

Grammar – who needs it?

An informal study of students' responses to learning grammar

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INTRODUCTION

The teaching of formal grammar has, in the past decade or so, largely been neglected in English teaching in favour of more 'creative' and 'communicative' approaches. Several theories of language acquisition (including those of Krashen and Lamendella) argue that the cognitive, meta-awareness of language involved in formal grammar does not enhance fluency or improve communicative competence. Many teachers have had the experience of seeing students perform well on grammar tests, but present essays littered with precisely the errors in usage that were painstakingly corrected and explained in the grammar class. There does seem to be a basis for the oft-repeated argument that formal grammar instruction only improves the student's ability to perform in grammar tests, but that this ability does not seem to transfer to spontaneous production of error-free English (written or spoken). Add to this the irritation that many teachers feel at having to deal with nitpicking issues of syntax or spelling when they would rather be talking about the glories of English literature or the excitement and fun of creative writing - and grammar teaching becomes a contentious issue indeed.

MOTIVATION

At the conclusion of a term's teaching in a Grammar 3 class for the English Teaching Institute at the University of Washington, during which a major personal issue for me was the value of grammar instruction, I wondered how many of my misgivings were shared by my students. This study was conducted as a pilot attempt to find out what general trends there were in the students' feelings about the value of grammar, their personal response to the demands made by the task of learning grammar, and the pedagogical needs they perceived in grammar instruction.

SAMPLE

The fifteen students in the Grammar 3 class were given questionnaires, and fourteen of these were returned. Four Grammar 2 students also filled in questionnaires. The total sample size was thus eighteen. Three grammar teachers also completed the questionnaire. The students were all foreign students studying at the Institute in an attempt to upgrade their English prior to studying at an American university. Their nationalities were predominantly Middle-Eastern, South American and Indo-Chinese.

METHODS

Students were asked to complete the questionnaire given on p 18.

The first pair of questions (like/don't like) was designed to elicit responses related to the students' subjective reaction to grammar. The second pair of questions (good/bad) focused on the perceived intrinsic objective value of grammar.

The third pair of questions was aimed at finding out what the students' perceived classroom needs were, while the final question invited students to indicate their emotional responses and states, directly related to their participation in a grammar class.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Students -

I'm interested in finding out how you feel about learning grammar. What are your ideas and feelings as you think back on the grammar classes you have taken? Please feel free to answer as honestly as you like. You don't have to put your name on the paper.

I'd be very pleased if you wrote any extra suggestions or comments. Thanks for your trouble.

1. One reason I LIKE to learn grammar is
2. One reason I DON'T LIKE to learn grammar is
3. I think grammar is a GOOD thing to learn because
4. I think grammar is a BAD thing to learn because
5. In grammar classes there should be MORE
6. In grammar classes there should be LESS
7. In grammar classes I feel -

Sleepy	_____	Scared	_____	Interested	_____
Worried	_____	Confused	_____	Bored	_____
Excited	_____	Nervous	_____	Clever	_____
Dumb	_____	Happy	_____	Busy	_____
Okay	_____	Not okay	_____	Rushed	_____

(Mark as many as you need to.)
8. Any Extra Comments?

RESULTS

In effect, students treated the first four questions as if they were indistinguishable. Responses to both the LIKE and GOOD questions were essentially statements on the value of grammar.

The common responses to questions 1 and 3 were the following:

- grammar is important
- grammar is useful
- grammar helps you understand English
- grammar helps you to speak and write good/correct/proper English.

Comments such as 'Grammar helps us to speak and write English in a good way', 'Grammar is the English language', and 'Grammar is the most useful class in IEP'¹, 'I would prefer don't have other classes but study only grammar for 9 hours' indicate the students' overriding conviction that grammar is the essential key to learning English. This conviction perhaps underlies the blurring of the distinction between the GOOD and LIKE questions. Grammar is regarded as so crucial, such a 'given' in the process of language learning, that the issue of personal likes or dislikes is totally subsumed in the acknowledgement of the importance of the subject. (Of course, the alternative explanation is simply that the questions were badly phrased!)

Two responses did indicate a distinction between the perceived value of grammar and the students' personal response to the task of learning it. The one student said that s/he liked learning grammar because 'It's funny.' (Whether 'funny' = fun or 'funny' = amusing, is not clear.) The other student said that s/he liked grammar because 'almost always the answer is only one' - a statement which reflects the sense of relief that students seem to feel at having a clear-cut, concrete issue to deal with, as opposed to the nuances and shades of correctness in writing, reading, or speaking-listening classes.

The DON'T LIKE and BAD questions elicited far fewer responses than did their positive counterparts (a total of 7 responses, compared to 32 to the GOOD/LIKE question). Given the student's perceived significance of grammar, the negative questions were probably seen as inciting heresy, or as being genuinely irrelevant. (One student wrote - 'I don't think that' in response to question 4.)

Those students who admitted to having a reason for not liking grammar attributed it to the confusion they felt in the grammar class. Two students resented grammar classes devoted to the review of material they felt they had already mastered. (Thus, grammar may be important, but it is not something that one wants to linger over!)

One student (a godsend to Krashenites) commented that grammar was a bad thing to learn because 'when we talk with someone, I can't help thinking about grammar, then we can't speak.'

FEELINGS

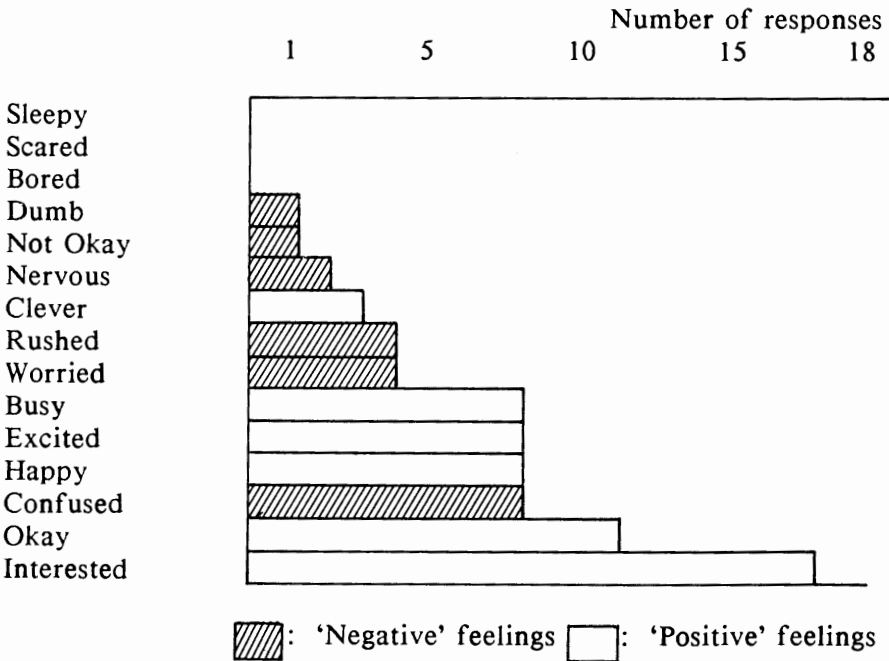
Figure 1 below tabulates students' responses to the Feelings checklist. 74 % of the responses (54 out of 73) were positive, and 26 % (19 of 73) were negative. The responses were thus weighted in favour of the more positive feelings (for example 'Busy' - 8 responses, versus 'Rushed' - 4 responses), and the predominant 'tone' was one of interest. The most prominent negative emotion was that of confusion, although the level of this feeling seems to be matched by that of excitement, happiness, and busy-ness.

'Bored', 'Scared' and 'Sleepy' were unanimously discarded as options.

'Interested' could have been chosen as the most popular option because students felt it impermissible to indicate a lack of interest, particularly in a subject to which they accord such significant status. (The single student who did not check 'Interested' seemed generally demotivated to complete the questionnaire at all, answer-

ing only two questions out of a possible eight. Those answers were characterized by a laissez-faire neutrality, so perhaps the index is a genuine indication of interest, and not just of obligation.

Figure 1: Response frequencies to feeling cues



PEDAGOGICAL COMMENTARY

(More/Less Questions plus Comments)

In their responses to this part of the questionnaire, students generally seemed to feel the need for more grammar - in the sense of more explanation, more examples, more practice, and even more homework (13 responses). The other consistent theme was the need for more attention to be given to each individual student, smaller classes, and more group work (9 responses). The third most common response was a preference for reduced speed, slower processing of the material, a more relaxed pace and presentation (5 responses).

TEACHERS

The three grammar teachers who answered the same questionnaire all indicated their awareness of the high status accorded grammar by ESL students ('The students think it's important, so I don't have to justify it to them'; 'For adult students it fills a need to know why'), but also voiced their doubts - not shared by the majority of the students - that grammar might be a handicap to fluency ('Grammar isn't always easily applicable, and is in danger of straying into the abstract'. 'I sometimes wonder if the students are really learning anything useful'). All three indicated a need for communicative student activity, and less teacher presentation of abstract grammar.

Interest was unanimously chosen (which correlates with the student profile), but 'Dumb', 'Worried' and 'Bored' also featured strongly (7 out of 14 responses)!

CONCLUSION

Contrary to my own (and my fellow teachers') misgivings about grammar, the consensus seems to be that students regard it as valuable, and are interested and challenged in grammar classes. Indications seem to be that they prefer a more contextualized presentation ('how to do it in real life'; 'less emphasized at how many rules we take, but how much knowledge we understand'), and experience a genuine frustration at large classes and rapid pace ('The grammar class should be in smole grobes and not more than 10 students.' 'You had better to explane more slowly, because it is grammar!'). Students would obviously prefer small group work and individual attention, because slower students feel they get left behind in the general class activity, while the better students feel hampered by the slow pacing and review required ('Grammar class is good, but the class is so big² that I sometime don't understand enough' vs 'I don't care if there are students who need review, because I lose time and money').

2 Class sizes were 20 for Grammar 3, 17 for Grammar 2.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The questionnaire was not successful in getting the students to differentiate between the value/usefulness of grammar as a subject, and their feelings about learning it. A personal interview would perhaps have been more effective in homing in on these issues, and might also have generated more detailed responses to all the areas of inquiry.

If a questionnaire were to be used, the open-endedness of the questions could perhaps be modified to multiple choice, or sliding-scale responses, in order to elicit more specific answers.

EXAMPLES

.	1	.	2	.	3	.	4	.	5
Not at				A little				Very	
all confused				confused				confused	

Place a check (\checkmark) beside what you would like MORE of in grammar class, and a cross (X) beside what you would like LESS of in grammar class:

Rules	_____	Examples	_____
Explanations	_____	Student talk	_____
Teacher talk	_____	Boardwriting	_____
Exercises	_____	Homework	_____

etc., etc., etc.

The role of grammar teaching, particularly in English Second Language classes, is one that is subject to much discussion and controversy. Many second language acquisition theories reject formal grammar teaching as having little value - certainly less than the teaching of reading, or writing. Yet the most consistent trend in queries we get from our students is a desire to become familiar with the rules of grammar. This clash of consciousness between what theorists and teachers see as the role of grammar, and the importance that students attach to it, should be resolved if our teaching is to be seen by our students as relevant, and by us as effective.