New Trends in Grammar Teaching:
Issues and Applications
An interview with Prof. Diane Larsen-Freeman

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Now that the Spanish Ministry of Education has announced that the new European degrees will start in the academic year 2008-2009, one of the most impending goals of English language teachers in Spanish universities is that of adapting to the pedagogical guidelines established by the European Space in Higher Education. As a result, new methodological models are being brought to the fore with the aim of providing learners not simply with what the Tuning Project (Universidad de Deusto and Universidad de Groningen 2003) defines as instrumental or generic competences in a foreign language (grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic competences), but also with social skills (i.e. group work, decision making and problem solving activities) and cognitive abilities (i.e. information search, information analysis and synthesis, and critical thinking skills). The integration of such competences in the English language syllabus seeks to make students more competent communicators in their future professional careers (cf. Fallows and Stevens 2000).

Both young and experienced teachers alike are thus devoting time and efforts to finding new teaching resources and to putting into practice new methodological approaches with greater potential to offer improved knowledge acquisition in the above mentioned competences, the linguistic, the social and the cognitive. Prof. Diane Larsen-Freeman, Director of the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan, is at present one of the most widely acknowledged applied linguists and teacher educators in the academic world. A Distinguished Senior Faculty Fellow at the School for International Training, Professor Larsen-Freeman was also named in 1999 one of 30 American pioneers in the field of ESL in the 20th century by *ESL Magazine*. As a leading figure in second language acquisition, she kindly accepted the invitation to be interviewed and to offer practical guidance in exploring language teaching methods and recent methodological innovations.

Traditional methodologies have often been the breeding ground of language acquisition problems and ineffective learning environments in which learners hardly participate and/or volunteer. What advantages do the new trends in theory and pedagogy offer to ESL teachers to avoid what you coined as the "inert knowledge problem" (Larsen-Freeman 2003a)?

The term *inert knowledge problem* is not mine; it was coined by Alfred North Whitehead in 1929. He used it to refer to the fact that students learn things in the classroom that they cannot later put to their own purposes outside of the classroom. I appropriated the term because I thought that it applied very well to the teaching of grammar. Students are taught grammar as a set of rules, but even if they can apply the rules to exercises successfully during the lesson, they don't seem to be able to activate their knowledge of the rules when they are communicating during another part of the lesson or in another context.

Undoubtedly, one source of the inert knowledge problem is the language teaching methodology used. For instance, I studied Spanish using the grammar translation method. While I learned a lot of vocabulary and a lot of grammar rules, I cannot speak Spanish. Of course, the grammar translation method had a different strength. We read Cervantes and *El Cid*, and we learned a great deal about Spanish culture. My point is that methodologies have different strengths. The newer methodologies, such as a task-based approach, try to address the inert knowledge problem. They try to get people using the language from the beginning rather than learning about the language with the hope that later on the students can apply knowledge of the rules in an active way.

You treat grammar as a skill – you call it grammaring *– and further state that teaching grammar as the 'fifth skill' can help students overcome the inert knowledge problem. Could you expand this a bit further?*

We all teach our subjects as we understand them. If we conceive of grammar as a static set of rules, then we teach grammar in a static manner. Such teachers have students read the rules, apply them to exercises and memorize them. These steps alone do not help students overcome the inert knowledge problem. Therefore, I think that the way to address the problem is to change the way teachers think about grammar. I created the term *grammaring* to convey the idea that grammar is a dynamic system, which needs to be taught as a skill, the fifth skill (the other four being reading, writing, speaking and listening), rather than as a fixed body of rules. If you understand that what you are trying to do is to get students to use grammatical structures accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately, then you realize that you need to provide students with an opportunity to use grammar structures in meaningful and engaging activities.

In your book Teaching Language: from Grammar to Grammaring *(2003a) you point out three major dimensions in every linguistic unit: form, meaning and use. How should these dimensions be taught to students?*

Any linguistic unit can be characterized by a form, a meaning and a use. So, for example, you could say that the form of the English word *house* is a common count noun, it's singular, it's spelt with the silent *e*, it contains a diphthong, etc. It has a meaning as well, of course. A house is a place where someone lives. However, we cannot stop there because there are a lot of words in English that refer to a place where someone lives. For example, there is *residence, dwelling, domicile, habitat*, etc. So students have to learn to pick among them the appropriate word for the meaning that they want and for the context of use.

For me, this means that for someone to be able to speak and use language accurately, meaningfully and appropriately, all three dimensions of form, meaning and use have to be learned. However, if you stop and think about it, you realize that they are not all learned the same way. For this reason, form, meaning and use need to be taught differently. Teachers need to focus students' attention on one of these three, the one which presents the greatest learning challenge for students at that moment. The challenge changes, depending on the proficiency of the students and their native language. For example, for Spanish speakers, the challenge in learning the English passive is probably not its form or its meaning. Students have to learn both; however, it is when to use the passive (as opposed to the active voice) that remains the greatest learning challenge. This suggests that the traditional way of introducing the passive to learners by transforming active sentences into passive ones is misguided because it suggests to students that the two voices are interchangeable, which they are not.

So, instead of learning grammar and lexis separately, does the awareness of these three dimensions facilitate the students' acquisition of lexico-grammatical units?

Yes I definitely think that grammar can be seen as a web of patterns, and I do not think it is helpful to think of grammar and vocabulary as being entirely separate. I prefer Halliday's term, *lexicogrammar*. It is very easy to see this in phrasal verbs, which are a traditional grammar structure, but whose learning challenge is really lexical – learning the sometimes unique meaning of each verb and particle combination. I am not so happy with the form-function dichotomy, or the form-meaning one either because as you know, I prefer a tri-partite view of form, meaning and use or function.

Would you make a difference between teaching spoken grammar and teaching a written grammar of English?

Yes. This is an important awareness now that we have access to linguistic corpora where we can study the differences in a systematic way. Of course, there is overlap between the two grammars, but where they differ, students' attention should be drawn to the characteristics of each.

In Larsen-Freeman (2003b) you foreground the use of native and non-native texts in the ESL classroom. You also contend that contextual analysis can be enhanced through the use of linguistic corpora as a means of accessing real language usage data (Larsen-Freeman 2004). What are the main advantages of looking at grammar in context and of accessing real instances of language use?

One of the main advantages of looking at grammar in context is that it can reveal information about the use of particular structures, and what patterns the grammar structures enter into, for instance, what preceeds them and what follows them in the discourse. An advantage of linguistic corpora is that we have access to many instances of attested language use. These are a helpful supplement to our linguistic intuitions about how the language works. However, I also think that there are limitations to corpora. For one thing they give us examples of what's right, but they don't tell us what

is wrong. In this sense, they don't really give a full account of the potential of the system. Furthermore, I believe that psychological authenticity is more important than linguistic authenticity for pedagogical purposes. If students are engaged in psychologically authentic activities, they have an opportunity to practice using language meaningfully for their own purposes. This is the only way to overcome the inert knowledge problem.

One of my main concerns as regards these new pedagogical trends is the suitability of teaching grammar using a context-based approach. What are basically the "rules and reasons" (Larsen-Freeman 2000b) of teaching grammar in context?

Rules can be useful, but rules are form-based and are usually stated in inflexible ways. However, that is not how language works. Language exists for the expression and interpretation of meaning, and that includes grammatical meaning. Sometimes, we give students simplified 'rules of thumb'. We tell students "You can't use a stative verb with the present participle". But this isn't so. English speakers use present participles with stative verbs when they say things like "I've been wanting to see that movie ever since it arrived in town". The reason that this sentence is acceptable is because the present participle is semantically compatible with the present perfect – both referring to a span of time. So my idea is to teach reasons so that students understand that language is the way it is. Also, I think reasons tend to be broader-based than rules, and if you understand the reason why speakers make the choices they do, you have some access to the way that people think in that language, the culture of speakers of that language.

Earlier you mentioned working to enhancing students' cognitive abilities. When you teach students reasons why things are the way they are in language, I think you are doing just this.

You propose three criteria for designing output practice activities – meaningful and engaging, focus on the learning challenge (be it form, meaning or use) and grading. From my own experience, planning, designing and implementing a new learning environment based on new methodological approaches is a time-consuming task. What advice could you give us in this respect?

Anytime you do something for the first time as a teacher it is time consuming. A few years ago I taught a new course, entitled 'Educational Linguistics'. Even though I have over 30 years' teaching experience, my new course took a tremendous amount of work. So we need to be realistic when we ask teachers to innovate.

Nevertheless, the reason why I believe that it is important to ask teachers to focus on output practice is that I think it's an area that has been overlooked since the days of drilling and pattern practice. A lot of SLA research, second language acquisition research, is focused on input processing; it ignores output processing. What we need are suggestions for how to make output practice interesting and engaging.

How to get around the time-consuming nature? Well I don't really have a very good answer for that, but I have two comforting thoughts to share – first, when you work in a way where learners are engaged in producing meaningful language, in a learning-centered way, then the teacher is much freer than when she was the center of attention.

This leaves her able to observe learning in progress, one of the great rewards of teaching. Second, it's a mistake to assume that a new method necessarily requires all new material. It is the way that you use the material that is important in a learning-centered approach.

Earl Stevick, a famous language methodologist, wrote years and years ago an article called 'Technemes and the Rhythm of Class Activity'. It's a classic article in which Stevick explains how a teacher can take an activity, change it a little bit, and by so doing, re-ignite students' interest, re-engage them. Using a good text or a good activity again and again need not be tedious, if it is skilfully managed as Stevick suggests.

Literature on autonomous learning defines it as that type of learning activity in which learners act independently of the teacher and become responsible for their learning progress by developing an awareness of their degree of motivation, learning strategies and group building abilities. What individual learner factors and what language learning procedures should ESL instructors observe and take into account to provide suitable feedback to students?

You're just reminding me that another way to manage the load of developing new materials is to ask students to bring their own materials to class. That's very much in keeping with making students more responsible and motivated.

I don't think the role of feedback giver is one that can completely be turned over to students, however. Giving students feedback so that they know when they are on and when they are off target is a really important function for a teacher to perform. Of course, for feedback to be useful, it must be given selectively. You don't want to constantly interrupt someone. Feedback needs to be cognitively challenging and affectively supportive. It is my experience that when it is, students appreciate it and learn from it.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages establishes six reference levels for grading language proficiency: A Basic User, A1 Breakthrough, A2 Waystage, B Independent User, B1 Threshold, B2 Vantage, C Proficient User, C1 Effective Operational Proficiency and C2 Mastery. Would you say that these different levels require different methodological approaches?

I am familiar with the Common European Framework because we have calibrated our University of Michigan tests, the ECCE and the ECPE, on its scale. To answer your question about whether different levels require different methodological approaches, I think it's helpful to be reminded that methodologies consist of both principles and techniques (Larsen-Freeman 2000a). The principles are the theory, the values, the beliefs, the ideas that underlie a particular methodology. The techniques are the practices that are realized in the classroom.

It seems to me the principles do not change depending on the reference level. For example, if you believe, as I have been saying in this interview, that it is the students who need the practice producing the language, then that's true for students whether they are at the A1 or C2 level. However the techniques and the materials that you use for

different levels would be different because the learning challenge is different for learners at different levels of proficiency.

My last question obviously tackles one of the most debatable issues in teacher-oriented fora, that of testing. In your view, what are the major criteria for testing in ESL courses based on communicative approaches to teaching? My dilemma, at times, is whether I should test accuracy, complexity of language and fluency or rather test the learner's competence according to the four communicative dimensions of Canale and Swain (1980) – grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic competence?

First of all, it is important to be aware of the backwash effect or washback effect – both terms are used – of the test and be sure that what we are testing is what we want students to learn because that's what the students are going to focus on. And, of course, it is not fair to test something that you haven't taught.

I must say I myself favor more direct testing in the classroom, which means that the things you ask the students to do in the exam situation are not different from what they would be asked to do, what they'd want to do, with that language in a non-exam situation.

[*one of the major challenges of the EEES is that of implementing ongoing assessment to students*] Yes, I think that it makes sense to make a distinction between formative and summative assessment. When you are assessing students in an ongoing way, you are practicing formative assessment. If you have your students engaged in producing meaningful language, you will be off stage and able to observe their language behaviour. Formative assessment involves constantly scanning students' behavior, trying to read it and seeing where students are stuck and helping them to get beyond the sticking point. This, to my way of thinking, is the essence of a good teaching. It's using ongoing assessment to identify the obstacles to students' learning. A related matter is to help students become better assessors of their own learning, something that prepares them to go beyond what they've been learning in the course, and by so doing, to become more autonomous. Teaching as managing learning is what we should all strive to achieve.

This interview took place on July 7th, 2006 at the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan. I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Larsen-Freeman for giving us part of her time and for agreeing to be interviewed. I am sure that, like myself, the readers of *Atlantis* will greatly profit from her broad experience and highly-illuminating insights as a linguist, a teacher educator and a second language acquisition researcher.

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