

# Reviews

## *Compte rendus*

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### **Grammar Practice Activities, A practical Guide for Teachers**

**Penny Ur**  
**Cambridge University Press 1988, 288 pages**

*Grammar Practice Activities* by Penny Ur is a recent addition to the series of Handbooks For Language Teachers, General Editors, Michael Swan and Roger Bowers. Like her two previous contributions to the Series: *Discussions That Work* (1981), and *Teaching Listening Comprehension* (1984), Penny Ur has once again provided an informative and useful resource text, providing, in Part One, some general guidelines on the topic of teaching grammar and designing effective classroom activities, as well as providing in Part Two a large section of suggested activities grouped according to grammatical category.

Penny Ur says in her Introduction that she has written this book because there were many teachers like herself who "felt most comfortable using a broadly communicative methodology in our teaching (and) were disappointed to find that our coursebooks provided very few ideas for interesting, meaningful and contextualized grammar practice. There are usually either 'communicative' activities designed to develop general fluency, or 'grammatical' exercises that are for the most part based on uninteresting manipulation of forms . . . but there seemed to be no comprehensive, systematically categorized collection that could be used to supplement a coursebook" (page 7). Penny Ur has succeeded very well in reaching her objective to fill this gap when, in the short term, the teaching of grammar becomes temporarily the main learning objective.

Part One: Guidelines, is forty-three pages in length and succinctly presents Penny Ur's thoughts on the topic of grammar practice. Sub-section One briefly describes what grammar is, the place of grammar in language teaching, what learning grammar involves, and the four stages of the grammar lesson. (It is interesting to note that this lesson framework is somewhat similar in its intention to the traditional nine step grammar lesson (Paulston/Bruder, 1976), and the four part grammar lesson outline in *Techniques and Resources in Teaching Grammar*, pp. 27/28, by Marianne Celcia-Murcia and Sharon Hilles, 1988.

The second sub-section defines 'practice' and outlines six factors that contribute to successful practice.

The third sub-section discusses three topics to do with the practical design of game-like or communicative practice techniques: 1) the function of the task, 2) its intrinsic interest, relevance, and entertainment value to the student, and 3) the amount of student participation and involvement in the activity. Again, it is interesting to note that Penny Ur includes in this latter topic, the main techniques used in the traditional typology of drills, described on a continuum from "teacher manipulation" to "student communication". Although some of these are now rarely or ever used in many classrooms, Ur nevertheless assesses the advantages and disadvantages of each technique for various learning situations or kinds of practise activities. This provides a useful perspective.

The fourth section of Part One deals initially with some practical aspects of ten classroom lesson activities, and lastly demonstrates a number of supplementary optional procedures for getting the most out of traditional coursebook exercises which teachers are frequently called upon to teach. Ur makes suggestions for exploiting these texts or tasks to provide maximally effective practice. I found this to be an interesting and useful addition.

Part Two of the textbook contains almost two hundred game-like activities for practicing important or problematical aspects of English grammar, with descriptions of procedures and materials required. A feature of this section is that texts and visuals may be photocopied or adapted for classroom use. Experienced teachers will recognize many of the activities and ideas, which Penny Ur acknowledges have been borrowed or adapted from several sources, a bibliography of which is provided.

An overview of one category—Future Tenses—exemplifies Penny Ur's unique contribution in two important ways: first, in the variety of activities compiled; secondly, in the progression from semi-controlled activities where the linguistic form is used to do something, but control of the form is the objective, to more communicative practice where comprehension or production of meanings for some non-linguistic purpose is the objective, although use of the linguistic form is monitored.

The section is 25 pages in length and includes 9 activities, incorporating all the skills of Talking, Writing, Listening and Reading. It begins with two semi-controlled oral activities, one in which an object is displayed to all except one student who must guess what it is by asking what they are going to/will do with it, the other displays a week's diary filled in with planned activities which students expand to full sentences using the future tense.

Subsequent activities are more communicative in nature, allowing students working in pairs or groups to express their own ideas and opinions

using information gap techniques, predicting what will happen in listening and reading activities, composing horoscopes and describing future events both orally and in the written form.

Two important decisions are left to the judgment of the teacher using this text. The first is to decide which activities are appropriate for the proficiency and performance level of the class they are teaching, and what modifications or adaptations could be made to make them suitable for any particular class. The second is to decide when and where these activities can be most effectively used in the stages of a specific grammar lesson, or whether some activities could be more effectively used as reinforcement and/or review during other coursework or language development. This assumes that all teachers have a broader understanding of the place of grammar teaching in language learning than is perhaps the case, and/or a thorough understanding of Part One of the text.

These comments aside, *Grammar Practice Activities* is a fresh new resource book for language teachers, both new and experienced, and helps enormously to demonstrate how the teaching of grammar can be both contextually interesting and creatively challenging in the teaching/learning process.

**Vivian McDonough**

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## REFERENCES

- Celcia-Murcia, Marianne and Sharon Hilles (1988). *Techniques and Resources in Teaching Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Paulston, Christina Bratt and Bruder, M. N. (1976). *Teaching English as a Second Language—Techniques and Procedures*. Winthrop Publishers.

## THE REVIEWER

Vivian McDonough is a Lecturer in ESL, and the Co-ordinator of the Language Learning Unit (Acting), at the School of Continuing Studies, University of Toronto. She has been a teacher trainer in the TESL Certificate Programme at Woodsworth College, University of Toronto, and in the ESL Department Continuing Education programme at the Faculty of Education, University of Toronto.

## Aspects of Language Teaching

H. G. Widdowson

Oxford University Press, 1990, ISBN 0-19-437128 X, 213 pp.

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Those readers who have grown accustomed to the clear-sightedness, readability and germaneness of H. G. Widdowson's writings will not be disappointed by his latest book, *Aspects of Language Teaching*. It is mostly a collection of papers written between 1983 and 1988. The author, however, has skilfully reworked his original productions in such a way as to keep any possible repetitiveness to a minimum.

The first part of the book deals with language teaching, the second part with the nature of language, and the third part with applications of language description to different approaches to teaching. In none of the various parts of this book is the author dogmatic or determined to defend one theoretical stance at the expense of others.

There is, nevertheless, a recurrent theme that gives unity and purpose of the book. It is that second language teachers do indeed have a legitimate profession and that an intrinsic part of their vocation is to establish boundaries and beacons for their students' linguistic creativity. Such an assertion might seem innocuous enough to those uninitiated in the plethora of writings published on second language acquisition. In actual fact, it is most controversial, since many other researchers contend that there exists an invincible natural morpheme acquisition order for second language learners that makes most interventions by teachers futile endeavors. Their students, according to some, would be just as well served by hearing the target language on television or on occasional visits to the country in which it is spoken. One writer, Teresa Pica (1987), even shows how the presence of the teacher in the classroom can reduce the negotiation of meaning that is essential to second language acquisition. Left to their own devices, the students seem to perform better than they do when a teacher stands before them and inhibits them by his authoritarian status.

Widdowson quite rightly asserts that language learning is only effective when it is delimited by the established rules and conventions of the language. It is the teacher who can provide the framework in which these standards are presented and respected. The teacher's authority and knowledge thus give both meaningful direction to the student's autonomy and purpose to his linguistic creativity.

Just as Hegel saw almost all knowledge in triadic formations, so Widdowson sees most aspects of second language teaching and acquisition in

terms of dichotomies. The following partial list of some of these dichotomies is presented here in order to give a sampling of some of the subjects covered in the book: conceptual vs. empirical evaluation, description vs. prescription of language, producing vs. promoting communicative competence, goals vs. processes of learning, formal vs. pragmatic meaning, teaching language for vs. as communication, outsider vs. insider research, the craft vs. the artistry of teaching, teacher education vs. training, types vs. tokens of linguistic elements, conceptual features vs. conceptual meanings, semantics vs. pragmatics, schematic vs. systemic knowledge, reciprocal vs. non-reciprocal negotiation, transactional vs. interactional negotiations, convergence vs. conversion in negotiating meaning, social/communicative vs. psychological/cognitive causes of errors, purpose vs. process of learning, medium view vs. mediation view in pedagogy, structural vs. notional/functional syllabuses, language learning vs. use, essential vs. enabling conditions for language acquisition, reference to vs. representation of reality in literature, authoritarian vs. authoritative teaching, natural vs. contrived contexts of instruction, etc.

The book has an extensive bibliography whose entries are mostly from the 1980's. There is also an index including subjects covered and the names of authors cited.

As Brian Page said at the 1990 SPEAQ convention, "Teachers don't read anything because teachers don't have time to read anything". If they did, or if there are any proverbial exceptions that prove the rule, they would find this book, like all of Widdowson's writings, worth their while.

**Robert Dole**

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## REFERENCE

Pica, Teresa, (1987). Second-language acquisition, social interaction, and the classroom. *Applied Linguistics* 8 (1), 3-21.

## THE REVIEWER

Robert Dole is *Directeur du Module des langues modernes à l'Université du Québec à Chicoutimi*. He has spent much of his free time in the past year feasting his way through a sizable portion of the complete works of Stefan Zweig in German.

## Large Classes

Rob Nolasco and Lois Arthur

London Macmillan, 129 pages

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*Large Classes* is a little handbook that comes to the rescue of practising teachers and teacher trainees faced with the prospect of teaching a large second language class. The dimensions of a *large class* are not defined precisely since *large* is taken to be any number greater than the norm in a given context, or any number that the instructor perceives as threatening. The *raison d'être* of the book is to demonstrate that there are indeed effective strategies for dealing with the problem of large numbers and that any extra time invested in pre-class planning results in less gruelling in-class work, meaningful contact with individual students, and communicative practice for the entire class (and not just a select few).

In a large class the most abundant resource is the students themselves. Thus, the authors recommend the systematic involvement of students in classroom management, materials development, group projects, and peer evaluation. (Delegating responsibility not only allows the focus to shift from instructor to student, but also prevents the instructor from becoming overworked.) The problem of "limited resources" can be overcome by using the physical surroundings in a creative fashion, utilizing student-generated materials, recycling handouts, bringing in guest speakers, and putting students in touch with organizations in the outside world. Throughout the book the authors emphasize the crucial role of classroom management. Seemingly minor operations such as giving unambiguous instructions, keeping multi-purpose checklists and adapting seating plans could make the difference between chaos and harmony in a large class.

The authors need to be commended for considering the issue of large classes worthy of serious attention. Taking the view that large classes (however defined) simply should *not* exist does not eliminate the problem; such classes, regularly multilevel as well, are a fact of life, as are desks nailed to the floor, uninspiring physical surroundings, and meagre resource materials. The authors also need to be commended for the simplicity of their approach. Theoretical issues are broadened without involving the kind of jargon that has pervaded the field of second language education. The teacher is encouraged to evaluate his/her performance through simple methods such as introspection and feedback from colleagues. Teaching techniques are advocated on the basis of common sense and the authors' own experiences.

*Large Classes* is modest in its scope. It is quite clear that there is very little in this handbook that a seasoned, well-informed teacher would find novel. It offers no new theory and no new teaching methodology. The value of the book lies elsewhere: in its reassuring tone and lucidity, in the large number of tips that it offers in so short a space, and in its reminder that the size of one's class is no excuse for engaging in questionable teaching practices. Thus, there is no reason why this affordable handbook should not serve as a useful resource text in any library containing materials for language teachers and teacher trainees.

**Rena Helms-Park**

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#### **THE REVIEWER**

Rena Helms-Park is a Ph.D. candidate in the Modern Language Centre at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

## **Erratum**

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In "Peer tutoring in vocational literacy skills" (*TESL Canada Journal*, vol. 7, no. 2, March 1990), the author, Gordon Nore, made certain factual errors in his description of WHMIS (The Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System). He had erroneously combined WHMIS with a separate package of legislation covering the *Transportation of Dangerous Goods* (Transport Canada), and with commercially produced hazard awareness materials. WHMIS contains only eight hazard symbols. Furthermore, employers are responsible only to provide hazard labels, worker education, and Material Safety Data Sheets.