Teaching Grammar in the ESL/EFL Context: Changing Perspectives and Current Trends

N P Sudharshana

ABSTRACT

Whether or not to teach grammar, and if yes, what are some of the most controversial questions in the ESL/EFL pedagogy? Numerous studies have been conducted and still there is no unanimous answer to this question. Over many years, several approaches have emerged and they can be grouped into three main schools of thought, namely structural approaches, meaning-focused approaches, and form-focused approaches. This paper reviews these three main schools of thought in grammar teaching, with specific reference to teaching adults in ESL contexts. The paper also includes relevant examples, wherever necessary, to elaborate on the methods and techniques. Our aim here is not to recommend any specific methodology as the best way to teach grammar, but to make practising teachers aware of the options available. We believe that the teacher is the best judge to choose from the array of options, depending on the learners' needs.

Keywords: Grammar Teaching, Structural Approaches, Meaning Focus, Form Focus

Introduction

No other topic in the ESL/EFL pedagogy has probably received as much attention as grammar teaching. This field has witnessed several debates and multitudinous research studies, and is still an active research area. Over the years, researchers have attempted to answer questions such as whether or not to teach grammar, and if grammar has to be taught what the best method was for teaching it. Obviously, there has been no unanimous answer to these questions; along with developments in allied areas, such as linguistic theories, first and second language acquisition research, philosophy of language, and psychological theories of learning, the answers have swung from one end of the spectrum to the other. In this paper, we will look at three main schools of thought, viz., structural approaches, meaning-focused approaches, and form-focused approaches, on teaching grammar and discuss the current trends. Note that these three schools of thought are not homogenous; they contain several methods and techniques that share some common principles, and therefore, are brought under an umbrella term. The aim of this paper is to present a detailed review of methods and approaches to grammar teaching and discuss some challenges lying ahead for teachers regarding effective grammar teaching in the Indian context, particularly with reference to adult learners.

We begin with the disambiguating key terms in the field of grammar teaching in Section 1. In the three subsequent sections (Sections 2-4), we discuss each of the three main schools of thought, detailing theoretical underpinnings, pedagogic practices and criticisms for each of them. The final section focuses on some

challenges lying ahead for teachers in the Indian context.

1. Defining key terms

Before we move on to discuss the different perspectives on grammar in detail, in this section we will analyse key terms and clarify in what sense each of these have been used in this paper.

1.1 What is 'grammar'?

At the heart of the debate on grammar teaching is the term 'grammar'. However, this term has been subject to numerous interpretations, sometimes in contradictory senses. The term has been used in applied linguistics to refer to linguistic theories on basic structure of language (e.g. universal grammar, cognitive grammar); morpho-syntactic patterns acquired by children and learners in L1 and L2 acquisition contexts (as in research topics such as 'acquisition of early grammar by children'); descriptive and/or prescriptive account of largely morpho-syntactic and lexical patterns of a language developed by applied linguists and teachers (as in 'grammar books'); and a more easily accessible version of definitions and patterns used by teachers in the classroom for teaching-learning purposes (which is known as 'pedagogical grammar'). In some accounts, the term 'grammar' has been applied to all patterns in language, including phonological, pragmatic, and semantic, and not just morpho-syntactic or lexical.

In this regard, we find the interpretation offered by Larsen-Freeman (2009) appropriate for our purposes:

"...grammar is a system of meaningful structures and patterns that are governed by particular pragmatic constraints". (p.521)

An important aspect of the definition given above is that it encompasses three dimensions with respect to morpho-syntactic and lexical patterns – form, meaning, and use, and not just information related to form. The first of these, 'form', actually refers to "how a particular grammar structure is constructed and how it is sequenced with other structures in a sentence or text" (Larsen-Freeman 2001, p.252). In other words, it includes details such as prefixes, suffixes, inflections, phrase and clause structure, and word order. The 'meaning' dimension is what a particular structure or a word means, both in terms of 'lexical' and 'grammatical' dimensions (Larsen-Freeman 2001, p.252). The lexical meaning would be what we see is a typical dictionary, whereas the grammatical meaning would include details of functions of phrases and clauses. The final dimension, 'use', refers to questions such as when a speaker is likely to use this particular structure to encode content and also context-specific variations of that particular structure (Larsen-Freeman 2001, p.252-3).

Let us look at an example to understand these three dimensions. In case of the first conditional (e.g. If it rains, John will carry an umbrella to the office), the form would include obvious details such as combining a dependent and an independent clause, use of present tense in the dependent clause and a modal verb in the independent clause, and how this structure differs from the other two conditionals. Usually, these details are found in all grammar books. In addition, we also need to emphasise on what this means – this conditional is used to talk about hypothetical situations that are probable in the near future. Regarding its use, one would use this when talking about probabilities and

possibilities in the near future from the current communicative context. Variations include use of different modal verbs, though the modal 'will' is the most common one.

1.2 Three main schools of thought on grammar teaching

At the outset, we need to note that the three main schools of thought on teaching grammar have been referred to by different terms. In this paper we adopt the terms 'structural approaches', 'meaning-focused approaches', and 'form-focused approaches', respectively to refer to these three schools of thought. The first school of thought has been referred to as 'synthetic approaches' (since they present patterns individually and learners are expected to put them together), or 'focus on formS' (with a capital 'S') (e.g. Long, 2015) since here the focus is on discrete elements, and structural approaches (the underlying philosophy of language being largely structural). The second school of thought that emerged as a reaction to the first one is known as 'analytic approaches' (since they present whole language before learners who are expected to infer rules from the data), or 'input based approaches' since they overemphasise the importance of providing exposure to learners. This school of thought is also known as 'focus on meaning' or 'meaning-focused approaches' since they emphasise on meaning making rather than on forms. The third school of thought on teaching grammar is known as 'focus on form' (e.g. Long, 2015) (which is seen in contrast to 'focus on formS approaches'), and 'form- and meaning-focused approaches' or simply 'form-focused approaches', since these aim to focus on both form and meaning. When TBLT emerged as a popular teaching methodology, the second school of thought came to be known as 'strong communicative/task-based approaches' and the third one as 'weak communicative/task-based approaches'.

Now that we have operationalised key terms for our purposes, in the next three sections we look at the three main schools of thought on grammar teaching. Under each of them, we present details of theoretical underpinnings and pedagogic practices with relevant examples. We also discuss shortcomings of each of these.

2. Structural approaches

The earliest approaches to grammar teaching could be termed 'structural approaches' and these include grammar translation, audio-lingual method, structural-oral-situational method and some of the alternative methods such as Total physical response and Silent way.

2.1 Theoretical underpinnings

Structural approaches to teaching grammar are governed by structural theory of language. According to structural theory, language is a system of grammatical patterns and structures that are organised pyramidically. This applies to all aspects of language, such as phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Language is made up of small building blocks which are combined using specific rules to make larger chunks, which in turn can be combined to produce still larger components. For instance, sounds come together to produce words, which in turn lead to phrases, clauses, sentences, and larger discourses. Accordingly, learning a language meant mastering these building blocks and the rules that help combine these blocks (Richards & Rogers 2014, pp.62-3). Further, learning was assumed to be linear, mastering one structure at a

time and moving onto a higher and more complex one. In structural theory of language, speech was regarded primary and mastering structures was assumed to lead to speaking ability.

Structural approaches to grammar teaching combine structural theory of language with behaviourist theory of learning (Skinner 1957). Skinner, in his classic work *Verbal Behaviour*, (1957), argues that learning a language is just like acquiring any other habit; it involves three main things – stimulus, response, and reinforcement. 'Stimulus' refers to an external object (in case of language learning 'a particular rule/structure presented to learners') that elicits a specific behaviour (as in repetition from learners). If that behaviour is desirable, it is followed by positive reinforcement (as in teacher appreciating learners) or if it is undesirable, negative reinforcement follows (as in teacher correcting the learners' errors). Positive reinforcement is supposed to encourage the repetition of similar behaviour in future, whereas negative reinforcement leads to suppression of the undesirable behaviour.

2.2 Pedagogic practices

How is grammar taught in structural approaches? We have seen in the previous section that these approaches are based on structural theory of language and behaviourist theory of learning. These translated into the 'Presentation – Practice – Production' or 'PPP' model in the classroom. A sample description of a PPP class is given in Table 1.

Table 1: A Sample PPP Lesson (The Indian Express of 13 April 1960, as cited in Prabhu 1987, p.116)

Repetition
'This is a pencil. . . . This is a book. . . . This is a flower. This is a red pencil. . . . This is a red book. . . . This is a red flower. The pencil is on the book. The red pencil is on the book.'
The teacher, holding aloft one by one the pencil, books, and flowers of various colours, went on repeating each sentence, and the little girls in the class repeated after him. Within a few minutes, some of them were even able to repeat the sentences, without the help of the teacher.

According to Ellis (1988, p.21 as cited in Evans 1999, p.2), the purpose of the presentation stage is to "help the learner acquire new linguistic knowledge or to restructure knowledge that has been wrongly represented". At this stage, the teacher will present new grammatical or lexical elements explaining rules and exceptions, if any. Presentation is mainly through speech, using discrete sentences. It is assumed that learners will acquire the features presented, building on previously learnt structures. Later, in the second stage, learners practice the target element in discrete tasks, such as substitution tables (see Table 2 for an example), focussing on accuracy. The final production stage may involve a relatively less controlled production in communicative activities (Skehan 1998, p.93).

Table 2: An Example of Substitution Table (Prabhu 1987, p.120)

The	blue yellow red green white	line stick piece of	ribbon string cloth	is	very long very short

2.3 Criticism

The structural approaches were very popular and could be seen in various language teaching methods and approaches, such as the audio-lingual method and structural-oral-situational method, and is popular in some contexts even now. Its popularity seems to stem from the aspect that the structural approaches appear very scientific and systematic – it is relatively easier to divide language into discernible units and structure lessons based on them. Similarly, material developers and practicing teachers find it easier to design units and activities based on the linear organisation of linguistic units. Structural approaches are popular in assessment contexts as well, since it is easier to construct discrete exercises that are 'objective' and 'machine gradeable'.

However, in the late 1970s, applied linguists, and teachers and teacher educators began to identify shortcomings of structural approaches. One of the major drawbacks was the learners' inability to use the target language in every day communicative contexts. Prabhu's (1987) 'Bangalore Project' was a direct reaction to the failures of structural-oral-situational (SOS) method that was very popular in India at that time. Doing a detailed analysis of the method, Prabhu (1987) notes that learners who were taught using the SOS method were "unable to use (i.e. deploy) the language when necessary outside the classroom" or achieve "an acceptable level of situational appropriacy in their language use" (p.16) though they could 'produce' language in classroom contexts. Though the SOS method focused heavily on grammatical accuracy, learners did not achieve "an acceptable level of grammatical accuracy in their language use outside the classroom" (p.16).

In addition, structural approaches are based on the assumption that "what you teach, when you teach it, is what they learn" (Long & Robinson 1998, p.17). Several researchers in L1 and L2 acquisition note that these basic tenets of structural approaches to grammar teaching do not hold good. Long (2015), for instance, notes several issues. First, structural approaches present linguistic elements one by one in a linear fashion. However, structures do not work in isolation, and are often closely connected. For instance, to understand spatial uses of the preposition *in*, one also needs to understand the uses of *on* or *at*, since they all occur in similar contexts. Second, structural approaches assume that when teachers present an element, learners will add it to their existing L2 system. However,

L2 acquisition has very rarely been found to progress in such a neat and linear fashion. Several studies have shown that L2 acquisition moves in a zigzag fashion. One often observes backsliding, occasional U-shaped behaviour, over- and under-generalisation of target forms, and significant variation from context to context (Long 2015, p.22-3). Third, morpheme order acquisition studies (e.g. Dulay & Burt 1974) and other studies have showed that L2 learners go through universal stages of development irrespective of varying L1 background or instructional methods. In other words, the acquisition of grammatical elements does not reflect the order in which they were taught. In fact, some studies have claimed that teaching is effective only when learners are developmentally ready (Pienemann 1984).

3. Meaning-focused approaches

Dissatisfaction with structural approaches led to the emergence of communicative approaches to language teaching (CLT). At the same time, changes in the world outside and developments in applied linguistics and learning theories in psychology necessitated a new approach to teaching grammar in particular, and language teaching, in general.

3.1 Theoretical underpinnings

One of the biggest blows to the structural approaches and behaviourist theory came when Chomsky (1959) wrote a scathing review of Skinner's *Verbal Behaviour*. Chomsky notes that human language is 'extremely complex' and 'abstract' and cannot be equated with acquiring other habits. In addition, language acquisition by children happens "in an astonishingly short time, to a large extent independently of intelligence, and in a comparable way by all children". Further, he downplays the role of external input and argues that "the fact that all normal children acquire essentially comparable grammars of great complexity with remarkable rapidity suggests that human beings are somehow specially designed to do this". Chomsky's Universal Grammar theory (UG Theory) led to other significant developments in applied linguistics. Chomsky proposed 'linguistic competence' (1965), the ability of an ideal native speaker to know "language perfectly", which is unaffected by "such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors" (p.3). This focuses exclusively on grammar in ideal conditions and separates 'performance'. In contrast, Hymes proposed 'communicative competence' that "includes not only knowledge of language forms but also knowledge of form-function relationships learned from the embeddedness of all language use in social life" (Cazden 2011, p.366-7). Communicative approaches draw on the philosophy of another sociolinguist, Halliday. He (1978 as cited in Thwaite 2019, p.43) emphasises on the social and cultural aspects of learning a language, rather than the cognitive aspects alone.

At around the same time, Wilkins (1972 cited in Richards & Rogers 2014, p.85) developed one of the earliest communicative syllabuses for language teaching. He analysed the communicative meanings that a language learner needs to understand and express, and divided them into two categories: notions or 'concepts' and 'functions'. The former includes conceptual domains such as time, location, and so on, whereas the latter includes language functions such as requesting, apologising, and so on. These two were combined to develop units and

activities. For instance, within the domain of 'time' one can focus on functions such as asking for information (e.g. What time is it now?), apologising for being late (e.g. I am late by 10 minutes, sorry!), or requesting an appointment (e.g. I would like to consult Dr John. Can you give me tomorrow's appointment?). As is evident from these examples, here the focus is on real-life communication rather than grammatical structures. Grammar focus, nevertheless, is ensured implicitly within these conceptual domains while performing several functions.

Another major influence of the time was Krashen's (1982) theories on second language acquisition. Krashen argues that 'acquisition', a subconscious process, is different from 'learning', a more conscious and explicit learning of grammatical rules. According to him, it is 'acquisition' that develops communicative competence and 'learning' is useful only for the purposes of 'monitoring'. How do L2 learners 'acquire' language? Krashen, in his now famous notion, argues that learners need to be exposed to 'comprehensible input' (i+1), and when their affective filter is low (learning environment is free of anxiety and learners have high self-esteem), that input is processed by learners to build their L2 system. He also proposes that learners go though 'a natural order of acquisition' and the classroom instruction has to respect this 'learner internal syllabus'.

Prabhu (1987) also emphasises on the 'subconscious' aspect of learning an L2 and opposes explicit and linear teaching of grammatical structures. He notes that "if the desired form of knowledge was such that it could *operate* subconsciously, it was best for it to *develop* subconsciously as well" (p.15 emphasis in original). He states that classroom contexts need to create opportunities for "an intense preoccupation with the meaning of language samples – i.e., an effort to make sense of the language encountered, or to get meaning across in language adequately forgiven, and immediate, purposes" (p.15). When learners are exposed to holistic samples of language, the abstract rules subconsciously.

3.2 Pedagogic practices

As noted above, meaning-focused approaches emphasise on the subconscious process of language acquisition and learners' engagement with holistic samples of language. Under meaning-focused approaches, two methodologies, viz., the natural approach (Krashen & Terrel 1983) and the procedural approach (Prabhu 1987), deserve a more detailed examination.

The natural approach was proposed by Krashen & Terrel (1983). This is based on Krashen's hypotheses on second language acquisition that are discussed in the previous section. In this approach, language is viewed as a means of communication, and therefore, "acquisition can take place only when people understand messages in the target language" (Krashen & Terrel 1983, p.19). Richards & Rogers (2014, ch. 14) note that the five hypotheses Krashen proposed (acquisition-learning, natural order, monitor, affective filter, and comprehensible input) govern pedagogic practices in the natural approach: (i) teachers need to provide as much comprehensible input as possible through reality, such as pictures, schedules, brochures, advertisements, maps, books, games, and through extensive reading; (ii) there is more focus on 'input' rather than 'practice' and speech

is allowed to 'emerge naturally' after a 'silent period'; (iii) focus is on comprehending vocabulary with the help of visual clues, physical actions, or games, and not on structures; and (iv) teacher should create optimum emotional conditions in the classroom by ensuring interesting input and a stress-free environment.

Prabhu's (1987) procedural approach is built around meaning-focused activities in which "learners are occupied with understanding, extending (e.g. through reasoning), or conveying meaning, and cope with language forms as demanded by that process" (p.28). Since the primary focus is on meaning, any attention to forms is purely incidental. Sample tasks from his Bangalore project are given in Table 3.

Table 3

Sheets of paper containing the following timetable and the questions below it are handed out. The teacher asks a few questions orally, based on an anticipation of learners' difficulties (for example, 'Is this a day train or a night train?' in view of the difference from the pre-task timetable, and 'For how long does the train stop at Jolarpettai?' in view of students' observed difficulty in calculating time across the hour mark) and then leaves the class to do the task.

Madras Arakkonam Katpadi Jolarpettai Kolar Bangalore
Bangalore Dep. 2140 Arr. 2250 Arr. 0005 Arr. 0155 Arr. 0340 Arr. 0550
Mail Dep. 2305 Dep. 0015 Dep. 0210 Dep. 0350
1 When does the Bangalore Mail leave Madras?
2 When does it arrive in Bangalore?
3 For how long does it stop at Arakkonam?
4 At what time does it reach Katpadi?
5 At what time does it leave Jolarpettai?
6 How long does it take to go from Madras to Arakkonam?
7 How long does it take to go from Kolar to Bangalore?

(Prabhu 1987, p.33)

Prabhu (1987) identifies three kinds of meaning-focused tasks, viz., information gap, reasoning gap, and opinion gap tasks. An information-gap activity involves "a transfer of given information from one person to another – or from one form to another, or from one place to another" (p.46). For instance, Learner A has half the picture while Learner B has the other half – together they construct the whole. A reasoning-gap activity involves "deriving some new information from given information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns" (p.46). For instance, learners plan a travel itinerary for a business traveller based on flight schedules. The last one, an opinion-gap activity involves "identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation" (p.47). For instance, learners express their views on the topic – "Balancing economic growth and environmental conservation".

3.3 Criticism

The meaning-focused approaches emerged as a reaction to structural approaches and seemed to address issues that the structural approaches could not. However, with advances in L1 and L2 acquisition research and experiences from implementing meaning-focused approaches, several drawbacks have been identified. The critics argue that pure meaning focus does not help; instead, some amount of form focus is necessary for instructed L2 acquisition contexts, particularly with adult learners.

Meaning-focused approaches insist that L2 learning is 'incidental' or 'subconscious'. However, several studies have shown that L2 learning by adults is usually less successful and too slow-paced. In most cases, adults are able to acquire only a basic variety of L2 in pure meaning-focused classroom contexts. Several explanations – such as maturational constraints on adults, unavailability of UG to adults, closure of sensitive periods for adults – have been proposed to account for this phenomenon (see Gass & Selinker 2008 and Long 2015 for more details).

Extensive studies of French immersion programmes in Canada have shown that learners do not achieve high levels of accuracy, even though they were provided with ample input and opportunities for meaningful practice (Harley & Swain, 1984; Lapkin et al., 1991; and Swain, 1985 as cited in Nassaji & Fotos 2011, p.9). This suggests that some type of focus on grammatical forms is necessary.

Long (1996, 2015) notes that some aspects of L2 systems are difficult to acquire only on the basis of prolonged exposure. Such 'fragile features' are learned late or never learned. This is because such features (e.g. third person singular '-s/-es' suffix) tend to be infrequent, irregular, non-salient, semantically empty, communicatively redundant, or have a complex form – meaning mappings (Long 2015, p.43). In some cases, the complex relationship with learners' L1 can also have an impact. White (1987, 1989 cited in Long 1996, p.424) and others, for instance, argue that when learners assume that a particular rule applies to L2 on the basis of similar patterns in their L1, they tend to over-generalise, and in such cases, without explicit form focus learners may never realise their mistake.

4. Form-focused approaches

Criticism mentioned in the previous section led to the emergence of form-focused approaches. Long (1996, 2015) has been one of the foremost exponents of this approach. Originally, 'form focus' included an implicit, less intrusive, and spontaneous way of emphasising a form during negotiation of meaning (see Long & Robinson 1998). In the last couple of decades, several researchers have proposed various techniques to bring in focus on form, without lapsing into structural approaches.

4.1 Theoretical underpinnings

Long (1983) noted that instruction that draws learners' attention to linguistic forms aids in L2 acquisition. However, this is different from techniques used in structural approaches. Instead of pre-planned and explicit teaching of forms in a linear fashion, Long advocates a reactive approach – the form focus has to be brought into interactional settings when learner-learner or learner-teacher engage in negotiation for meaning. Long (1996) notes, "negotiation for meaning, and especially negotiation work that

triggers interactional adjustments by the NS or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways" (pp. 451-452). This has come to be known as the 'interaction hypothesis'. Long (1980 as cited in Gass & Selinker 2008, p.319) observes that conversations between the native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) often have confirmation checks (e.g. Is this what you mean?), comprehension checks (e.g. Do you understand? Do you follow me?), and clarification requests (e.g. What? Huh?). These result in reformulations, repetitions, prompts, or paraphrases by NSs, and direct the attention of NNSs to specific linguistic forms. Let us look at the following example.

NS: Do you like California?

NNS: Huh?

NS: Do you like Los Angeles?

NNS: Uhm...

NS: Do you like California?

NNS: Yeah, I like it.

(Long 1983, p.180 as cited in Gass & Selinker 2008, p.320)

As we can see, in this conversation, the NS asks a question but the NNS does not follow it. There is a clarification request from the NNS that results in paraphrasing by the NS – replacing 'California' (state) with 'Los Angeles' (a city that may be more familiar to the NNS). After this, the NNS understands the question and responds. Long (1996) notes that such input modifications "may be facilitative of L2 development, at least for vocabulary, morphology, and language-specific syntax, and essential for learning certain specifiable L1-L2 contrasts" (p.414).

Long (1991, 1996, 2015, Long & Robinson 1998) draws on the 'noticing hypothesis' by Schmidt (see e.g. Schmidt 1990, 2001). If we recall, Krashen (1982) emphasises comprehensible input for successful L2 acquisition. When learners have a low affective filter and are provided with comprehensible input, that input becomes 'intake' and builds the L2 system. Schmidt argues for the pivotal role of 'attention' in successful L2 acquisition. In fact, not every part of input becomes intake; "intake is that part of the input that the learner notices" (Schimdt 1990, p.139). In other words, learners need to 'notice' ('detection plus rehearsal in short term memory' according to Robinson 1995 as cited in Schmidt 2001, p.5) linguistic forms in the input and mismatches between their own output and the input to progress in L2 acquisition. Learners, particularly at the beginning levels, cannot focus on both meaning and form at the same time due to processing constraints. When they pay 'attention' to forms, it leads to registering in memory and may work in tandem with metacognitive strategies (O'Malley & Chamot 1990). VanPatten's input processing theory (e.g. VanPatten 1996, VanPatten & Cadierno 1993) also emphasises 'focused practice' at the level of input and not at the level of output (as in structural approaches).

Recall here that Prabhu's (1987) project was one of the first attempts at designing and implementing task-based language teaching (TBLT). Though Prabhu's tasks were exclusively meaning-focused, later conceptualisations of TBLT have emphasised form focus in communicative contexts (e.g. Long 1998, Ellis

2003). We will discuss form focused tasks in the next section.

Summing up, advances in psycholinguistics and studies in classroom L2 acquisition showed that pure meaning focus may not result in desirable levels of success in adult L2 acquisition informal contexts. This led researchers to propose that some amount of form focus is necessary, but without compromising on meaning focus. In the next section, we will discuss various techniques that have been proposed to achieve form- and meaning-focus in the L2 classroom.

4.2 Pedagogic practices

Nassaji & Fotos (2011) note that form focused approaches "while adhering to the principles of communicative language teaching, attempt to maintain a focus on linguistic forms in various ways" (p.13). In this section, we will look at two kinds of form-focused approaches, viz., input-based and output-based. For an extensive discussion on various techniques, see Nassaji & Fotos (2011).

4.2.1 Input-based options

Input-based options, as the name suggests, refer to various classroom procedures and techniques that bring in form-focus at the level of input. This includes processing instructions based on VanPatten's model (e.g. VanPatten & Cadierno 1993), input enhancement (e.g. Smith 1991), interactional strategies (e.g. Long 1996), and interpretation tasks (e.g. Ellis 2003).

The processing instruction model relies on "a series of input-processing activities that aim to help learners create form-meaning connections as they process grammar for meaning" (Nassaji & Fotos 2011, p.24). These input processing activities may be of two kinds: referential and affective (VanPatten, 1996 cited in Nassaji & Fotos 2011, p.24). Referential activities are those activities "during which the content focus of input sentences is not on the learner but on some other third person(s)" and these have "a right or wrong answer that reveals whether or not the learners have made correct subject and object role assignment" (VanPatten 1996, p.64). The following is an example activity.

Match each sentence you hear with one of the statements below.

1) a. A man is calling me.

b. I am calling a man.

2) a. My parents visit me.

b. I visit my parents

(Adapted from VanPatten & Cadierno 1993 as cited in VanPatten 1996, p.65)

Affective activities do not have a right or wrong answer; here learners "provide indications of their opinions, beliefs, feelings, and personal circumstances" in the form of "agreement-disagreement, true for me – not true for me, checkboxes in surveys" (VanPatten 1996, p.64). The following is an example.

What are the things that relatives do to us? They can bother us, visit us, criticise us, love us, and so on.

1. Read each statement and select the ones that you think are typical.

2. How do you interact with your parents? Indicate whether or not each statement applies to you?

(Adapted from VanPatten & Cadierno 1993 as

cited in VanPatten 1996, p.66)

VanPatten (1996) suggests that teachers need to choose one linguistic form at a time, input strings chosen must be meaningful and require learners to attend to it and respond, bring in both oral and written inputs, and start with individual sentences to ease the processing burden on learners, and slowly move to connected discourses (e.g. conversations, monologues, articles).

As we noted earlier, 'noticing' plays an important role in the acquisition of forms in L2. How does one ensure that learners 'notice' a specific feature in the input? One of the techniques suggested is **textual enhancement**. Nassaji & Fotos (2011) note that in naturalistic settings, where the primary focus is on meaning, not all linguistic features in the input are equally noticeable. They may be communicatively redundant or perceptually non-salient. In such cases, the teacher can use various techniques to make specific features more salient, thereby increasing probabilities of 'noticing'. Smith (1991) argues that "colouring instances of particular morphological inflexions green, or embedding instances of a particular grammatical rule or principle in a metalinguistic explanation, as in the giving of rules for using the subjunctive in French, could all be construed as attempts to put 'flags' in the input, that is, to direct the learners' attention to particular properties of the input in the hope that they can use these flags to develop their own internal mental" (p.120). Textual enhancement can be used with both written and oral texts. In written text, the teacher can use markers to highlight, or use boldface/italics or bigger font or a combination of all of these. Oral input can be made more noticeable through changes in intonation, pitch, or repetitions. Another form of input enhancement is **input flooding**. Here, the teacher chooses a text (oral or written) that has numerous examples of the target element. These examples could also be inserted by the teacher without compromising the textual integrity. It is assumed that when learners are exposed to such numerous instances, the target element becomes salient and learners' attention is drawn towards the form (see Hernandez 2018 for details).

As we noted earlier, **interactional strategies** refer to various conversational tactics deployed by the NS and NNS during negotiation for meaning. The teacher in the classroom uses various techniques, such as recasts, prompts, clarification requests, repetitions, metalinguistic feedback, and so on, to draw learners' attention to specific linguistic forms. Here are two examples; for details see Gass & Selinker 2008.

Example 1: Recasting (teacher rephrases the learner's erroneous sentence)
NNS : What doctor say?
NS : What is the doctor saying?(Lyster, 1998, p.58 as cited in Gass & Selinker 2008, p.335).

Example 2: Clarification requests leading to pushed output
NNS : And in hand in hand have a bigger glass to see.
NS : It's erring. You mean, something in his hand?
NNS : Like spectacle. For an older person.

NS : Mmmm, sorry I don't follow, it's what?
NNS : In hand have he have has a glass for looking through for make the print bigger to see, to see the print, for magnify.
NS : He has some glasses?
NNS : Magnify glasses he has a magnifying glass.
NS : Oh aha I see a magnifying glass, right that's a good one, ok.

(Gass & Selinker 2008, p.327)

In an **interpretation task** (Ellis 2003 among others), as the name suggests, learners are expected to process the target form and not produce it. Learners may be presented with an oral or a written text for comprehension and may be asked to choose appropriate pictures that represent the meaning, draw lines, or similar other activities that involve no or very little language production. Such tasks help build implicit knowledge of the target elements. A sample interpretation task from Ellis (2003) – on psychological verbs – is given in Table 4.

Table 4: A Sample Interpretation Task

A. Answer the following questions.

1. Do tall people frighten you?
2. Do people who cook impress you?
3. Do smartly dressed people attract you?
4. Do argumentative people annoy you?
5. Are you interested in physically attractive people?
6. Are you bored by self-important people?
7. Are you irritated by fat people?
8. Are you confused by clever people?

B. On the basis of your responses in A, make a list of the qualities whom

1. you like
2. you dislike

(Ellis, 2003, p.160)

4.2.2 Output-based options

The second set of options focuses on learner output. These are basically communicative tasks that bring in form focus and are referred to as 'focused tasks'. Nunan (2004) defines a focused task as "one in which a particular structure is required in order for a task to be completed" (p.94). We discuss various kinds of focused tasks below.

Loschky & Bley-Vroman (1990) propose **structure-based communication tasks**. These are tasks in which "structural accuracy in comprehension and production" are "essential to meaning in the task" and teachers provide

"communicatively oriented feedback on structural accuracy" (p.172). Loschky & Bley-Vroman (1990) argue for 'task naturalness', that is, a task naturally leads to the use and practice of a particular structure. Let us look at an example task. Learners work in pairs – one as a travel agent and the other as a customer. During the role-play, the simple present is most likely to be used (e.g. Your flight leaves New Delhi at 9.10 and arrives in Hyderabad at 13.00). It is possible that this task can be performed without the simple present (e.g. Take a flight from New Delhi at 9.10). However, the simple present is a "particularly natural form to occur in tasks of this sort" (p.173).

Ellis (2003) proposes **consciousness-raising** (CR) tasks. In CR tasks, the focus is on making learners aware of rules underlying the usage. Learners may be given a text (mostly an authentic written text) and are asked to identify occurrences of the target structure. Then learners work in pairs or groups and attempt to hypothesise about the underlying patterns and rules. The teacher sometimes presents learners with additional data that either confirms or disapproves the tentative hypotheses made by learners. A sample CR task from Ellis (2003) – on dative alternation – is given in Table 5.

Table 5: A Sample CR Task

A. What is the difference between verbs like 'give' and 'explain'?
   (1) a. She gave a book to her father. (=grammatical)
       b. She gave her father a book. (=grammatical)
   (2) a. The policeman explained the law to Mary. (=grammatical)
       b. The policeman explained to Mary the law. (=ungrammatical)

B. Indicate whether the following sentences are grammatical or ungrammatical.
   1. They saved Mark a seat.
   2. His father read Kim a story.
   3. She donated the hospital some money.
   4. They suggested Mary a trip.

C. Work out a rule for verbs like 'give' and 'explain'.
   1. List the verbs in B that are like 'give' and those that are like 'explain'.
   2. What is the difference between the verbs in your two lists?

(Adapted from Ellis, 2003, p.164)

Samuda (2001) seeks to build focus on form-meaning relationships into **communicative tasks** themselves. The task would start with a specific area of meaning and then the teacher would direct their attention to specific forms during the class interaction. Let us look at an example. During a task, learners were provided with a set of objects that supposedly belonged to a person. Learners, working in groups, had to make guesses on which object belonged to whom and indicate how sure they were on a three-point scale, viz., 'Less than 50% certain (It's possible)', '90% certain (It's probable)', and '100% certain (It's certain)', and justify their

decisions. As we can see, this starts with a meaning focus – learners have to identify which object belonged to whom. However, the teacher managed to bring in form focus – modal verbs and possibility and probability in particular. In a discussion that followed, the teacher directed learners' attention to these forms, as shown in the following extract.

S1: Habits?

Y: Well, first he smokes.

C: But we think uh 50% we think just 50%.

N: Yes, just maybe. We're not sure.

T: Oh yeah? *Only 50%?* Why's that?

S2: Yes, give proof.

N: Because here (showing matchbox). A matchbox.

T: Hmm, but *you're not certain* if he smokes, huh? (looking at matchbox).

A: Look (opens matchbox). Many matches, so maybe he just keep for a friend, not for him (laughter).

T: Hmm, I guess *it's possible he might smoke*. It's hard to tell just from this.

A: Yeah, not sure.

S2: You have more proof?

(Samuda 2001, p.129, emphasis added)

5. Challenges Ahead

In the previous sections, we have discussed numerous options available for teaching grammar in ESL/EFL contexts. The next question most people would have is – what is the best method to teach grammar to adult ESL learners? Though form focused approaches are the current trend and may appeal to many researchers and teachers, the answer is no method can be judged as 'the best way to teach grammar'. This is because of the dynamic nature of the ESL classroom context. Unlike L1 acquisition, classroom L2 acquisition is influenced by various factors such as personality styles, learning strategies and styles adopted, various affective factors (such as attitude, motivation), teaching-learning beliefs, educational policy, and socio-economic status, along with instructional methods and materials (see Lightbown & Spada 2013 for details). In view of this, many researchers have emphasised the role of the teacher [see e.g. Sudharshana (forthcoming)]. The teacher is the best person to decide which method is best for their class. The teacher can supplement materials and adapt the existing/ prescribed materials to cater to the requirements of learners in the class.

However, a few issues need to be addressed here. Teachers need to be enabled in this direction. There is a need for teacher training programmes to emphasise materials development and materials adaptation. This assumes greater significance in Indian contexts, since our contexts pose several practical challenges such as large class size, restricted access to the Internet, limited infrastructure, and heterogeneous socio-economic and linguistic background conditions.

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N. P. Sudharshana, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Kanpur