst wird die Relevanz des Begriffs „lernerzentriert“ für den Grammatikunterricht erörtert, danach werden Prinzipien der K+K Grammatik, die sich einerseits auf die Beschreibung, andererseits auf das Erlernen der Grammatik beziehen, aufgelistet. Darauf aufbauend werden spezifische Aspekte des Grammatikunterrichts – Bestimmung der Grammatik-Lehrziele, Grammatikregeln, Lehrmethoden, Testen etc. – sowohl aus der Perspektive der Lehrenden als auch aus der der Lernenden verglichen. Weiters wird erläutert wie die K+K Grammatik versucht, diese beiden Perspektiven zu harmonisieren. Darüber hinaus werden Kriterien angeboten, die in der Evaluierung und der Erstellung von Grammatikübungen angewendet werden können. Abschließend werden die im Artikel erörterten theoretischen Aspekte in Form einer Liste von „Ratschlägen für Lehrende“ zusammengefasst.



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## 1. Introduction

In the past few decades modern language teaching in classrooms across Europe has undergone radical changes. At the core of these changes are, on the one hand, a fundamental rethinking of teaching methodology based on principles deriving from a **Communicative Approach** to language, learning and teaching, and, on the other, a move to embrace a **learner-centred** orientation to classroom practices. Whilst influences of these approaches can be widely observed in materials design and classroom teaching concerning the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and to a certain extent in the teaching of vocabulary, it is my overwhelming experience of working with teachers and students in many countries that grammar tends to be taught in traditional ways which do not differ substantially from how teachers themselves learned grammar at school and university.

The reasons for the dominance of traditional grammar<sup>2</sup> are complex. Two significant causes are

that, from a theoretical point of view, the relative lack of interest in grammar among methodologists in the post-communicative era has led to a failure to provide a coherent methodology based on valid theories of learning and language. From a practical point of view, in the shifting sands of communicative teaching, traditional grammar practices – defining grammatical objectives in terms of forms, explaining grammar to pupils, giving them heavily guided grammar exercises which are easy to design and assess etc. – provide a teacher-friendly comfort zone.

The teacher-centred rationale of traditional grammar stands in marked contrast to views on grammar acquisition often expressed by applied linguists, who, rooted in their own familiar territory of first and second language acquisition research, have occupied their own comfort zone, which is on quite a different planet from that of teachers. What is particularly problematic with much of applied linguistic theory is that it is based on Chomskyan nativist, or innatist, theories of acquisition and the purported similarity between first and second language acquisition – “[i]n the most general terms, L2A theory tackles the question of the resemblance of L2A to L1A” (Birdsong, 2004: 83). Such views rely on the power of an innate language acquisition device or universal grammar to steer ‘natural’ and unconscious processes, as seen for example in the methodological applications proposed by Krashen (Krashen, 1981, 1982; Krashen & Terrell, 1983, etc.). It follows that an explicit, conscious focus on grammar and grammar-based syllabi are considered unhelpful.

Since the beginning of the 21st century a quite different theoretical direction has been taken by certain researchers, who operate under the general umbrella of **Cognitive Linguistics (CL)**. This direction provides valuable insights into both language description – for example,

Langacker (2008), Radden & Dirven (2007) – and language learning – for example, Achard & Niemeier (2004), DeKeyser (ed.) (2007), Littlemore (2009), Robinson & Ellis (eds.) (2008). Taking as a starting point the *rejection* of a specific language acquisition device – “constructivists deny any innate linguistic universals” (Ellis, 2001: 36) – and recognising the *differences* between L1 and L2 acquisition, and the ability of school pupils to apply metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies when learning a language, these theories recognise the potential of grammar pedagogy, part of which will be an explicit focus on grammar<sup>3</sup>. It should be stressed, however, that this is not a ‘back-to-traditional-grammar’ view: grammar pedagogy must be based on **theories of language use** and **language learning** deriving from cognitive psychology.

CL provides a much-needed theoretical basis for harmonising principles of teaching and of learning. Moreover, Cognitive theories of language and learning are closely aligned to a general Communicative rationale and provide complementary sets of principles. In addition, these theories have practical applications which can be linked to practices already applied in many classrooms concerning skill development. As Broccias (2008: 67) points out:

There is a striking similarity between the development of (theoretical) cognitive linguistics [...] and the recent history of language teaching. Cognitive approaches to grammar are converging towards a usage-based/network model of language [...], which contrasts with the decontextualised view of language [...] espoused by generative grammarians. Similarly, language teaching in general and the teaching of grammar in particular have moved from decontextualised drilling activities to more meaningful, communicative/context-based methods, i.e., a usage-based model of language teaching.

Relevant insights from Communicative and Cognitive approaches have been woven into a theoretical model,

which I term **Cognitive+Communicative Grammar (C+CG)** (Newby, 2003 etc.), and which I have used as the basis for my own pedagogical grammars and school textbooks (Newby, 1989, 1992; Heindler *et al.*, 1993).

## 2. Learner and teacher perspectives

A term which has been at the core of discussions of language teaching in recent years is that of learner-centredness, which Tudor defines as “a broadly-based endeavour designed to gear language teaching in terms of both the content and the form of instruction around the characteristics of learners” (1996: ix). Whilst accepting the tenor of this definition, I shall prefer to use the term ‘learner – and teacher – **perspective**’; whereas ‘centredness’ implies a marginalisation of the role of the teacher, ‘perspective’ stresses that teachers and learners are **partners** in the learning process and their relationship **complementary**. However, it is important to state that a) the teacher must be able to take *both* a learner *and* a teacher perspective, and b) that the teacher’s perspective must be filtered through *that of the learner*. In designing pedagogical activities we, as teachers, are looking to **harmonise** these two perspectives.

## 3. Learners as learners and users of language

When learning a language, learners take on two different, but complementary, roles: first, they are **learners** of the language and consequently are aware that the materials and activities they are given by the teacher have the specifically **pedagogical function** of accelerating and optimising the acquisition of this language. Second, they are **users** of the language and want and expect to communicate their ideas, feelings, needs etc. through this language – as indeed they will need to do

in real life; thus, they are aware that materials and activities also have a **rehearsal function**. It is important to state this since an analysis of many exercises in commercially available grammar practice books will clearly show that the learner is seen almost exclusively as a learner of grammar but not as a user of grammar; as a result of this, most exercises have a learning function but not a rehearsal function. Conversely, the centrality of the ‘learner as a user’ view which underlies the Communicative Approach has tended to devalue the role that appropriate grammar pedagogy can play in the acquisition of communicative skills. This dichotomy, and the resulting methodological vacuum, is reflected in the comment often made to me by teachers: “I teach communicatively but I teach grammar too”. As Achard (2004: 165) says, “The integration of grammar in communicative models currently constitutes one of the hardest pedagogical challenges foreign-language teachers face”. Recognising and harmonising the dual role of learners as both learners and users of language is one of the first steps to meeting this challenge.

## 4. Principles of language use and language learner – a Cognitive+Communicative view

C+CG is based on two theoretical models: the first, a ‘Communicative Model of Language’ (Newby, 2003: 250), which sees language as an **action-oriented, communicative event**<sup>4</sup> and which serves as an aid to exploring the mental processes activated in the human mind when people **use** – encode and decode – language in general and grammar in particular. The second model is a model of learning – the ‘Cognitive Learning Model’ (Newby, 2003: 399), which explores the mental processes activated in the human mind when learners learn new grammar. As can be seen, the word ‘**mental processes**’ figures in both models and represent a core

category of any Cognitive analysis. Examples of language processes are: focusing on and categorising what is perceived; planning an utterance; mapping perceptions onto grammatical forms; retrieving word forms from long-term memory etc. Examples of learning processes are: noticing and attending to a new item of grammar; making a generalisation (i.e.) recognising a rule about new grammar; analogy – comparing the new grammar with other L1 or L2 grammar; activating schematic knowledge to make sense of new grammar etc.. These two models are based on general principles, relating to language and learning respectively, some of which are:

**Language:**

- “Grammar is conceptualization” (Croft & Cruse, 2004: 1).
- Language is a system for the expression of meaning.
- The primary function of language is for interaction and communication.
- “The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 161).
- Grammatical knowledge is embedded in other types of knowledge – schematic, contextual etc.

What these statements, relating to Cognitive Linguistics and the Communicative Approach, stress is that grammar must be seen primarily, as a **meaning-centred** phenomenon and second, as a dynamic, action-oriented system of use, or act of **performance**.

**Learning:**

- “Knowledge of language emerges from language use” (Croft & Cruse, 2004: 1).
- “Learning is an active and dynamic process in which individuals make use of a variety of information and strategic modes of processing” (O’Malley & Chamot 1990: 217).
- “Learning a language entails a stagewise progression from initial awareness and active manipulation of information and learning processes to full automaticity in language use” (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990: 217).

One criticism that can be made of innatist theories of language acquisition is that, as N.C. Ellis points out, (2001: 37) “it has no process explanation”. Ellis further states that “without [...] a process explanation, innatist theories are left with a ‘and here a miracle occurs’ step in the argumentation.” The category of learning processes is central to designing cognition-based pedagogy: if we are able to identify and understand how new information is perceived, stored in memory and utilised in performance, this will open the door to providing a framework for the design of grammar activities which seek to stimulate and optimise the use of learning processes and the learner’s cognitive resources.

**5. Applying a learner perspective to grammar pedagogy**

Seeing grammar through the **learner’s** and **user’s** minds, which is what we are attempting to do when we take a C+C learner perspective, will have implications for many aspects of grammar pedagogy. Table 1 shows some possible differences between a **teacher** and **learner perspective**. It should be noted that a) the table is exemplary, and not in any way comprehensive; b) the teacher/learner perspectives are not mutually exclusive: as the ‘+’ sign indicates, the dual perspectives should represent a **harmonious relationship**. Nevertheless, it is useful to juxtapose the two perspectives since it seems to me that much of traditional teaching fails to take into account the learner perspective. The categories in the table will be discussed in sections 5 and 6.

**Table 1: Teacher’s and learner’s perspectives**

| Category               | Teacher perspective                           | Learner perspective                                       |
|------------------------|---|---|
| Overall aims           | cover curriculum, get through school textbook | what will I need to be able to do in real life?           |
| Grammatical objectives | input: what I am teaching in this lesson/unit | outcome: what am I able to do after this lesson/unit      |
| Needs                  | grammar should be easy to teach and test      | cognitive and affective needs should be met               |
| Methodology            | teaching methods                              | learning processes and strategies                         |
| Learning aims          | why am I giving this exercise?                | what contribution will this exercise make to my learning? |
| In class               | instruction                                   | reflection + action                                       |
| Rules                  | explanation                                   | discovery, learning by using                              |
| Interaction            | teacher - student                             | student - student   |
| Assessment             | tests, examinations                           | self-assessment   |

## A ‘Communication Model’ view of language shows that grammar does not consist of a set of forms which can express certain meanings, as pedagogical reference grammars tend to suggest, but it is a set of meanings encoded into forms.

### Aims

Many national curricula and school textbooks are partly based on a grammatical syllabus and certain books of grammatical exercises are international best sellers. But why exactly do students learn grammar? The general aim, from the learner’s perspective, could be formulated as follows: **The overall aim of learning grammar is to be able to express your own ideas in real situations in language that is as correct, meaningful and appropriate as possible.**

The most important point that emerges from this statement is that having grammatical competence means being able to **generate ideas** and **encode** them into grammar. An examination of commercially available grammar practice books and school coursebooks will show that by far the most common type of grammar exercise is the single-sentence, ‘fill-in-the-gap’ format, with prompt words given in brackets. What such exercises require learners to do is to add discrete items of grammar to other people’s – textbook authors’, teachers’ – pre-fabricated ideas. These exercises may test the student’s declarative knowledge of rules but they do not provide for **grammar rehearsal**, which must figure strongly in any coherent pedagogy.

### Objectives

In recent years, there has been much debate among applied linguists as to how grammatical objectives should be defined and indeed whether grammatical, as opposed to more general functional ‘communicative’ language units, should be defined at all. As this debate has raged, teachers and textbooks have continued to use the formal objectives familiar from traditional grammar descriptions: present perfect, indefinite articles, adverbs, indirect speech etc. In the C+C approach which I have applied in the design of my own school textbook (Heindler *et al.*, 1993), grammatical objectives play a central role alongside other categories such as language functions, topics and semantic fields (vocabulary). However, there is one significant difference between my approach and how grammatical objectives are specified in traditional approaches. In section 4, I referred to Communicative and Cognitive principles of language, two of which are: “Language is a system for the expression of meaning” and

“The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses”. A ‘Communication Model’ view of language shows that grammar does not consist of a set of forms which can express certain meanings, as pedagogical reference grammars tend to suggest, but it is a **set of meanings encoded** into forms. It follows from this that any meaning-based grammatical objectives must be specified in terms of meanings, or **grammatical notions** (see Newby, 2008, 2012, 2013b) rather than just forms. This means that a formal category such as ‘present perfect tense’ will give way to the specific notions listed in Table 2.

**Table 2: present perfect notions<sup>5</sup>**

| Notion                  | Form  |
|-------------------------|---|
| [Experience]            | - I’ve never <b>been</b> to England.              |
| [Changes/completion]    | - You’ve <b>had</b> a haircut!                    |
| [Duration - state]      | - I’ve <b>been</b> here since yesterday.          |
| [Duration - activity]   | - They’ve <b>been playing</b> tennis for an hour. |
| [Recentness - state]    | - I’ve <b>been</b> on holiday.                    |
| [Recentness - event]    | - I’ve just <b>seen</b> a car accident.           |
| [Recentness - activity] | - I’ve <b>been watching</b> television.           |

There are several advantages to taking a notional approach to grammar. First, grammatical meaning can be taught systematically and coherently – for example, the teacher can decide which of the above notions fulfils the learner’s communicative needs and at what stage of learning to teach them. Second, since a notional approach follows the ‘meaning form’ direction of the encoding process, notions can be specified as **competences** or **skills** by means of the kind of ‘I can’ descriptors found in the *Common European Framework of Reference*, and can be used by learners for self-assessment:

- √ I can talk about my experiences using the present perfect.
- √ I can express an intention using ‘going to’.
- √ I can make predictions about the future using ‘will’ etc.

In Table 2, I juxtaposed input and outcome with regard to objective specification. These categories are, of course, totally compatible with each other: a category such as ‘expressing intention with *going to*’ may be used equally as an **objective specification** in a notional/grammatical syllabus as well as a student’s self-assessment of his/her **outcome**.

### Methodology and learning aims

The role of the teacher and of pedagogical materials is, in my view, absolutely pivotal to the effective learning of grammar: teachers need

to have at their disposal a wide range of activity types to support learning. However, the decision whether, when and how to use specific activities must be based on certain principles or theories of learning and, in turn, an idea of how a specific activity might contribute to the learning process. In other words, it is learning processes that determine methodology, not the other way round. Yet it is often the case that teachers and student teachers do not give much thought to why exactly they are giving their students a particular exercise and what they hope it will achieve. It is therefore essential that we identify not only the grammatical objective of a particular activity but also its **learning aim**. Learner aims cover a spectrum of specific processes across the overall acquisition process: they include awareness-raising of new grammar, internalising a rule, rehearsing a particular notion, testing declarative knowledge etc., all of which need to be incorporated into teaching materials if pedagogy is to be coherent and effective.

### Rules

As any linguist will confirm, all grammar is **rule-based**; however, we need to clarify what we actually mean by a rule. A rule can be defined in psycholinguistic terms as a **generalisation** or **regularity** stored in the minds of speakers. A rule in a pedagogical reference grammar or school textbook can be defined as metalanguage used to

describe such regularities. In order to communicate in a foreign language, learners need to internalise and store grammar rules in their minds in such a way that they are available for retrieval and use in communication. A particularly controversial aspect of grammar pedagogy concerns what the teacher and learner can do in order that rules are internalised – i.e. stored effectively in the learner's mind and applied in communication. Nowadays there is a general consensus among applied linguists that an explicit focus on grammar and grammar rules, expressed through metalanguage, facilitates learning, although the nature and extent of this explicit focus is age-dependent. Explicit rules can be acquired by learners in various ways: in traditional grammar approaches, the usual way is that teachers or textbooks explain grammar – a **learning by understanding**, teacher-centred approach. A further, more strongly learner-oriented option is so-called discovery, or **learning by reflection**, in which learners arrive at their own formulation of rules based on language examples provided by the teacher. There are various advantages to this approach. First, since discovery proceeds through an explorative task, the learner is likely to apply his or her **cognitive resources** more deeply than if merely listening to a teacher's explanation; second, students formulate rules using their own metalanguage, which obviates the danger that they might not understand the metalanguage in which the teacher's rule may be couched. A third option is a **learning-by-using** approach. In this case, learners use the new grammar in an activity which is structured but which requires them to generate their own utterances. With this approach, rules may or may not be made explicit. It has the advantage that, unlike explanation or discovery, such activities act as an immediate springboard to language use; in other words, the learner is both a user and learner of language.



Les enchevêtrements d'un arbre de Judée à l'Hay-les-Roses (France). Photo: Laurent Coudray.

## 6. Criteria for assessing grammar activities

To evaluate the effectiveness of a grammar exercise teachers need to have a set of criteria, based both on Communicative principles of language (learner as a user) and on cognitive principles deriving from insights from cognitive psychology (learner as a learner). Some of these criteria are the following<sup>6</sup>.

- a. **Depth of processing:** The extent to which a new item grammar becomes stored in the memory of the learner is partly dependent on *how mentally active* the learner is when doing grammar tasks. Depth of processing will be determined by the nature of the grammar task given to students. Traditional methodology tends to provide activities which are '*cognitively shallow*'. Open-ended, communicative activities provide for deeper processing.
- b. **Commitment filter:** Pupils must be encouraged to 'commit themselves' to learning grammar. This may include *affective* aspects such as enjoyment or fun but also *cognitive needs* such as curiosity, problem solving, drive for communication, acquiring knowledge etc. A continual diet of boring grammar exercises is not just demotivating but inhibits efficient processing.
- c. **Contextualisation:** Language used in an explanation or exercise is *embedded in a clear context*, or the exercise *facilitates contextualisation* (imagining a context) by the student. Grammar is partly acquired by relating new notions to contexts of use.
- d. **Complex encoding:** Exercises should require pupils not just to insert grammar, but to use vocabulary and, preferably, complete utterances.
- e. **Personalisation:** When we produce language we are representing information, ideas, knowledge etc. from *our own personal perspective*. Grammar activities need to take into account this 'personalisation' aspect of language and give pupils the opportunity to *apply their own schematic constructs*, and *express their own ideas*, from their own perspective in order to produce utterances.
- f. **Peer/social learning (oral activities):** All learning is influenced by the learner's social environment. The contribution to learning made by interaction between learners and their peers is an important factor. On some occasions, peers may be better at teaching than teachers! Group work activities can include *peer monitoring* as part of their design.

- g. **Task-based:** In addition to producing correct utterances, students fulfil a *purposeful cognitive task* which will have some kind of outcome or end product.

These criteria, especially when applied in conjunction with the identification of grammatical objectives, learning aims and learning stages, provide a tangible means of evaluating the quality and likely effectiveness of a grammatical exercise.

### Tips for teachers based on C+CG principles

The principles discussed in this paper can be summarised in the form of a set of tips or guidelines for teachers on how to introduce and teach grammar in accordance with C+C principles.

- a. **Grammatical objectives: what item of grammar is being taught/learnt/practised?**
  - objectives should be defined in terms of **grammatical notions**, not forms
  - teachers should always **identify** the grammatical objective in terms of both its meaning/function and form when giving an exercise
- b. **Grammar rules: what does grammar mean and how is it formed?**
  - rules must explain the knowledge stored in the minds of speakers
  - rules must explain **single notions** of a form (there is no single rule to explain, e.g. the present simple).
  - rules can be acquired in **different ways**: explanation, discovery, learning by using etc.
- c. **Methodology: exercises, activities etc.**
  - a grammar exercise may be effective or it may even hinder learning; teachers need to evaluate the **quality** of an exercise
  - **criteria** should be applied to evaluate an exercise
- d. **Learning aim: what is a grammar exercise expected to achieve?**
  - teachers need to be aware of **why** they are giving students a grammar exercise
  - when an exercise has been done, teachers and learners need to consider to what extent a learning aim has been achieved
- e. **Learning stages: learning takes place in a series of stages (awareness, internalisation, automatisisation etc.)**
  - when giving students a grammar exercise, teachers should identify the **specific learning stage** which it should support.
  - methodology must be designed to support learners through **all stages**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper provides but a brief outline of core aspects of Cognitive+Communicative Grammar. For more information, the reader is referred to the following: general summary of C+C approach to language and learning in Newby 2008; Communicative Model of Language and related categories in Newby (2012); Grammatical notions in Newby (2008, 2012 and 2013b); Cognitive Learning Stage Model and criteria for evaluating grammar exercises in Newby 2014. Examples of 'communicative' grammar exercises can be found in Newby (1992).

<sup>2</sup> Since it is beyond the scope of this paper to explain exactly what I mean by 'traditional grammar'; I shall rely on the reader's intuitive understanding of the term. This, and other approaches to grammar, are defined and discussed in Newby (2013a).

<sup>3</sup> Amongst applied linguists there is a tendency to refer to an explicit approach to teaching grammar as 'form-focussed'. This is an unfortunate term as it ignores the most essential aspect of grammar – its role in conveying meaning.

<sup>4</sup> See also the *Common European Framework of Reference*, which uses the term 'communicative event' 11 times.

<sup>5</sup> Taken from Newby (1989: 84–90).

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the criteria should not be used as a simple checklist: it is not a necessary condition of a good exercise that all criteria are fulfilled. Rather, the categories should help teachers and student teachers to reflect systematically and in a principled way on the activities they give their pupils.

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