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Current Issues in Grammar Teaching

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Abstract:

The current paper will look at certain trends of grammar instruction in recent years and present some perspectives on current challenges and issues concerning the role of grammar in language teaching and learning. Firstly, definitions of "grammar" and "grammar teaching" will be provided. Secondly, historical background information about how modern grammar teaching has appeared will be given. Finally, some key points and current issues regarding the grammar instruction in a foreign/ second language will be discussed by drawing on contemporary theories and research in language education.

Keywords: grammar teaching, the role of grammar in language teaching, current issues in grammar teaching, approaches in grammar instruction.

Introduction

The research into how learners acquire a language has enabled to gain an understanding about how grammar of a foreign/second language can be taught. However, there exists a reasonable number of debatable points on grammar instruction. When and how grammar should be taught to language learners is still a controversial issue; and grammar teaching is an area that has been subject to much research and discussions in language teaching. Many researchers and language teachers believe that pedagogic grammar is of great significance in second language acquisition (SLA); on the other hand, some others believe that grammar of a second language cannot be taught in an implicit way. Although it has been disputed quite often whether grammar plays an important role in language learning, latest developments suggests that "grammar cannot be discarded from foreign language pedagogy"; form and meaning should not be separated from one another; they should complement each other (Saraceni, 2008:165). Some linguists also place much emphasis on intense use of grammar in language teaching (Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Lightbown & Spada, 1993).

Nassaji and Fotos (2011:1) underline the vital role of grammar by stating that "grammar is fundamental to language; without grammar, language does not exist". As Richards (2002) also points out, grammar teaching has regained its importance in language teaching field. In the same vein, Brown (2001) says that quite a few language teaching experts defend the zero option of no-formed focused instruction, which was recommended by Krashen and Terrell (1983). Studies also reveal that in the past hundred years there have been a number of popular methods in language classrooms at different times, and it turns out that the major difference while choosing a method is the function of grammar and significance given to grammar instruction.

Defining "Grammar" and "Grammar Teaching"

Notions of grammar have had changes throughout the years. Cobbett (1819) wrote in the last century:

> "Grammar . . . teaches us how to make use of words; that is to say, it teaches us how to make use of them in the proper manner . . . to be able to choose the words which ought to be placed, we must be acquainted with certain principles and rules; these principles and rules constitute what is called grammar".

In recent years, grammarians are paying more attention than in Cobbet's day to describing language as it is used. Widdowson (1988:152) defines grammar as "a device for indicating the most common and recurrent aspects of meaning, which formalizes the most widely applicable concepts, the highest common factors of experience: it provides for communicative economy". Nunan, (1991:97) gives in his chapter a detailed explanation as in the following:

> "Grammar is (1) an analysis of the structure of a language, either as encountered in a corpus of speech or writing or as predictive of a speaker's knowledge, (2) an analysis of the structural properties which define human language, (3) a level of structural organization which can be studied independently of phonology and semantics".

Generally, grammar teaching is regarded as the presentation and practice of grammatical structures. Ur (1996) put some additions to his chapter titled "Teaching Grammar", which involves sections on "presenting and explaining grammar" and "grammar

practice activities". Similarly, Hedge (2000) deals with "presenting grammar" and "practicing grammar" in her work titled "Grammar". On the other hand, Ellis (2006:84) provides a lot broader definition of grammar teaching as in the following:

> "Grammar teaching involves any instructional technique that draws learners' attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps them either to understand it metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they can internalize it".

Historical Background

Whether explicit grammar instruction is vitally important in second or foreign language teaching has always been a notable issue for major methodological approaches during the past twenty-five years. Four main approaches which shall be looked into are the audio-lingual approach, cognitive code approach, comprehension approach, and various communicative approaches in this section.

The audio-lingual approach had ruled language teaching area in the USA for a long time. This approach placed more emphasis on speech and oral skills, and rejected explicit grammar teaching more strictly. The learners were supposed to acquire grammar with the help of mechanical drills. Grammar points were taught from simple to more complex structures, learning a language was regarded as a habit formation; hence imitating forms and memorizing certain sentence structures were utilized to provide rules. Learners' errors were seen as bad habits, which should be corrected by teachers, and the interferences from the first language were told to bring about these errors (Celce-Murcia, 2001).

The cognitive code approach, having appeared mainly as a response to the behaviorist characteristics of audio-lingualism, was heavily drawn by Chomsky's (1959) work in generative grammar. Language learning was regarded as rule acquisition and hypothesis formation, not habit formation, and grammar was viewed significant. Grammar structures were given deductively or inductively, determined by the learners' choices. Errors, which were seen both as normal language development and as transfer from the first language, were accepted inevitable. Perfection was considered unreachable and unrealistic (Celce-Murcia, 2001).

With regard to the comprehension approach, it depended on the idea that comprehension is quite significant; thus, it should come before production during 1970s and

1980s. This approach suggests that production can be delayed for the best comprehension at the first stage, and learners should be encouraged to resort to nonverbal reactions to show their understanding. Some proponents like Asher (1977) believe that grammar structures should be carefully ordered, whereas some others (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) believe that grammar instruction does not help learners acquire a second language; and it should be discarded from the classroom since they think that grammar instruction only enables learners to become aware of the forms presented. Moreover, they feel that errors will disappear slowly as learners experience more complicated and comprehensible input during language learning process.

The communicative approach, which appeared in 1970s, view language as a tool for communication. Wilkins (1976) brings forward that the goal of language teaching is communication; the syllabus should be developed around activities, projects, semantic notions, pragmatic functions. In other words, the syllabuses should not be designed around grammar; and language teaching should be meaningful, contextualized, content-based and discourse-based. In this approach, the teacher facilitates communication and language use, give feedback, and correct errors (Celce-Murcia, 2001). On the other hand, among advocates of this approach, some debate is still taking place regarding the type of grammar instruction, nature, grammar awareness activities, and when and how teachers should make corrections of learners' errors.

Current Issues in Grammar Instruction

The role of grammar has been a debatable subject along the history of second language teaching as mentioned above. Richards (2002) believes that it is even the most controversial. Similarly, Thornburry (2001) suggests that there have been no other issues that have been heavily disputed by theorists and practitioners. These discussions have given rise to various arguments. Some believe that grammar should be given importance in language teaching, and some others defend that grammar should not be taught.

Throughout the past years, one of the current issues that have been heavily discussed has been explicit grammar instruction (EGI), which functions to draw students' attention and to get students to focus on structure, received much attention; and focus on meaning was neglected in second or foreign language instruction, but in the last forty years the role of explicit grammar instruction in a second and foreign language classes has altered radically

from grammar translation to audio-lingual, later from audio-lingual to cognitive, and ultimately from cognitive to communicative approaches.

The grammar translation is principally based on the view that grammar skills should be developed to use grammatical terminology and to identify specific morphological and syntactic features of language. With the advent of audio-lingualism, dialogues and pattern drills were quite structured and strictly provided to learners. Advocates of the cognitive approach emphasized that learners should comprehend the grammatical structures in order to use the target language for communicative purposes.

With the emergence of communicative approaches, which are based on notional syllabus, the principal role of grammar in language classes has changed; explicit grammar instruction has taken peripheral position with functional and communicative activities that facilitate performance in four basic skills. Heavy grammar, which is not so beneficial for in daily usage of language, has been disfavored (Terrell, 1991).

On the other hand, early research revealed that language learners seem to acquire language in a natural order. They pick up grammatical forms in a certain and universal order. This brought some researchers like Corder (1967) to point out that there was a built-in syllabus in learners' mind in order to learn grammar. Similarly, Krashen (1982) suggested that grammar did not have a role in language acquisition, which was dependent on the view that the built-in syllabus helps learners to progress automatically if they are subject to comprehensible, sufficient input. He also argued that second language studies favor the idea that knowing how grammatical structures work in the target language explicitly is not obligatory and adequate. Additionally, Krashen (1982) articulated the non-interface position, which is primarily the notion that grammar instruction does not affect the development of productive ability even though some grammar structures can help learning when sufficient time is given to apply, but it is limited since communicative ability is dependent on acquisition. However, Garrett (1986:134) emphasizes the existence of the paradox that "grammatical competence must be an integral part of communicative competence, but learning grammar does not seem to help students achieve either". In this respect, Rutherford (1988:172) says that the question is "not whether to impart to the learner a knowledge of the language system but rather how we might go about it". In return, Garrett (1986:134) answered as follows: "instead of asking how we should teach grammar, we need first to determine and analyze the basic notion of what grammar is". Hence, before potential

advantages of grammar pedagogy (PG) are appropriately assessed, the definition of effective grammar pedagogy should be provided. Pienemann's (1985) suggested that teaching grammar can facilitate acquisition and attainment, but it may not change the stages in which learners go through progress between not knowing and knowing grammatical structures. In this regard, the arguments are basically grounded on developmental stages rather than orders of acquisition.

A number of studies were carried out for the purpose of comparing the order of acquisition of individuals who are given instruction and learned naturally (Pica, 1983), comparing instructed and naturalistic learners' performances (Long, 1983), and examining trials of teaching particular grammatical structures end up with their acquisition (White, 1991). These studies indicated that for instructed and naturalistic learners the order of acquisition was the same in spite of some differences. In addition, instructed learners were found to achieve higher than naturalistic learners. Consequently, it was interpreted that instructed learners showed much higher levels of proficiency. Long (1988) also reached a conclusion that the order in morphology and syntax acquisition remained almost unaffected by grammar instruction, and he further added that grammar had to be taught considering the natural process of acquisition; in this way teaching grammar would be relatively useful. Long also put an emphasis that tendencies to overuse grammatical morphology differentiated instructed learners from naturalistic learners at all proficiency levels. Pica (1994, as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2003) provided a summary of research which indicated that instruction improved the speed of acquisition of easy-to-learn items and items that are close to the first language. Pica additionally found that learners with no formal instruction showed tendency to turn to production strategies of omission. White (1987) gave a description of some L2 information which would be unreachable if it were not emphasized, since in evidence it may not be observed. Ellis (2006) explained another research in his article by Norris & Ortega (2000), which showed how effective grammar instruction was. The evidence is that instruction supported both learned knowledge and acquired knowledge.

In short, there exists evidence that favors grammar instruction but research to date has not demonstrated that explicit grammar instruction is a key factor in second language acquisition. It has turned out that grammar instruction may accelerate the acquisition process, and enable learners to keep clear of particular production strategies like omission. Nevertheless, the effects of explicit grammar instruction on second language acquisition has not been explained sufficiently, which still remains indefinite. Rather, it can possibly be said

that it is useful for learners to be instructed about grammar of the target language at a certain point.

Styles of teaching grammar

Deductive teaching to grammar instruction, which is rule-driven learning, includes the presentation of rules and examples (Thornburry, 2001). Teaching starts with presentation of rules and continues with practice of rules. Due to the fact that this approach has some weaknesses, it has not been applied to for quite a long time. It does not help to achieve the current purpose of language learning and teaching, which is oral communication, as written language was placed too much emphasis. Furthermore, learners get too overwhelmed with grammatical explanations and rules, which may bore or frustrate learners.

Ellis (2006) reports the fact that acquisition of grammar includes learning the rules and practicing them has been validated with convincing empirical verifications. Consequently, deductive approach to grammar teaching receives less attention than inductive approach. In spite of all these weaknesses, one advantage of deductive approach is that it is time-saving; and numerous grammatical structures could be clarified more easily than they are drawn by learners through the examples presented (Thornburry, 2001).

In Inductive Approach, known as discovery learning, examples are given first, and learners are expected to reach the rule. This is a similar procedure to the first language education. Learners acquire the rules subconsciously through peripheral attention to forms and structures by being exposed to comprehensible input (Thornburry, 2001).

Brown (2001) states that because of certain reasons inductive grammar instruction is more suitable. First, it is highly compatible with the concept of inter-language development and natural language acquisition. Second, it enables learners to develop more intrinsic motivation through discovery learning; learners can have a communicative feeling during classroom activities. Presenting grammar inductively also helps learners reach generalizations about structures of grammar through various practices and examples.

Even though these two main approaches to grammar instruction appear to relate to Krashen's acquisition vs. learning, Krashen (1985) notes that both inductive and deductive approach are in fact learning, but not acquisition. According to him, acquisition is mainly pertinent to improving first language abilities, whereas learning is more concerned with the development of second language abilities. That is to say; acquisition is a subconscious

procedure of implicit learning in which human acquire their mother tongue without exposure to formal instruction. However, learning is studying grammatical structures consciously, which is often connected to foreign language education.

Consciousness Raising and Noticing

Consciousness Raising (CR) includes both deductive and inductive approach. In other words, CR appears as a synthesis of these two approaches. According to Rutherford (1987:189), consciousness raising can be defined as "the drawing of the learners' attention to features of the target language".

Celce-Murcia (2001) puts forward that repeated noticing and awareness of language forms help to raise students' consciousness of structures and to enable students to restructure learners' unconsciousness system of linguistic knowledge. Hence, when students afterwards come across linguistic form that is taught in grammar lessons in communicative input, they will recognize it and remember that they have learned about it before. Through such frequent occasions, students' unconscious language system develops new hypothesis about target language structures that students will test again unconsciously through noticing the input and getting feedback on their own output. That is to say; explicit knowledge gained by means of formal instruction results in the acquisition of the target feature.

Nunan (1991) underlines that CR does not accept the separation of conscious learning and subconscious acquisition. Learning should occur by exposing learners to language input, and the items that are learned will contribute to the acquisition of input subject to learners with the help of noticing. It is principally inductive even though it seems to be the synthesis of deductive and inductive approach because it begins with learners' exposure to input.

Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990) has led to the development of "consciousness raising" teaching methods that promote noticing and awareness of target language structures, which is a good example of focus-on-form approach attracting students' attention to forms in lessons where meaningful activities take place. These activities involve only implicit grammar instruction and communicative activities with target structures in which students pay attention to these target forms so as to perform communicative tasks successfully.

CR might be regarded as a way of problem solving; learners reach conclusions from what they notice, and regulate their thought based on the conclusions that they reach (Willis & Willis, 1996). CR can also be considered as facilitator for grammar acquisition, but does

not affect directly communicative competence or fluency (Rutherford, 1987). In the same line with this, Ellis (1993) further agrees that CR does not require learners to produce a particular structure of grammar; only helps them to notice and comprehend how a particular structure works. As it is understood, noticing is of great significance, which Ellis (1993:11) calls as "an interpretation grammar activity", and also adds:

> "An interpretation grammar activity . . . a listening activity as opposed to a production   grammar activity. . . would provide learners with a very structured input, structured in the sense that the input would have been manipulated to contain examples of the particular grammatical structure that you wanted to teach. In addition, the task would require learners to listen to this input in order to identify the meaning of the sentences containing this particular structure".

To sum up, CR is an approach to teaching grammar that has a significant role in teaching grammar; it is, on the other hand, challenging to define precisely because of its nature (Nunan, 1991). Noticing and raising awareness is of vital importance for acquisition; learners are supposed to create hypothesis about the language by making connections between the language they have acquired and newly learned items.

Focus on Forms, Focus on Form, and Focus on Meaning

How to teach grammar most effectively in second or foreign language classrooms has always been an intriguing issue in research and discussions. Throughout the past years, discussions have taken place regarding the place of grammar in different language teaching methodologies. In recent years, second language research and discussions on grammar instruction have principally focused on three major concepts in grammar teaching; namely "focus-on-forms", "focus-on-meaning", and "focus-on-form" (Long, 1991). Current studies have been conducted to compare the effectiveness of these three approaches, and indicated that focus-on form is more effective than focus-on-forms and meaning-based instruction with respect to language acquisition, more accurate language use, and longer retention of forms (Norris & Ortega,2001; Ellis, 2002).

Among these three important grammar instruction approaches, "focus-on-forms" is the traditional one, which is clearly seen in grammar-translation, audio-lingual, direct, and cognitive approaches. In this approach, students primarily focus on form (accuracy), language

is presented in isolated linguistic parts. Also, the easiest subjects come before and more complex ones are taught later by explaining grammar rules explicitly and giving students immediate feedback (Long,2000). The typical way of providing grammatical structures is designed in three stages: "presenting of a grammatical structure, its practices in controlled activities, its production – PPP" (Ellis, 2001). This approach aims to turn explicit knowledge into implicit knowledge with the help of sufficient practice.

However, this traditional way of grammar instruction has been harshly disfavored because in this approach language is separated into small units, and taught in a linear way. The class is teacher-centered, and students' needs are neglected. Also, exposure to language input, meaningful activities, interaction is quite limited (Long, 2000). Research also indicated that the order of grammatical structures is not compatible with internal development acquisition orders. Consequently, learners cannot acquire language structures which are presented through explicit instruction until they are cognitively ready (Pienemann, 1985). Larsen-Freeman (2003:144) did not approve grammatical syllabuses stating that the improvement of grammar is "organic and holistic rather than linear and atomistic".

The weaknesses of focus-on-forms approach caused language scholars to go with more meaning-based and communicative instruction. The "focus-on-meaning" approach was basically affected by communicative approaches, which are based on specifically Krashen and Terrell's (1983) Natural Approach to L2 acquisition. This view rejected directly teaching grammatical structures, explicit error correction since this approach considers that L2 acquisition is a natural process which only takes place by means of exposure to sufficient, meaningful input. For this issue, Larsen-Freeman (2003) argues that explicit and implicit knowledge do not interact each other; hence conscious learning does not contribute to language acquisition.

Studies, yet, have offered evidence that only exposure to input through meaningful activities and implicit grammar instruction with no error correction and no attention to grammar led to poor L2 grammar and fossilization. In addition, findings showed that some grammatical structures that are irregular, infrequent in input, and in contrast with the first language cannot be learned without some emphasis on forms (White, 1987; Larsen-Freeman, 2003)

Because of some problems with focus-on-meaning and focus-on-forms approaches, language professionals began to look for new ways to combine form and meaning. Recent

trends such as Schmidt's (1990) noticing and consciousness-raising pointed out that during communicative activities, noticing and consciousness to structures and feedback on errors would contribute to better acquisition. As a result; a new approach, "focus-on-form", which was broadly defined by Ellis (2001: 1-2) as "any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic forms" emerged in second or foreign language acquisition.

In this approach, attention to forms is necessary; both input and output practice through feedback during writing or speaking activities is included. This view also suggested that there exists some degree of relation between explicit and implicit learning, particularly output practice (Lightbown, 1990). Similarly, Larsen-Freeman (2003:13) emphasized the importance of output practice on grammar learning and described this process as "grammaring". In this process, students are developing the ability to deal with grammar rather than memorizing explicit knowledge about grammatical structures. Long (1988, as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2003) also put an emphasis on the effectiveness of focus-on-form by stating that implicit knowledge is acquired as a consequence of learners' attention to linguistic structures during meaningful activities, so focus-on-form is best fitted to lead to interlanguage development.

Focus-on-form approach was divided into two, namely "planned focus-on-form" and "incidental focus-on-form" (Ellis, 2001). In both of them, the primary focus is on meaning, yet the planned focus-on-form includes pre-determined forms, whereas incidental focus-on-form includes attending to the problematic forms as they appear during actual language use (Ellis, 2001). Research showed that both planned and incidental focus-on-form contributed to learners' second language acquisition. Ellis (2002a) revealed that generally focus-on-form facilitated language acquisition, and contributed to more accurate oral and written language production. Another study provided evidence that attention to certain grammatical structures together with communicative language use affected L2 proficiency positively (Lightbown & Spada, 1993). On the other hand, some studies found that incidental focus-on-form has more benefits in terms of correct use of language (Loewen, 2005; Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen, 2001).

Feedback

Another controversial concept with regard to grammar instruction has been the issue of feedback. As Chaudron (1988: 132-133, as cited in Celce-Murcia, 2001) states in his review of feedback as follows:

> "From the language teachers' point of view the provision of feedback ... is a major means by which to inform learners of the accuracy of both their formal target language production and their other classroom behavior and knowledge. From the   learners' point of view, the use of feedback in repairing their utterances, and   involvement in repairing their interlocutors' utterances, may constitute the most   potent source of improvement in both target language development and other   subject matter knowledge".

The two main points about error correction have been whether feedback on errors should be given and what type of feedback would be the best to elicit corrected structures. The answers to these two questions are challenging to find since when students' errors are not corrected, students will not be able to correct their mistakes on their own, thus they might not learn from their mistakes; on the other hand, communication can be broken down if their errors are corrected. Truscott (1999) claims that the errors should not be corrected particularly during oral production; Truscott further argues that it is a challenging task for teachers to identify real errors, to give a clear feedback that students can understand, to have consistency in correction, to adapt the type of feedback considering each and every student, and to achieve all these without damaging the communication. As a consequence, Truscott stands for the use of delayed correction by writing down common mistakes and showing them later as a mini class on common errors, which does not disrupt the flow of lesson and not discourage students.

Celce-Murcia (2001) notes that a traditional view is that teachers give corrections for students' errors, whereas a current notion highlights the significance of learners being provided with feedback only when conveying meanings are not understood, showing that feedback should be a natural result. She further emphasizes that even in learner centered classrooms feedback is necessary in order to identify acceptable and unacceptable language use. She also suggests that there have been many choices available from simply showing lack of comprehension to more sophisticated grammatical explanations. More specifically, Lyster and Ranta (1997, as cited in Celce-Murcia,2001) found in their study that *recast*, which is clearly showing what is wrong, providing correct form, and the most commonly preferred

method by teachers, was the least effective correction. *Clarification requests*, which is asking students to repeat their utterance, *metalinguistic* feedback, which contains information or questions related to certain grammatical rule and *repetition* turned out to be more effective; and *elicitation,* which refers to asking students to elicit the right form, was found to be the most effective feedback type. Lyster (1998a, as cited in Celce-Murcia, 2001) puts forward that in general, *recasts* can be quite vague for young learners. That is why; they cannot understand that *recasts* are the indicators of their errors, but in *negotiation of form* (clarification requests, repetition, metalinguistic and elicitation), learners are supposed to notice first and change their wrong use on their own, which is a lot more effective. Research also indicates that during meaningful activities shifting focus from meaning to form may be beneficial to develop inter-language restructuring (Lightbown, 2000). It can help students become aware of features of a language, and consequently they can become more conscious about rules in their written and spoken production. However, teachers should bear in mind that the primary goal of giving feedback is to provide a focus-on-form in order to enable students to become aware of rule-based and formal characteristics of language, so they will be more conscious about specific grammatical structures in their spoken and written output.

Conclusion

Along the history of second language acquisition, the role of grammar has been an issue of great controversy; but it is worth noting that grammar has played and continues to play a major role in language teaching. This paper aims to indicate the place of grammar and various approaches in grammar instruction by drawing on recent theories and research, revealing that there is sufficient evidence that grammar contributes to language learning. In addition, even though there is now a clear understanding that a traditional approach to teaching grammar through explicit explanations may not end up with the acquisition of the implicit knowledge, which is a necessity to communicate accurately and fluently, there still exists a considerable disagreement regarding how grammar should be presented best to help students develop implicit knowledge.

However, based on aforementioned study findings, it is clearly seen that grammar instruction has a significant place in second and foreign language teaching field. Besides, students do not devote attention to grammatical structures by themselves; they need to be guided to focus on certain forms. Cameron (2001:96) also claims that grammar certainly has a place in children's language learning since "it is closely tied into meaning and use of

language". Moreover, the place of grammar and how teachers should deal with grammar is an important point to be taken into consideration in language learning and teaching. The goal of grammar instruction should move from "focus-on-forms" to "focus-on-form" approach, which appears to be more useful and realistic in language classrooms.

It can also be concluded from this paper that explicit grammar instruction can be a means to bring about acquisition of implicit knowledge; teaching explicit knowledge can be combined with focus-on-forms and a focus-on-form approach. As mentioned in the current paper, for focus-on-forms approach, deductive and inductive teaching can be preferred considering all the factors for a more effective instruction. Thus, it can be drawn that grammar should be taught around not only form but also meanings and various uses of linguistic structures; form and meaning should complement each other. In other words, learners should be also provided with opportunities to practice productive skills in interactive tasks along with focus on forms. Another outstanding issue is corrective feedback that is relatively important for the acquisition of grammar. A mixture of implicit and explicit feedback types can work best in language teaching.

To sum up, grammar acquisition of an L2 is rather a complex process, and can be well aided by means of various approaches, but the most important thing is to be aware of what different options are available for best grammar instruction, what theoretical rationales exist for these options, and also what difficulties exist for these rationales (Ellis, 2006).

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