TO TEACH OR NOT TO TEACH GRAMMAR

The next question, then, is whether to teach grammar in language classes, and if so, how to teach it. As noted above, varied opinions on the question can be found in the literature on language teaching. Reason, balance, and the experience of teachers in recent CLT tradition tell us that judicious attention to grammatical form in the adult classroom is not only helpful, if appropriate techniques are used, but essential to a speedy learning process (see Fotos 1994, Doughty & Williams 1998). Appropriate grammar-focusing techniques

- are embedded in meaningful, communicative contexts,
- contribute positively to communicative goals,
- promote accuracy within fluent, communicative language,
- do not overwhelm students with linguistic terminology,
- are as lively and intrinsically motivating as possible.

For adults, the question is not so much whether to teach grammar, but rather, what the optimal conditions for overt teaching of grammar are. Marianne Celce-Murcia (1991) offered six easily identifiable variables that can help you to determine the role of grammar in language teaching (see Figure 20.1). Notice that for each variable, the continuum runs from less to more important; grammar is important to some degree in all the six variables.

1. Age

It is clear that due to normal intellectual developmental variables, young children can profit from a focus on form if attention to form is offered through structured input and incidental, indirect error treatment. Somewhat older children may

Figure 20.1. Variables that determine the importance of grammar (Celce-Murcia 1991: 465)

	Less Important ← Focus on Form → More Important		
Learner Variables			
Age	Children	Adolescents	Adults
Proficiency level	Beginning	Intermediate	Advanced
Educational background	Preliterate No formal education	Semiliterate Some formal education	Literate Well-educated
Instructional Variables			
Skill	Listening, reading	Speaking	Writing
Register	Informal	Consultative	Formal
Need/Use	Survival	Vocational	Professional

benefit as well from very simple generalizations (such as "This is the way we say it when we're talking about yesterday") and concrete illustrations. Adults, with their abstract intellectual capabilities, can use grammatical pointers to advance their communicative abilities.

2. Proficiency level

If we force too much grammar focus on beginning level learners, we run the risk of blocking their acquisition of fluency skills. At this level, grammatical focus is helpful as an occasional "zoom lens" with which we zero in on some aspect of language but not helpful if it becomes the major focus of class work. At the advanced level, grammar is not necessarily "more important," as Celce-Murcia would suggest by her chart. Rather, it is less likely to disturb communicative fluency. It may or may not be more important, depending on the accuracy already achieved by learners.

3. Educational background

Students who are non-literate or who have no formal educational background may find it difficult to grasp the complexity of grammatical terms and explanations. Highly educated students, on the other hand, are cognitively more receptive to grammar focus and may insist on error correction to help refine their already fluent skills.

4. Language skills

Because of the permanence of writing and the demand for perfection in grammatical form in written English, grammar focus may be more effective in improving written English than speaking, reading, and writing.

5. Style (register)

Informal contexts often make fewer demands on a learner's grammatical accuracy. In casual conversation among peers, for example, minor errors are acceptable, while more formal contexts (say, a student consulting with a teacher) usually require greater grammatical accuracy. Similarly, in writing, tolerance for error is higher in, say, a quick e-mailed message than in a formal essay.

6. *Needs and goals*

If learners are headed toward professional goals, they may need to stress formal accuracy more than learners at the survival level. In either case, message clarity is a prime criterion.

These six categories should be looked on as general guidelines for judging the need for conscious grammatical focus in the classroom, but none of these suggestions is absolute! For example, you can probably think of numerous situations where it is important to focus on form with beginners, or to get learners away from too intense a grammatical focus in the context of a formal register.

ISSUES ABOUT HOW TO TEACH GRAMMAR

While the professional community in general agrees on the importance of form-focused instruction, there are still degrees of opinion on what kind of instruction should be offered to learners. Four primary issues characterize this ongoing professional discussion

1. Should grammar be presented inductively or deductively?

Do learners benefit from an inductive approach in which various language forms are practiced but in which the learners are left to discover or induce rules and generalizations on their own? Or would they be better off being given a rule/generalization by the teacher or textbook and then allowed to practice various instances of language to which the rule applies? These two approaches are often contrasted with each other when questions about grammar teaching arise.

In most contexts, an inductive approach is more appropriate because

a. it is more in keeping with natural language acquisition (where rules are absorbed subconsciously with little or no conscious focus).
b. it conforms more easily to the concept of interlanguage development in which learners progress, on variable timetables, through stages of rule acquisition.
c. it allows students to get a communicative "feel" for some aspect of language before possibly being overwhelmed by grammatical explanations.
d. it builds more intrinsic motivation by allowing students to discover rules rather than being told them.

There may be occasional moments, of course, when a deductive approach—or a blend between the two—is indeed warranted. In practice, the distinction is not always apparent. Consider the following excerpt from a low intermediate classroom (the T has asked Ss to tell the rest of the class about a recent journey):

S1: And so, you see, I tell the, eh, uh, stewardess, to bring me hot tea! Well, she doesn't!
T: Uh huh, okay. [*pause; Kamal raises his hand*] Kamal?
S2: Yes, eh, well, I am also very, eh, frustrated last week. When I, eh, travel in the airplane, I get no sleep . . .
T: Okay, Kamal, before you go on, since we need to review the past tense anyway, let me remind you that you should be using the past tense here, okay? So, you want to say "I *was* frustrated," "I *got* no sleep," "I *told* the stewardess." Okay, Kamal, go ahead and continue your story.

After Kamal finished his story, this time with a little more accurate use of the past tense, the teacher put the verbs they used on the board, listed their past tense forms, and had students practice them. While you might question the appropriateness of the interruption here, the point is that the lesson's objective was to use the past tense, and

the teacher's focus on the past tense in this particular instance was deductive for the rest of the students in the class who were listening. But it was inductive in that the focus on the past actually was triggered by students' meaningful performance.

2. Should we use grammatical explanations and technical terminology in a CLT classroom?

Our historical roots (in Grammar Translation methodology) placed a strong emphasis on grammatical explanations (in the mother tongue) and on the terminology necessary to carry out those explanations. Many foreign language learners in the US have remarked that their first and only encounter with grammatical concepts was not in English (language arts classes) but in a foreign language class, where that they learned about subjects, predicates, direct objects, and intransitive verbs.

In CLT classes, the use of grammatical explanation and terminology must be approached with care. We teachers are sometimes so eager to display our hard-earned metalinguistic knowledge that we forget that our students are so busy just learning the language itself that the added load of complex rules and terms is too much to bear. But clearly, adults can benefit from occasional explanations. Following a few simple (but not always easily interpreted) rules of thumb will enhance any grammatical explanations you undertake.

a. Keep your explanations brief and simple. Use the mother tongue if students cannot follow an explanation in English.
b. Use charts and other visuals whenever possible to graphically depict grammatical relationships.
c. Illustrate with clear, unambiguous examples.
d. Try to account for varying cognitive styles among your students (for example, analytical learners will have an easier time picking up on grammatical explanations than will holistic learners).
e. Do not get yourself (and students!) tied up in knots over so-called "exceptions" to rules.
f. If you don't know how to explain something (for instance, if a student asks you about a point of grammar and you are not sure of the rule), do not risk giving false information (that you may have to retract later, which will cause even more embarrassment). Rather, tell students you will research that point and bring an answer back the next day.

3. Should grammar be taught in separate "grammar only" classes?

The collective experience of the last two decades or so of CLT practice, combined with the research on the effectiveness of grammatical instruction (see Fotos 1994, Long 1983, Eisenstein 1980), indicates the advisability of embedding grammatical techniques into general language courses, rather than singling grammar out as a discrete "skill" and treating it in a separate course. Grammatical information, whether consciously or subconsciously learned, is an enabling system, a component

of communicative competence like phonology, discourse, the lexicon, etc. Therefore, as courses help students to pursue relevant language goals, grammar is best brought into the picture as a contributor toward those goals.

In some curricula, however, certain class hours, workshops, or courses are set aside for grammar instruction. In a language-teaching paradigm that stresses communicative, interactive, meaningful learning, such courses may appear to be anachronisms. Under certain conditions, however, they can provide a useful function, especially for high intermediate to advanced learners, where a modicum of fluency is already in place. Those conditions follow:

a. The grammar course is explicitly integrated into the total curriculum so that students can readily relate grammatical pointers to their other work in English.
b. The rest of the curriculum (or the bulk of students' use of language outside of the grammar class) controls the content of the grammar course, and not vice versa. That is, the grammar course "serves" (enhances) the curriculum. For example, a significant portion of the agenda for the grammar class should come from students' work in other courses.
c. Grammar is contextualized in meaningful language use.
d. The course is tailored as much as possible for specific problems students are experiencing. For example, in grammar "workshops" for intermediate and advanced students, grammatical topics come from the students' own performance in other classes, rather than being pre-set by a curriculum or textbook.
e. Sometimes grammar modules in a standardized test preparation course serve as helpful reviews of grammatical principles that may be incorporated into the test.
f. The ultimate test of the success of such courses is in the improvement of students' performance outside of the grammar class, not in their score on discrete-point grammar tests.

Under these conditions, then, grammar assumes its logical role as one of several supporting foundation stones for communication.

4. Should teachers correct grammatical errors?

Many student errors in speech and writing performance are grammatical. It is interesting that little research evidence shows that overt grammatical correction by teachers in the classroom is of any consequence in improving learners' language. But we do have evidence that various other forms of attention to and treatment of grammatical errors have an impact on learners. (See Chapter 17 for a detailed discussion of error correction.) Therefore, it is prudent for you to engage in such treatment, as long as you adhere to principles of maintaining communicative flow, of maximizing student self-correction, and of sensitively considering the affective and linguistic place the learner is in.

The treatment of grammatical (and discourse) errors in writing is a different matter. In process writing approaches, overt attention to **local** grammatical and rhetorical (discourse) errors is normally delayed until learners have completed one or two drafts of a paper. **Global** errors that impede meaning must of course be attended to earlier in the process. Studies have shown (Ferris 1997) that certain attention to errors does indeed make a difference in the final written products.

GRAMMAR TECHNIQUES

Following are some sample techniques for teaching grammar, using Sandra McKay's (1985) classifications.

1. Charts

Charts and graphs are useful devices for practicing patterns, clarifying grammatical relationships, and even for understanding sociolinguistic and discourse constraints. The exercise in Figure 20.2 stimulates students to practice frequency adverbs.

Figure 20.2. (from H. D. Brown, 1992, *Vistas,* Book 1, p. 99)

EXERCISE 1

Read the paragraphs on page 98 again. Then choose the appropriate adverb of frequency.

	never	seldom	sometimes	often	usually	always
1. Keiko works hard.						✓
2. She is on time for work.						
3. She is late or sick.						
4. She is early for work.						
5. She types letters.						
6. She files.						
7. She makes copies.						
8. She makes mistakes when she types.						
9. She answers the phone politely.						
10. She is angry.						

Now say the complete sentences.

1. Keiko always works hard.
2. She is always on time for work.

3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Another grammatical system that lends itself well to charts is the verb system. Figure 20.3 illustrates a commonly used system of depicting some verb tenses

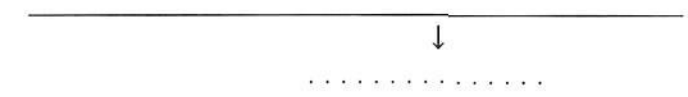
Figure 20.3. (from Cross 1991: 29–30)

Introducing tenses

A visual representation can often be clearer than a verbal one to introduce a tense. This is especially true where students do not have similar tense systems in their mother tongue. Time can be shown by a line across the board. An arrow pointing down indicates this moment now. To the left of the arrow is past time, to the right is the future. A cross indicates a single event, a row of dots denotes an action that lasted or will last for a period of time. The uses of most tenses can be shown and contrasted pictorially on such a time line, as shown in the following examples.

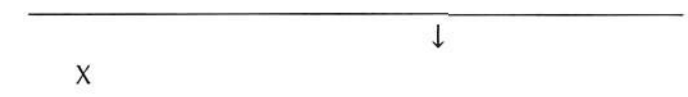
1 *He used to smoke* (in the past, not any more).

2 *She works in the market* (did in the past and will continue in the future).

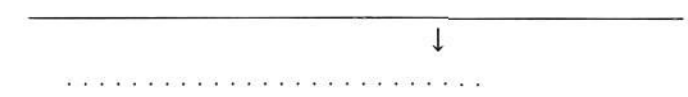


3 *He is having his supper* (eating now, having started a short while ago in the past, but this will not continue for any appreciable length of time).

4 *He got up at six o'clock* (in the past, a single event).



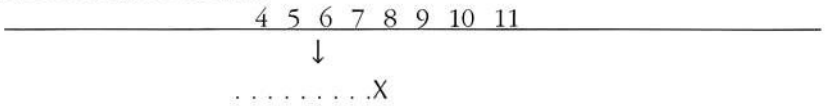
5 *I've been teaching for a long time* (started in the past, still doing it today).



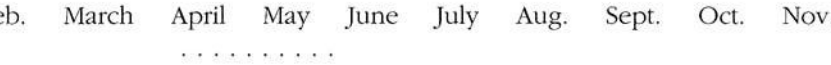
6 *We'll travel by plane* (in the future).

7 *We were out walking when it started to rain* (a continuous past action interrupted by a single event).

8 *It's 6 o'clock now, I shall have finished by 8 o'clock* (a task started earlier and which will continue for 2 more hours).



This is by no means the full range of tenses, but once you have grasped the idea you will be able to use the technique to introduce others the same way. You can also use a time scale to show concepts like *for 2 months, since April* and *from April to mid June.* This is done in the following example.



2. Objects

Objects brought into the classroom not only liven up the context but provide a kinesthetic, hands-on dimension to your teaching. By engaging students in communication with each other, you also stimulate them to practice conversation rules and other discourse constraints. To teach the possessive to beginning level students, for example, bring in a few small items such as a necklace, a purse, and some glasses. Then ask students to put two or three of their own things on their desks. Then do something like the three exercises in Figure 20.4. Notice that embedded in grammatical attention to possessives are politeness forms ("Excuse me") and discoursal ellipsis rules that allow a person to say "No, it's Lucy's," rather than "No, it's Lucy's handbag."

Figure 20.4. (from H. D. Brown, 1992, *Vistas*, Book 1, p. 43)

EXERCISE 1

Review the vocabulary on page 10. Then talk about possessions.

This (that) is **my** handbag.
This (that) is **Gina's** sweater.
These (those) are **Oscar's** glasses.

EXERCISE 2

Work with a group. Ask questions about things in the classroom.

A: Excuse me. Is this your *handbag*?
B: No, it's *Lucy's*. (Yes, it is. Thank you.)

A: Excuse me. Are these your *papers*?
B: No. They're *Pravit's*. (Yes, they are. Thank you.)

EXERCISE 3

Listen and match the people with the things.

1. Lucy	a. glasses
2. Tony	b. English book
3. Gina	c. handbag
4. Mrs. Brennan	d. gloves
5. Lynn	e. money
6. Carlos	f. briefcase
7. Olga	g. wallet
8. Tetsuo	h. earrings

3. Maps and Drawings

Maps, also mentioned in Chapter 12 in the discussion about group work, are practical and simple visual aids in a classroom. Useful for jigsaw, information-gap, and other interactive techniques, they can also serve to illustrate certain grammatical structures. For example, maps can stimulate learners' use of

- prepositional phrases (*up the street, on the left, over the hill*, etc.),
- question forms (*where, how do I get to, can you tell me, is this*, etc.),
- imperatives (*go, walk, look out for*, etc.),
- appropriate discourse for getting someone's attention, asking for directions, receiving and clarifying given information, and terminating the conversation.

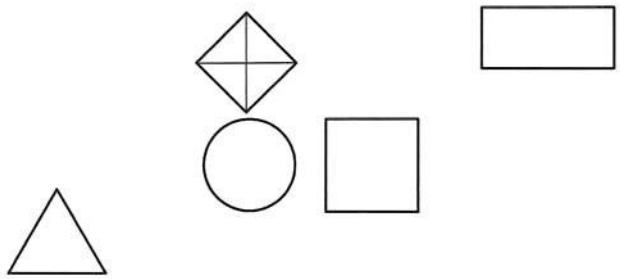
Sandra McKay suggested using drawings of circles, squares, and other familiar shapes to teach locative words (see Figure 20.5).

Figure 20.5. (from McKay 1985: 61)

SIMPLE DRAWINGS

With Prepositional Phrases of Location **To Describe Locations To Give Directions**

Drawings of simple shapes can be used to provide practice in stating locations and giving directions. In order to do this, you might begin by using the following drawing, modeling the expressions which follow.



The circle is *in the center of* the paper.
The diamond is *directly above* the circle.
The square is *to the right of* the circle.
The rectangle is *in the upper right-hand corner.*
The triangle is *in the lower left-hand corner.*

After you have introduced these terms tell the students to take out a piece of paper. Give them a series of commands and have them draw these on this paper. (E.g., Draw a square in the upper left hand corner. Draw a circle inside the square.)

Later you might use this same technique to introduce more technical vocabulary of shapes along with the relative proportion (E.g., Draw a triangle in the center of the paper. Draw a circle above the triangle. The diameter of the circle should be the same length as the base of the triangle.)

4. Dialogues

Dialogues are an age-old technique for introducing and practicing grammatical points. Consider the dialogue in Figure 20.6, with the suggestions for teachers in Figure 20.8 (both from H. D. Brown 1992).

5. Written Texts

At the very simple, mechanical level, a text might be used to get at a certain verb tense, such as in the passage in Figure 20.7, or simply to illustrate a grammatical category, as in Figure 20.6 (both from H. D. Brown 1992). In the latter, written discourse rules for paragraphing and sequencing ideas can also be attended to.

GRAMMAR SEQUENCING IN TEXTBOOKS AND CURRICULA

Grammatical sequencing received a great deal of attention in the 1950s and '60s when curricula and textbooks were organized around grammatical categories. Some language professionals were of the opinion that difficulty could be predicted (especially if the native language were taken into consideration) and that therefore grammar in a curriculum should be sequenced in a progression of easier to more difficult items. Yet no one had been able to verify empirically such hierarchies of difficulty by the time the debate over grammatical sequencing whimpered to a halt and situational and notional-functional curricula assumed popularity. At that point the question shifted more to whether or not there was an optimal **functional** sequence.

In recent years, we have witnessed a return to a more balanced viewpoint in which grammar is seen as one of several organizational aspects of communicative competence, all of which should be considered in programming a textbook or a curriculum. In this perspective, the question of an optimal sequence of grammatical structures is not irrelevant, but with our current disciplinary maturity, we seem to agree that

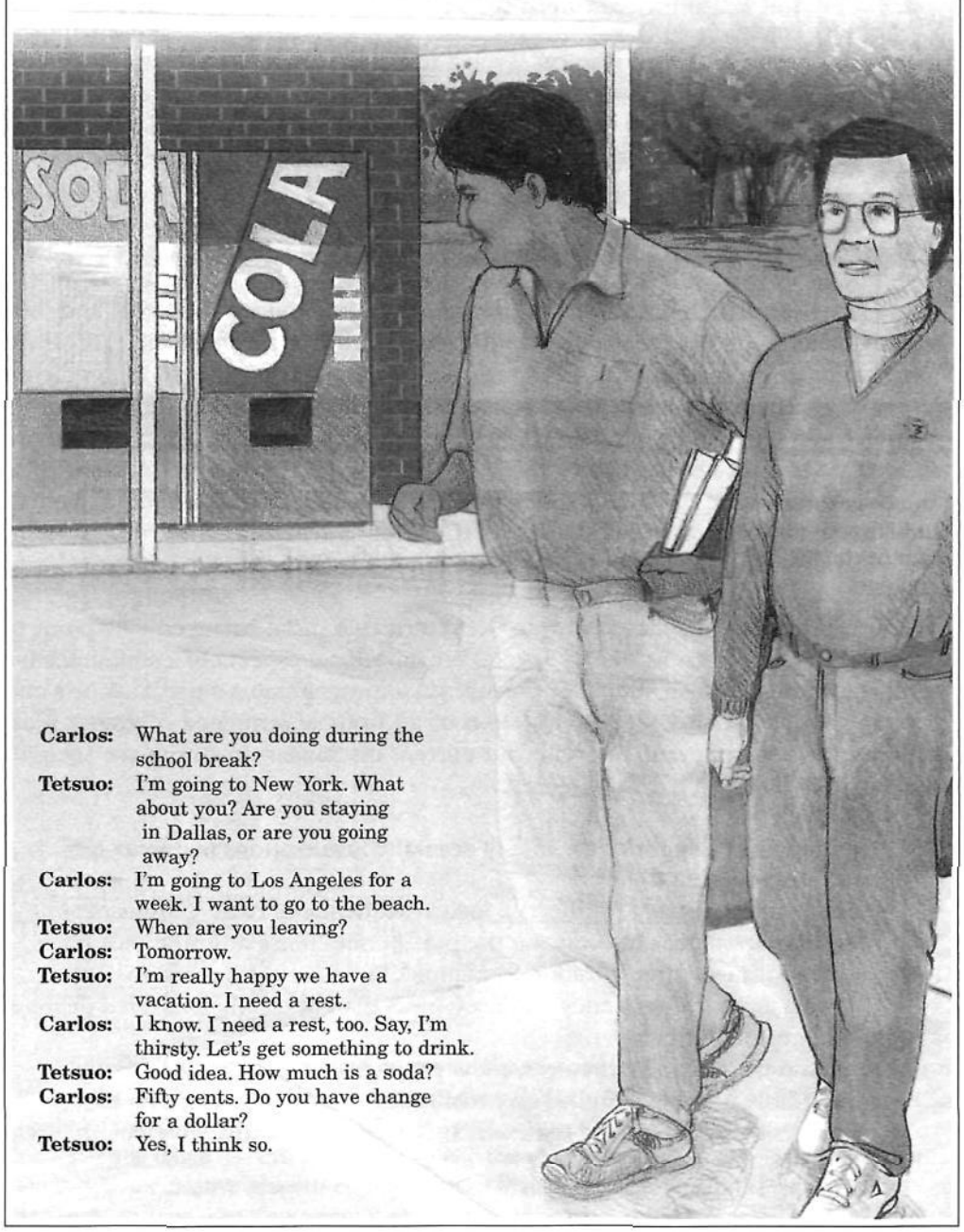
- grammatical categories are one of several considerations in curricular sequencing.
- *a curriculum usually manifests a logical sequence of basic grammatical* structures (such as introducing the past perfect tense after the past tense, relative clauses after question formation), but such a sequence may be more a factor of frequency and usefulness than of clearly identified degrees of linguistic difficulty.
- beyond those basic structures, a few permutations here and there will make little difference in the eventual success of students, as long as language is being learned in the context of a communicative curriculum.

Figure 20.6. (from H. D. Brown 1992: p. 360)

Lesson 2

What are you doing next week?

Look at the picture. Then listen as you read the conversation.



Carlos: What are you doing during the school break?
Tetsuo: I'm going to New York. What about you? Are you staying in Dallas, or are you going away?
Carlos: I'm going to Los Angeles for a week. I want to go to the beach.
Tetsuo: When are you leaving?
Carlos: Tomorrow.
Tetsuo: I'm really happy we have a vacation. I need a rest.
Carlos: I know. I need a rest, too. Say, I'm thirsty. Let's get something to drink.
Tetsuo: Good idea. How much is a soda?
Carlos: Fifty cents. Do you have change for a dollar?
Tetsuo: Yes, I think so.

Figure 20.7. (from H. D. Brown 1992: p. 362)

EXERCISE 6

What does Lucy do every day? What is she doing now? Choose the correct form of the verb.

"Lucy Mendoza is a nurse. She is never bored because she is always busy. She usually (**1.** works/is working) in a hospital, but sometimes she (**2.** works/is working) in a special home for old people. Lucy (**3.** enjoys/is enjoying) her work every day, and she never (takes/is taking) a day off. She is always happy. She is never sad. Today she (**4.** doesn't work/isn't working) in the hospital. She (**5.** works/is working) in the home for old people. Right now she (**6.** talks/is talking) to a woman. The woman is very lonely because her children never (**7.** visit/are visiting)."

What about you?
What do you usually do every day?
What are you doing right now?

Please turn back to pages 104–7 in Chapter 7 and review the sequence of grammatical and communication skills of the *Vistas* series (H. D. Brown 1992). This "scope and sequence" chart is illustrative of a typical sequence of grammatical structures in a basal ESL series. In arranging the order of structures, the principles of simplicity and frequency were followed. Therefore, the more "complex" tenses and clause formations come later in the series. While one could quibble with certain elements and suggest alternative permutations, nevertheless learners' success in a course like this seems to be more a factor of (a) clear, unambiguous presentation of material and (b) opportunity for meaningful, interactive practice, rather than a factor of a grammar point presented a week earlier or later.

A "WORD" ABOUT VOCABULARY TEACHING

One of the casualties of the early approaches to CLT was a loss of a concerted focus on the lexical forms of language. While traditional language-teaching methods highlighted vocabulary study with lists, definitions, written and oral drills, and flash