

Student Perceptions of Grammar Learning

Barbara Jonckheere, Rosemary Hiruma, & Karen Fox

ALI/CSULB and ECPI/UCI

Proceedings of the CATESOL State Conference, 2005

Student Perceptions of Grammar Learning

The research plan was simple: administering during class a two-part survey using a Likert scale with an excluded middle which resembled the class/teacher evaluations already in use in our four-level pre-university intensive English program and would, therefore, be reasonably familiar along with 12 open-ended questions to be completed at home so that time was not a limiting factor in student responses. The survey results were simply tallied numerically, while the questionnaire responses were examined for trends. Of course, there is always the question with self-report responses whether or not they truly reflect objective reality since dishonesty or even honest misperceptions may contaminate the data they reveal; still, the results obtained appear to be useful.

Learner Strategies and Teacher Practices

To our surprise, by far the most utilized methods were also the most active and, to our minds, the most difficult. 87% of the respondents reported trying to use target grammar structures in writing and in conversation as their preferred learning strategy, while making up sentences on paper was favored by 81%. An active but non-overt strategy favored by 76% of the respondents is what communication skills experts term “rehearsal”— students’ making up sentences in their heads, a strategy teachers might do well to encourage since it can be done anywhere at any time with no particular input or materials needed. Least used (68%) seems to be the obvious study skill of reading the textbook section before the teacher explains it; in other words, what educators call anticipatory set.

By far the most helpful classroom activity, rated “1” or “2” by 89% of the students, was teacher example sentences. The next two strategies, favored by 85% of the students, are clearly

related: the writing of sentences or paragraphs using the target structure and the teacher's correction of these sentences or paragraphs. Students do find helpful the next five strategies, the teacher explaining textbook examples, reading and explaining the textbook section, assigning and correcting textbook exercises, but that result might be influenced by students' familiarity with these activities. Interestingly, the teacher's giving answers to textbook exercises was ranked "1" by slightly less than a third of the respondents; when we consider how much class time is normally spent on this activity, this ranking argues for textbooks with answer keys at the back. Also, two staples of the communication-based classroom—students working in pairs or groups to complete and correct textbook exercises, ranked near the bottom in our survey.

Findings and Implications

The key findings and related implications include the following:

1. Students use the dictionary and non-class textbooks (either brought from home or from previous classes) far more than we suspected, so don't rely on your textbook: your students won't.
2. Active learning (actually using the target structures to construct original oral and written sentences) was considered by the majority of students as crucial to their learning; admittedly limited classroom time should probably be focused at least partly on these active strategies.
3. Certain basic study skills such as previewing and reviewing are not widely used by our students so perhaps it would be wise to teach and reinforce these explicitly in our lessons.
4. Despite the availability of technology, "asking the teacher" is still the most widely reported strategy when learners encounter problems or confusion, so make sure your lessons provide maximum access to *you*—your examples, explanations and corrections.