What do teachers need to know about language?

Scott Thornbury questions the what, why and how of language knowledge and transmission.

First, try this quiz.

1. What is the past participle of *underlie*?
   - a) underlied
   - b) underlaid
   - c) underlain

2. What is a relative clause attached to?
   - a) a main clause
   - b) a noun phrase
   - c) a relative pronoun

3. What part of speech is *barking* in *I heard a dog barking*?
   - a) gerund
   - b) participle
   - c) adjective

4. What is the first consonant sound in *jam*?
   - a) a plosive
   - b) a fricative
   - c) an affricate

5. What is the maximum number of auxiliary verbs you can put before the main verb?
   - a) 2
   - b) 3
   - c) 4

6. Which of these is an example of ‘preposition stranding’?
   - a) Who were you talking to?
   - b) For how long have you lived here?
   - c) Keep off of the grass.

Answers

1. underlain (although the British National Corpus has a handful of occurrences of *underlaid*)
2. a noun phrase, as in *the spy who loved me*
3. a participle, because it is more verb-like than noun-like
4. an affricate, i.e. a sound that begins as a plosive and then is released like a fricative
5. 4, as in *their phones must have been being tapped*, although the occurrence of so many auxiliaries together is extremely rare
6. *Who were you talking to?* i.e. where the preposition is ‘stranded’ away from its object (*who*)
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Knowledge about language

If you didn’t score very well in this test, should you give up your teaching job? Not really, although if the test didn’t at least pique your curiosity, then maybe you should consider a career in banking or catering!

It does seem self-evident, though, that language teachers should know a lot about their subject – language – just as we would expect doctors to know a lot about medicine, and rocket scientists to know a lot about rocket science. Assuming that this is the case (and I will play devil’s advocate shortly), the question confronting teacher educators – whose job it is somehow to inculcate this knowledge – is: knowledge about what, exactly? And, how much? And, for what purposes?

Let’s consider the what. It’s generally agreed that language consists of a number of interdependent systems which, conceived as an inverted pyramid, with the more global systems at the top, might look like the diagram below.

Knowledge about grammar

For teaching purposes, however, knowledge about language is traditionally construed as knowledge about grammar. The ‘language analysis’ strand of most pre-service teacher training courses tends to deal primarily with grammar, with some phonology thrown in, and even the grammar syllabus is almost exclusively concerned with features of verb morphology (the so-called tenses) with little reference to syntax, let alone phraseology.

This somewhat narrow perspective on language is, of course, consistent with the notion that pedagogical grammar – the grammar for teaching – is a subset of descriptive grammar. But even the grammar that has been described by grammarians represents only a portion of what occurs in actual language use – just as a map of the night sky is only the visible fragment of a vastly bigger system. Moreover, language is changing, morphing, shifting, fragmenting and merging, even as we speak. No single ‘grammar’ is capable of capturing this dynamism and complexity.

We could represent these different grammars in the form of embedded circles.
Which brings us to the question of how much? The Grammar Book by Marianne Celce-Murcia and Diane Larsen-Freeman purports to cover ‘the information that ESL/EFL teachers need in order to address the learning challenges of their students’, but runs to over 900 pages and weighs in at just under two kilograms. And that’s just the grammar. There are (admittedly, not quite as heavy) books on phonology, lexis and discourse. Is there any way your jobbing teacher could ever really get to know all this stuff?

The terminology alone is daunting: anaphor, binomial, clefts, ditransitive, ellipsis, fricative … and so it goes on. And then there are the rules, and the exceptions, and the exceptions to the exceptions. An upper-intermediate coursebook, taken at random, lists eight uses of the present perfect and a dozen ‘rules’ for the definite article.

Moreover, as Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman argue, language knowledge should not be limited to the rules, but should embrace the reasons for the rules. Most rules (and their exceptions) are not arbitrary: there is a good reason underlying them. The student who asks ‘Why do we say “The mailbox is on the corner” but “I’ll meet you at the corner”?’ may not be satisfied with the answer ‘Well, that’s just the way we say it’. What’s more, many so-called exceptions can be explained by reference to the reasons why one choice is preferred to another, or why one choice occurs more frequently than another. Try the test opposite.

**The purposes of language knowledge**

So, what purposes does language knowledge serve? As suggested above, the ability to answer your students’ questions can seriously increase your credibility – and the inability to answer them might seriously undermine it! But you’ll never be able to answer all of the questions that get thrown at you, so it’s worth developing some ‘hedging’ strategies, such as throwing the question back on the learners, or promising an answer in the next lesson. Many experienced teachers who have adopted such strategies have survived quite well, and without serious loss of face. Indeed, their students may have become more resourceful and less teacher-dependent in the process.

Of course, knowledge of language does come in handy when designing syllabuses, planning lessons and making sense of coursebook material. Combined with a knowledge of the students’ first language (more on that later), it can help anticipate problems at the planning stage. And it can help in dealing with learners’ errors as they occur ‘in flight’. The student who says ‘I am living here since six months’ might appreciate an explanation that contrasts the way this idea is expressed in English as compared to, say, in her native French. On the other hand, there are many errors that resist this type of explanation, and/or may best be dealt with by explicit correction alone: ‘No, I’ve been living here for six months’.

In fact, do you really need language knowledge for actual teaching? Arguably not. After all, generations of teachers using the Direct Method or an audiolingual approach never made explicit reference to the grammar at all. It was actively discouraged. Why? Because a long tradition of teaching learners about the language, ie about its rules and regularities, had produced questionable results. Why not model second language acquisition on first language acquisition instead? That is to say, why not try to replicate the processes by which we learnt our mother tongue – without grammar explanation, without rules, without metalanguage – when learning a second language?

Moreover, language is not a subject
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in the same way as, say, rocket science is. It’s a skill, and, like most skills, might best be acquired through practice rather than through detailed explanation. In fact, detailed explanation may be counterproductive: research into skills acquisition suggests that the longer and more detailed the explanation, the slower the uptake in terms of learning. And the temptation to ‘show off’ language knowledge, at the expense of providing opportunities to practise it, seems hardly consistent with the goals of a communicative approach. As Tony Wright has pointed out: ‘One great danger of acquiring specialist knowledge is the possible desire to show learners that you have this knowledge.’

Transmitting knowledge of language

More to the point, there is a body of opinion that argues that the kinds of rules found in grammar books have little or no ‘psychological reality’ for learners. As Bill VanPatten notes: ‘What the teacher offers as a “rule” is not what winds up in the learner’s mindbrain.’ A case in point is the account that Dick Schmidt recorded in his language learning journal of a lesson in Brazilian Portuguese:

‘The class started off with a discussion of the imperfect vs. perfect, with [the teacher] eliciting rules from the class. She ended up with more than a dozen rules on the board—which I am never going to remember when I need them. I’m just going to think of it as background and foreground and hope that I can get a feel for the rest of it.’

Such evidence might be dismissed as the confessions of a bad language learner, but, at the time, Schmidt was a foremost scholar in the field of psycholinguistics. If he couldn’t handle all those rules, what chance of doing so have our (less academically-minded) students!

Of course, a lot will depend on the context you’re teaching in. If, for example, you’re teaching very young learners, the use of metalanguage – ie the language about language – is unlikely to make a lot of sense. Teaching beginners, too, is probably more a matter of facilitating the acquisition of a critical mass of vocabulary and formulaic language than of transmitting ‘facts’ about the language.

The goals of the learners will also play an important role in determining how much explicit reference is made to the language systems: those whose aim is to pass exams where they will be tested on this knowledge obviously need to be familiar with it. Nor can we dismiss the learners’ own expectations or predispositions when it comes to language learning. Those who come from an educational tradition that prioritises declarative knowledge (ie knowing that) over procedural knowledge (ie knowing how) will feel short-changed if their teacher appears not to possess, or, at least, not to value, language knowledge.

But equally important, if not more so, is language awareness: that is to say, awareness of the way that, over time and space, and from one person to another, language varies and changes, and the way that language, especially a second language, develops in individual learners – their interlanguage. Coupled with that, a key component of a language teacher’s knowledge base is knowledge of the learner’s first language. It is quite extraordinary, given the influence that it has on second language learning, that generations of teachers have been discouraged from using, referring to and even knowing much about their students’ mother tongues.

What teachers need to know about language, then, is probably more than coursebook grammar, but a lot less than formal linguistics. As Leo van Lier puts it:

‘While appreciating the need for “training in linguistics”, I … argue that the knowledge teachers need is not that of theoretical linguistics, prescriptive grammar and formal accuracy, but a knowledge that starts from everything they already know about language, that connects this knowledge to all that their students already know about language, and then builds bridges to deeper understandings of the uses and processes of language in personal, social, academic, and professional contexts.’

In the end, whether or not you make explicit reference to rules and terminology in your teaching, language is what you deal with, and language is inherently interesting. In fact, language teaching brings together two of the qualities that most uniquely define us as humans: language and cultural transmission, ie teaching. If we cease to be fascinated by either, we risk turning our vocation into just another routine occupation.

CONTINUES