Handbook on

TEACHING GRAMMAR FOR SPONTANEOUS COMMUNICATION

TGSC

TEACHING GRAMMAR FOR SPONTANEOUS COMMUNICATION

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1 INTRODUCTION

We mostly use a kind of knowledge that is unconscious to speak our first language. We don't think very much about how to say what we are thinking, we just say it. When we learn a second language, we often develop a very different kind of knowledge, one that is conscious and requires mental effort. For example, we may know that, in English, verbs in the present simple end in -s in the third person singular. It is very difficult to use this kind of knowledge while speaking because accessing this knowledge in real time isn't easy and because we need to pay attention to many other aspects of the conversation. As a result, we can end up having correct knowledge of the language but not being able to use it during fluent communication.

Experts in this area of second language acquisition today agree that to overcome this difficulty we need large amounts of practice. According to this view, practice at using our grammatical knowledge can help us gradually build a knowledge system which can allow us to speak our second language the way we speak our first language: fluently, spontaneously, and largely effortlessly. Practice can include a range of activities, from the more traditional exercises typical of a grammar book through more communicative classroom activities to conversations outside the classroom. All these kinds of practice can be beneficial in different ways. The aim of this handbook is to familiarise teachers of a second language with the way that different kinds of practice activities can help learners develop *grammatical knowledge for spontaneous communication (*GKSC).

2. BACKGROUND

WHY SHOULD GRAMMAR BE TAUGHT?

Grammar lays the foundation for effective communication; it is at the heart of spoken and written communication and it allows us to express ourselves with clarity. Some scholars in the past, notably Stephen Krashen, argued that the best way to acquire grammar in second language learning environments

is through participation in meaningful interaction and not through formal instruction. This would mirror the process of language acquisition children go through when they acquire their first language. Today, however, researchers widely agree that there is a place for explicit instruction of grammatical rules in second language learning contexts. This is, in part, because many features of the grammatical system would likely never be learnt without explicit instruction. Additionally, second language learners don't generally have enough time to learn a second language the way they learnt their first language. Grammar instruction can help make the most of the little time second language learners have at their disposal.

THE AIMS OF GRAMMAR TEACHING

Grammar lessons can sometimes be frowned upon by teachers and learners who have experienced grammar being taught for its own sake. Teachers and learners alike can sometimes associate grammar learning with the study of a metalanguage which has little impact on the development of their communicative abilities. They know that while traditional approaches to grammar learning can be effective towards common classroom activities and procedures (e.g., written exercises and tests), they often fail to prepare learners for participation in real time communication outside the classroom.

> "What language teachers seek in grammar lessons is to help learners at-ain a good command of the grammar so that they can speak fluently and accurately when using the second language in natural, spontaneous communication."

The aim of a grammar lessons is not to develop an understanding of complex rules for the majority of language teachers. What language teachers seek in grammar lessons is to help learners attain a good command of the grammar so that they can speak fluently and accurately when using the second language in natural, spontaneous communication. In other words, the goal of language teachers is to help learners develop what will be termed *grammatical knowledge for spontaneous communication* (GKSC) throughout this handbook. This can be defined as grammatical knowledge that can be accessed

with speed and cognitive ease for the purposes of participating in real-time communication.

For the most part, teachers aim to help learners develop GKSC through the provision of three key elements: explicit information about the grammar (i.e., grammar rules), practice, and corrective feedback. All these elements can make significant contributions towards the development of GKSC. The provision of explicit information sets an initial foundation that learning can build upon, and corrective feedback can then help fine-tune this foundation at a later stage. The main focus of this handbook, however, is on practice, which can help towards bridging the gap between initial knowledge of grammar rules and the ability of using such rules during real-time communication.

The aim of practice in a grammar lesson is to help learners become adept at using the grammar rules they learn in class during everyday communication so that they can express their ideas successfully and be effective communicators. More specifically, the practice activities provided in a grammar lesson aim to help learners make the transition between a learning stage where a new grammar rule is merely understood and a more advanced stage where the grammar rules can be used quickly and correctly in real-time communication. There is a wide range of practice activities available to language teachers, and different kinds of practice activities can contribute to the development of GKSC in different ways. This handbook aims to help language teachers understand how different kinds of grammar practice activities can help encourage the development of GKSC.

REASONS FOR DEVELOPING GKSC IN THE CLASSROOM

There are many reasons why developing GKSC in the classroom is important. One obvious reason is that, in the case of many learners, the ability to communicate fluently and accurately is perceived as the end goal of instruction. This is particularly true where adult learners are concerned; when they attend a language course, they often do so to improve their ability in communicating in the second language (e.g., because they have a job that requires use of the second language or because they have relocated in a country

where the second language is spoken). Thus, a learner who has developed ample knowledge of grammar rules but little ability in using such rules upon demand may feel that their course has failed their needs.

A more practical reason why developing GKSC should be seen as a prime item on the agenda of language teachers is that the time available for use of the second language outside the classroom is often scarce. For many learners, class time constitutes the bulk of their exposure to and interaction in the second language. This means that if the development of GKSC is left to take care of itself through language use outside the classroom, the learner may not have sufficient opportunities for practice for GKSC to materialise.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH: CURRENT PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES

At the outset of this project, we decided to do some background research to find out about current practices and perspectives in relation to this area of second language instruction. We carried out two small-scale pieces of research. The first was a questionnaire which we administered to 26 second language teachers. The second was a modest survey of popular coursebooks used in EFL (English as a foreign language) teaching contexts. Below, our main findings are reported.

Our first piece of research was a questionnaire which sought to find out about language teachers' practices and views with respect to our area of interest, and this was administered to 26 second language teachers. Our main findings are presented below:

1   Our respondents recognised the value of providing explanation of grammar rules and more so the value of practice, as the time they reported allocating to practice activities was more than double the time they reported allocating to the provision of grammar rules.

2   Our respondents were moderately confident about their students' ability to use the grammar rules they learn in class during real-time communication. This was not in line with our expectations, as we had

predicted a more negative response. However, it was also clear that our respondents felt more confident about their students' ability to understand grammar rules and use them in simple grammar exercises than about their ability to use them for the purposes of real-time oral communication. The data also showed that our respondents identified some scope for improvement in this area of language teaching.

3   Our respondents perceived practice as a key factor in the development of GKSC, which suggests that they are well aware of the tight relationship between practice and the development of GKSC. Our data also suggested that while teachers do not feel powerless about this aspect of language teaching, they do not feel as confident as they arguably should.

The second piece of research involved an analysis of grammar practice activities in popular EFL coursebooks. Coursebooks for second language learners have come a long way in recent decades, and their design is often informed by research findings. However, the teachers involved in this project advised that coursebooks don't always include the kind of practice which would be optimal for promoting the development of GKSC. For that reason, we decided to also investigate the extent to which coursebooks can be expected to foster the development of GKSC and thus prepare learners for the demands of real-time communication.

In our research, we examined how many of the grammar practice activities included in a series of EFL coursebooks could be considered fit for the purpose of developing GKSC. To this end, we made a distinction between knowledge-oriented activities and targeted communicative activities. The former category refers to grammar practice activities which are provided for the purposes of reinforcing and consolidating knowledge of newly presented grammar rules. Targeted communicative activities, on the other hand, are defined as activities which create opportunities for learners to use target grammatical structures during meaningful, communicative spoken interaction. These activities are more likely to help learners develop the ability to use targeted grammatical structures in real-time communication, i.e., these are more likely to help learners develop GKSC.

Our analysis included the following five coursebook series: English File 4th edition (Oxford University Press, 2019); Impact (National Geographic, 2017); Straightforward 2nd edition (Macmillan, 2012); Global (Macmillan, 2010); and Empower (Cambridge University Press, 2015). For each of these series, we analysed three coursebooks, one at a lower level (generally CEFR A2-B1), one at an intermediate level (generally CEFR B1), and one at a higher level (generally CEFR B2). We coded and classified all grammar practice activities into one of two categories: (1) knowledge-oriented activities and (2) targeted communicative activities.

Our findings were in line with our expectations, as 109 activities were coded as knowledge-oriented activities while only 43 activities were coded as targeted communicative activities. This means that there was roughly a one to three ratio of targeted communicative activities to knowledge-oriented activities. Although this was infrequent, we also found that some of the lessons in the coursebooks did not include any targeted communicative activities at all.

Our findings show a marked bias in the coursebooks analysed towards knowledge-oriented activities. We fully recognise the value of such activities and hold the view that establishing a solid understanding of grammar rules should be a priority in grammar lessons. However, we also believe that a higher presence of targeted communicative activities would be helpful in making this knowledge more useable in everyday communication.

Overall, a clear picture emerges from this data:

While teachers recognise the need for learners to develop GKSC and are aware that learners need practice in order to achieve this, learners don't seem to be making the gains they should in this area of language learning. This may be, in part, associated to the lacks in targeted communicative practice activities in language coursebooks.

The present work aims to help second-language teachers become better equipped to incorporate more targeted communicative practice activities onto their courses. It is hoped that this will have an impact on the learning

outcomes delivered on their courses and that this will help their learners become more effective communicators.

3. HOW TO PROMOTE THE DEVELOPMENT OF GRAMMATICAL KNOWLEDGE FOR SPONTANEOUS COMMUNICATION

INTRODUCTION

This section will describe how language teachers can help learners develop GKSC in the classroom. It will explain that establishing explicit knowledge should be the starting point towards the development of GKSC. This is because explicit knowledge is what makes it possible for learners to form correct sentences with target grammatical structures during practice. As learners continue using explicit knowledge to form new sentences over the course of practice, GKSC can gradually develop. It should be noted, however, that explicit knowledge does not have much value for learners on its own, and that what can ultimately promote the development of GKSC is the practice that follows the initial establishment of explicit knowledge. This section will also discuss what forms of practice can promote the development of GKSC and how different forms of practice can contribute to this development. It will also explain that, in general, teachers can promote the development of GKSC by sequencing practice activities so that less attention is available for focus on target grammatical features as practice unfolds.

> *"...explicit knowledge is what makes it possible for learners to form correct sentences with target grammatical structures during practice. As learners continue using explicit knowledge to form new sentences over the course of practice, GKSC can gradually develop."*

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EXPLICIT KNOWLEDGE

INTRODUCTION

Explicit knowledge is conscious knowledge about features of the language, often learned through formal classroom instruction. This knowledge can be verbalised and shared with others. For example, a learner might know and be able to state that we often use *will* or *be going to* followed by a verb to indicate that something will happen in the future. It is important to note that although a learner might have this knowledge, they may be unable to access it during real-time communication and therefore make mistakes. This is because the learner needs to carry out cognitive operations in order to access this knowledge (i.e., access is not automatic) and they may not be able to do this under time pressure. This would explain why learners can often apply grammar rules when enough time is available (e.g., in a grammar exercise or a writing assignment) but not when there is some time pressure (e.g., oral communication).

THE ROLE OF EXPLICIT KNOWLEDGE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF GKSC

Explicit knowledge is important because this is what can guide learners to construct accurate sentences at the initial stages of learning. When a new grammatical feature is first introduced in class, explicit knowledge is what allows learners to use that feature accurately during grammar practice activities. Therefore, one requirement for grammar practice activities to be valuable to learners is that explicit knowledge of the target grammatical feature is available. If explicit knowledge has not been established prior to the beginning of grammar practice activities, there is no reason why the learners should be expected to use the target feature with accuracy during practice. Explicit knowledge can guide learners during practice in two ways. First, it can allow learners to generate correct sentences at the formulation stage, i.e. the language production stage when the learners decide what words to use to express their message. Second, it can allow learners to monitor their

speech in real-time and make adjustments as necessary, for example, when a learner notices a mistake in their output and this triggers self-correction.

Explicit knowledge is important because this is what can guide learners to construct accurate sentences at the initial stages of learning.
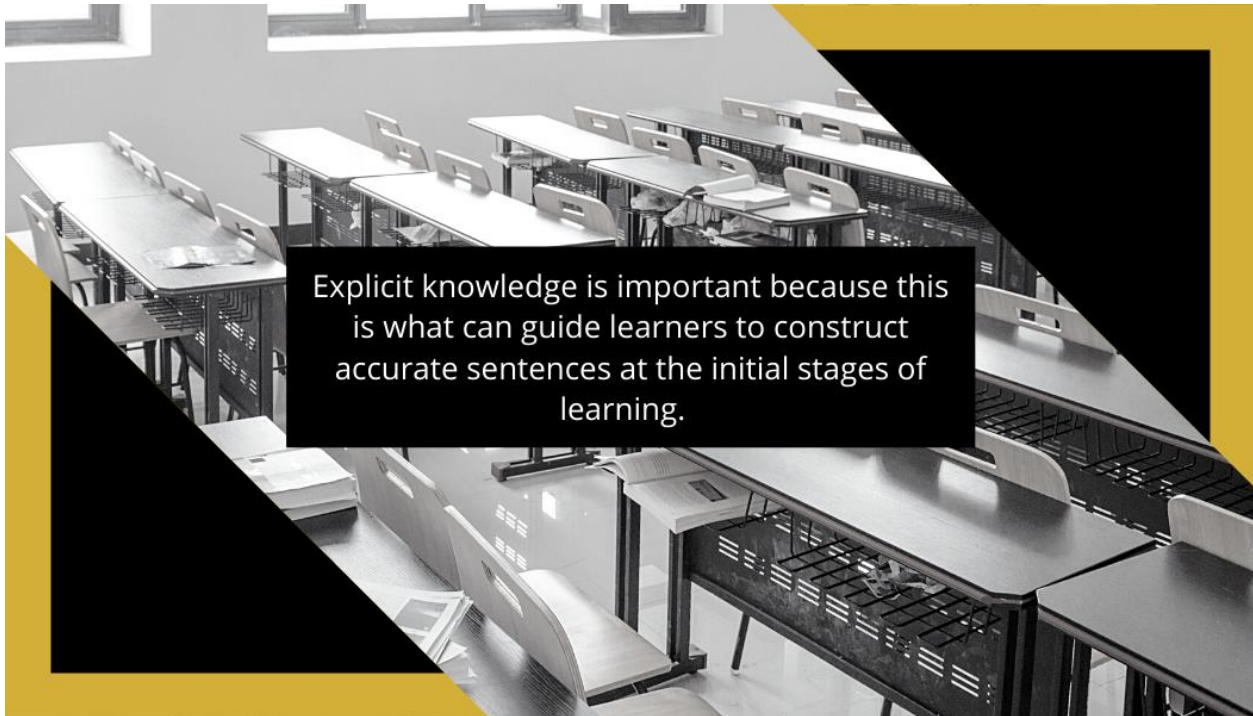
HOW TO HELP LEARNERS DEVELOP EXPLICIT KNOWLEDGE

Teachers can help learners develop explicit knowledge in multiple ways. They may, for example, provide metalinguistic explanations in the form of grammar rules. They may also opt for more learner-centred approaches where the learner is stimulated to work out grammar rules by themselves (e.g., guided-discovery, consciousness raising activities, etc.). Experienced teachers often use different approaches for different target grammatical features, and sometimes a combination of approaches. What is important at this stage is that learners achieve a clear understanding of the grammatical feature and develop solid explicit knowledge, and this is what teachers should consider when choosing deciding on their approach.

WHAT MAY PREVENT LEARNERS FROM DEVELOPING EXPLICIT KNOWLEDGE

Grammar rules can sometimes be long and complex. They are often expressed in burdensome language and, at times, they require prior knowledge of more basic elements of the grammar or specialised terminology. While learners who are more experienced or have a stronger academic background can generally cope with such grammar rules, less experienced learners may not always be able to achieve a clear understanding. Even if some understanding is achieved, rules that are overly long and complicated may be inaccessible during practice activities, as there is a limit to how much information a learner can manipulate in their working memory at any given time. This can have an impact on the learner's ability to implement the grammar rules during practice activities. For this reason, we hold the view that the grammar rules provided before practice should generally be concise and transparent.

DEVELOPING GKSC

INTRODUCTION

Once learners have developed explicit knowledge, practice can start. Grammar practice includes a variety of activities which can help towards the development of GKSC in different ways (e.g., some activities are better suited for the early stages of learning whereas others are more suitable for later stages). In what follows, a distinction will be made between two kinds of grammar practice activities: *knowledge-oriented* and *targeted communicative* activities. The function of knowledge-oriented activities is to help consolidate accurate explicit knowledge in preparation for later practice. The function of targeted communicative activities is to give learners the practice they need in preparation for spontaneous, fluent communication in everyday settings. That is, knowledge-oriented activities are provided as preparation for targeted communicative activities, and targeted communicative are provided as preparation for communication outside the classroom. We believe that both kinds of activities are necessary for practice to achieve its aims and that considering this distinction can help teachers select and sequence practice activities in such a way that the learning outcomes are maximised.

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KNOWLEDGE-ORIENTED ACTIVITIES

Knowledge-oriented activities are simple, often mechanical grammar exercises typically provided after a new grammar rule has been presented. They can be helpful at this learning stage, as they give learners a chance to *fine-tune* and *reinforce* their explicit knowledge of grammar rules.

Examples of these activities include the "controlled" practice activities usually available on the grammar pages of a language coursebook (e.g., gapfill exercises). These activities can be helpful for a learning stage where a new grammar rule has only been initially presented. At this stage, learners don't generally have a full, solid understanding of the new grammar rule. While some explicit knowledge may have been established, this knowledge can often be fragile, inaccurate, and inaccessible in real time. For these reasons, errors can be expected during performance. Knowledge-oriented activities can be helpful at this learning stage, as they give learners a chance to fine-tune and reinforce their explicit knowledge of grammar rules. This can serve as preparation for subsequent practice activities which involve time pressure and other demands inherent in real-time, spoken communication.

DESIGN FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE KNOWLEDGE-ORIENTED ACTIVITIES

This section will provide an overview of some design features that can help make knowledge-oriented activities effective. The first consideration is that these activities should create opportunities for the learner to use the target grammatical feature repeatedly. This is because repeated use of the target feature can gradually help consolidate the relevant explicit knowledge as well as make it more easily accessible during practice. Hence, repetition is encouraged for these activities. That said, activities should not become overly repetitive, as this could compromise the learner's engagement. For this reason, it may be appropriate to spread these activities over several lessons.

These activities should also provide opportunities for corrective feedback. This is because, as explained above, errors are likely at this stage of practice, and corrective feedback can help learners adjust their understanding and

thus lead to more accurate explicit knowledge. Activities like gapfill exercises are ideal for this stage of practice because they allow teachers to give feedback to all learners simultaneously. Simple oral drills performed as a whole class may also be appropriate for this stage of practice.

Finally, knowledge-oriented activities should not involve much time pressure. This is because access to the relevant explicit knowledge may still be slow and effortful, and so the learner may not be able to access it under time pressure conditions. Written grammar activities generally

"…knowledge-oriented activities should generally provide opportunities for repeated use of target grammatical features, sufficient thinking time to apply the relevant explicit knowledge, and opportunities for corrective feedback."

involve a low degree of time pressure, and so they can make ideal knowledge-oriented activities, especially for the earliest stages of practice. Oral activities like grammar drills which involve simple manipulation of grammatical features can also be suitable as long as they offer enough time to access the relevant explicit knowledge.

Summing up, knowledge-oriented activities should generally provide opportunities for repeated use of target grammatical features, sufficient thinking time to apply the relevant explicit knowledge, and opportunities for corrective feedback. Written activities often make excellent candidates for this stage of practice, but some oral activities can also be helpful as long as they allow the learner to access their explicit knowledge and can offer corrective feedback. Introducing oral activities after some initial written activities can help make this stage of practice more varied and bring in a progressive level of difficulty.

WHAT COULD MAKE KNOWLEDGE-ORIENTED ACTIVITIES UNSUCCESSFUL?

There are a number of factors which can impede knowledge-oriented activities from achieving their best outcomes. Some of these are related to the design features described in the previous section (i.e., lack of opportunities for repetition and feedback or too much time pressure). There are other factors beyond these. An obvious one is that the necessary explicit knowledge should be available before practice begins. If this knowledge is too fragile or inaccurate, the learner may be forced to rely on their own resources to complete the practice activities, rendering the activity futile. Another factor which was touched upon in the previous section is that the activities should not become excessively repetitive, as repetitive activities may make learners disengaged. Although some repetition is desirable, this should not come at the expense of learner engagement. Additionally, knowledge-oriented activities should not be too easy or too difficult; they should be pitched at the learners' level of proficiency while stimulating and challenging them within reason. Care should be taken to avoid obscure examples and sentences which require an understanding of complex language in (e.g., more advanced vocabulary). Finally, lack of sufficient practice can also be problematic. Since the aim of these activities is to allow learners to fine-tune and consolidate their explicit knowledge, it follows that learners should work on these activities until a low error rate has been achieved.

THE LIMITATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE-ORIENTED ACTIVITIES

Knowledge-oriented activities can play a fundamental role towards the aims of practice in grammar teaching. They can initiate the process of bridging the gap between initial explicit knowledge of grammatical rules and the ultimate objective of developing the ability to apply that knowledge during fluent, spontaneous communication. However, these activities cannot be expected to bring about the development of such an ability on their own. Hence, although we see these activities as a good starting point and advocate them for the purposes of fine-tuning and consolidating explicit knowledge at the initial stages of practice, we believe that if the aim of

practice in a grammar lesson is to promote the development of GKSC, knowledge-oriented activities, on their own, are bound to be ineffective. In our view, these activities need to be followed by other more communicative and demanding activities. These activities are referred to as targeted communicative practice activities and will be the focus of the next section.

TARGETED COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICE

INTRODUCTION

Once explicit knowledge is accurate and robust, the targeted communicative practice stage can begin. Targeted communicative activities can help learners develop the ability to use target grammatical structures with speed and with minimal attention and effort. Hence, these are the activities which can truly prepare learners for the demands of fluent, spontaneous communication in everyday settings.

As this section will show, the aim of preparing learners for this kind of communication requires that these activities mirror more closely the demands of real-time communication, e.g., involving more time pressure and a shift towards more communicative interaction.

WHAT ARE TARGETED COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICE ACTIVITIES?

The term **targeted communicative practice** covers a range of activities which are designed to engage learners in using target grammatical features during meaningful, communicative interaction.

Many activities typical of communicative language teaching designed to be carried out in pairs or small groups fall under this category. Examples of these activities are the oral activities often provided as freer practice in language coursebooks. These range from simpler activities such as communicative drills to more complex activities such as interviews, information-gap activities, or opinion-sharing activities. These activities aim to help students

develop the ability to use the grammatical structures they learn in class in real-time communication, i.e., to help bridge the gap between the outcomes of knowledge-oriented activities and the demands of everyday communication outside the classroom. The focus of this handbook is on practice designed to help learners improve their oral skills, and so, this section will only include activities which involve oral communication.

DESIGN FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE TARGETED COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES

As mentioned above, for GKSC to develop over the course of practice, it is essential that learners engage in using their explicit knowledge of the target grammatical feature. For that reason, targeted communicative practice should continue to encourage use of this explicit knowledge. As the learner continues to access and deploy this knowledge, the cognitive effort and speed this task require can be expected to gradually decrease.

The aim of targeted communicative activities is to prepare learners for fluent, spontaneous communication in everyday situations. The ideal kind of practice towards that aim would comprise activities which create opportunities for language use within settings which resemble those of everyday communication outside the classroom. However, such activities don't make a good choice at the beginning of the targeted communicative practice stage. This is because such activities are fairly demanding of attention at different levels beyond use of grammar (e.g., content of the message, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc.), and the learner may be deprived of attentional resources which they very much need for focus on the target grammatical feature at this stage of practice. This would interfere with the aim of encouraging learners to use their explicit knowledge to form correct sentences containing the target form.

Before learners can perform practice activities which resemble real-time communication in everyday situations, they need to develop the ability to access their explicit knowledge when only some attention is available for focus on the grammar. To this end, teachers can sequence practice activities in

such a way that attentional demands increase as practice unfolds so that less and less attention is available for focus on the target grammatical feature.

At the beginning of this stage, activities which are less demanding of attention can be provided so that the learner can focus on the target grammatical feature with ease. Subsequently, activities can become more complex so that less attention is available for focus on grammar. This can push the learner to develop the ability of accessing their explicit knowledge under increasingly demanding conditions, and thus serve as preparation for the demands of fluent everyday communication.

The attentional demands of an activity can be moderated by several factors. One important factor is time pressure. As time pressure increases, the time available to access the relevant explicit knowledge decreases and so does the attention available for focus on form. A second important factor is related to the degree of spontaneity the activity requires. At higher degrees of spontaneity, more attention will be needed for focus on the content of the message and attention available for focus on the target form will decrease. Another factor is the focus of the activity. The focus of an activity can sometimes be to practise using a target feature, whereas at other times an activity may be designed to provide practice of a target feature while also pursuing other communicative goals. Activities which have the lesser requirement of practising a target feature are likely to consume less attention than activities which also have other communicative goals. These are some examples of factors which can moderate the attentional demands of an activity, but there are other factors in addition to these – some of which will be introduced below. Considering these factors can help teachers sequence activities so that the learner has less and less attention available as practice unfolds. Over time, this can push the learner to develop the ability of accessing their explicit knowledge when only minimal attention is available.

Things to compare
1   a pencil, a ball, a garden rake
2   an elephant, a snake, a crocodile
3   a television, a lamp, a chair
4   a rock, a mountain, a river
5   a car, an aeroplane, a bicycle

Figure 1: Prompt for a communicative drill (from Ur, 1988)

Early targeted communicative practice should include activities less demanding of attention, which can be achieved by having, for example, less

time pressure, lower spontaneity, and a narrower focus on form. Activities such as communicative drills can make a suitable candidate for this stage of practice. Communicative drills are activities which provide opportunities for repeated use of target features within meaningful yet simple messages. For example, the activity presented in Figure 1 can be used to provide practice of comparatives and superlatives. In this activity, the learners are asked to make comparisons of their choice between several items (e.g., an elephant is heavier than a snake).

There are several reasons why such an activity can serve as suitable practice for learners towards the beginning of the targeted-oriented practice stage. For a start, the activity is fairly simple: it can be completed with simple vocabulary and grammatical forms, and it does not require production beyond the sentence level. Because the focus of the activity is largely on using the target structure, sufficient attention should be available for focus on form and thus the learner has better chances of being able to construct correct sentences with the target feature. On the other hand, there is a departure from the simplicity of knowledge-oriented activities in several ways. For one thing, the learner is responsible for creating the content of their message. While the learner has to use the target structure to complete the activity successfully, they are free to choose how to use it (e.g., which adjectives to use). Hence, use of the target structure is no longer mechanical and predictable. The activity is also designed to be performed orally, and so some time pressure will be involved. Together, these features make this a more complex activity than knowledge-oriented activities, and one that can begin to push the learner towards developing the ability to access their explicit knowledge during real-time communication.

Simple communicative activities such as communicative drills can help take the learner one step further so that they can access their explicit knowledge with more speed and less effort. This, however, is not enough preparation for

Encouraging the development of GKSC

Activities like the communicative drill above can encourage the development of GKSC *but to a limited extent only*. This suggests that, as practice unfolds, **a shift towards more complex activities** is needed.

For practice to be effective, it should **replicate** the processing conditions which learners will encounter while performing in the real world.

As targeted communicative practice progresses, activities should mirror more closely oral communication in **everyday settings**.

spontaneous, real-time oral communication. There are several reasons for this: real-time communication is, among other things, time pressured, message-focused, and more complex in the sense that it involves a number of tasks beyond using explicit knowledge (e.g., content creation, message organisation, and input decoding). Thus, activities like the communicative drill above can encourage the development of GKSC but to a limited extent only. This suggests that, as practice unfolds, a shift towards more complex activities is needed.

It is also widely believed among researchers that, for practice to be effective, it should replicate the processing conditions which learners will encounter while performing in the real world, i.e., practice should be *transfer appropriate*. According to this view, if grammar practice activities replicate the processing conditions involved in oral communication in everyday settings, then the knowledge resulting from class activities will be more likely to transfer to performance outside the classroom. This suggests that the practice cycle should involve a stage where activities mirror the processing conditions learners will find in real-time oral communication outside the classroom. As mentioned, such practice can be expected to be overly demanding at the initial phases of practice, but it may be more appropriate as targeted communicative practice shifts towards more complex activities.

It follows from the above that as targeted communicative practice progresses, activities should mirror more closely oral communication in everyday settings. Such activities can be expected to provide better preparation for learners to be ready for the attentional demands they will find in the target communicative scenarios while making it more likely that what they practise in class is transfer appropriate. Accordingly, these are the activities which may ultimately provide the preparation learners need in order to be able to access their grammatical knowledge during spontaneous communication outside the classroom. As such, these activities play a fundamental role towards achieving the aims of practice.

The activities used at this final stage of practice would continue to provide opportunities for practice of targeted grammatical features, but they should have their main focus on the message and encourage the use of language as a means towards an outcome. That is, language use during these activities

should be meaningful and purposeful. This would make them closer to real-time communication in everyday situations. An example of a communicative activity suitable as practice of comparatives is provided in Figure 2.

Prepare to tell your partner about two cities you have visited. Compare the two cities so that your partner can decide which one they would prefer to visit. Consider, for example:
- cost
- weather
- size
- transport
- cleanliness
- safety
- accommodation
- food
- comfort
Use comparatives.

Figure 2: Instructions for a communicative activity

This activity requires oral production at the discourse level with a range of linguistic elements in addition to comparatives, involves some time pressure, and focuses primarily on the message. Together, all these features should make this activity more demanding of attention than a simpler activity like a communicative drill while making it closer to everyday oral communication.

It should be noted that **the role of explicit knowledge is as important as ever during this final stage of practice, as explicit knowledge is what allows learners to construct correct sentences with the target feature**. This is important because learners can sometimes get too absorbed in the conversation during these activities and forget that the main aim is to improve their grammar. Accordingly, teachers should continue encouraging learners to use explicit knowledge. This can be done in multiple ways, e.g., by instructing learners to use the target structure, providing corrective feedback, and encouraging learners to monitor their speech or their partners' speech.

One shortcoming of these activities is that they are less likely to elicit repeated production of the target feature. Knowledge-oriented activities and simpler targeted communicative activities such as communicative drills often require frequent use of the target feature (e.g., in every sentence), but the same is not true for more advanced targeted communicative activities. Some design features can maximise the chances that target features are used (e.g., through instructions or planning time), but even then, many learners may only produce a handful of sentences containing the target feature. Accordingly, it seems reasonable that these activities should form a significant portion of the targeted communicative practice stage.

SEQUENCING TARGETED COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES

As this section has shown, there are many kinds of targeted communicative activities. The activities presented in figures 1 and 2 above, for example, are very different from each other, as can be seen in the commentary provided below each activity. This brings the question of which activities are most suitable for earlier and later stages of practice and, more broadly, how different activities should be sequenced over the course of practice. As said in the introduction of this section, this handbook presents the view that practice activities should be sequenced in such a way that attention available for focus on the target feature gradually decreases over the course of practice.

There are a number of factors that can contribute to how much attention is available for focus on the target feature during practice. A selection of key factors which can affect how much attention is available for focus on the target feature during practice is presented in Figure 3 below.

1   Time pressure: Low time pressure vs. high time pressure

2   Planning time: Planning vs. no planning time

3   Degree of spontaneity: Rehearsed/structured vs. spontaneous performance

4   Prompts for target feature: Provided vs. not provided

5   Focus of the activity: Focus on form mostly vs. focus on form and message

6   Range of linguistic features: Narrow (use of the target feature mostly) vs. wide (use of a range of linguistic forms)

7   Discourse level: Production at sentence level vs. production at discourse level

Figure 3: Key factors which can determine the attentional demands of practice activities

Each of the features provided Figure 3 and their relationship with attentional demands are explained below.

1   Time pressure: Low time pressure vs. high time pressure

The first feature refers to the degree of time pressure the activity involves. Some activities involve less time pressure and thus allow a degree of thinking time (e.g., a simple communicative drill whose primary purpose is to practise a target feature), whereas other activities (e.g., a two-way dialogue with a more communicative purpose) may convey a higher sense of urgency and more time pressure. Low time pressure can be expected to place lower demands on attention than high time pressure.

2   Planning time: Planning vs. no planning time

The second feature is related to the provision of planning time. If learners are provided time to plan their speech, lower demands will be placed on attention during performance than if planning time is not provided. This is because the message will have been partly conceptualised and so more attention is available for focus on the target form at the stage where the message is formulated.

3   Degree of spontaneity: Rehearsed/structured vs. spontaneous performance

The third feature is related to degree of spontaneity, and it can overlap to a certain extent with the second feature above (planning time). If the degree of spontaneity required is lower, more attentional resources will be available for focus on the target feature. The degree of spontaneity could be lower, for example, if the activity provides opportunities for rehearsal or if the talk to be produced is pre-structured (e.g., when prompts for the content are supplied). The less scaffolding the activity provides, the more spontaneous and thus demanding on attention the activity will be.

4   Prompts for target feature: Provided vs. not provided

It is possible to design activities in such a way that prompts for the target feature are provided or absent. If prompts for the target feature are provided,

the learners' task will be simpler and thus they will generally need fewer attentional resources to supply the target feature with accuracy.

5 Focus of the activity: Focus on form mostly vs. focus on form and message

The fifth feature is related to the focus of the activity. Sometimes, the focus of a targeted communicative activity is to practise using a target feature and there is little purpose beyond that. At other times, an activity may be designed to give practice of a target feature while also having other communicative goals. Activities which have the lesser requirement of practising the target feature are likely to consume less attention than activities which also have other communicative goals.

6 Range of linguistic features: Narrow (use of the target feature mostly) vs. wide (use of a range of linguistic forms)

Some activities only require a very narrow range of linguistic features (e.g., a communicative drill), whereas others require a much wider range. An activity that only requires a narrow range of linguistic features can be expected to place lower demands on attention than an activity that requires use of a wider range of linguistic features.

7 Discourse level: Production at sentence level vs. production at discourse level

The last feature is related to the discourse level. Some activities only require production of short and simple sentences. Others require the production of a longer and more complex speech which involves considering aspects of communication such as discourse organisation and pragmatics. The higher discourse level an activity requires, the bigger the cognitive burden it will place on attention.

Although this selection of factors is not exhaustive, an effort has been made to include the features which we consider to be likely to have the most significant effect on the burden an activity places on attention. It is hoped that this will offer language teachers guidance towards assessing the nature of

different activities and towards making an informed selection and sequencing of practice activities.

WHAT COULD MAKE TARGETED COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES UNSUCCESSFUL?

There are a number of factors which can compromise the effectiveness of targeted communicative activities. Some factors which can often be problematic will be discussed in what follows. Sometimes the targeted communicative practice stage can be very brief, and as a result it may not include sufficient opportunities for practice. When this happens, learners may be given either activities which are too simple and cannot be expected to promote GKSC to a desirable degree, or activities which are too complex for the learners. In the latter case, the learners may not have the means to use their explicit knowledge during the activity (e.g., because attentional demands are too high) and this may lead to either omission of the target feature or inaccuracies. For these reasons, we would like to emphasise that the sequence of targeted communicative practice should be carefully designed and planned for in line with the learners' needs and competences, ensuring that they will be able to perform well over the course of practice and that opportunities will be created for a meaningful degree of GKSC to develop.

Another common issue during targeted communicative activities is that learners can sometimes engage in communication in such a way that they focus exclusively on the message and neglect their language use. This is problematic for obvious reasons: the learner is not using their explicit knowledge and thus practice cannot be expected to support the development of GKSC. As explained above, we hold the view that learners should continue using their explicit knowledge throughout the stage of targeted communicative practice. As such, we deem it essential that learners are aware of the aims of practice activities and are prepared to monitor their speech and apply their explicit knowledge during performance.

4. SAMPLE ACTIVITIES AND PROCEDURES

In this section, some sample activities will be presented with the aim of giving the reader a better understanding of what targeted communicative practice activities can look like and how they may be sequenced. The assessment grid presented in Table 1 below will be used to assess the demands each activity places on attention and thus how much attention is available for focus on the target feature of the activity.

Table 1: Assessment grid

Activity feature	Attentional demands		
	Low	Medium	High
1 Time pressure			
2 Planning time			
3 Degree of spontaneity			
4 Prompts for target feature			
5 Focus of the activity			
6 Range of linguistic features			
7 Discourse level			

This assessment grid can be helpful towards understanding the nature of different targeted communicative practice activities and towards sequencing activities in such a way that attention available for focus on the target feature decreases over the course of practice. It can also help teachers ensure that a range of activities are provided over the course of practice, with easier activities towards the beginning and more complex activities as practice unfolds. One caveat is that there is no reason to believe that all features 1-7 above will contribute equally to how much attention an activity will consume. The purpose of the grid is thus indicative.

ACTIVITY 1

Level: Upper-intermediate

Target feature: Reporting verbs

Materials:

Read the following sentences and try to memorise them. Then cover the sentences and try to report what each person said from your memory.

a Martin: Shall I help you with the dishes?	a Martin offered…
b Anna: Did you go to work yesterday?	b Anna asked…
c Jessica: We are sorry but we can't help you.	c Jessica apologised…
d Carol: James, switch off the light please.	d Carol told James…
e Eric: I won't tell anyone your secret.	e Eric promised…

Assessment of attentional demands:

Activity feature	Attentional demands		
	Low	Medium	High
1 Time pressure	X		
2 Planning time		X	
3 Degree of spontaneity	X		
4 Prompts for target feature	X		
5 Focus of the activity	X		
6 Range of linguistic features	X		
7 Discourse level	X		

Attentional demands rating: Low

ACTIVITY 2

Level: Upper-intermediate

Target feature: Obligation and permission

Materials:

> Think about your secondary school. Look at the sentences below and decide how you could complete them. Then, share your sentences with your partner. How similar or different were your experiences at school?
>
> *When I was at school…*
>
> a   *… we weren't allowed…*
>
> b   *… we were forced…*
>
> c   *… the teachers didn't let us…*
>
> d   *… we were supposed…*
>
> e   *… the teachers made us…*

Assessment of attentional demands:

Activity feature	Attentional demands		
	Low	Medium	High
1 Time pressure		X	
2 Planning time	X		
3 Degree of spontaneity	X		
4 Prompts for target feature	X		
5 Focus of the activity		X	
6 Range of linguistic features	X		
7 Discourse level	X		

Attentional demands rating: Low

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ACTIVITY 3

Level: Pre-intermediate

Target feature: Past simple

Materials:

Tell your partner about your last holiday. Talk about the following:

a   Where and when you went

b   Who you went with

c   What you did there

d   Where you stayed

e   What you enjoyed

f   What you didn't enjoy

Remember to use the past simple correctly when you speak to your partner.

Assessment of attentional demands:

Activity feature	Attentional demands		
	Low	Medium	High
1 Time pressure			X
2 Planning time			X
3 Degree of spontaneity		X	
4 Prompts for target feature		X	
5 Focus of the activity		X	
6 Range of linguistic features		X	
7 Discourse level		X	

Attentional demands rating: Medium

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ACTIVITY 4

Level: Intermediate

Target feature: Past tenses

Materials:

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Assessment of attentional demands:

Activity feature	Attentional demands		
	Low	Medium	High
1 Time pressure			X
2 Planning time		X	
3 Degree of spontaneity	X		
4 Prompts for target feature	X		
5 Focus of the activity		X	
6 Range of linguistic features		X	
7 Discourse level			X

Attentional demands rating: Medium

ACTIVITY 5

Level: Pre-intermediate

Target feature: Comparative adjectives

Materials:

> You are going to speak with your partner about the following pairs of items. Using comparative adjectives, make sentences to compare the items in each pair. If your partner disagrees with you, justify your opinion.
>
> a   A river and the sea
>
> b   France and China
>
> c   Motorbikes and bicycles
>
> d   Cats and dogs
>
> e   Maths and history
>
> f   Watches and shoes
>
> g   Football and tennis
>
> h   Chicken and salad
>
> First, plan what you are going to say.

Assessment of attentional demands:

Activity feature	Attentional demands		
	Low	Medium	High
1 Time pressure		X	
2 Planning time	X		
3 Degree of spontaneity	X		
4 Prompts for target feature			X
5 Focus of the activity		X	
6 Range of linguistic features	X		
7 Discourse level	X		

Attentional demands rating: Low-medium

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ACTIVITY 6

Level: Intermediate

Target feature: Comparative adjectives

Materials:

Your partner wants to go somewhere on a holiday and would like you to help with suggestions. Prepare to tell your partner about two cities you have visited, if possible, in different countries. Consider the following: a Cost   b Size   c Temperature   d Safety   e Temperature   f Light   g Cleanliness   Explain your ideas; provide reasons, examples, etc.

Assessment of attentional demands:

Activity feature	Attentional demands		
	Low	Medium	High
1 Time pressure			X
2 Planning time			X
3 Degree of spontaneity		X	
4 Prompts for target feature			X
5 Focus of the activity			X
6 Range of linguistic features			X
7 Discourse level			X

Attentional demands rating: High

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ACTIVITY 7

Level: Intermediate
Target feature: Comparative adjectives
Materials:
Note: To be provided after activity 6 above.

> Now, repeat the same talk with another partner. Focus on your use of comparative adjectives.

Assessment of attentional demands:

Activity feature	Attentional demands		
	Low	Medium	High
1 Time pressure			X
2 Planning time	X		
3 Degree of spontaneity	X		
4 Prompts for target feature			X
5 Focus of the activity		X	
6 Range of linguistic features			X
7 Discourse level			X

Attentional demands rating: Medium-high

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ACTIVITY 8

Level: Intermediate

Target feature: *Would* for imaginary situations

Materials:

Interview your partner about their dream job. Ask them questions about the following:

a Job title

b Place of work

c Main tasks

d Hours of work

e Salary

f Downsides

Assessment of attentional demands:

Activity feature	Attentional demands		
	Low	Medium	High
1 Time pressure			X
2 Planning time			X
3 Degree of spontaneity		X	
4 Prompts for target feature			X
5 Focus of the activity			X
6 Range of linguistic features			X
7 Discourse level			X

Attentional demands rating: High

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ACTIVITY 9

Level: Pre-intermediate
Target feature: Future forms
Materials:

Talk to your partner about your plans for this weekend. Talk about what you are planning to do in the morning and in the evening each day. If you are listening, ask your partner follow-up questions.

Assessment of attentional demands:

Activity feature	Attentional demands		
	Low	Medium	High
1 Time pressure			X
2 Planning time			X
3 Degree of spontaneity			X
4 Prompts for target feature			X
5 Focus of the activity			X
6 Range of linguistic features			X
7 Discourse level			X

Attentional demands rating: High

References

Latham-Koenig, C., Oxenden, C., & Lambert, J. (2019). *English file intermediate students' book* (4th ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Ur, P. (1988). Grammar Practice Activities: *A Practice Guide for Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.