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Introduction to the Theme Section: Continuing Developments in Discourse-Based Grammar Instruction

Several months ago a friend asked me to clarify a grammatical matter for him. He had been in a minor dispute with a colleague, as they were collaborating on a paper to be submitted to a scientific journal, regarding a collocation with the word *tool*: Can one refer to something as “a useful tool *to measure*” something, as my friend’s colleague suggested, or does one rather say—as my friend himself insisted—that it is “a useful tool *for measuring*” something? This was important, I was assured, as the possibly offending structure appeared in the first sentence of their paper, and who wants an editor to be put off by a grammatical error in the very first sentence?

I responded as I usually do, in all but the most clear-cut cases, when asked about questions of “correctness”: that I didn’t know definitively, that my friend’s version sounded better, more natural, more native to me, but that his colleague’s alternative suggestion might well be attested in some records of language. I’d have to check. My friend appeared dissatisfied, giving me a look that said, “You have to *check*? What kind of grammarian do you claim to be? Shouldn’t you know?” But I’m used to this, as I imagine many of us in this profession are. To many minds, still, words and sentences are either right or wrong, and you can tell (overall) when someone has spoken or written something grammatically sound, or not. And even if you can’t tell, there’s someone more learned who can. Thus, my friend wanted me to supply him with the *correct answer*. It’s a testament to the lack of grammar discussion during our 20-year friendship (and possibly to the survival of that friendship) that my friend didn’t yet fully realize that I’m a descriptive linguist, that my interest lies in what is said and written, by whom, by how many of those people, how often, in what contexts, and most important, precisely in what manner, in those specific contexts. My interest, and the interest of most linguists, is not to define what is right and wrong, how something should be done, but rather to describe and explicate what is already there. This, my friend hadn’t known. (But it doesn’t matter; I know nothing about his area of expertise, cyclic peptides, either.)

(Several days later, I indeed checked my in-house corpora, my large grammar tomes, and Google for the noun *tool* and its collocations, and I found some respectable instances of an infinitive complement. *For + gerund* was, however, the much more common structure.)

Language is always changing. This is a truism that has become nearly a cliché, yet its implications—that there can be no full description of any lan-

guage; that even if a full description were possible, it would hold only instantaneously before it would need to be modified; and that thus a search for such a description is a waste of time—haven't sunk in entirely. Also, a full cataloging of a grammar isn't just impossible; it's also undesirable, inasmuch as it draws attention (and scarce research time) away from what is pedagogically invaluable, and that is a discussion of the broader social and textual contexts in which grammatical structures appear. A search for "complete correctness" forces people, unnaturally, to discount the notion that being wholly grammatical is a matter not only of forming constructions based on certain rules but also of mastering the choices among all those rules that one must make with every utterance and every written sentence. These choices are determinable partly by prior norms and partly by a language user's willingness to sound a certain way. Different choices in structure—all of them "correct" at sentence level—may achieve different tones. (See Larsen-Freeman, 2002, for further discussion and exemplification of "grammar as choice.")

In this vein, a terminology shift seems in order. It is time to begin thinking not of "grammar rules" but rather of "practices." The word *rule* implies a maxim imposed by an outside, detached regulator, as if a court of judges chose how a grammar item is to be structured and presented that from on high. In some languages, something approaching this is indeed the case, as with the Académie Française or the Real Academia Española. English, however, has always resisted a formal academy of this sort, and thus the language has been relatively free to go its own direction. (So, actually, have French and Spanish, as their academies have limited power.) So instead of prescribed "rules," it is more sensible to regard the grammatical choices made around us as *practices*, a word that connotes actual (as opposed to idealized) usage.

To repeat a point made above, thus, what should interest educators is "how grammar is used" rather than "how you should use it." Educators and language analysts should also be interested in frequency of use and register, especially with disputed structures (such as the American English use of the simple past tense to denote perfective completion: "Did you eat yet?"). The ESL/EFL teaching profession, in particular, requires a shift from thinking of "rules" to thinking of "practices" to combat the prescriptive "what is *correct*?" mind-set. In my experience, there remain plenty of writing and language instructors who rarely venture beyond the comfort zones of sentence-level grammar discussion and who tie the conventional formal structures to abstract and decontextualized explanations of when they "might" be used. (Also, as some teachers may know from discussions with colleagues, even certain old-fashioned grammar "rules" are still in currency: Never end a sentence with a preposition, never split an infinitive, never begin a sentence with "and" or "but," and so on. These sorts of mandates, foisted upon generations of hapless schoolchildren and language learners, are myths, easily debunked by a glance at journalistic and academic prose, in which the so-called "ungrammatical" phenomena appear quite often.) Many grammar textbooks still exist in which the standard exercise consists of 10 "fill-in-the-blank" sentences. But, as ESL teachers and TESOL educators often repeat, sentences *never* exist outside of context; they *always* relate in some fashion to the paragraphs or larger discourse units in which they appear. When viewed in their locations in authentic discourse samples, grammar takes on shapes and mean-

ings whose best explanations spring from that very placement—explanations that may not be immediately generalizable to other contexts, but that are most salient to the rationale for *why* a structure appears *right here and now*.

Fortunately, of course, the last 20 or so years have seen a reform of ESL/EFL grammar instruction methods, one that is broadly referred to as “discourse-based.” Partly complementarily to, and partly in reaction to, the rise to prominence of the process approach to writing instruction (second-language and first-language), grammar pedagogy began to be seen as an integral part of that process. Educators began to realize the potential of analyzing lexicogrammatical structures in various authentic contexts, to examine their nuances, and to encourage students to emulate their usages. Eventually, they also began to understand the generative possibilities of explicit grammar analysis and instruction; the form, meaning, and pragmatics of grammar structures should be mastered not only in order to “fix errors” but also in order to guide a language user’s clarity of thought. (A writer might ponder, “If I join these two clauses by coordination, I’ll give the idea in each clause equal footing; if I join them by subordination, one of them takes higher prominence. Which one fits my meaning and purpose here?”) “Grammar as choice” has become, thus, a heuristic, a way of helping writers and thinkers “discover” their own ideas.

The field of ESL/EFL, therefore, has taken steps toward seeing grammar as integrated within language as a whole, not as separate. Many language teachers are learning techniques that reflect this vision. They continue to explain grammatical structures, and practice error correction, at the sentence level—important activities, still—but they do so with an eye on the suprasentential level as well to make sure a sentence fits the grammar of the paragraph in which it appears. (It is good to correct an erroneous past tense form, but if the rest of the paragraph is in the present, the sentence may just need to be changed to present tense.) Many textbooks now include authentic texts and always analyze the grammar of these texts at the discourse level. There is some way to go: As noted above, the notions of “descriptive versus prescriptive” and “correctness relative to specific contexts” have yet to broadly infuse the teaching profession. But much of the theory of discourse-based grammar instruction is available, and so are many specific classroom techniques. This special issue of *The CATESOL Journal* provides more of that theory and practice.

Contents of the special issue. Contributors to this special issue in grammar were asked to respond to the following prompt:

“Discourse-based” grammar instruction has, by now, become well known as a concept, if not already well established in ESL/EFL classrooms. Texts such as Celce-Murcia and Olshtain’s (2000) *Discourse and Context in Language Teaching* and Frodesen and Holten’s (2005) *The Power of Context in Language Teaching and Learning* have taught us (and our students) always to regard grammar at levels higher than the sentence, and have exposed us to many ways in which grammatical structures interact and shape each other in their contextual environments.

Where are we now in this endeavor? How established, indeed, has discourse-based grammar instruction become in classrooms, and what have

the pluses and pitfalls been? And where to next? What further insights into particular grammar structures have arisen from this approach?

The five resulting manuscripts have chosen to tackle the prompt in a variety of ways. In the first, "Using Discourse-Based Strategies to Address the Lexicogrammatical Development of Generation 1.5 ESL Writers," Christine Holten and Lisa Mikesell provide an analysis of grammar and lexicon: what a word means in a particular grammatical environment and how that meaning may be modified by changes in grammatical structure. Holten and Mikesell examine the writing of Generation 1.5 students and examine the possible reasons for, and ways of dealing with, faulty word and phrase constructions that will be familiar to any instructor of academic writing: **The author describes that ...*, or **In this article, it claims that...* Holten and Mikesell also include an illuminating discussion, sparked by an old quotation from Mina Shaughnessy, of what it means to "know" a word. While this article focuses on Generation 1.5 writers, the insights and analyses the authors provide may be transferred to any language or writing classroom.

The next two contributions are concerned with classroom techniques for discourse-based grammar instruction. Susan Kesner Bland, in "Ten Questions for Guiding a Discourse-Based Grammar Syllabus," provides writers and grammar instructors with a series of guidelines for determining where certain grammar structures might appear in texts. Having surveyed a wide range of literature on genre analysis and grammar, Bland outlines certain patterns that have been found. The present perfect tense, for example, often appears in the introduction of a text, indicating a generalization to be expanded later in the same paragraph (after a switch to simple past or simple present); the present perfect also often appears in a text's summarizing conclusion, which reverts to generalizations. Relative clauses and conditional sentences are often used to define new terminology or concepts. Writers who are given these patterns have an architecture on which to build their ideas. In addition to presenting a range of grammar patterns in texts, Bland details several classroom presentations techniques that instructors may use.

John Liang, with "Language Scaffolding in Second Language Writing," offers a five-step process for introducing, analyzing, and practicing grammar structures in writing classes. In this process, students build awareness of the use of grammar structures in authentic texts; read, analyze, and categorize the structures; proceed through a variety of controlled grammar exercises and sentence composition practices; collaborate with their instructors in the building of novel texts; and finally independently produce, and then proofread, their own new texts. This sequence of events, moving from less difficult to more difficult tasks, provides students with a model for emulating grammar patterns common to different kinds of texts. Liang chooses verb tenses as the example to illustrate the classroom techniques, but many other grammar structures may be taught and practiced in this manner.

Roberta Ching has been working with the California State University's 12th Grade Task Force to bring discourse-based grammar instruction to California's high schools in order to prepare students for the advanced grammar understanding they will need in higher education. In her piece, "Integrating Grammar

Into a High School Expository Reading and Writing Course,” Ching outlines the history of the CSU–created Expository Reading and Writing Course and its current status. She then describes the materials she has produced for these particular classes. Ching’s approach combines the twin precepts of effective grammar instruction—analyzing authentic language and analyzing that language in larger units of discourse—into a single approach. Ching also provides a variety of pedagogical suggestions: For example, teachers should work with the structures relevant to their own students (using grammar manuals as a “cookbook” for issues) and make use of vocabulary logs in the high school classroom.

Finally, Peter Master’s contribution, “Article Errors and Article Choices,” is an addition to his long list of “articles on articles.” This time, Master takes on a question that has vexed many grammar teachers: How do you address an “error” in the article system that is only an error at a higher level of discourse? (In other words, the sentence itself is grammatical, yet within the paragraph, or as a matter of idiom or “generally understood” context, it doesn’t make sense.) This is a topic that language teachers often shy away from, since it isn’t a matter of “not following the rule” but rather a more complex problem. Master’s piece offers teachers a way to explain *why a given article is used in a given context* rather than resort to the traditional explanation, “It’s just that way.”

I hope you enjoy reading this special issue as much as I enjoyed editing it.

Acknowledgments

I greatly appreciate *The CATESOL Journal* editors, Mark Roberge and Margi Wald, for asking me to take charge of this special issue, and I am also thankful for their candid and apt suggestions on this introduction as well as other editorial matters. My special gratitude goes to the authors of the five manuscripts: You all taught me a lot more than I bargained for, made the whole process smooth and pleasant, and together created an exciting collection of articles. Thank you!

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