Putting a Humanistic Approach to Grammatical Input into Practice: A Sample Lesson

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Abstract
The paper’s focus is on a humanistic, multi-dimensional approach to grammar teaching. In this approach the learners practice a variety of skills in order to become affectively engaged through the elicitation of their thoughts, views, motivations, experiences, knowledge, interests and emotions, while being intellectually stimulated. Though grammar is covered in detail in such a lesson, it does not drive the lesson because the focus is on a non-interrogative, communicative approach that promotes collaboration. The aim of the lesson is to provide a positive learning experience which meets the learners’ needs while appealing to the various learning styles and encouraging each learner to take charge of their learning.

The humanistic approach to grammatical input
Humanism, which, according to Tomlinson (2003), respects learners as “human beings and helps them to exploit their capacity for learning through meaningful experience,” connects what is in the course material with what is in the learners’ minds. Experiencing language through personalized and student-centred tasks is mentally stimulating and helps a learner develop self-confidence as well as a positive attitude to learning. Only after this has been achieved should the focus of a lesson move on to the analysis of the contextualised target language.

To be effective, learners need to be provided with good models of such a humanistic, grammar teaching methodology based on authentic text presentations which show the grammar in context. Carter, Hughes and McCarthy (1998) state that this non-threatening, student-centred approach coupled with practice opportunities raises learner awareness of the language being presented.
The materials on relative clauses featured in this article, which are shown in chronological order in the Appendix, follow this humanistic approach of affectively and cognitively engaging the learners in such high level skills as problem solving and creating. To begin with, the material features introductory activities (Figures 1 and 2). The first activity (Figure 1) personalises the topic, providing an opportunity for the target language to be produced subconsciously, while generating information which can be used to write an essay for homework (Figure 7). The second activity’s questions focus on the topic of the texts in order to summon learners’ schemata (Figure 2).

**Figure 1**

**Lead-in**

*Please think about one or more of the following topics. Feel free to make some notes if you want to. You have a few minutes to do this.*

- Your favourite possession
- Your favourite place
- The person you admire the most

*Now try and explain it / them to your partner, who has to guess the answer/s.*

*For example:* ‘This is something which I’ve had for fifteen years. Originally, it was given to my brother by my mother but he couldn’t wear it because of his work. He’s a builder. Once, when I was visiting, I saw it lying around so I asked my mother and brother if I could have it. They said I could so I brought it back with me to Singapore. I wear it every day and never take it off’.

*Do you know what the answer is?*

*We’ll return to this task a bit later.*

**Figure 2**

**Discussion**

- What do people think of when they think of your country and/or Singapore?

Name at least 4 of them. For example, Scotland means whisky and rain to me.

What about Switzerland?

- What does your country import/export?
If you had a choice, would you buy something that was made in your country, even if it was cheaper to buy an imported alternative?

What does ‘WTO’ mean?

This is followed by the exploitation of authentic texts from a TV programme (Figure 3), and a newspaper (Figure 4).

**Figure 3**

**Listening**

Let’s hear what Craig Ferguson has to say.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50dHXiKn-vg

‘The Swiss Armies Swiss Armies Knifes’ (sic)

**Figure 4**

**Reading**

http://business.guardian.co.uk/story/0,,2140969,00.html

**Made in China: Swiss army knife suffers an identity crisis**

*Kate Connolly: the Guardian: Friday August 03 2007*

*Could Swiss manufacturers be screwed by WTO rules? Photograph: Linda Nylind*

It is as closely associated with Switzerland as the Matterhorn, muesli and the cuckoo clock. But the Swiss army knife, considered by millions around the world to be an indispensable tool, is in danger of losing its Swiss identity.

The Swiss army, which is to order a fresh batch of 65,000 of the pocket knives with new specifications, has caused nationwide consternation by declaring that under World Trade Organisation rules, the tendering process must be opened to companies worldwide because of the high value of the contract.

China, which has been producing pirate copies of the knife for years, is thought to have the best chance of winning the contract, which is estimated at 1.7m Swiss francs (£695,000), followed by Taiwan and Bulgaria.

The issue has become one of the hottest political topics of the summer, with far-right politicians saying that national pride is at stake.

“If the Swiss army knife no longer comes from Switzerland, then we might as well stop producing it altogether,” said Thomas Fuchs, MP for the far-right Swiss People’s party.
Alois Kessler, a lawyer and a former colonel in the Swiss army, has taken up the campaign and launched a nationwide petition, Keep Soldiers’ Pocket Knives Swiss!

He said he had found that under WTO rules “stabbing weapons” – among them the Swiss army knife – are on a list of products that do not need to be put out to tender.

“I simply cannot imagine our soldiers carrying a Made in China knife in their knapsacks,” he said.

“It would be like us giving them German-made chocolate.”

The army is saying little, except that it is working on the technical specifications for the new product to make it suitable for modern soldiering, including a serrated blade with a locking mechanism, a saw, and a Phillips – crosshead – screwdriver. It should also have a case, allowing it to be attached to a belt.

Victorinox, the company that makes the knives, said it was confident it would win the bid on the combined factors of quality and cost.

The knife, which was first produced in Ibach in the canton of Schwyz in 1897, can be equipped with anything from a nail file and a tin opener to a fish-scaler and a USB stick, and features in the design collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

It is credited by everyone from balloonists and astronauts to surgeons and pilots with saving lives and is the official pocket knife for 16 armies around the world, including the US military.

It has also prompted many jokes, perceived as it is as the weapon of choice for the military of neutral Switzerland. The US comedian Robin Williams once quipped: “How can you trust an army that has a wine opener on its knife?”

Initially, the tasks are student-centred in order to create affective engagement amongst the learners by eliciting their thoughts, opinions, beliefs, experiences, knowledge, interests and emotions, as well as being intellectually stimulating (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Pre-listening

We’re going to listen to and read about the Swiss army knife. Did you think of this when you made your list of all things Swiss? Discuss the following with your partner/s? Feel free to discuss them in any order you’d like:
1. What is a Swiss Army Knife?
2. Which professions could use it?
3. What does it include?
4. What (else) do you think of when you think of Switzerland?

Let’s watch ‘The Swiss Armies Swiss Armies Knifes’ (sic) to see if Craig Ferguson agrees with your replies.

Though grammar is covered in detail after the initial tasks have been completed, it does not drive the lesson. The focus is on a non-interrogative, communicative approach asking the learners for their opinions, attitudes and feelings (Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

**Post reading**

*Discuss the questions with your partner. Again, you don’t have to go in order.***

- Should it be manufactured in Switzerland?
- Is it a weapon? Is it a work of art?
- What do you think about this World Trade Organisation law?
- What other features should it have?

Testing via the answering of comprehension questions is avoided as, according to Hill and Tomlinson (2003), this “has very little beneficial effect” (as cited in Tomlinson, 2003, p. 373). However, a traditional gap-fill activity is included as an optional homework task (Figure 7), as it might be of appeal to learners of a certain learning style. Appealing to these various learning styles by providing the participants with variety and choices, as opposed to being prescriptive, can develop a sense of ownership, while promoting learner autonomy, both of which are features of humanism, which “isn’t an indulgence but a necessity, if durable acquisition and development is to take place” Tomlinson (2008).

The teaching material is related to the students’ lives, which is in keeping with the personalization of materials as advocated by Tomlinson (2008), because the tasks ask for the participants’ responses to the text before the focus moves on to the analysis of the target structure contained within the text, in order for it to be seen in context.
As Bolitho (2003) asserts, “the minefield of real texts with all its apparent chaos and hidden traps” (as cited in Tomlinson, 2003, p. 422) should be used instead of sentence level material because of their capacity to promote informal learning due to no simplification having taken place. Another reason the same author promotes the use of real texts is:

“In real communication… language hardly ever exists at single sentence level, and meaning can only be successfully decoded by understanding the complex web of patterns in written and spoken discourse… until learners are given the opportunity to grapple with these complexities, it is unlikely that they will emerge from their language courses prepared for the encounter with real language” (as cited in Tomlinson, 2003, p. 422).

Batstone (1996) concurs saying that “…larger stretches of discourse… which go beyond the single sentence should be used, and using this, in tandem with affectively involving tasks, will lead to greater motivation” (p.273). This exposes the learner to as much language as possible, and shows sentences in relation to each other, exposing the learners to English as it is used. This maximises investment in the learning process, which is a focus of natural acquisition (Mares, 2003), and, as shown in Figures 3 and 4, the participants are exposed to this input.

Using authentic material promotes learner autonomy by reassuring the learners that they can comprehend such material, as opposed to limiting their input to simplified EFL materials. As well as newspaper articles and TV programmes, which cater for visual and auditory learners respectively, poems and book extracts, for example, can also be exploited in a syllabus, as well as songs. With regard to musical input, Moi (2003) says that learners can:

“…enthusiastically read and interpret texts which are relevant to their lives but are usually excluded from the selection of reading materials used… the words of rock songs” (as cited in Tomlinson, 2003, p.407).

In the modern classroom, digital information from such sources as Facebook or blogs can also be exploited, as well as YouTube, which is the source of this lesson’s TV clip.
Homework tasks (Figure 7) can also be developed and assigned based on humanistic principles, such as the gathering of target language from real life sources.

Figure 7

Further practice / Homework

- Re-read the newspaper article: Made in China: Swiss army knife suffers an identity crisis in order to find and classify the relative clauses.
  and / or
  - Go back to the Lead-in activity and write up your notes.
  and / or
  - Make a note of the relative clauses you come across in your reading.
  and / or

Complete this worksheet (if you like doing gap-fills)

Which relative pronouns are needed? There may be more than one correct answer.

a. Switzerland, __________ rate of inflation was the lowest in the twentieth century, is a neutral country.
b. Taiwan is an island __________ hopes to manufacture the Swiss army knife.
c. Robin Williams, __________ is an American comedian, and Craig Ferguson, __________ is a Scottish comedian, joke about the Swiss army.
d. Bulgaria is a country __________ many tourists visit because of the skiing.
e. Alois Kessler is a man __________ used to be a soldier.
f. 1.7m Swiss francs is an amount of money __________ I can only dream of having.
g. The Swiss army knife is a gadget __________ I would love to have.
h. The Swiss Army Knife is a gadget __________ was originally produced in Ibach, Switzerland.

Reflective journals as recommended by Bailey (1990) can also be kept and these could be submitted for assessment or peer review. Harmer (2007) comments on the fact that they “allow students to express feelings more freely than they might do in public, in class…and this introspection may well lead them to insights which will greatly enhance their progress” (p. 400), while Ragupathi (2011) focuses on the benefits of online journal writing, with blogging used to develop reflective learning through knowledge creation and sharing.
The material has a grammatical focus because Fotos (1994) found that using the target language in post-input communication tasks raises awareness, which is essential for language acquisition. She goes on to mention that the most use, and for that matter, the most complex usage of the target language occurs with the exchange of information, which explains the focus on this type of activity.

*Figure 8*, for example, contains an activity in which the students are asked to describe various lexical items from the authentic material. Though the lexis is prescribed, the students are provided with the option of including items of their own choosing from the input, because, as previously mentioned, the provision of choice promotes learner autonomy. Furthermore, Ellis (1995) states that it is in the interests of the learners to attempt to comprehend the “targeted structure in the input...paying attention to linguistic features and meanings” (p.88), as this noticing will result in language intake.

*Figure 8*

**Practice activity**

**Student A**

*Complete the sentences. Feel free to use your own prompts if you don’t want to use the ones given.*

*For example: A saw is a tool which is used to cut wood.*

- Germany is a country
- A Swiss Army Knife
- A surgeon
- A USB stick
- Taiwan
- A knapsack
- A politician

*Your partner, who has different words, will try and guess your words. You try and guess his/hers. For example: “This is an object which is used to cut wood. What do you think it is?”*
**Practice activity**

**Student B**

*Complete the sentences. Feel free to use your own prompts if you don’t want to use the ones given.*

*For example: A saw is a tool which is used to cut wood.*

- The Museum of Modern Art
- The WTO
- A comedian
- Chocolate
- China
- A belt
- A pirate

*Your partner, who has different words, will try and guess your words. You try and guess his/hers. For example: “This is an object which is used to cut wood. What do you think it is?”*

The focus, as advocated by Wright (1993), is not on the grammar, but personalized student-centred activities such as the attitudes of the speaker or writer and the feelings of the listener or reader to the material. Van Lier (2001) suggests that such activities can take the form of:

- asking for an emotive response
- asking for an expression of attitude, opinions or ideas
- asking for an experiential response
- focusing on the meaning and context

As well as including such activities, problem solving activities should be integrated in the material in order to engage learners cognitively and emotionally.

Some learners might be unfamiliar with the features of this approach which involve active participation in the learning process, thinking critically, being pro-active and taking
responsible for learning both in and out of the classroom whilst investing energy in the process. Consequently, activities such as communicating with peers in pairs or groups, including the checking of answers, would be alien to this particular type of course participant and the rationale for the lack of ‘teacher-centeredness’ would need explaining.

Decontextualized material is extremely forgettable and highly unlikely to allow for humanistic principles which maximise student motivation and result in language acquisition. Therefore, it is imperative that humanism is implemented because a preponderance of sentence-level gap fill or matching activities means that there will inevitably be very little investment in the learning process. Therefore, humanism, according Tomlinson (2008), is not something which is optional, but an integral aspect of the learning process.

Furthermore, it is important to ensure that the proportion of theory to practical application strikes a balance, avoiding the spending of a disproportionate amount of time on the former. As Cives-Enriques (2003) notes “…language learning does not occur as a result of the transmission of facts about a language or from a succession of rote memorization drills. It is the result of opportunities for meaningful interactions with others in the target language” (as cited in Tomlinson, 2003, p. 253). This is illustrated by the activity presented in Figure 8, which requires the participants to use the target language in an information gap activity.

Consequently, using repetitive and mechanical material, with rules simply being given, should be avoided. This is achieved in Figure 9 by using the guided discovery approach in which the participants are provided with contextualized examples of the language and answer questions in order to formulate grammatical rules pertaining to the target language. Such a procedure actively involves the participants, which makes it more likely that the rules are processed. Figure 10 is provided for those unable to complete the activity.

Figure 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relative clauses – a guide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. A soldier is a person who knows how to use a weapon. that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. A Swiss Army Knife is a that is very useful.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ELTWorldOnline.com
gadget

3. The Swiss Guard are people that which whom the comedian makes fun of.

4. German-made chocolate is a product that which the Swiss don’t particularly like.

5. A lawyer is a person whose job involves dealing with legal issues.

6. New York is a place where you can see many tourist attractions.

7. The Swiss Guard, who wear colourful uniforms, protect the Pope.

8. New York, which has the Statue of Liberty, is in the USA.

Language analysis

1) Can you work out when the zero (Ø) pronouns are used? Use the following page if you are unsure, or to confirm.

2) What’s the difference between sentences 1 and 2, and sentences 3 and 4?

3) What do you notice about sentences 5 and 6?

4) What’s the difference between sentences 7 and 8 and the first 6 sentences?

5) Why are the following sentences incorrect:
   a) Taiwan is an island where hopes to produce the Swiss Army Knife.
   b) Taiwan which is an island.

Figure 10

**Defining and non-defining relative clauses: The rules**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defining clauses</th>
<th>Non-defining clauses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gives essential information</td>
<td>Gives extra information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used in speaking and writing (with no commas)</td>
<td>Only used in writing (with either 2 commas or a comma and a full stop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The relative pronouns used are: who, which, where, whom, whose, that</td>
<td>The relative pronouns used are: who, which, where, whom, whose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The relative pronoun as the object of the relative clause can be omitted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The relative pronoun cannot be omitted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### Defining Relative Clauses

The relative pronoun can be the subject or object.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>People</strong></td>
<td><strong>People</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who, that</td>
<td>Who, that, whom, whose (can’t be omitted)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Things</strong></th>
<th><strong>Things</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Which, that</td>
<td>Which, that, who, where, when (can’t be omitted)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A **verb** follows the relative pronoun

A **(pro)noun** comes between the relative pronoun and the verb

Other relative pronouns are:

- **what** (not after a noun), **whereby**, **why**, **whatever**, **whoever**, **whichever**.
- Preposition + relative pronoun is also possible.

Presenting the target language using a number of the previously mentioned unrelated, decontextualised sentences in order to do the following type of activity should also be avoided:

- half-sentence matching
- gap fills
- categorizing sentences
- underlining the target language in sentences

This is because such activities lack variety in the way the material is presented, appealing to logical/mathematical learners but not to the other learner types, which, according to Gardner, are: verbal-linguistic, visual-spatial, musical, logical-mathematical, bodily/feeling (which I take to mean kinaesthetic), interpersonal (contact with other people) and intrapersonal (understanding oneself) (Campbell, L., Campbell, B. & Dickinson, D., 1996).
Total Physical Response (TPR) is an example of kinaesthetic intelligence which, leads to better comprehension, production and enhanced motivation (Ellis, 1995, p.88). For example, during revision in subsequent sessions, course participants could be asked to put their arms in the air if a dictated sentence is Defining or their hands on their head if it is Non-defining.

With regard to auditory intelligence, the TV clip (Figure 3) is included which encourages active listening and participating in problem solving activities as recommended by Rost (1991), in order to engage the participants cognitively and emotionally. The material in Figure 5 personalizes the material to further promote engagement, as advocated by Hill and Tomlinson (2003), who also comment on overt listening material being needed, as opposed to “… simple classroom language such as following the teacher’s instructions, or…” ‘speaking activities’ “(as cited in Tomlinson, 2003, p. 366).

In conclusion, humanistic language learning material should

- Contextualize the grammar
- Provide a balance of theory and practical application
- Cater for various learner styles
- Be humanistic
- Promote learner autonomy
- Promote reflection
- Allow for choice and individual preferences
- Exploit authentic materials
- Provide a variety of skills work
- Develop ‘good habits’
- Raise the learners’ grammatical awareness
- Help to instil confidence
- Be a ‘draft’ which can be improved upon

Cives-Enriques (2003) says, “…if students of any discipline enjoy what they are doing, they will at least make the effort to learn” (as cited in Tomlinson, 2003, p. 240). Hopefully, the materials for this lesson achieve this aim.
References


**Appendix**

*The chronological order of the lesson*

- Lead-in
- Discuss
- Pre-listening
- Listening
- Reading
- Relative Clauses – a guide
- Language Analysis
- Defining and Non-Defining Relative Clauses: The Rules
- Practice Activity
- Further practice / Homework

**About the author**

Gareth Morgan has been teaching English for 15 years, having worked in Turkey, Thailand and Vietnam before coming to Singapore, where he now works for the Centre for English Language Communication (CELC) at the National University of Singapore. As chair of CELC’s Oral Initiatives Committee, he is involved in developing and conducting workshops for staff and students. Gareth also teaches writing skills.