

Guided Discovery Grammar Instruction

by Marcella Caprario

This article encourages explicit grammar instruction through guided discovery, which has been defined as any situation where the learner must “find [the target information] independently and with only the provided materials” (Alfieri, Brooks, Aldrich, & Tenenbaum, 2011, p. 2). The techniques suggested are based on the assumption that explicit attention to form through an inductive approach aids second language (L2) acquisition, particularly when embedded within a communicative, meaning-focused lesson. The efficacy of explicit grammar instruction and guided discovery are briefly examined below, followed by a suggested procedure for using guided-discovery materials and a sample worksheet. Teachers are encouraged to create their own worksheets based on the model.

Explicit Grammar Instruction

An examination of several large-scale literature reviews reveals that learners acquire language faster and more accurately with explicit attention to form (see Nassaji & Fotos, 2011; Norris & Ortega, 2000). MacWhinney (1997) has advocated a sensible combination of explicit and implicit instruction, calling this combination a “no-lose proposition.” To those who advocate a natural approach, Larsen-Freeman (2003) has countered that just because language learning can occur unassisted does not mean we should try to emulate that experience in the classroom. Students come to a teacher because we provide an enhanced environment. Our classrooms should assist learners in acquiring language more quickly and more accurately than they would without formal instruction.

Guided Discovery

Alfieri et al. (2011) have concluded that “participation in guided discovery is better for learners than being provided with an explanation” (p. 11), though they warn that learners will usually require more time to form the necessary explanations and complete the task. The instructor can provide different amounts and different types of guidance, but unguided discovery has generally been found unproductive (Mayer, 2004). Mayer surmised that learners “need enough freedom to become cognitively active . . . and . . . enough guidance so that their cognitive activity results in the construction of useful knowledge” (p. 3). Following these ideas, teachers have many options for creating guided-discovery activities. The grammar worksheet in this article is offered as one possibility.

Guided discovery activities have been shown to benefit learners in several ways, including greater memorability of rules, active student engagement, development of problem-solving and critical thinking skills, and increased motivation (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2002, p. 164). Moreover, Thornbury (2011) has explained that “practice in identifying patterns in naturally-occurring data, and hypothesising rules from these patterns, is undoubtedly useful preparation for self-directed and autonomous learning” (para. 11). Larsen-Freeman (2003) went on to encourage instructors to “help students learn how to learn—to become our partners in the teaching/learning process” (p. 153). Using guided discovery on a regular basis will enable learners to hone these skills, which can be transferred to any environment both within and outside of formal education.

Procedure

The students first encounter the target language within a natural context, such as a reading, discussion, or similar authentic setting. The class then examines the form using the guided-discovery handout. After this exploration, the instructor provides opportunities for the learners to encounter this form again, using both receptive and productive skills. This sequence can take place over more than one lesson. It is important to remember that students require many hours of exposure and practice, and will use a new structure in non-target-like ways many times before stable, target-like use emerges. Researchers agree that true acquisition is a result of continued communicative opportunities.

The worksheet suggested here is divided into three sections: Section A looks at formal structure, Section B focuses on the communicative meaning, and Section C consolidates the previous sections. Using the STOP HERE points at the end of each section is recommended to make sure everyone has the correct answers before going on. This is especially important before learners attempt Section C, which pulls everything together. Before students begin, they must be familiar with the metalanguage on the handout. After working with the handouts a few times, students will recognize this metalanguage easily without assistance.

The activity begins with sample sentences on the board, which should be drawn from a meaning-based activity, such as a brief student discussion on a topic that will naturally lend itself to the form or a reading rich in examples of the target form, from which the teacher extracts the sample sentences. If using student discussions to generate the language, the teacher makes any necessary corrections when writing the sample sentences on the board but without explaining those corrections. Students copy the sample sentences into the space provided on the handout. Next, students complete Section A independently before discussing their answers with a partner or in a small group, explaining the reasons behind their choices. Next, the teacher elicits the answers to Section A from the class. After the class responses, students go on to Section B and Section C, following the same process in each section.

There are many more facets of a grammatical structure than these handouts highlight, such as pragmatics, negation, question formation, and lexical considerations specific to the form. How and when to teach these will depend on the instructor, the needs of the particular students, and the requirements of the context in which each instructor teaches.

Guided discovery provides an opportunity for collaboration and problem-solving skill development, while also encouraging learners to see linguistic input as a place from which to glean important information about language. This type of instruction develops more than grammatical accuracy; it encourages autonomy and life-long learning.

References

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Passive Voice

Sample Sentences (copied from the board)

Sentence 1:

Sentence 2:

Sentence 3:

Sentence 4:

Section A—Form

1. Circle the verb “be” in each sample sentence.
 2. Underline the main verb (the one with “be”) in each sample sentence.
 3. What form is the main verb in? Circle a choice: past present base V3
 4. What time periods are the sentences talking about? Circle all correct choices:
past present future
 5. Which word(s) tells you the time period in each sentence? _____
 6. What is in the subject position (before the verb)—the doer of the verb or receiver?

 7. If the doer of the verb is included, what word appears directly before it (we can call this the “doer phrase”)? _____
 8. If the “doer phrase” is included in the sentence, where does it occur?

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*** STOP HERE ***

Section B—Why Use It?

1. What is the action (verb) in each sentence? (List them all.)

2. Who or what is the doer of the action in each sentence? (List them all.)

3. In these sentences, which is the speaker or writer more focused on, the doer of the action or the receiver? _____
4. Do we have to include the doer in each sentence? _____
5. Can you guess why the speaker or writer put the focus on the receiver of the action in each example? (There may be different reasons for different sentences.)

*** STOP HERE ***

Section C—Put It All Together

What's the form? Use your answers from Section A to help you.

Subject + _____ + _____ (+ _____ _____).

What are some reasons for using this form? _____

Do you think it is more common to include the doer of the verb or leave it out when using this grammar structure? Why do you think so?

Teaching Notes for the Passive Voice

Form: Subject (receiver of the verb) + be verb (in the correct tense and matching the subject in number) + V3 (past participle) (+ by + doer of the verb). The “by doer” phrase is optional and is more often omitted.

Examples: *This paper **was written** in 2013.*

*The house **was built** by Irish immigrants in 1882.*

*Every year, prizes **are given** to the highest achieving students.*

*Two women **were attacked** last night in Central Park.*

Use: There are many reasons for using passive voice instead of active voice: the doer of the verb is unknown; the doer of the verb is not important; the speaker or writer wants to avoid attributing responsibility to the doer; for better cohesion, the speaker or writer wants the receiver in the subject position.

Special considerations: Students must understand the idea of doer and receiver of a verb before completing the handout. Start with a few simple s-v-o (subject-verb-object) examples (e.g., *John called Mary.*) and elicit the doer/receiver of each verb before asking students to complete the handout.

Include examples of past and present tenses, and use singular and plural subjects so that students can see clearly that *be* matches the subject in number and also carries the tense. Include at least one example with the agent (doer) stated, but students should know it is more commonly omitted.

When working with passive voice, it is particularly important to continually draw learners’ attention to why and how it is used in context, since knowing why and how to use it is the biggest challenge with this structure.

A good place to go for examples of passive voice is the newspaper. Find a story with a few examples and use the article first for a reading lesson. You may not find all the variety I have suggested (past and present, singular and plural subjects), but you can supplement or show those variations later in the lesson. After students have completed the handout and have a general understanding of how the passive is formed, you can have them search additional news stories for more examples and have them analyze the examples they have found.