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Prioritizing Grammar to Teach or Not to Teach
A Research Perspective

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Introduction: The Continuing Conundrum

A truly enormous amount of research has been published about the effectiveness (or a lack thereof) of methodologies, approaches, strategies, techniques, and activities for teaching L2 grammar. Hundreds of reference grammars and course books are currently available. Some textbooks can be as extensive as a proficiency- and level-based series.

Grammar textbooks and much instruction usually cover the traditional range of structures that have been covered from time immemorial. The reasons for this lie in the historical criteria for grammar books to include "complete" grammar curricula. Given that second language (L2)[1] instruction almost always takes place under great time constraints, it is important to maximize language learning gains and make grammar instruction as efficient as possible (Hinkel, 2013, 2015).

To this end, in L2 research and pedagogy, a great deal of work has been devoted to identifying principles that can permit prioritizing grammar instruction efficiently and most effectively for the best interests of the learners. Establishing the criteria for identifying grammar points that are useful in teaching and those that provide too low a return on the investment of precious time is one of the central topics in pedagogical grammar. One complaint often heard is that many grammar constructions usually found in manuals and textbooks seem to be outmoded in contemporary English usage (e.g. the past perfect progressive, as in *The tree had been growing well before the drought* or the future perfect passive, as in *The letter will have been mailed by 5 o'clock*). Such constructions, as well as a good number of others that are similarly obsolete or rare, are hardly ever found in today's English (Conrad, 2010; Folse, 2016; Hinkel, 2015).

The goal of grammar teaching and learning is to enable learners to communicate effectively and appropriately in context (Celce-Murcia, 2016; Richards & Reppen, 2016). For pedagogical purposes, grammar features can be divided into those that L2 learners need to be able to use reasonably accurately and those that they do not. By and large, the criteria for selecting which grammar features to focus on and which to postpone or drop have differed considerably depending on evolving perspectives on the effectiveness of grammar teaching in general, how grammar is learned, and how it should be taught—if taught at all.[2] Although numerous definitions and guidelines have been proposed for prioritizing grammar to teach or not to teach and in what contexts, the principles for such pedagogical choices are not necessarily clear-cut (Ur, 2011, 2012). For one thing, communicative contexts almost always determine the types of discourse and text that learners need to produce in real life

(e.g. spoken, written, or their variations). In turn, the types of discourse employed in context invariably influence pedagogical decisions for prioritizing grammar constructions.

This chapter reviews research in four interrelated areas in which an array of discourse contexts and productive skills are emphasized and where L2 grammar abilities have traditionally been considered to be of utmost importance. These research areas are likely to be of relevance to most L2 users and in most world regions, and they include the following:

- discourse contexts and grammar uses on major international L2 tests
- principled guidelines proposed by leading L2 experts and based on a large body of research findings
- recommendations for grammar teaching on the strength of error studies
- directions offered in corpus analyses on grammar for speaking and writing

Taken together, an overview of these research areas presents a thorough and well-rounded picture of what grammar to teach (and learn), what priorities for teaching should be established, and in what communicative contexts.

Spoken and Written Grammars: The Caveats

The distinctions between common and everyday uses of grammar and those found in literary texts originally became the topic of contentious debates in the 1600s, when the issue at hand concerned the teaching of Latin grammar, as discussed in the book *Didactica Opera Omnia*, published by John Amos Comenius in 1657. The heated disputes of the time dealt in part with such considerations as whether the grammar of ordinary Latin (Vulgar Latin or *Sermo Vulgaris*, "common speech") was applicable or even useful to the study of high literary prose.

In contemporary language research, the emergence of research on the distinctions between various language genres and analyses of corpora have in a sense extended to similar deliberations of the differences between spoken and written grammars. In general terms, analyses of written language and grammar strongly dominate corpus and genre studies (Biber, Conrad, & Leech, 2002). Researchers of various corpora have long contended that spoken and written grammar are distinct. On the other hand, in his review and synthesis of numerous corpus analyses, Leech (2000) asserts that, in spoken and written English, the types of grammar features are the same, but they are employed with different frequencies.

In most pedagogical grammars, the variations between spoken and written forms have received uneven attention (Folse, 2016, Richards & Reppen, 2016, Leech & Svarvik, 2002). The reasons for the typical slighting of spoken grammar in language teaching are often practical and expeditious. As Leech (2000, p. 715) points out, "grammar plays a lesser role in the total communication process in speech than in writing. This is yet another reason why, for learners, new understandings of spoken grammar need to be integrated in a larger discourse framework, rather than treated as 'another thing to be taught.'"

Testing Research: Discourse Contexts and Grammar

In the past several decades, a relatively large number of research reports and pedagogical grammars have been published to elucidate language features, including grammar, associated with particular types of discourse, contexts, and communicative purposes. Some of these investigations account for the characteristics of speech and writing in naturally occurring language to advance knowledge and linguistic theory. On the other hand, large organizations that design and develop language tests study

discourse contexts and language uses with the goal of validating their products. As a result, a great many empirical studies have been carried out to describe discourse contexts and language functions that can be typically expected of most L2 users.

Research on grammar attributes in spoken and written English has been conducted by major testing organizations, such as the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate (UCLES), currently operating as Cambridge Michigan Language Assessments (CaMLA).[3] Both language testing organizations are among the most prestigious in the world and have long traditions of research in the discourse and language required in different types of communication.

In dozens of studies, the findings clearly indicate that the importance of grammar among L2 production skills cannot be underestimated. According to the criteria developed for the purposes of evaluating L2 communication, grammar range and accuracy are paramount (Biber & Gray, 2013; Buck, 2001; Powers et al., 2009). Practically all publications disseminated by ETS and CaLMA "make explicit the importance of grammatical ability when describing the criteria for rating the writing and speaking" skills (Purpura, 2004, p. 191). All in all, much testing research has provided detailed descriptions of L2 contexts and language skills needed to conduct communication, not the least of which centers on grammar.

As one of the most prolific and best-funded organizations to conduct linguistic studies, ETS designs and produces several major worldwide tests, such as the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and the TOEIC (the Test of English for International Communication). Dozens of ETS research reports and monographs have examined the communicative contexts of spoken and written discourse, and their findings serve as a foundation for the development of their test tasks. The TOEFL content is geared toward academic language uses, settings, and functions suitable for L2 learners in high schools, colleges, and universities. The TOEFL language production tasks entail both spoken and written texts, and the grammar features requisite for completing the test items are also likely to be academically oriented.

On the other hand, the TOEIC is intended for language proficiency testing in the workplace and for employment. The test is considered to be appropriate for employees in practically any category of businesses and organizations and for practically any work-related task, such as travel, banking, entertainment, meetings, and making various arrangements (e.g. ticket, restaurant, and hotel reservations). The TOEIC also deals with spoken and written language, but the test's discourse contexts are markedly different from those covered in the TOEFL (more on this later in this chapter) (Powers, et al., 2009). Interactional settings and language uses addressed on the TOEIC are designed to be far more conversational, interactional, and informal than those found on the TOEFL (Powers, 2010). The grammar attributes, discourse, and language on the two tests are also clearly distinct.

CaMLA similarly provides relatively detailed descriptions of spoken and written tasks, and the test is designed to be appropriate for a broad array of institutional functions, such as proficiency measures at college and university levels, language programs, K-12 schooling, as well as employment and the workplace. Because the test covers a wide diversity of discourse contexts, the range of grammar on the test tasks would necessitate both formal and informal language uses. Recently, CaMLA tests have been aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), adopted by the Council of Europe to establish common language requirements in 32 languages. CEFR provides comprehensive and detailed descriptions of the tasks that L2 learners have to accomplish and the productive language skills needed for effective communication in employment and educational settings at six proficiency levels.

To be sure, standardized language tests have almost always placed a high value on grammar skills. ETS publications state explicitly that grammar usage constitutes one of the main criteria for measuring L2 proficiency as a broad construct. For instance, as Biber and Gray (2013) point out in their

ETS-commissioned report: "Numerous empirical studies have directly documented the association of the[se] core lexico-grammatical features with language development and proficiency" and "studies indicate that any lexico-grammatical feature that distinguishes among spoken and written registers will probably also be an important indicator of language development and proficiency" (p. 10).

Overall, the three dominant proficiency tests probably identify and describe discourse types and productive language tasks that, in all likelihood, can be required of all language users on the planet at one time or another. Table 27.1 summarizes discourse and language contexts outlined on the three tests: the TOEFL, the TOEIC, and CaMLA. The summary is concerned only with the productive L2 skills and tasks (i.e. speaking and writing).

Table 27.1 Discourse Types and Language Production Tasks Required in the Three Dominant Language Tests

Speaking

TOEFL*

Scoring Dimensions

Delivery—pace and clarity of speech: pronunciation, intonation, rate of speech, and degree of hesitancy
Language Use—vocabulary and grammar: range, complexity, precision, and automaticity, ability to select words and phrases and to produce structures that appropriately and effectively communicate ideas
Topic Development—response coherence and completeness: the progression of ideas, the degree of elaboration, the completeness and, in integrated tasks, the accuracy of the content

Test Tasks

- Express an opinion on a familiar topic
- Speak based on reading and listening tasks
- Participate in study groups and student interactions
- Participate in discussions and extracurricular activities
- Speak about: academic course content, campus situations, familiar topics

Settings and Situations (a few examples)

Academic topics, campus situations (e.g. dorms, off-campus apartments), travel (e.g. vacations, destinations), restaurants (food, likes, dislikes), laboratories (e.g. equipment, technology), computers, study groups (e.g. schedule, participants, arrangements), clubs, activities, tuition and fees

TOEIC**

Evaluation Criteria

- pronunciation
- intonation and stress
- grammar
- vocabulary
- cohesion
- relevance of content
- completeness of content

Test Tasks

- Read a text aloud
- Describe a picture
- Respond to questions (survey type)
- Respond to questions using information provided (e.g. schedule or agenda)
- Solve a problem—propose a solution, show that you recognize the problem, propose a way of dealing with the problem
- Express an opinion

Settings and Situations (a few examples)

Dining out (business and informal lunches, receptions), entertainment (cinema, theatre, music), finance and budgeting (banking, investments, taxes), general business (contracts, negotiations, mergers), health (insurance, visiting doctors, dentists), housing/corporate property (construction, buying and renting), manufacturing (assembly lines, quality control), offices (board meetings, committees, letters, email)

CaMLA

Key Areas of Spoken Language Performance

- fluency and intelligibility
- vocabulary range and relevance to task
- grammatical complexity and accuracy
- ability to successfully complete a specific task

Test Tasks

- Descriptions and presentations on complex subjects, integrating subthemes, developing particular points, and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion
- Systematically developed descriptions and presentations, with appropriate highlighting of significant points and relevant supporting detail
- Descriptions and presentations on a wide range of subjects related to his/her field of interest, expanding and supporting ideas with subsidiary points and relevant examples
- Sustained and straightforward description of one of a variety of subjects within his/her field of interest, presenting it as a linear sequence of points

Settings and Situations (a few examples)

Public—public spaces (streets, shops, restaurants, sports, or entertainment venues) and other social networks outside the home
Occupational—workplace settings (offices, workshops, conferences), etc.
Educational—schools, colleges, classrooms, residence halls, etc.

Writing

TOEFL*

The writing section is scored by

Integrated writing tasks—development, organization, grammar, vocabulary, accuracy and completeness
Independent writing essay—overall writing quality, including development, organization, grammar and vocabulary

Test Tasks

Integrated writing tasks:

- Write essay responses based on reading and listening texts
  - read a passage
  - then listen to a lecture that takes a position that is somehow different from the position presented in the reading passage
- Write a summary in connected English prose of important points made in the listening passage and explain how these relate to the key points of the reading passage. Suggested response length is 150–225 words.

Independent writing essay:

- Write an essay that states, explains, and supports your opinion on an issue. An effective essay will usually contain a minimum of 300 words.
- Support your opinions or choices rather than simply list personal preferences or choices.
- Typical essay questions begin with statements such as:
  - Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Use reasons and specific details to support your answer.
  - Some people believe [X]. Other people believe [Y]. Which of these two positions do you prefer/agree with? Give reasons and specific details.

TOEIC**

Evaluation Criteria

- Grammar
- Relevance of the sentences to the pictures
- Quality and variety of sentences
- Vocabulary
- Organization
- Whether the opinion is supported with reasons and/or examples

(*Continued*)

Table 27.1 (Continued)

Test Tasks

- Write a sentence based on a picture
- Respond to a written request (e.g. email)
- Write an opinion essay (e.g. in response to a question that asks you to state, explain and support your opinion on an issue). Typically, an effective essay will contain a minimum of 300 words.

CaMLA**

Key Areas of Written Language Performance:

- grammatical accuracy
- vocabulary range
- mechanics and spelling
- cohesion and organization
- task completion and relevance

Test Tasks

Produce written language at the sentence and paragraph levels and to produce a short essay.

- **Task 1**: short responses on a related theme
  - relate a life experience
  - express an opinion about it
  - elaborate on the situation
- **Task 2**: compare and contrast essay with supporting details

* (Wei & Llosa, 2015; Xi &Mollaun, 2009); retrieved from http://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/scores/understand; https://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/about/content/; https://www.ets.org/s/toefl/pdf/toefl_writing_rubrics.pdf; https://www.ets.org/Media/Tests/TOEFL/pdf/Writing_Rubrics.pdf;

** Retrieved from https://www.ets.org/toeic/speaking_writing/about/content/, https://www.ets.org/Media/Tests/TOEIC/pdf/TOEIC_Speaking_and_Writing_Examinee_Handbook.pdf; https://www.etsglobal.org/Tests-Preparation/The-TOEIC-Tests/TOEIC-Speaking-Writing-Tests/Scores-Overview; https://www.cambridgemichigan.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/CaMLA-Speaking-Test-Dev-Report.pdf, http://www.cambridgemichigan.org/institutions/products-services/tests/placement-progress/camla-writing-test/

According to the criteria presented in Table 27.1, productive L2 uses in context and on the tasks on major proficiency instruments "strive to match the types of language-use tasks found in real-life or language-instructional domains" (Purpura, 2004, p. 126). The majority of testing research reports also demonstrate that L2 tests rely on findings on when, where, and how language is used by speakers and writers, as well as the overarching impact of grammar on the effectiveness of communication (Biber, 2006; Biber & Gray, 2013; Buck, 2001; Ellis, 2005, 2006; Hinkel, 2004, 2015).

On the three tests, L2 speaking contexts consist of the following:

- a mixture of formal and informal interactions in colleges, universities, workplace, offices, meetings, and casual gatherings
- formal spoken discourse mainly in classroom discussions, student interactions with faculty, presentations in higher education and on-the-job, and meetings
- informal conversational interactions that are likely to occur with greater frequencies and in diverse settings (e.g. hotels, restaurants, airport lounges, or picnics)

Similarly, formal writing takes place in specific and well-defined contexts, such as in university assignments and academic papers, as well as on-the-job reports, email messages, proposals, and memoranda.

Although the specific grammar features are not outlined in detail, in both speaking and writing, grammar accuracy and complexity occupy one of the highest priorities. On the writing tests in particular, grammar usage and accuracy are considered to be the top indicator of L2 proficiency overall.

Regrettably, however, based on the published L2 testing criteria, the main conundrum of how to prioritize grammar teaching remains unresolved.

Research-Based Guidelines for Prioritizing Grammar Teaching

Several world-class experts on English grammar for teaching and learning have proposed principled and research-based recommendations for prioritizing what grammar to teach.

Michael Swan states clearly that "grammar points in the course book may not all be equally important for a particular class" (2002, p. 148). Swan (2002, 2006) elaborates on seven bad reasons that often serve as a basis for prioritizing grammar teaching. The bad reasons are as follows: grammar is taught because (1) it is there; (2) it is tidy unlike vocabulary or pronunciation; (3) it is testable; (4) it is a security blanket for both teachers and learners; (5) teachers studied grammar as students and, therefore, they teach it to their students; (6) grammar has to be taught as a whole system; and (7) it can represent power in the form of rules, examinations, and social control.

On the other hand, Swan's two good reasons for prioritizing grammar teaching are:

- comprehensibility
- social acceptability

Because the purpose of learning grammar is to communicate successfully, the grammar structures necessary for communication should be identified and taught because "without structures, it is difficult to make comprehensible sentences" (Swan, 2002, p. 151). According to Swan, in social contexts, serious deviance from accepted grammar norms can weigh against the learner and lead to prejudice. Such situations are in fact commonly encountered in employment, examinations, or dealing with authorities. Swan further states: "what points of grammar we choose to teach will therefore depend on our circumstances and our learners' aims" (p. 152).

Rod Ellis emphasizes that the entire range of canonical grammar features is probably not suitable or necessary for instruction (Ellis, 2002). Ellis recommends that selecting grammar for teaching be approached from the vantage point of "cognitive difficulty" (Ellis, 2006, p. 88):

1. Teach those forms that differ from the learners' first language.
2. Teach marked rather than unmarked forms.

Ellis explains, however, that neither of these principles for grammar choices is without its problems, simply because "we do not yet know enough about" (p. 89) many essential cognitive variables that crucially impact L2 learning. Ellis points out that the first principle is the one adopted in the early structural school of thought, and it pivots on the transfer hypothesis that extends to the contrastive analysis of learners' L1s and L2s. This approach does not constitute a sound basis for prioritizing grammar structures. The second principle has also proved to be "somewhat opaque" (Ellis, 2006): the concept of markedness (i.e. a grammatical structure that can be "infrequent, unnatural, and deviant from a regular pattern") is often difficult to apply with precision.

Jan Hulstijn presents research on the effectiveness of grammar instruction. He argues that difficult, complex, or lexicalized grammar rules should be taught. On the other hand, easily accessible grammar characteristics can be left to the learners to acquire without explicit instruction. Hulstijn (1995) specifies five principled criteria that determine whether grammar rules should be taught:

- the frequency of occurrence of language construction
- the reliability of the rule

- the scope of the rule (the number of items to which the rule applies)
- receptive or productive uses of the rules
- the ease and comprehensibility of the explanation

However, a degree of caution is needed when selecting grammar rules of instruction: there are probably very few linguistic phenomena that prove to be regular and reliable in every case (Hulstijn & De Graaff, 1994). Furthermore, form-meaning-context relationships invariably add to the complexity of rule applications. Hulstijn (1995) also points out that the effect of grammar teaching may not be noticeable immediately in productive L2 uses, but it is likely to be helpful in language learning in the long run.

Keith Folse proposes guidelines for instructional decisions regarding what grammar features to teach and in what settings. Folse's (2016, p. 66) approach seems unambiguous: "in all teacher decisions about what to teach, when to teach it, how to teach it, how to practice it, and even how to test it, we should always keep our focus clear: learner needs." However, learners' needs can vary substantially according to their long-term goals and teaching curricula.

As Folse indicates, teachers in various locations and educational settings around the world are the ones who need to determine "which grammar points merit more and less instructional time, but their informed decisions should be solidly based on learner needs" (2016, p. 80). For example, learners who have the goal of passing exams are likely to have different needs from students who would like to engage in L2 conversations or become proficient academic writers. According to Folse, the findings of corpus analyses can be fruitful for examining the saliency and usefulness of what is taught in L2 grammar classes (i.e. which grammar points to teach and which to omit).

Vocational and Academic Priorities for Grammar Teaching

Additional criteria for prioritizing grammar for teaching are geared toward specific types of L2 learners whose needs are determined by their language experiences and educational goals. These individuals can be enrolled in, for instance, classes for adult immigrants, intensive pre-academic programs, or college and university writing courses. For broadly diverse learning needs, the contents and objectives of grammar instruction are usually determined by the curricula adopted in these institutions. The guidelines for prioritizing grammar teaching may be more narrowly identified when learners' educational aims are relatively well-known and established.

A very brief synopsis summarizes recommendations for prioritizing grammar constructions for three types of L2 learners:

- adult learners preparing for employment and vocations
- school-age students
- academic university writers

In teaching *adult L2 learners in vocational education*, Savage, Bitterlin, and Price (2010, p. 4) refer to grammar as "an enabling skill," motivator, and "a means to self-sufficiency." Grammar is essential in all language skills, for example, listening to ensure comprehension, speaking in job interviews, reading directions, and writing to fill out forms and applications. According to these authors, for such adults, two important factors govern grammar priorities:

(1) communicative purposes for speaking and writing on-the-job, as well as daily tasks outside the classroom (e.g. children's teachers, friends, or neighbors)
(2) the contexts in which learners use English (e.g. "riding a bus, talking to a doctor," or shopping; p. 8)

Savage, Bitterlin, and Price outline the principles for prioritizing grammar teaching, which include the following:

(a) the relationship between a grammar structure and its functions (e.g. "giving advice" or speaking to "a subordinate or a supervisor"; p. 13)
(b) frequency of use
(c) necessity for conveying meaning (e.g. some grammar structures may be incorrect "but they are not crucial to meaning" (e.g. **John live*; p. 14)
(d) actual use, that is, omitting constructions that are not "commonly used," such as "*were* as used in the unreal conditional (*If I were married . . .*)" because "over time, *if I were* has been regularized to *if I was*" (ibid)[4]

The book emphasizes that selecting grammar to teach for teaching or omitting should be designed around the communicative needs of adult learners and the contexts of their daily activities.

For teaching grammar to *school-age students*, Derewianka and Jones (2010) present systemic-functional grammar as a social framework of interrelated choices required to build the text. While traditional and structural approaches envision grammar as a set of structures that can be "assessed as correct or incorrect" (p. 9), systemic-functional grammar sees language as a resource and a complex semiotic for constructing meanings and genres. Thus, teaching grammar can enable learners to think grammatically about language and to understand grammar as a meaning-making resource that is essential for schooling. In their examination of what grammar to teach and how to teach it, Derewianka and Jones present a view of grammar that extends beyond the sentence; that is, grammar patterns within and across whole texts, be it spoken or written. In this case, selecting grammar for instruction is "more a matter of what we want the model to do for our students" (p. 7).

To meet grammar learning needs of *college and university L2 academic writers*, Hinkel (2013) claims that teaching the whole range of English grammar is not particularly beneficial for learners. She states that grammar can be divided into two major areas:

- constructions that are essential in academic writing and that require intensive and persistent instruction
- constructions that are found in practically all L2 grammar teaching but are hardly ever used in written academic prose (e.g. outdated, rare, or conversational grammar structures, such as *to whom you are speaking* or *like she is totally so cool*)

Hinkel points out that, based on a large body of research in L1 and L2 university writing, the fundamental grammar that requires instruction encompasses sentence- and phrase-boundaries, frequently occurring verb tenses (e.g. the simple present and the simple past), discourse functions and uses of the passive voice, possibility and ability modals, hedging devices, reporting verbs, nominalizations, and impersonal *it*- constructions (e.g. *it seems* or *it is interesting*). In addition to academic grammar structures, however, important distinctions between conversational and formal written grammar also need to be addressed to help learners develop register differentiation skills.

Analyses and Hierarchies of Grammar Errors

There are probably few topics in L2 grammar teaching and learning that have created as much debate and controversy as grammar errors and their studies. It would be hard to find many teachers, researchers, or methodologists who do not have an opinion on learner errors and what to do about them. To further complicate matters and as an aside, it is important to mention that with the

proliferation of the use of English as a lingua franca practically everywhere in the world, what is seen as an error, what is not, and in what contexts has become a matter of considerable deliberation.

Systematic collecting, documenting, and classifying L2 production errors emerged as an area of study in the late 1950s. In recent decades, the studies of L2 grammar errors have been far less focused on their definitions and typologies. Rather, research has attempted to shed light on effective means of dealing with errors to improve L2 quality. The amount of work and the number of research reports on grammar errors are truly astounding. For this reason, the super-brief overview in this section covers only a couple of influential and ongoing developments.

As has been mentioned, *in spoken discourse*, it is not always easy to pinpoint the types and sources of L2 grammar errors when, for example, phonetic and phonological misrepresentations (e.g. in sound articulation, word stress, or intonation) may obscure accurate or inaccurate grammar usage. In particular, L2 speaking entails a broad array of converging subskills required for immediate deployment and without much leeway. For instance, some of the componential speaking abilities are, say, pragmatics (e.g. speech act formulations, politeness devices, or adherence to socio-linguistic norms), discourse flow and structuring, pausing, intonation, word stress, fluency, vocabulary, and overall comprehensibility (see the criteria for rating L2 speaking skills adopted on major standardized tests earlier in this chapter). Many empirical studies show clearly that, in L2 speaking, grammar errors are treated as far less severe than other classes of errors (e.g. inaccurate sound articulation or word stress) (Isaacs & Trofimovich, 2012; Kasper, 2001; Trofimovich & Isaacs, 2012). In fact, Kasper's thorough overview of the research on the impact of incremental L2 skills on spoken production quality concludes that grammar errors generally do not have a high priority, relative to potential shortfalls in the uses of other skills. As an outcome, assessing severity of errors that preclude the comprehension of speech cannot always be achieved consistently and reliably, and in some cases, can be close to impossible (Munro & Derwing, 1999; Rifkin & Roberts, 1995).

On the other hand, establishing hierarchies of *errors in L2 writing* seems to be a great deal easier to accomplish. In general terms, grammar errors occupy a much more prominent place by far in research on L2 writing than L2 speaking. For one thing, written errors can be more tangible and damaging than those in spoken discourse. It is well-known, however, that occurrences of errors can decline as learners attain greater L2 proficiencies and as their productive skills continue to improve (Ferris, 1999, 2011; Hinkel, 2011, 2015). Additionally, however, recent research has demonstrated that, for a majority of L2 writers, eliminating all grammar errors may be virtually impossible. Furthermore, while some types of sentence- and phrase-level errors can be reduced with experience, other classes of errors are a lot more difficult to eliminate.

Typically, error analyses set out to gauge the severity and importance of L2 grammatical inaccuracies (also called error gravity studies). The objectives of such investigations are usually to design and refine L2 curricula, uncover which specific errors interfere with comprehension, and promote learners' awareness of grammar uses. Numerous research reports have created hierarchies of errors that are considered to be more egregious than others because they can impede comprehension. The overarching purpose of error hierarchies is to enable L2 instruction and curricula to prioritize grammar teaching.

At present, Ferris's investigations (Ferris, 1999, 2003; Ferris & Roberts, 2001) of L2 grammar errors are widely considered to be the most comprehensive and well-regarded. Her findings and classification provide the following priorities for grammar teaching and learning:

- "most serious" (Ferris, 2011, p. 45) (also called grave errors) that can impede comprehension
- frequent and correctable errors that are patterned and rule-governed (Ferris, 1999)
- the effectiveness of error correction (i.e. error frequency reduction) and developing learners' skills to self-correct

Table 27.2 Types of Grammar Errors in Declining Order of Severity

Bates, Lane, and Lange (1993)	Ferris (2003, 2011), Ferris and Roberts (2001)	Raimes (1991, 2004)
Most Egregious Errors		
Verb tense form modals	Sentence structure: boundaries, unnecessary/ missing elements; unidiomatic expression	Sentence structure
Conditional sentence/ clause	Word choice: meaning, prepositions, pronouns	Sentence transitions, coordinating conjunctions
Active/passive voice	Verb tense form	Punctuation
Dependent clauses	Noun endings, singular and plural	Verb tense
Sentence structure	Punctuation	Subject-verb agreement
Word order	Articles/determiners	Active/passive voice
Sentence transitions	Word form: morphology	Modal verbs
Less Severe Errors		
Subject-verb agreement	Spelling	Verb form
Articles	Run-on sentences	Nouns and quantifiers
Noun endings, singular and plural	Pronouns	Articles
Word choice: morphology, meaning	Subject-verb agreement	Pronoun reference
Prepositions	Sentence fragments	Adjective/adverb form
	Miscellaneous: idioms, inappropriate register	Prepositions

On the whole, an impressive body of studies of L2 errors and their priorities portray a relatively detailed picture of grammar areas that require persistent instruction. Table 27.2 consolidates the findings of several key large-scale studies. Predictably, these investigations vary in their aims, methodologies, design, and findings. For example, Bates, Lane, and Lange (1993) provide extensive guidelines that are compiled in a manual for teaching error awareness and self-editing. Ferris (1999, 2003, 2011) puts forth a meticulous and comprehensive program for teachers to deal with L2 grammar errors systematically and consistently. Ferris's empirical results are derived from her longitudinal research on the severity and frequency of L2 errors in writing (Ferris, 2003, 2011; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Also, in a single-shot study, Raimes (1991) carried out a survey of composition faculty regarding their perceptions and evaluations of L2 grammar errors in university essays. The findings of Raimes's inquiry are reflected in her textbooks and grammar manuals for students, all of which have been re-issued in multiple editions. Given their somewhat disparate nature, the hierarchies of important error types also differ from one study to the next.

To summarize, based on the studies of errors, the gist of high-priority grammar features to be addressed in teaching includes the following:

- sentence structure and boundaries, as well as complex sentences
- the verb phrase—tenses, the passive voice, and subject-verb agreement
- punctuation

Overall, error studies typically adopt the view that L2 writers' abilities are a work in progress and are developmental at least to some extent. Taken together, the findings of error analyses lay a foundation for prioritizing grammar instruction and curricula, with the ultimate goal of improving students' grammar range and quality.

Corpus Analysis Findings: Grammar to Learn and Use

Analyses of large language corpora seek to identify all manner of patterns in naturally occurring spoken and written language. In this technological age, many corpora are available, and the results of their analyses are published widely. One of the important and stated purposes of corpus studies is to provide empirical foundations for prioritizing pedagogical grammars (Biber, Conrad, & Leech, 2002). Usually, corpus analysts regard the descriptions of authentic and real language to be far superior to those found in language textbooks that reflect authors' intuitions, traditions, and anecdotal evidence (Biber & Reppen, 2002).

Corpus researchers have long emphasized that, for teaching, the benefits of natural language analyses are hard to match. Such databases permit representations of transcribed spoken and written texts in practically any genre available (e.g. conversations, formal speeches, university lectures, journalistic writing, fiction, or academic prose). Grammar investigations of corpora can describe constructions that occur (or do not) in a great variety of language contexts.

When it comes to grammar teaching and learning, corpus findings identify three strategic factors that should serve as guidelines for prioritizing grammar pedagogy (Biber, Conrad, & Leech, 2002; Biber & Reppen, 2002; McEnery & Hardie, 2012):

- frequencies of uses
- comparisons of constructions across different text types (e.g. the passive voice is far more characteristic of written academic prose than of virtually any spoken genre, or the simple present tense dominates in conversations, compared to the present progressive)
- associations between grammar constructions and specific words (lexico-grammar); for example, both in speech and writing, the most common verbs followed by infinitives (*to*) are *want, try, seem*, and *like*, but other verbs accompanied by infinitives are far less prevalent.

Corpus analysts have contended for decades that the decisions for prioritizing grammar teaching should reflect natural language as it occurs in real life. The three strategic factors mentioned previously are clearly relevant for selecting grammar for instruction. However, it is equally important to note that additional considerations can intervene in immensely varied and variable contexts of L2 teaching and learning.

For instance, learners in English as a Foreign Language settings may not be particularly concerned with the frequencies of grammar features in native speaker corpora (Swan, 2006). Furthermore, the issues of difficulty, learnability, usefulness, relevance, and cultural access have to be taken into account in corpus-based L2 pedagogy and instructional materials (Widdowson, 2000).

Although many researchers and methodologists are confident that corpus findings can make grammar teaching far more effective and efficient, critical complications in corpus-based priorities may simply hinge on the essential characteristics of how language is employed and learned in daily life.

A couple of examples are noted as follows. As Hulstijn (1995) notes (see the previous section on "Research-Based Guidelines"), highly frequent grammar constructions are often learned effortlessly and incidentally in the course of L2 exposure. According to frequency-driven recommendations,

the 12 most common English verbs (Biber, Conrad, & Leech, 2002; Biber & Reppen, 2002) are as follows:

say, get, go, know, think, see, make, come, take, want, give, mean

However, because these verbs are encountered ubiquitously, it seems that covering them in language lessons may not be the most efficient and fruitful use of instructional time (Hinkel, 2004, 2015). The same can be said about such constructions as *want/try/seem/like + to* infinitive in, say, *like to travel* or *want to go*.

Other high-frequency grammar constructions recommended for teaching may simply defy instruction (Hinkel, 2004, 2015). For instance, contextual uses of the definite article *the* are extremely common in both speech and writing (Biber & Conrad, 2010). However, its uses appear to be lexicalized and difficult to teach. For one thing, the definite article rules can be abstract and not easily applied in context. The following guidelines on the usage of *the* are provided for instruction:

- The noun was introduced previously in the text.
- Shared situational context specifies the noun.
- Modifiers of the noun specify the noun.
- The specific noun can be inferred from earlier discourse.

Although such corpus-based rules and descriptions might be more authentic than those found in grammar textbooks, it may well be that accurate uses of the definite article do not easily lend themselves to instruction.

In sum, the findings of corpus analyses can serve as general and beneficial pointers for prioritizing grammar teaching. While highly frequent constructions are likely to be straightforward to learn without much teaching, the distinctions between the grammar of speaking and formal writing may warrant deliberate attention. Undoubtedly, though, in a great number of suitable contexts, prioritizing specific grammar features for instruction and textbook materials can profit from corpus analysis findings.

Conclusions and Future Research Directions

Relatively accurate grammar is an essential tool for producing comprehensible sentences that can become a part of coherent text. As has been demonstrated, debated, considered, examined, explained, attested, and argued, not all L2 grammar errors are created equal. They vary greatly in terms of their severity, frequency, type, context, or effects on spoken—but mostly written—text clarity and comprehensibility. An overview of research shows that, at present, much is known about the common and recurrent types of grammar constructions that can profit from prioritizing and thorough instruction.

Currently, research conclusions are somewhat mixed on which grammar features to teach, which to omit, as well as which errors to correct, how to correct them, when, and with what frequency. Countless (i.e., no one counted them) studies of grammar uses in speech and writing indicate that in practically all L2 learning contexts, the quality of productive skills can benefit from work on grammatical accuracy and range. Although in theory the value of prioritized grammar instruction has been debated by researchers and methodologists alike, the basic fact is that "without grammar very little can be conveyed" Wilkins (1972, p. 111). While numerous and raucous debates continue, some degree of accuracy in grammar takes a priority in producing spoken and written text. One

consideration, however, is not subject to much debate: in grammar instruction, the first order of business is to identify learners' grammar needs and objectives. Prioritizing grammar teaching can rely on two rather invariable factors in any context: what specific types of learners need to know and should be able to do.

Notes

1. In this chapter, the term *second language* (L2) refers to a language that a person learns in addition to his or her first language (even when it is his or her third or fourth language), as well as a foreign and/or an additional language.
2. An extensive, raucous, and ongoing debate on whether grammar should or should not be taught is not addressed in this chapter because it was discussed in chapters on grammar teaching and learning in Volumes 1 and 2 of the handbook.
3. Cambridge Michigan Language Assessments is a joint venture of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate that merged with the Michigan English Test office in 2010.
4. The accuracy of grammar and language descriptions that are found throughout Savage, Bitterlin, and Price (2010) is not addressed in this chapter. However, some of the language and grammar constructions advocated in that book may be of interest to sociolinguists. The language features recommended for instruction and curricula in adult education for immigrants—to help them secure and maintain employment—may appear to be specific and socially marked.

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