4. Noticing: a re-appraisal of its implications for methodology

Abstract

I think the concept of 'noticing' is fundamental to all our principled behaviour in the classroom. First coined by Schmidt (1986), it has been much-explored over the last 18 years. The aim of this article is to outline my own view of how it might work for us. The key assumption, as I said in Article 1 - The Prologue, is that noticing is a phenomenon of learning, not of teaching, and that it works cumulatively, successively, invisibly, until, one day, something is 'learnt'! Our role as teachers is to invite the learner to notice, and, ultimately, that is all we can do. My contention is that the ways we can do it include all the ways ever invented either to present or to activate language in classrooms. In other words, anything goes. Everything has the potential to provide noticing opportunities.

A philosophical enquiry

I want to start with an apparently simple question, which I believe should be the starting point for every professional in the language classroom. This question is: what is really going on here?

I believe that we should each be our own scientist. This means not using somebody else's belief-system to influence what we observe, but rather to use our own perceptions and our own beliefs as that basis. If we don't look for something in particular, we are free to see what's there.

In the philosophy of science, this view would be seen as untenable, because it is illogical to suppose that we can simply 'observe'. Observation implies some kind of filter, even an unconscious one, through which we view people and events, and so we are always using some 'theory' or other to make sense of everything. I don't disagree with this, I simply want teachers to stop following the theories of other people and start following their own.

It was on this basis, using my own value-system, that I started to see language teaching in a different way, and I would urge every colleague to do the same. What I've put down here, therefore, in these articles, is my own, hopefully humble, contribution to the wider debate.

And so what are the basic questions? This is what I have come up with:

- What is really going on in the language learning classroom?
- What is language?
- What is learning?
- How does teaching influence learning?
- Is language grammar a reality?
- If so, what is the relationship between second language grammar and mind?
- Do rules exist?
- If so, what are they like?
- How do students see rules? Is this the same as for teachers?
- What is a rule, and what is the value of a rule?
- Is a rule a starting point or a reference point?
- Do people learn rules?
- If so, how?
- Do people absorb rules?

- If so, how?
- If they know a rule, how do they use it?
- If rules do not exist, what other processes are going on?
- Is lexis, in the form of fixed and semi-fixed expressions, a reality?
- If so, what is the relationship between lexis and mind?
- And what is the relationship between lexis and grammar?
- What is the nature of lexis, in all its forms?
- And if the learning of language is not about lexis or grammar – let's say it's more something to do with neither of these and more a question of process, not yet definable because it is too complex – then what is this process, and what will we need to know about it to make it useful in the classroom?

These questions are only a few. But I would suggest that they are useful. And I would suggest that each of us needs to address them in our observations of our own students.

And so what I want to posit here is a new starting principle. I want to suggest that there is a difference between the analysis of the language classroom by academic linguists and the reality of language learning for students and teachers. This is exemplified by the difference, long accepted, between descriptive grammar and pedagogic grammar. I would suggest that we extend this idea into the realm of practicalities, and to put forward the fundamental notion of 'usefulness'. I think that our starting point, for all classroom observations and all classroom decisions, should be: is this useful for my students?

You might say that this is obvious. And you would be right! But 'usefulness' is not the criterion used by many language planners, Directors of Studies, teacher trainers, and textbook authors. The classic example of this is the much-vaunted 'Corpus' of native speaker English. The 'corpus' has been cited as the only valuable source of language use, because it takes 'actual' data, and uses 'authentic' contexts. But this focus on 'authenticity' may be misplaced, and may lead to teaching language expressions, even at low levels, because they are 'there', rather than because they are useful. (Compare the native-speakery 'that's out of the question', 'can you bear with me', and 'it's a piece of cake' with 'that's not really possible', 'can you wait a few moments' and 'it's quite easy'). And look at Scott Thornbury's valiant attempt to derive deep value from the corpus (2004) – an interesting analysis, but quite useless to both teachers and students of English.

Noticing – an introduction

So, what about noticing? This is the first article in a 'triple-header' which goes together with the following two articles, on Authentic Participation and Good Teaching. In this first article, I want to explore what I think may be the basic learning process in classroom second language learning – noticing – and how I think this process can be best addressed by teachers. In the second article I want to explore the possibilities for a particular methodology – Authentic Participation – which utilises 'noticing' principles and which also combines the ideals of the task-based approach and the benefits of the language-focus approach. In the third article – on Good Teaching – I want to re-appraise the old assumptions about this issue and suggest a new way forward.

Language as 'bits'

Over 150 years now, serious scientific attempts have been made to make sense of what language is about. The most celebrated early language philosopher, de Saussure, established one very important principle: even if the underlying truth of language is that it is a continuous stream of behaviour – like thinking, or playing, or working – even if it is like this . . . it is still useful to divide it up into units! Indeed, he claimed that it is our duty to do so, because if not, we can not make sensible statements about it, we can not analyse it, and we can not teach or learn it as a second language. *So, though language is not in reality made of units, we are obliged to treat it as if it is*. Saussure gave us two valuable notions (i) the idea of the vertically regular particle, which he called 'paradigmatic' (e.g. the –ed' in past simple regulars, and the verb inflections in Spanish, French, etc) (ii) the idea of the 'eme', a unit of any given language which is identifiably different from other 'emes' in that language. So he gave us 'phonemes', i.e. identifiably different sounds. (For example, a light 'l' and a dark 'l' are not different phonemes in English (viz: lad vs fill); and the 'b' sound and the 'v' sound are not different phonemes in Spanish, but they are different in English). He suggested there was something called a 'syntagmeme' – a unit of structure or a string of words with regular components, that was identifiably different from other 'syntagmemes'. (So, for example, 'to have + past participle' and 'need + verb + ing'). Subsequently, others have taken his lead and suggested the notion of the 'sememe' – a unit of meaning identifiably different from other 'sememes'. (So, for example, 'a four-legged flat-topped contraption on which things are eaten or written or done' – i.e. a table – is a sememe identifiably different from 'a four-legged flat-topped contraption with storage cupboards and/or drawers under and on which written work is done' – i.e. a desk.

Given this truth of language analysis, the question then becomes: what do these units look like? Well, over the years, many different claims have been made, and I would like to rehearse some of those models.

1. The classical model: for centuries, Latin and Greek were regarded as the basis for language analysis, and so words, parts of speech, declensions of nouns, and conjugations of verbs, were all seen as the units (i.e. the rules) that had to be taught and learnt before language could be mastered. The rest of the language, the words, were incidental to the central task of mastering the rules.
2. The structuralist model: classical grammar was replaced by structures, very much on Saussurian lines; however, it was different in an important respect – it was considered there was no intrinsic linguistic meaning except that which was defined by the context. Words, in the form of vocabulary, were seen as incidental, and only 'filled' the 'slots' in the structures.
3. The transformational-grammar model: here, Chomsky developed an almost mathematical model, in which he posited that 'meaning' lay deep in our behaviour, in a state he called 'deep structure'. He claimed language was our way of expressing that deep meaning (e.g. 'I angry bicycle here today morning'), and that getting from the deep structure to the surface, or 'expressed', level of language, involved a series of psycho-linguistic 'transformations' (e.g. 'Where on earth is my bicycle, it was here this morning?'). These transformations, he argued, were rule-governed, and language, on the surface as experienced by us, was the product of transformational rule-governed behaviour. He also said that some of these rules – such as the passivisation of verbs – were universal to all languages.
4. Halliday's 'functional grammar' model (don't confuse with 'functions of language'): a complex model in which Halliday posits the idea that language is primarily a product of context and intention, rather than simply a system of forms and structures. While he does account for the syntactic structure of language, he places the function of language as central (what language does, and how it does it), in preference to more structural approaches. He starts at social context, and looks at how language both acts upon, and is constrained by, this social context. Interestingly, his system has become central to the development of computational linguistics.
5. Searle's 'speech act' model: this was the idea that language behaviour could be described as speech acts, things we 'do' with language, and that what we 'say' is the expression of what we want to 'do' (e.g. I want to 'do' *a request for action in a letter*, so I 'say' '*We would be grateful if*

you could . . .'). The Council of Europe developed a very similar model based on 'notions and functions'. Interestingly, though lists were made of the many speech acts (functions) that were possible (e.g. apologising, reprimanding), it was not felt to be possible, except in narrow routinised contexts, to establish direct relationships between any speech act and the way of expressing it.
6. Pawley and Syder's prefabricated language model: in the 1980s came the first soundly-argued model of memorised syntagmemes, which have come to be called 'chunks', and which Michael Lewis has categorised as words, collocations, phrases, fixed expressions, and semi-fixed expressions. Importantly, the psycholinguistic (i.e. mind-language) principle here, was that these 'prefabs', or 'chunks', were memorised, and deployed automatically by the language-user from that memorised store, as they were needed in the discourse. Until recently, this model clearly related only to lexis. But there are now many, on the basis of computerised language corpus research, who claim that, in fact, all language is *primarily* lexical, apart from a few unimportant paradigmatic features (e.g. '-ed' for past simple regulars), and that grammar is an illusion created by historical models of language.
7. Pedagogic grammar: in the late 80s it became apparent that language teaching needed to define its own parameters for language description, and since, de facto, many teaching grammars already existed, these became valid descriptions in their own right. Indeed I would argue that it was these grammars that helped shape some of the linguistic notions held by pure linguists. The sort of rules seen in every teacher's and learner's grammar textbooks were a pragmatic combination of Saussure, structuralist, classical, speech act, and lexical principles.

So much for the 'bits' theories.

The thing to remember next about them, however, is that, apart from the classical model (which was not really a linguistic model but a pedagogic model from the 19th century), and the pedagogic model of language itself, none of them was designed as a way of describing language for *learning*, only as a way of describing language as a phenomenon.

We teachers and applied linguists have had to extrapolate language descriptions, over the years, for our own purposes. And, using both those pedagogic grammar books mentioned above and our own ingenuity, we have been more or less successful. We know that the grammar-translation model utilises the classical tradition, and the audio-lingual approach of the 60s was borrowed from the structuralist model. Chomsky's theories led to no pedagogic language model, but they did lead to a resurgence of the importance of grammar rules in language textbooks (different rules from those of Chomsky of course). By this time, these 'rules' had become largely pragmatic descriptions of what seemed to make sense to students, using both classical and structuralist principles.

Speech act theory, an applied linguistics phenomenon from the US, was mirrored in the Council of Europe's Language Committee's descriptions of language as being 'functional' and 'notional', and the consequent lists provided a new way to organise syllabuses. Halliday in turn, though fascinating, contributed almost nothing to pedagogic language analysis. And finally, the lexical descriptions of language, plus the corpus work (done initially by the Cobuild project), have dramatically altered the way we teachers describe and divide up the language.

We have established that all these approaches see language as 'bits'. And what is nowadays under debate is the extent of the influence of the 'lexical view of language' on how we *see* these bits. Language textbooks still tend to include a traditional grammar syllabus, but this is nowadays becoming more subliminal, with a much more explicit lexical syllabus. Some adventurous textbooks are even including grammar but not calling it grammar (see *Cutting Edge*, which has 'should + infinitive' as a semi-fixed expression). The key advance of the lexical influence in textbooks, however, has been the vast increase in the attention to collocations, phrases, and fixed expressions. In this, the revolution started with the mould-breaking *Business Matters* in 1996.

Language as 'process'

A word is now needed about 'grammar as process' (Batstone 1994). This comes from the idea that *language* is process (remember that the division of language into bits has always been accepted to be a necessary artifice, resulting from having to analyse it). A growing body of people are saying that the true complexity of language as behaviour can*not* be analysed, and so, in the classroom, exposure to language as process, both receptively and productively, will ultimately yield better results to a trained and open-minded learner, because this complexity will be somehow absorbed through a combination of exposure and attention. This is the assumption behind task-based methodology. It is also behind the methodology known as 'grammaticisation' or 'allowing the grammar to emerge' (Thornbury 2001). 'Grammaticisation' and methods of 'uncovering grammar' are not exclusively about language as process, but they are largely about that. And it may well be that there are deep and complex insights about English that learners can be guided to get, that can only be got through treating language as process. Some commentators, such as Thornbury, do argue this, and they say that the whole profession is in the middle of a 'paradigm shift' towards the new view. I disagree.

My view is that 'language as process' is an interesting line of inquiry, but that the 'bits' view has proved itself over centuries, and that *second language learning depends on teachers parcelling the language into manageable pieces in a way which makes sense to learners.* I think we should stick with these assumptions for the time being, at least as the underlying paradigm. Talk of paradigm shift needs, I think, to be based on much sounder footing than is currently offered by proponents of 'language as process'.

Looking back at the questions posed in the first few paragraphs, we see that I have tried to address the theme 'what is the nature of language rules?' For 'rules', read 'bits'. I think there are lots of ways to describe language 'bits' for pedagogic purposes, including lexical ones, and these ways take us back through all the eras of language teaching fashion. On balance in my experience, having tried all of the approaches to parcelling up the language that have ever been proposed, I would say that they are not qualitatively different, and that whether classical, structural, functional, notional, or lexical, *these approaches are probably all equally valid*.

Learning the 'bits'

So we can now move on to the next theme: how are rules learnt?

Well, this <u>is</u> the $64,000 question.

In the past, the much-maligned PPP approach was based on assumptions now seen to be false. The belief was held that when we teach students a piece of language they learn it. It was believed that in order to teach that piece of language we had to deal with it thoroughly, in a sequentially ordered way. This meant that we had to, in order:

(i) introduce it carefully to the students, with attention to the rule of form, the rule of meaning, and the pronunciation
(ii) put it into different other (artificial?) contexts and get the students to practice saying it in those contexts

(iii) give the students some ‘freer’ activity to do in which they could use the ‘target’ item with the minimum of prompting.

Many teachers came to believe that each lesson should be planned to achieve these three stages in one 45 minute period, and if the students could use the target item ‘correctly’ after this procedure, it was deemed they had ‘learnt’ the item.

Such a simplistic model was neither tenable nor sound. However intuitively solid it seemed to many teachers at the time, it was strongly attacked by those who were looking more at the *learners* in the classroom and less at the *teaching* method.

What we needed was a theoretical base for the second language classroom, which recognised that teaching was not learning, and that what is taught is not necessarily what is learnt, but that still allowed us to talk about learning and teaching at the same time.

The model which seemed best to fit this brief was that of William Rutherford in the mid 80s. When William Rutherford posited his notion of ‘consciousness-raising’, it was within the context of a long debate originating with Stephen Krashen in the 1970s. Based on the idea that comprehensible input, or ‘i +1’, was a valid starting point for discussion of second language learning, a whole series of developments on this model have since emerged. They went from an Input model (Krashen), to an Input-Output model, to an Input-Output-Feedback model. Rutherford’s idea was roughly that it should be Input-Gestation-Output-Feedback-Gestation-Output-Feedback-Etc. And it was Rutherford who first coined the term ‘noticing’.

The key difference between the traditional view and the current Rutherford view is that, while we clearly control *teaching*, we no longer see language *learning* as being a process which the teacher controls - a process which goes . . . 'A + B + C = et voila!'. Learning is now widely seen as a cyclical, organic, and invisible process, which the teacher can only marginally influence. Focussing on language can be heavy or light, it can be analytical or superficial, it can pre-practice or while-practice or post-practice.

So, whether we are introducing new language, or practising old language, or highlighting a fixed expression, or reminding students about a particular stress-pattern, or correcting a bit of grammar, or giving feedback on an error in a roleplay . . . . we are <u>*helping*</u> the learner to <u>*focus*</u> *on a point of language* and in so doing to <u>*notice*</u> *that point of language*.

What happens in ‘noticing’?

Because noticing is an inner psychological process, data on noticing can only be gleaned from two sources – introspection and observation. From both of these points of view, I think we can say two things about it definitively.

Firstly, we teachers are not doing the noticing. Noticing is something that (i) only the learner can do (ii) is not guaranteed even when the teacher leads the learner by the nose.

Whatever we teachers do to focus the learners on the language point, we are only helping them to notice. They may or may not do so. For noticing to happen requires that: (i) the learner’s attention is on the language point (ii) the language point is ‘learnable’ (i.e. not too difficult) (iii) the learner can make sense of the meaning, the form and the pronunciation (iv) the learner is aware of any interference of form or meaning with L1 (v) the learner wants to notice it (vi) the learner can see why it might be useful to learn. However, even when all these things are in place, the learner may still not notice.

Secondly, noticing is something that can take many stages, and may not happen either knowingly, or all at once. Here is a story which I hope will exemplify this ‘layered noticing’. In 1990, I became vaguely aware of a type of music emanating from South America that was good to dance to. In 1991, I was given a CD and realised that this was that fantastic music. In 1994, open to the influence, I noticed a dance teacher’s card on a noticeboard – the dance was called ‘salsa’. In 1995, with a friend, I started group classes. Learning was slow, the technique unnatural for my western body and all its muscle memory. In 1996, I met a Colombian, who ‘showed’ me the way to do it, through tireless private lessons. In 1998, I was beginning to ‘feel’ the rhythm naturally, and another Colombian became my dance partner. For two years, I ‘let myself go’, and started to dance without conscious attention. Then suddenly, in 2000, I could do it, without thinking. All these stages, these successive approximations towards being a good salsa dancer, required me to both notice things consciously, such as ways of moving my feet and hips, and to notice things unconsciously, such as getting the feel of the rhythm. When applying the principle to language learning, however, I’m not recommending that it takes ten years!

No. Noticing does not normally happen all at once. So let’s not force our students into producing freely what can take ages to assimilate. Let’s just let them come to it when they do. That moment, the moment when it becomes part of them, is invisible. It just happens at an unknown point, and the student is from then on a different person. We should not want to know when it happens. We should not want to control when it happens. We should just be open to when it happens.

Noticing and teaching

So how do these issues translate into the terminology of teaching method? Well, we teachers, with our practical experience and common sense, have always known some unchangeable truths about language teaching and learning. We have always known that, before learners can start to learn a language item,

- (i) they need to be exposed to the language item
- (ii) they need to make sense of it
- (iii) they need to hear what it sounds like
- (iv) they need to see how it is written
- (v) they need to have a chance to say it and play with it
- (vi) they need to have some feedback on their experimentation

So that’s: focused exposure, meaning and form, pronunciation, spelling, activation (output), feedback. Pretty much what the much-maligned PPP approach was all about in fact, even if some of its other assumptions were wrong.

There are many methods of *helping the students to notice*, which work well, and they include the updated version of PPP (See ‘Which approaches enhance noticing’ below, and see the next article on Authentic Participation for a list of language focus methods).

The key principle behind Rutherford’s work is that he takes the pressure off the teacher to believe that the single lesson is the moment of learning for the student. It is the moment of teaching, but it is not necessarily the moment of learning. It becomes part of a sequence of **‘successive accurisations’** (my term, my bold), each one reinforcing the previous ones and *building an increasingly firm imprint of the language item into the language capacity of the learner*. This gradual accrual of accuracy is not new, because the notion of 'successive approximations' was part of the interlanguage model of the 1980s. But what is new is the application of it to the classroom, and the idea that it is an invisible and unknowable process, and one which we teachers can only marginally influence.

Peter Skehan (1998), a major commentator in the field of 'noticing', has charted the history of these ideas and developed them over the last 10 years. He feels that the learner's mental attention has to be ensured for noticing to be enhanced. In my experience, I feel this is generally true. However, occasionally, my students surprise me. Aspects of language quite incidental to the lesson, seem to make as much impression on my students as the targets of my focusing. What seems to happen here is that, while the bulk of these aspects emerge after focused attention directed by the teacher (I call this 'directed noticing'), some emerge either after attention applied by the students alone (I call this 'incidental noticing'), or after no attention at all (I call this 'unconscious noticing').

For instance, the other day in my class, I was focusing on the vocabulary connected with 'giving project updates', using a number of lexical phrases (e.g. our aim was to . . . , we followed the . . . . guidelines, we divided the . . . . into . . . . . , so far . . . . ., up till now . . . . , results obtained are that . . . . , etc), and I gave a sample presentation myself. The next day, in the mini-presentations, I was pleased to discover that, quite incidentally, the accurate use of the present perfect had improved dramatically for two of the students, having had *no* directed focusing from me on that language point.

Which approaches enhance noticing?

1. Basic principles of noticing

If there is a basic principle of noticing, it is that language noticing comes from language focusing. All the techniques that help the students tend to have this feature in common. In the next article, on Authentic Participation, I list nine ways of focusing on aspects of language, and all of them have particular relevance to the principle of noticing.

I have categorised the techniques according to whether the 'target' language points in each case are being focused on *before* a language-activation activity (pre-focusing), *during* a language-activation activity (while-focusing), or *after* a language-activation activity (post-focusing)[1]. For more detail, read the next article on Authentic Participation. The techniques are:

1. *General reformulation after the activity (Output-feedback 1 - post-focusing) .*
2. *Intensive lexical reformulation after the activity (Output-feedback 2 - post-focusing) .*
3. *On-the-spot reformulation (Output-feedback 3 - while-focusing) .*
4. *Lexical exercises for collocation (gapfills, matching, discrimination, sequencing, categorising, unjumbling, completing, deleting) (pre/while/post-focusing)*
5. *Presentation of 'rules' (PPP – can be pre/while/post-focusing) .*
6. *Pre-teaching lexis (pre-focusing) .*
7. *Generating lexis via video (while-focusing).*
8. *Referencing lexis via paper material – frameworks (while-focusing).*
9. *Generating lexis via discussion (aka 'authentic participation') (while-focusing)*

[1] Since writing this article, a new book (Ellis 2003, Chapter 8) has come to my attention, in which a similar framework is put forward.

But it is always key to remember, as discussed above, that when learners notice an aspect of the language, this is only ever one stage among a succession of stages in the learning of that item by those learners. So in subsequent lessons, that language item will return in other guises, in practice exercises, role-play scenarios, discussion topics, etc, and each time, with feedback and focus from the teacher or peers or self-correction, the learner will 'learn' it a little deeper.

And then, one day, at a time not known to either teacher or learner, *it will have become part of the learner*, and they will have learnt it. For some language items, this process seems to happen very quickly, for instance with the structure *'can/can't'* + *infinitive*, although the question form sometimes takes longer to 'bed in'[2]. Here, the three concepts (possibility, ability, permission), are easy to comprehend and often have cognates in the L2. The form couldn't be simpler.
But the hoary old *present perfect* seems to take learners much longer, mainly for its concepts[3] not for its form, largely because, I think, its concepts exist only partially and confusingly in other languages.

Below, I have outlined some principles we can apply to the techniques we deploy to raise the noticeability of language points.

2. The principle of 'guided discovery'

You probably remember the distinction between 'inductive' and 'deductive' approaches to language input. Inductive teaching, or guided discovery as we usually call it, is a really useful noticing technique, and has always been especially applicable to PPP and Test-Teach-Test. Here, the learners are asked to use their own problem-solving urge, and led, but not spoonfed, to making sense of both the form and the linguistic meaning of a language item – grammar or lexis – for themselves. It is the 'leading to' that makes all the difference to the depth of the outcome.

3. The principle of feedback: 'o + 1'

I have detailed the many approaches to feedback in the article on Authentic Participation. The key principle of feedback is that, just as input should be at 'i + 1', *feedback should be at* ***'o + 1'***. In other words, feedback should be made appropriate, by the teacher, to the level at which the learner's 'output' is coming out, and should be carefully judged, for each individual learner, to be just above their productive level.

4. The role of 'rules'

There has been a curious hysteria about rules for many years. I am not sure why. The early resistance to rules in the 1960s came from a justifiable desire not to be prescriptive about language, as the classical linguists had been, with their claims that 'x' was correct English but 'y' was not. Indeed academic linguists from the 60s onwards were keen to emphasise that their new grammars were descriptive not prescriptive. This principle, of describing, remains undisputed to this day, but it masks another issue, the issue of the role of a standard.

[2] I have deliberately ignored Krashen's notion of 'order of acquisition' here.
[3] The term '**concept'** has been used for decades by IH teacher trainers to denote the meaning of a language structure in its most neutral context. Other terms which have emerged from the applied linguists for the same thing are: **notion** (from the notions and functions identified by the Council of Europe Language Project in the 1970s; **usage** (from Henry Widdowson, who distinguished it from communicative 'use'); **linguistic meaning** (my term, originally used to distinguish it from 'communicative meaning', with the intention that these terms are more transparent than 'usage and 'use').

Standards are there not to control but to provide a benchmark, a reference point, against which performance can be compared. So rules clearly have their place in language teaching. Rules indisputably help some (the majority?) of learners to hang on to any complex point of the language for long enough for it to become learnt. Rules are an aid to learning, not an object of learning. Rules provide a reference point in times of difficulty or confusion.

The four key rules about 'rules for teaching purposes' are these: they should be at least 90% true, they should be useful, they should be simple, and they should be applicable. And good examples of these principles can be found in *Business Grammar Builder* (Paul Emmerson, 2001).

Michael Lewis made an important distinction in the mid 80s between 'rules' and 'hints'. He said quite rightly that there are no rules as such, but there are lots of sensible generalities which help learners to learn. I call them 'rules of thumb', and tell the students that most rules are only 90% true. This reinforces the idea that they are there to help, not there to be learnt. And most learners know this intuitively anyway.

Seeing rules in this way helps to diffuse the fear among teachers of teaching rules. It helps to reinstate the PPP approach as a valid one, because the status of what is being taught has been 'de-horned'. So my suggestion is that all teachers use rules with a light touch, teach them as background rather than foreground, and allow the learners to build up a repertoire of *rules as reference points* in their note-books, according to what they need.

And remember. A rule can simply be a clear and thorough whiteboard rendering of a semi-fixed expression (such as: 'I am <u>look</u>ing <u>forw</u>ard to - <u>hear</u>ING from / <u>see</u>ING / <u>meet</u>ING – you'), clearly highlighting structure, rhythm(!) and grammar. Or it can be a full whiteboard exposition of the definite article, with its two functions – (i) textual reference and (ii) use in lexical phrases – clearly exemplified, categorised and contextualised.

Finally, lest we forget, rules need to be reinforced with examples and practice. So, insofar as we use rules in the classroom, the traditional ways to achieve practice and exemplification still hold. This follow-up work reinforces the learner's understanding and command of the tricky structure. It is not a test of how well they have learnt it – an aim, in my view, that we should no longer have as language teachers – it is a further opportunity to notice.

It is time to stop feeling guilty about teaching rules. The rules are not there to be learnt, they are there to help the learner make sense of what is regular and meaningful in the structure of the language, and how to use this to express what they want. They need to learn grammar, not <u>as</u> grammar, but *for communication*.

The way to teach rules is any way that is efficient and meaningful. Some people have become attached to the ARC, or Authentic-Restricted-Clarification, approach of Jim Scrivener (1994). Others like the OHE approach of Michael Lewis (Observe-Hypothesise-Experiment). Many stick to the Test-Teach-Test approach. Even modern PPP. And whether you isolate the language point in advance, or whether you let it emerge from the classroom discourse, is not important, as long as you help the learner to notice it in all its thoroughness.

4. The principle of while-activity language focus

Because of the traditional hold on classrooms of PPP, teachers came to think of teaching as having to be sequential, with input leading to practice leading to output, etc. But as I have tried to show above, and in the articles on Authentic Participation and Good Teaching, 'noticing' can be achieved in very subtle ways, almost deviously sometimes, at any time in the teaching sequence, with the lightest of touches and a radically different set of assumptions.

1) 'Asking for'

In task-based teaching, the principle is that learners will ask for what they need when an activity is underway, and so seamlessly use and therefore absorb, in the flow of real conversation, the items of language that come up. In a way this 'asking for' could be called language focus, because at that moment the learner is focusing on a piece of language. And if the activity is staged, so that there is a preparation phase followed by a performance phase, this focusing could be said to be even more thorough. So, some might argue that even task-based approaches can have a language focus element.

2) Frameworks

What I want to highlight here is something akin to the task-based principle, but something a bit more teacher-guided. The idea was first suggested in the early 90s by Wilberg (1988). This is the idea of a language sheet, or even a whiteboard, with selected words, phrases, and expressions on it, which *the students have constant access to during a language activation activity*. It is one type of material, from among a range of types, called a *'framework'*. Here are some examples.

(i) a 'newspaper article summary' sheet on which are written sentence stems like; 'I read this article the other day in the . . . ., and basically what it said was . . . ., I was interested in it because . . . . etc'. This idea is taken from *Business Matters Teachers' Book* (Powell 1996).

(ii) a 'personal statement' sheet on which are written phrases like: 'I work for . . . ., in the . . . . . field / sector / business, and we make / produce / manufacture / deal in / sell . . . . . ; I am in charge of . . . . . , and I work in the . . . . . department / division / unit, and my line manager is . . . ., etc'

(iii) a sheet of 'discussion' and 'chairing' expressions to be used when students are role-playing meetings

(iv) the 'language box' employed by the *Cutting Edge* authors in their task activities, containing several of the structures the students are likely to need as they fulfil the task.

In doing these tasks, it helps a lot if the students have carefully read the list of expressions for homework the night before. In the case of the summary framework and the personal statement framework, they may actually have done their homework using it. NB Rhythm marks on all expressions help enormously with both pronunciation and memorability.

3) 'While-discussion' and 'while-video'

I use the principle of while-focussing a lot in my teaching. And I stretch it beyond the activity types mentioned above to include one other activity – the 'while-discussion' and 'while-video' language focus. As I show in the lesson transcript, in my article on Authentic Participation, discussion throws up language, and it is my technique to place on to the board important expressions (lexical phrases, discussion exponents, etc) which arise from it, so that the students can then use them again as the discussion progresses. Wherever necessary, I nudge and remind the learners to do so, so that they notice the appropriate expression from the board when it is needed. Even in full flow, learners, in my experience, make significant jumps in progress by using expressions in this way.

Above all, I have remarked that students get an enormous satisfaction from saying something well, and if these frameworks offer the chance of much greater accuracy with not too much memory-load – i.e. they act as an aide-memoire – the learners get a huge sense of achievement.

4) Error feedback

This is possibly the most widely-used while-focussing technique of all. Here, while the students are in the flow of their language expression, the teacher will from time to time bring their attention to an error. Dealt with quickly and sensitively, this type of language focus can be a tremendously powerful noticing device, as the student is in the flow of their desire to say something and so to be able to say it even more accurately is highly motivating.

Conclusions

Learning is essentially an osmotic process. Teaching is essentially a structured one. Learners make 'progress' almost imperceptibly. So how do we account for this in our school structures, our exam systems, our sequences of lessons, and our individual lessons? Can the teacher become less structured?

In this article, I have argued that we have witnessed a sea-change in the way our teaching strategies in the modern classroom are underpinned. Influenced by the language principle of lexis and the learning principle of consciousness-raising, we have been obliged to re-think our teaching method from the ground up, especially in the area of language focus and noticing psychology. When we have done this, however, we find that though there are clear shifts of emphasis, much remains very similar to what went before.

Just a few examples will suffice. Previously, we would talk of presenting new language, now we talk of focusing on an aspect of language and helping students to notice it. Previously, we would talk of language practice, now we talk of language activation. Previously, we would talk of correction, now we talk of feedback. Previously, we would be trying to find the secret of cause and effect – which teaching approach led to the best learning. Now, we talk of *all* teaching approaches having merit, as long as we do not look for cause and effect and look instead for 'successive accurisation'.

It is worth saying at this point that Thornbury (2001) covers, in part, similar ground to the points made in this article, but I have to disagree strongly with the base assumption behind his otherwise excellent book, which is that there is new paradigm of teaching on the horizon – let's call it the 'emergent grammar' paradigm – which will sweep away the old and ring in the new. One gets the feeling that all that has gone before is somehow 'not OK', and that there is a range of new techniques which will radically alter the teaching landscape. I take the opposite view. For me, everything that has gone before *is* OK, as long as it is done with a new awareness. For me, we have to incorporate the old, not sweep it away.

As long as we never become complacent, we will continue to develop. In the light of the new ideas, I think we are clearer in our minds about what we are doing and why. But we are grounded in the old and we integrate it into the new with mindfulness and awareness.

Before enlightenment, chop wood carry water.
After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.

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