This article explains how to teach ESL/EFL students to notice grammar. There is also a suggested lesson plan.

**Introduction**

Many teachers are confused on how to teach grammar. The form-focused instruction of the audio-lingual method produced students that knew a lot about a language but could not apply what they knew to spontaneous speech. Conversely, the lack of grammar instruction in the Communicative Approach has often produced students who communicate well but lack grammatical competency. Is it possible to teach grammar in a way that will help students develop grammatical competency, even in spontaneous speech? This article explores a possible answer to this dilemma, the theory of noticing, and its application to the classroom.

**Why Noticing?**

The theoretical basis for noticing centers around the relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is conscious knowledge of grammar rules learned through formal classroom instruction. For example, Li knows every rule about subject-verb agreement but makes frequent mistakes in natural speech. This knowledge is only available to him when he has time to think about the rules and then apply them (i.e. a grammar exercise or a writing assignment). In contrast, implicit knowledge is unconscious, internalized knowledge of a language that is available for spontaneous speech. For example, Jim speaks English with near perfect use of the basic rules of subject-verb agreement. This is despite the fact that he may have no idea what subject-verb agreement is or what the rules are.

The question is can explicit grammar knowledge (Li's knowledge) become implicit knowledge (Jim's knowledge)? There are two basic answers to the question. The first is the non-interface position proposed by Krashen. In his view, explicit knowledge can never become implicit knowledge because these two types of knowledge are located in different parts of the brain. Li could keep studying grammatical rules for the rest of his life and never speak like Jim. On the other hand, the interface position claims that explicit knowledge can have some impact on implicit knowledge. The interface position is divided into two views, the strong and the weak position. The strong interface position holds that explicit knowledge becomes internalized through practice, like the acquisition of other skills. The weak interface position, however, agrees with Krashen that explicit learning does not become implicit knowledge, but that it can aid or foster the acquisition of implicit knowledge (Brook). Proponents of this position acknowledge that there are simply too many linguistic rules for any learner, native speaker or not, to learn them all consciously. Thus, a strong interface is unlikely. Nevertheless, recent data suggests that students who have explicit grammar instruction as part of their study achieve a higher level of grammatical accuracy than those who do not (Ellis, 2002, p19). This suggests a weak-interface between explicit and implicit knowledge. Noticing is based on this position.

**What is Noticing?**

Noticing is basically the idea that if learners pay attention to the form and meaning of certain language structures in input, this will contribute to the internalization of the rule (Batstone, 1996). Ellis expounds on this idea:

". . . we don't actually try to influence the construction of the complex network [implicit knowledge] . . . because really learners can only do it themselves. We cannot implant rules into that network. Learners extract from the available information around them the regularities that form into their knowledge system. If this is the case, all that we can do is make them aware of some of these patterns . . . under the assumption that if you have an
awareness of them, then ultimately your pattern detector might function a bit more efficiently” (Ryan, 2001, p2).

In addition, learners acquiring language through a natural approach often experience fossilization, certain errors do not get better despite a significant amount of experience with the target language. Perhaps once learners develop communicative sufficiency they do not make progress in accuracy. Noticing helps rectify this by helping learners “notice the gap.” They recognize that the language features noticed are different from their current language.

Remember, according to this theory, the primary nature of explicit knowledge is to develop awareness of rather than production of target forms. Hence, teachers ought not to grade students on accurate use of these forms in spontaneous speech. Hopefully, this awareness will help learners notice target forms in future input and facilitate the eventual acquisition of these forms as implicit knowledge (Ellis, 2002, p 29).

**How Do Teachers Help Students Notice?**

How can we as teachers help students notice target forms? Cross (2002) summarizes factors that draw attention to certain features in input:

- Explicit instruction -- instruction explaining and drawing attention to a particular form.
- Frequency -- the regular occurrence of a certain structure in input.
- Perceptual Salience -- highlighting or underlining to draw attention to a certain structure.
- Task Demands -- constructing a task that requires learners to notice a structure in order to complete it.

Also, Rod Ellis outlines five teaching activities to develop grammatical knowledge of a problematic feature (Ellis 2002, pp. 30-31):

1. Listening to Comprehend: Students listen to comprehend a text that has been structured to contain several examples of the target form.
2. Listening to notice: Students listen to the same text again, but are given a gap-fill exercise. The target form is missing and the students simply fill it in exactly as they hear it to help them notice the form.
3. Understanding the grammar point: With help from the teacher, the students analyze the data and "discover" the rule.
4. Checking: Students are given a written text containing errors and are asked to correct them.
5. Trying it: Students apply their knowledge in a production activity.

Ellis warns that this is not designed to develop implicit knowledge, but simply to develop awareness of grammar, which -- when supplemented with other forms of input and communicative tasks -- may aid in the eventual acquisition of implicit knowledge.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, explicit grammar knowledge can foster the acquisition of implicit knowledge through noticing. Teachers can draw students’ attention to certain language features of input through explicit instruction, increasing the frequency and perceptual salience of the structure, and/or designing tasks that require the students to notice a structure to complete it.

**Lesson Plan**

The following lesson plan is a direct application of the five step approach by Rod Ellis (above), designed to teach the problematic features of tense and subjunctive use of “were” in imaginative conditionals to adult students.

**Standards**

- TESOL 1.1 - To use English to communicate in social settings: Students will use English to participate in social interactions, engaging in conversation.

**Objectives**

- Students will analyze the subjunctive mood in sample imaginative conditional sentences and synthesize a "rule" governing the behavior of these sentences.
- Students will correct grammar mistakes in conditional sentences.
- Students will create conditional sentences to engage in conversation.

**Materials (Included at bottom)**
Dialogue -- for teacher
Handouts: dialogue -- cloze, analyze sheet, exercises

Procedure:
1. Read dialogue orally to students one or more times.
2. Ask comprehension questions. 1) Where are these people? 2) What do they do for a living? 3) Do they think they could do the other person's job?
3. Cloze exercise -- Hand out dialogue-cloze. Read again to students. Students fill in blanks as they hear them.
4. Analysis -- Pass out "analyze" handout. In groups, students analyze the sample sentences and write a rule that describes the pattern they see.
5. Teacher led large group discussion of the rule.
6. Students write the real rule and compare it with their rule.
7. Application: In pairs, students complete exercises 1 & 2. In exercise 1 students correct errors in conditional sentences. In exercise 2, students use prompts to create conditional sentences for paired conversation.

Evaluation
- Teacher observes student answers and conversations in exercise 1 and 2.

Dialogue - Listen to Comprehend

John: Hello. My name is John. What's your name?
Sue: My name is Sue. What brings you to this party?

John: I work with Tom.
Sue: Oh, so what do you do?

John: I am a teacher.
Sue: Oh really, well, I can't stand kids. If I were a teacher, I think I would go crazy.

John: Really? Well, what do you do?
Sue: I am a politician.

John: Oh wow! Well, if I were a politician, the world would be in even worse shape than it already is. And my wife . . . if she were a politician's wife, she would definitely be even unhappier than she already is. She is a woman that needs time to her work in her garden. Well . . . what does your husband do?
Sue: Presently, he is a lawyer. But if he were a teacher, I'm sure he would go crazy too.

John: You are being too hard on yourselves. You see that couple over there? They are teachers. If they can do it, so can you.
Sue: I suppose so, but if they were ballerinas, I'm sure they would be great too. I think anybody can be anything they want to if they try hard enough.

John: I suppose. But if we were ballerinas, I don't think we would be great ones. We are professionals who work in an office all day. I doubt we would have much success with professional athletics or arts.

Dialogue -- Cloze - Listen to Notice

John: Hello. My name is John. What's your name?
Sue: My name is Sue. What brings you to this party?

John: I work with Tom.
Sue: Oh, so what do you do?

John: I ______ a teacher.
Sue: Oh really, well, I can't stand kids. If I ______ a teacher, I think I ______ go
John: Really? Well, what do you do?

Sue: I _________ a politician.

John: Oh wow! Well, ______ I ____________ a politician, the world ___________ be an even worse shape than it already is. And my wife . . . ______ she ____________ a politician’s wife, she ____________ definitely be unhappier than she already is. She ____________ a woman that needs time to her work in her garden. Well . . . what does your husband do?

Sue: Presently, he _________ a lawyer. But ______ he ____________ a teacher, I'm sure he ____________ go crazy too.

John: You are being too hard on yourselves. You see that couple over there? They are teachers. If they can do it, so can you.

Sue: I suppose so, but ______ they ____________ ballerinas, I'm sure they ____________ be great too. I think anybody can be anything they want to if they try hard enough.

John: I suppose. But ______ we ____________ ballerinas, I don't think we ____________ be great ones. We are professionals who work in an office all day. I doubt we would have much success with professional athletics or arts.

**Analyze -- Understanding the Grammar Point**

Analyze the following sentences. At the bottom of the page, write a rule to describe the patterns you find.

1. A) I AM a teacher.
   B) If I WERE a teacher, I would go crazy.

2. A) I AM a politician.
   B) If I WERE a politician, the world would be in even worse shape than it already is.

3. A) She IS a woman that needs time to her work in her garden.
   B) If she WERE a politician's wife, she would definitely be unhappier than she already is.

4. A) He IS a lawyer.
   B) If he WERE a teacher, I'm sure he would go crazy too.

5. A) They ARE teachers.
   B) If they WERE ballerinas, I'm sure they would be great too.

6. A) We ARE professionals who work in an office all day.
   B) If we WERE ballerinas, I don't think we would be great ones.

**Extra Examples**

7. A) It IS a problem.
   B) If it WERE a problem, people would tell us.

8. A) You ARE a good person.
   B) If you WERE a good person, you would help me.

**Your Rule (your guess):**
Exercise 1 -- Checking

Look at the underlined part in the following sentences. If the sentence contains an error, correct it. If it does not contain any errors, write Correct.

1. I were a lawyer.
2. If I were a lawyer, I would make more money.
3. If I was a rock star, I would be happier.
4. If you were an animal, what animal would you be?
5. If he were the president, he will make many new laws.
6. If they are popular, they would act differently.
7. He were a math professor.
8. If you were president, what laws would you make?
9. If we were born in France, we would speak French.
10. If I were a rich man, I would give to the poor.

Exercise 2 -- Trying it

Use the following prompts to make conditional sentences for conversation with a partner.

Example: (You) -- (President of the U.S.)
Person A: If you were the President of the U.S., what would you do?
Person B: If I were the President of the U.S., I would get rid of taxes.

1. (you) -- (movie star)
2. (he -- another student in the class) -- (rich man)
3. (she -- another person in the class) -- (the last woman on earth)
4. (you) -- (party animal)
5. (we) -- (teachers)
6. (they) -- (criminals)
7. (you) -- (most beautiful person alive)

Write a journal entry to answer this question: If you were the richest person alive, how would your life be different?

References

Available: [http://www3.oup.co.uk/eltj/hdb/Volume_50/Issue_03/freepdf/500273.pdf](http://www3.oup.co.uk/eltj/hdb/Volume_50/Issue_03/freepdf/500273.pdf)
- Brook, Andrew and Edina Torlakovic. The Role of Consciousness in Second Language Acquisition. 40 paragraphs.
Available:
When teaching grammar to ESL students, it is necessary to spend a certain amount of time lecturing, explaining the grammar to the students, providing examples, and having them create their own sentences using the previously explained grammar structure. After doing this and ensuring that all of the students have a baseline understanding of the target grammar structure, the teacher can then break the class into groups and let them play a game. After explaining the game to them, they can then begin playing the grammar game, with the guidance of the teacher. Games can be as simple as past tense re For mainstream teachers of ESL students, on the topic: FAQ about language learning . Who is this FAQ for? What's the most important thing I should know about the ESL students I teach? Should I correct an ESL student's grammar mistakes? Should I correct an ESL student's pronunciation mistakes? Should I correct an ESL student's spelling mistakes? Should I let ESL students talk in their native language in my classroom? Should I encourage ESL students to use their dictionaries in my lesson? How can I help my ESL students learn English as well as my subject? Why don't my ESL students look at me when I'm talking to them? How can I judge if a task or ass Teaching grammar in an ESL / EFL setting is different from teaching native speakers and there are important questions to address before you begin. Check responses, ask students to explain the grammar concept that has been introduced. At this point introduce teaching explanations as a way of clearing up misunderstandings. Provide an exercise which focuses on the correct construction of the grammar point.