Teaching Grammar in an ESL Classroom

Timothy Shenk

For further project information please contact:

The Pennsylvania Action Research Network
Dr. Gary William Kuhne, Director
P.O. Box 189, North East, PA 16428
814-725-5259
Email: gwk1@psu.edu

Or go to the Learning From Practice Website at:
www.learningfrompractice.org

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the teaching of grammar in an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. The idea for this research project stemmed from my observation that many times ESL students don’t seem to adequately learn the grammar taught in class. Some theorists believe that overt grammar teaching should not be implemented in an ESL classroom; instead, teachers should focus on communicative activities. Both my personal observations and the information I had read concerning overt grammar teaching made me curious about how much grammar my ESL students were retaining after a period of instruction. For a week, I instructed my students on the topic of comparatives, superlatives, and equatives. I gave a pre-test, post-test, and a delayed post-test in written form to my whole class and in oral form to five students. My expectation was that the five students would use the form correctly in both the written and oral pre-test 20 percent of the time. Along with the testing, I asked the whole class to write a response to specific lessons, and I kept extensive notes of my own feelings about each day of the grammar instruction. I also maintained detailed lesson plans. Overall, the students seemed to feel that grammar instruction was important. The results of the testing showed minimal to moderate gains among most of the students, but there was evidence that the students were experimenting with some of the new structures they had learned.

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The Problem:

I teach advanced ESL to a class of 15 to 25 immigrants and refugees aged 17 to 70 at the Adult Enrichment Center in Lancaster city, Pennsylvania. This is my third year of teaching the advanced level class. Through my teaching experiences, I have noticed that many students don’t seem to retain or correctly utilize the grammatical structures I teach in class. As a result of this observation, I decided to participate in this Pennsylvania Action Research Network (PA-ARN) project which would give me data about the effectiveness of grammar teaching
among my students.

The issue of whether grammar should be taught in the classroom has been a controversial debate among linguists, particularly over the last few decades. Krashen and Terrell (1983) actually argue that concentrating on accurate grammar and pronunciation impedes students progress in the target language because it takes their focus away from developing comprehension skills (pp. 77-8). They continue by saying that since adults have many similarities with children in the language acquisition process, they cannot be forced to learn a grammatical structure before they are internally ready for it. (p. 1). If the theories of Krashen and Terrell and other linguists who have down played the effectiveness of grammar instruction are correct, then language teaching both in domestic and international settings would change dramatically. I wanted to know on a personal level if I could see improvements in grammar usage among my students so that I could make a more informed decision about how I would teach my class. During the initial phases of this PA-ARN project, I wrote, “If this study shows that overt grammar teaching does not in any way improve the ability of my students to communicate effectively, then I will either eliminate grammar teaching altogether or take a hard look at the way I teach grammar.” Evidently, I thought the only way to measure the value of grammar instruction was through obtaining measurable results from the students.

**The Intervention:**

After deciding that I would teach comparatives, superlatives and equatives for a week to my advanced level ESL class, and after acknowledging the difficulties and data collection problems I might encounter, I developed a goal in the form of a question: Will one week of teaching a specific grammatical point to five adult ESL class representatives in Lancaster city help them to improve their proficiency level to 80 percent of accuracy a month after the intervention? Before I answer this question, I would like to describe the details of the research project.

I decided to teach comparatives (taller than), superlatives (the tallest) and equatives (as tall as) in early March. My plan was to give the whole class a written pre-test, post-test, and a second post-test at least a month after the first test. On top of this, I also thought I should study a smaller group of about five students to whom I would administer an oral pre-test, post-test and a second post-test with written consent from the students. (appendix). For these five students, I estimated that their written and oral pre-test scores would average 20
percent, but that their second post-test scores would average 80 percent..

In order to prepare for the written testing, I created three tests (pre-test in appendix) which were similar in their structure and in the number of questions, but had differing questions and data. I also made three large collages depicting people, buildings, animals, and other items which could be compared. I decided that I would tape record the oral testing and then write out transcripts of what each student said in order to analyze their grammar usage. To prepare for the recording sessions, I connected a microphone to a tape recorder in order to get the best quality recording possible. Other plans I had for data collection included students’ reflections for various lessons, my own analysis of each instructional day, and the use of my lesson plans.

It was evident before I began the testing process that there would be some constraints to receiving accurate data. First of all, I was aware that the five class representatives would know what grammar point I was testing them on and that the type of oral test I was administering did not include free conversations. Therefore, I would not be testing them on their ability to use the grammar in everyday usage, but rather in controlled settings. Secondly, I knew that the results from the five class representatives were not necessarily indicative of the scores from the entire class. In fact, since these five students knew they were being closely analyzed, I realized they would likely study the grammar extra diligently, thereby making the results inconclusive. During the “reflection” stage of this paper, I will comment on how I could have restructured this project to ensure more accurate results.

**The Documentation Tools:**

Test results and researcher journal were the documentation tool.

**The Results of the Intervention:**

I taught the students how to use adjectives as comparatives, superlatives and equatives on March 2, 3, 4 and 8. Due to the nature of the program, only four students out of 25 to 30 students attended all of these classes. Each class period was three hours long, but I rarely taught grammar during the full class period, and some students could not stay for the entire class. I gave the whole class a written pre-test on March 2, a written post-test on March 8, and a second
written post-test on April 14. Unfortunately, many of the students were not present for all three days of testing. In order to obtain data about the oral competency of the class, I chose six students from a variety of levels and countries to represent the class. These six students signed a consent form which freed me to use their testing results for this paper. Unfortunately, after the first post-test, one of the six class representatives terminated her participation in the project. I gave the remaining five participants an oral pre-test, an oral post-test and a second oral post-test around the same time that I administered the three written tests (see appendix for the oral testing grading sheet).

These five class representatives come from a variety of backgrounds and have different goals. Participant A is a 43 year old student who studied English in her home country of South Korea for 10 years, and in the U.S. for 1 1/2 years. “A” wants to learn as much English as possible before returning to South Korea in the indefinite future. Participant B is a 31 year old Vietnamese student who studied English in her country for six years before continuing her English studies in the U.S. 1 1/2 years ago. “B’s” goal is to get her GED, go to a vocational school or college, and find a job in an office. Participant C, from the Ukraine, is a 41 year old student who arrived in the U.S. three years ago. “C” studied English for five years in his home country and for 1 1/2 years in the U.S. The places “C” uses his English are in the store, at work, and at a friend’s house.

Participant D terminated her involvement in the project. Participant E, from Puerto Rico, is a 19 year old student who studied English for 12 years in his home country. “E” has only lived in the U.S. for the past four months. Although “Es” goal is to speak without problems, he does not feel pressured to learn the language quickly. Participant F, 47, studied English in her home country of Colombia for a year before moving to the U.S. 24 years ago. “F” has studied English in the U.S. for five years. To become a secretary or a nurse’s aide is the goal of “F.”

There were a number of constraints to giving the oral test to these five individuals. First of all, it was difficult to find a space available to administer the oral test. Frequently, all of the rooms were utilized during class time, and after class many of these participants had to leave. I had to find ways to schedule students into slots when rooms were available. Secondly, it was difficult to teach class while at the same time making sure the participants were successfully completing the oral testing. Thirdly, the microphone I was using for oral testing mysteriously disappeared making the recordings difficult to hear, especially when a class was being taught in the same room as the testing. Fourthly, since I
was sometimes helping a student with the oral testing while the rest of the class was working on the written exam, I couldn’t always be with the class while they were testing. It appeared a few students shared answers, although I asked them not to, thereby skewing the results.

I asked the five participants to attend class as much as possible during the grammar teaching: Participants E and A are the only ones who missed a class. As with all my units on grammar, I taught the structures within the framework of a theme and a topic. The theme was “culture” and the topic was “The Amish.” The following is a brief synopsis and the response of students and/or myself to various lessons that I taught during this unit.

On Tuesday, March 2, the main grammar activity revolved around writing. The students imagined they were going to host an Amish person at their house for supper, but they wanted to prepare him/her for all the differences between the host and guest community by writing a letter. Naturally, this activity utilized a lot of comparative and superlative adjectives. After class, I journaled about this lesson: “A lot of these activities would fall under the product or skill categories. We didn’t do any process activities since level four didn’t seem ready for process learning. (My level four class is joined by level five on Tuesdays and Thursdays). We studied the Amish all of last week, and therefore, this topic was very familiar to them. When teaching grammar, it is helpful not to introduce new vocabulary so that students can focus solely on the grammar.”

On Wednesday, March 3, I took the students through three steps; grammar as product, skill and process. I went through the comparative and superlative steps again using Tuesday’s list of adjectives from the writing activity. In my journal, I wrote, “This seemed to be immensely helpful for the students who hadn’t grasped the concept before.” With this grammar as product activity completed, we continued with a grammar as skill activity. The students wrote sentences comparing specific topics which I chose within the framework of the Amish community and the students’ community. After class, I journaled, “It turned into a game since students only got a point if no one else in the class chose the same sentence.” Next, we moved into process learning. Without preparation, students had to compare U.S. culture with their own culture. In relation to Tuesday and Wednesday’s classes, one student wrote, “I’m feeling very good about the different activities in the class, because is important to talk and practice the new words.”

After class on Thursday, March 4, I journaled, “I think I screwed up.” This
particular Thursday was a snowy day, and only half the class came, but I continued with the lesson since I needed the expertise of the level five students to help the level four students complete the task. Using about 20 pictures about the Amish community, I had written equative sentences, half of which were grammatically incorrect. I asked the students to work in groups to decide which sentences were correct, restructure the incorrect sentences, and make a list of guidelines for how to use equatives correctly. The level five students seemed to benefit from the challenge of the activity, but I felt bad for the level four students. I journaled, “For level four, it was either a negative and confusing and time consuming task, or else it did benefit them somewhat in the sense that it gave them some foundational rules.” One of the level four students wrote, “I’d like admit, basically worked students level five. What about me?” Since I wanted the level five students to take the post-test, I gave the test to the whole class, but then surprised the level four students with a re-test on Monday.

Monday’s class went much better than Thursday’s class. The students started with a worksheet in which they practiced comparatives and equatives. I then gave them a word scramble sheet using equatives which related to pictures of the Amish. I later journaled, “Both of these activities went very well and I couldn’t have been happier with the results. Unfortunately we didn’t have time to practice grammar as process, and therefore I wonder how much of today’s lesson students will retain. It has become painfully clear that grammar instruction takes lots and lots of time.”

With the week of grammar teaching, testing, and student and personal journaling completed, I put my energy into compiling the data and administering the second oral post-test. The results were not astounding, and yet within the data, I discovered fascinating bits of information which I never expected to find.

Both the data from the written tests, which I gave to the whole class, and the oral tests, which I gave to the five participants, are charted on the attachment (see next page). The first chart shows the results of the oral testing with the five participants. Only participant A did not make any progress between the pre-test and the post-test. “A’s” scores were high to begin with, partially because her grammar is excellent, but also because she received grammar instruction on the same topic from another teacher immediately before the pre-test. Participant B took the testing very seriously. “B” spent extra time outside of the class studying the grammar, and as a result, her scores more than doubled. Participant C made modest gains in spite of the fact that he seemed somewhat depressed throughout the testing period. Participant E was more focused on work than on
class, and yet he made modest gains. Participant F surprised me the most. “F” has lived in the U.S. for 24 years, and much of her grammar has fossilized. However, she more than doubled her oral scores.

PAARN Project Attachment

| Oral Testing with Participants A. B. C. E. and F |
| A    | B    | C    | E    | F    |
| Pre-Test | 27  | 11  | 13  | 21  | 7  |
| Post-Test | 27  | 26  | 17  | 26  | 16 |
| 2nd Post Test | 25  | 23  | 16  | 26  | 14 |

*The highest score possible is 34.

| Written Testing with Participants A. B. C. E. and F |
| A    | B    | C    | E    | F    |
| Pre-Test | 27  | 19  | 19  | 29  | 5  |
| Post-Test | 29  | 14  | 24  | ?   | 15 |
| 2nd Post-Test | 26  | 27  | 28  | 29  | 8  |

*The highest score possible (including extra credit) is 31.

| Written Testing for the Whole Class Including Participants A. B. C. E. and F |
| Pre-Test | First Post-Test | Second Test |
| Post-Test | 21.21 | 22.36 |
| Average score for students who took the pre-test and the first post-test. |
| Average score for students who took the pre-test and the second post-test. |
| Average score for students who took all three tests. |

*The average scores for the students who took all three tests are also included
in either column one or column two. The highest score possible (including extra credit) is 31.

The results of the written tests among the five participants are shown on the second graph. Only two participants showed gains on both of the post-tests. However, all but one of the participants made improvements on at least one of the post-tests. The last chart shows the results for the written testing for the full class. The least amount of gains occurred between those who took the pre-test and the first post-test. This is because one student dropped from a 17 on the pre-test to a three on the post-test since he got confused during Thursday’s frustrating lesson on equatives.

There was an unanticipated result from this study. At times, the students’ written or oral work made it apparent that although they had not mastered the new form, they were reshuffling their internal grammatical structures. For example, participant F did not even attempt to use the superlative in her oral pre-test. However, in her second oral post-test, “F” said, “tallest than,” and “olderest than.” Another example of grammatical restructuring comes from the oral testing of participant C. In the pre-testing, this is his only attempt at an equative: “Two cans of milk the same. However, in the second post-test, “C” said, “The cardinal is as not nearly as tall as man in suit.” One more example of this grammatical shuffling is taken from a class member’s written testing. In the pre-test, he did not use descriptive adverbs such as “almost, not quite, exactly, not, and just about” with the form “as + adj + as.” However, in the first post-test, he wrote sentences such as, “Sakina’s weight as nearly as Khoa weight” and “Khoa is not as the others age.” All three of these examples indicate that students were experimenting with the new grammatical structures, even if they were not always used correctly.

It is clear that although the students were not always able to produce an error free sentence, their grammar usage had been changed as a result of the teaching intervention. Ellis (1997) writes about this phenomenon: “Formal instruction results in faster and more successful language learning and yet learners often fail to learn what they have been taught. This can be explained by positing that formal instruction contributes primarily to explicit knowledge which can facilitate later development of implicit knowledge. In other words, it will often have a delayed rather than an immediate effect” (p. 131). It could be that at a later time, certain constructs related to this unit on comparatives, superlatives and equatives will make more sense in the minds of the students than they do
now.

From a teacher’s perspective, I am pleased that most of the students made gains between the oral and written pre and post testing. A bonus to this is that many of the students demonstrated that their internal grammar system had been shaken up, and they were attempting to re-formulate their grammatical diagram. Because of these factors, I feel satisfied with the results.

However, in retrospect, it is clear that this project could have been even more successful if I had made some changes in my teaching patterns and in the research project itself. First of all, since the students knew that I would be administering tests, some of them spent extra time studying at home. This creates the question of whether the gains were natural or non-typical. Secondly, none of the oral testing included activities in which the students were unaware that they were being graded. Dr. Aneta Pavlenko, my “Teaching the New Grammars” professor at Temple University, made a suggestion through E-mail near the beginning of my research: “Either you or another teacher could tape-record the students talking about a subject that would be familiar and typical enough that would dull their suspicions that you are trying to elicit specific forms but at the same time would be targeted at eliciting these forms.” Unfortunately, I did not have time to implement this method of testing before I had begun teaching the unit on grammar for this project.

Thirdly, waiting a month and a half between the pre-test and the post-test was not enough time. There have been studies which show that the immediate gains students made after receiving instruction dropped to approximately half after six months (Lightbown, Spada and Wallace, 1980). Therefore, the students in my study may not be able to maintain their gains in the long run. Fourthly, I picked a difficult and confusing topic to teach. Using adjectives as comparatives, superlatives and equatives is no easy task. Since I taught all three forms within a week, some students got the various forms confused. Along with this, I did not give the students enough time to freely practice the forms. It was clear that the students needed more time to internalize these structures.

As a result of both the successes and failures of this project, I have learned a lot about the nature of research and about teaching grammar. It has been a valuable experience both for myself and for the five participants who received their taped transcripts in written form, and who had the opportunity to observe their own language learning progress.
Reflections on the Intervention:

With the results of the PA-ARN project in mind, it is now possible to discuss the problem statement: Will one week of teaching a specific grammatical point to five adult ESL class representatives in Lancaster city help them to improve their proficiency level to 80 percent of accuracy a month after the intervention? For the oral testing, the answer is clearly no. None of the five students received a score of 80% on any of the oral tests. However, on the written tests, all of the five students except participant F received a score of 80% or above on the second post-test. Interestingly, the base line I had chosen as an average for these five students was 20%. In other words, I expected the students to increase their scores by 60% between the pre-test and the second post-test. This was an extremely optimistic prediction. Overall, the students made modest increases relevant to their pre-test scores.

I would consider participating in a related PA-ARN project at some point in the future. If I did so, I would likely approach the research with some variations. First of all, I would reduce the number of participants in my research. Rather than testing the full class plus five class representatives, I would likely choose three students to represent the full class. This would allow me to analyze the results of the study in more detail. It would also enable me to maintain better control over the testing atmosphere in regards to the noise level and the sharing of answers. Secondly, I would not tell the students what grammar point I was testing them on so that they wouldn’t spend an unusual amount of time preparing for the tests. Along with this, I would test the students informally so that they wouldn’t be conscious of the grammar point I was researching. Thirdly, I would look more closely at how the students were restructuring their grammar, paying particular attention to the introduction of new constructs within their language usage. Finally, I would give the pre-test early in January in order to space the pre-test and the second post-test as far from each other as possible.

As stated earlier, during the planning phase of this research project, I wrote, “If this study shows that overt grammar teaching does not in any way improve the ability of students to communicate effectively, then I will either eliminate grammar teaching altogether or take a hard look at the way I teach grammar.” What I did not realize when I wrote this statement was that whether or not the results showed positive gains in the students’ test scores, it was impossible to do this research project without seriously analyzing my teaching. Although I mostly feel positive about the methods I used to teach comparatives,
superlatives and equatives, the lessons could have been strengthened by allowing time for the students to experiment with the language. Interestingly, not only have I thought a lot about my teaching techniques, but also about the pattern of learning among my students. Frequently, throughout the testing, the students said or wrote a grammatically imperfect sentence, but it was evident that they were attempting to implement new forms into their personal grammar grid. This is related to the theory that students will many times enjoy the positive results of formal instruction at a delayed point in time. All of these learnings have proven to be invaluable as I continue in the process of becoming a better teacher and of learning more about the nature of students’ learning patterns.

Reference List
