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Being Practical in Teaching Grammar: Reflection on TFLTA

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In my memory, grammar is always being boring. Although it is a must topic in second language acquisition, it is students' least favorite area to learn. For a long time, how to teach grammar is a tricky issue for me. On TFLTA Conference, with curiosity, I went to Mary Nolen's room to see how she PACEd herself and contextualized grammar in the target language.

“To be honest” is the most frequent phrase I heard in Mary's presentation. As a former second language acquisition teacher and a current Spanish teacher at high school, Mary believes that due to their characteristics, high school teenagers still need to be taught grammatical rules explicitly. From her perspective, the strategy PACE (Presentation, Attention, Co-construction and Extension) is the most effective strategy to teach grammar at a high school level. In her classroom, she usually gives the students materials that include grammar topics, such as a story or a poem at the beginning of the class. She pointed out that it would be better if teachers use authentic materials. However, for beginning learners, being comprehensible is the first priority. After presenting, she draws students' attention to grammar rules and has them look at the structure and analyze linguistic features. To avoid the situation that the students would make assumption about grammatical rules, Mary would invite them to present their hypothesis to the whole class. Afterwards, the teacher and the students would collaborate to figure out the right rules. With all of these done, they will move from basic parts to communicative activities. Though Mary knows that “worksheet” is a dirty word in the linguistic field, she claims that public high school students need worksheet practice before they talk (M. Nelon, personal communication, November 7th, 2014).

I read PACE strategy in Brandl's work before. As it is a small part of our reading, I didn't pay a lot of attention to it. I'm glad that Mary brought it to the spotlight. I used to struggle with whether I should pull out grammatical rules explicitly. Since I want to teach high school students

in the future, I feel that high school students won't automatically employ grammatical rules correctly and they still need to be taught grammar in an explicit way. Yet, a traditional grammar-translation method is the least strategy I want to use. From Mary's presentation, I can tell that through PACE, students will not only learn grammar rules explicitly, but also have the opportunity to apply the rules in practice. However, implementing PACE in a high school classroom is not an easy task. It requires students' motivation and initiative. They need to be motivated to find the structure, analyze the structure and construct the rules. It takes time for students to get accustomed to this instruction strategy and actively participate in learning. Also, even though communicative methods advocate that classroom should be student-centered, high school students still need direction from teachers to move on the right track. To which extent I should guide students' learning is another problem remaining in my mind.

There are considerable fabulous teaching strategies in second language learning, but what I learned from Mary's presentation is to be practical. Know your students and modify your strategy so that you can help them achieve their best.