Teaching grammar through community issues

Jason Schneider

In recent years, ELT researchers have begun exploring how teachers can link their lessons to student communities and student concerns; however, little attention has been given to the potential for explicit grammar focus in the context of such approaches. In this paper, it is proposed that language lessons structured around local issues and concerns can be successfully linked to explicit grammar focus; furthermore, it is argued that such lessons have the potential to raise students’ awareness of critical issues in the world around them and to help them understand how ideologies and viewpoints can be expressed through grammatical choices. In order to highlight these points, the author relates one of his own lessons in which a grammar point—the passive voice—was taught in the context of a local concern—an on-campus labour dispute.

Bringing community into the classroom

In recent years, teacher-researchers have explored various possibilities for making ELT more relevant to student worlds. Examples of such studies include Morgan’s (1998; 2002; 2004) look at the potential for structuring lessons around timely and controversial issues in students’ lives, Benesch’s (2001) exploration of critical pedagogy approaches to ESL in higher-education environments, and Kumaravadivelu’s (2003) suggestion of practical strategies for incorporating local media materials into English language lessons. Based on my own readings of these and other writings, at least two advantages of bringing community issues into the classroom seem evident: 1 it offers a way to give local culture and local concerns a prominent place in the English language classroom; and 2 it provides an opportunity to make learning more engaging and relevant, because students have the opportunity to understand new material in terms of their own lives and realities.

Grammar in research on community-oriented ELT

Despite this attention to community-oriented teaching, there has been limited focus on the potential place of explicit grammar instruction in the context of such approaches. To some extent, a teacher reviewing the literature might get the impression either that there is no place for grammar instruction in lessons that address local issues, or that community-oriented teaching serves as something of a break from the daily grind of cloze exercises and grammar drills.
Putting the two together

In this article, I will share one of my own lessons, carried out at an American university, in order to demonstrate how explicit grammar instruction and community-oriented pedagogy can work together, and to propose that, moreover, they complement each other quite well. The grammar point under consideration is the passive voice; the community issue is an on-campus labour dispute which took place at the university where I carried out the project described here.

Grammar in local situations

In order to make language focus effective in a community-oriented lesson, it is necessary to go beyond the decontextualized, sentence-level presentations of grammar that dominate many pedagogic materials, because if students are going to understand the place of language in real discourse situations—i.e. local situations—they have to begin seeing how speakers’ and writers’ grammatical choices reflect and construct those situations.

Passive voice as a linguistic choice

In the case of passive voice, this means moving beyond the rather simplistic presentations of passive voice as a construction that is appropriate in formal language, or as a structure that should be avoided because it ‘can contribute to confusion,’ ‘deaden[s] the impact of an action’ and ‘tends to be wordier’ (Belenoff, Rorschach, and Oberlink, 1993: 57). In both of these treatments, it seems that the central questions of what kinds of ideological meanings passive voice can be used to express, and why one might choose to use the construction (or not to use it), are not addressed—and in my own experience as a teacher, these are the issues that students find most challenging about passive voice.

Passive voice as a removal of agency

Researchers working from critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis perspectives have explored at least one of the motivations for using passive voice—to displace or eliminate agency. In discussing the use of passive voice in the press, for example, van Dijk (1988) explains the situation as such: ‘...this procedure of deemphasizing the role of agents, or of making agents invisible, is an expedient strategy in the expression of perspectives on news events’ (p. 274). As an example of ‘making agents invisible’, he cites a study in Fowler, Hodge, Kress, and Trew (1979), which reveals that certain newspapers omit the police or other authorities as grammatical agents when the actions are negative, thus indicating a certain world-view on the part of the newspaper.

Applying the analysis to pedagogy

It was these sorts of ideological uses of passive voice that I wanted to help my students appreciate, both because I assumed that few of them would have explored such implicit meanings in their earlier studies of English, and because I knew it would be a way of helping them think critically about a timely concern on our campus.

A lesson on passivity

The lesson I describe was carried out with a group of advanced international graduate students. Around the time we were going to be looking at passive voice, the graduate student Teaching Assistant (TA) union at our university was threatening to strike, because the university was, purportedly, engaging in unfair bargaining practices regarding the negotiation of a new contract. Since my students were graduate students
and some were TAs, I felt that the strike would be an appropriate community issue to bring into the classroom; furthermore, I knew that the question of the strike would provide a rich context through which to explore the links between passive voice and speakers’ and writers’ viewpoints towards information, and especially towards agency and responsibility (or lack thereof).

Setting the scene and drawing on students’ knowledge

At the beginning of class, in order to find out what students already knew about the issue, I simply wrote ‘TA STRIKE’ on the board, and asked students to discuss what it meant in pairs. As I circulated and listened, it became clear that many students knew little or nothing about the planned strike; some had seen an article in the campus newspaper that morning, but they had not paid much attention to it. In the context of discussions about community-oriented teaching, there is sometimes argument over whether or not local issues—especially controversial or ‘political’ issues—should be brought into the classroom at all, given that students may have no interest in them. (See Auerbach 1994; Benson 1997.) At first, I thought my students’ lack of awareness regarding the strike might be an example of such a lack of interest; however, as we began talking together as a group, and as the students who had heard about the strike shared what they knew, it became clear that everyone was eager to learn more. Before long we had established a collective picture of the situation, and the discussion also gave me a chance to pre-teach some issue-related vocabulary that students would need for the lesson, including ‘contract negotiations’, ‘to file unfair labour practices’, and ‘bargaining’.

Looking at authentic community texts

I had prepared a reading using quotations from the local and campus newspapers, and from some official statements made by both the TA union and the university. I gave out a collection of eleven quotes about the strike, and as a top-down (‘gist’) reading task I asked students to determine the source of each statement: the university (U), a student (S), a member of the TA union (TA), or a newspaper (N). The worksheet was the following (with my changes in brackets, and with answers in bold):

1 ‘After months of unsuccessful contract negotiations, the union representing teaching assistants, readers and tutors has decided to strike. The union […] represents 11,000 employees on all [university] campuses . . .’ (N)

2 ‘The planned strike comes after a one-day walkout by [union] members in October. At [our campus], where more than 1,400 academic student employees are union members, TAs didn’t show up for 36 out of 311 classes scheduled to meet that day. Eleven of the classes were taught by a substitute and 25 were cancelled.’ (N)

3 ‘I’m disappointed that they believe this is something they need to do.’ (U)

4 ‘The University has failed to remedy the 64 unfair labor practices which the [union] previously filed, and in fact has committed numerous additional unfair labor practices. . . . the University continues to deny the Union information necessary for bargaining, send negotiators to the bargaining table who lack the necessary authority to reach an
agreement, and otherwise interfere with the parties' abilities to resolve the contract dispute.’ (TA)

5 ‘While the university continues to negotiate in good faith, seeking a contract that recognizes the important work of our graduate student employees, we understand that the [union] may attempt to organize another strike among our academic student teaching staff before the fall quarter concludes.’ (U)

6 ‘This is the point at which we feel we have no other choice.’ (TA)

7 ‘It’s really unfair to the students who need the TAs. They’re being paid to do their job and they’re not doing it. I don’t think it reflects well on their work ethic.’ (S)

8 ‘Regardless of another strike, it is important that the [local campus] community understand the University’s positions in these negotiations, especially concerning the issue of ‘sympathy strikes’—one union joining another union’s strike ‘in sympathy’—which is the main issue currently separating the parties. . . . All [university] labor contracts, including the most recent [union] contract, contain standard “No Strikes” prohibitions against virtually all manner of strikes during the contract. . . . [university] lecturers, librarians, police officers, service and patient care employees have all expressly agreed that the standard “No Strikes” provisions in all of [the university’s] contracts include sympathy strikes. [The university] is simply asking graduate student employees to do likewise.’ (U)

9 ‘The strike is planned to take effect in the first week of December, just before finals. While he declined to state whether the December date was strategic, a union leader noted that it would have a significant impact on the students. If the strike extended into finals, the members of the union would not proctor or grade the finals.’ (N)

10 ‘It’s unfortunate they [the students] are being hit by this, but it’s the university and not the union that’s brought this to this point.’ (TA)

11 ‘[The university] has a long tradition of supporting the civil expression of individual views and supports fully the free speech rights of all its employees, including academic student employees.’ (U)

Generally, the students had no problems identifying the sources of the quotes. There were a few exceptions—3, 7, 10—but we agreed that these were ambiguous, and might have been statements made by either the university or students (3, 7), or by students or the TA union (10).

Grammar in the texts

After we had talked about these and other issues, I asked students to turn over the worksheet, where I had four of the quotations pulled out with their use of passive voice in bold. They were:

2 ‘The planned strike comes after a one-day walkout by [union] members in October. At [our campus], where more than 1,400 academic student employees are union members, TAs didn’t show up for 36 out of 311 classes scheduled to meet that day. Eleven of the classes were taught by a substitute and 25 were cancelled.’ (N)
‘It’s really unfair to the students who need the TAs. They’re being paid to do their job and they’re not doing it. I don’t think it reflects well on their work ethic.’ (S)

‘The strike is planned to take effect in the first week of December, just before finals. While he declined to state whether the December date was strategic, a union leader noted that it would have a significant impact on the students. If the strike extended into finals, the members of the union would not proctor or grade the finals.’ (N)

‘It’s unfortunate they [the students] are being hit by this, but it’s the university and not the union that’s brought this to this point.’ (TA)

I had no problem eliciting that the bold constructions were passive forms, and the students were easily able to guide me through a quick review of the passive voice, in terms of its structural components (to be + past participle, or the insertion of ‘been’ or ‘being’ when using perfect or progressive constructions) and with regard to the related repositioning of agents and recipients. The more difficult question was when I asked students to think about why, in each of the four quotations, the writer or speaker might have chosen to use the passive voice. After the students had discussed the question in pairs for a time, we looked at the sentences as a group and agreed on the following interpretations: in sentences 2 and 9, which were both from newspapers, the passive may have been used to draw attention to the agent (sentence 2) or because the agent is obvious (sentence 9); in the case of sentence 7, a student quotation, it seemed that the agent was also obvious (the university), but it was observed that the usage may contain the suggestion that the TAs are the recipient of their employer’s benevolence; the final quotation, sentence 10, was by far the most interesting, because it was quite easy to understand why a TA-union representative might claim that ‘they [the students] are being hit by this’, because if the agent ‘this’ refers to the strike (as it seems to), then it is an actor-less strike that is affecting students in some ‘unfortunate’ way.

In order to further explore the passive voice’s potential for removing the overt expression of agency, I had prepared five other sentences for students. These sentences were also taken from the quotations, but they included grammatical manipulations on my part (in bold). They were (with their original numbers):

1 ‘After months of unsuccessful contract negotiations, it has been decided that there will be a strike. The union […] represents 11,000 employees on all [university] campuses . . .’ (N)

3 ‘I’m disappointed that they believe this is something that needs to be done.’ (U)

4 ‘The 64 unfair labor practices which the [union] previously filed have not been remedied, and in fact numerous additional unfair labor practices have been committed . . . the University continues to deny the Union information necessary for bargaining, send negotiators to the bargaining table who lack the necessary authority to reach
an agreement, and otherwise interfere with the parties’ abilities to resolve the contract dispute.’ (TA)

5 ‘While the university continues to negotiate in good faith, seeking a contract that recognizes the important work of our graduate student employees, we understand that another strike may be organized among our academic student teaching staff before the fall quarter concludes.’ (U)

6 ‘This is the point at which we feel we have been given no other choice.’ (TA)

Having already pointed out at least one example in which the use of passive could easily be linked to a speaker’s attitude about content information (the strike), I asked the students to compare these grammatically altered sentences with their original counterparts and to discuss how the two versions expressed varying perspectives on the strike. They found the task somewhat challenging at first, but as I moved from pair to pair, listening and helping, it became clear that they were really beginning to get a sense of some of the possible ideological implications of passive voice; in an example like sentence 3, it was especially easy for them to understand why a university representative might be more inclined to say of the union and the strike, ‘I’m disappointed that they believe this is something they need to do,’ as opposed to ‘I’m disappointed that they believe this is something that needs to be done.’ After this process of examining some of the speakers’ and writers’ grammatical choices, I felt the students had really begun to grasp passive voice in terms of ideology and in terms of its role in constructing conflicting discourse positions regarding a local situation.

Sentence-level practice with passive voice

However, in order to give students more practice with form, we looked at some cloze exercises from our textbook that the students had done for homework. This meant moving out of our community context for a time, but I did not want the students to leave class with a critical awareness of why speakers and writers might use passive voice without an understanding of the structure’s sentence-level mechanics—because throughout the academic quarter I had observed many instances of incorrectly formed passive constructions in student writing, and I felt that some controlled practice would help those students who were still struggling (like when and where to use ‘been’ and ‘being’).

Discussing the issue

After this practice, we used the remaining class time for a discussion about the relatively comfortable financial situation of the TAs at our university compared to that of graduate students in my learners’ home countries, and about the strike in general. It was during this period that students were really able to share some of their own views on the situation, and during which we, as a group, were able to explore some of the complex dimensions of a local concern.

Conclusions and implications

In designing this and other lessons that couple grammar-focus with local concerns, my motivation has always been two-fold: 1 to give students a pedagogic space in which they can explore aspects of
a contentious issue that is directly relevant to their own lives; and 2 to help students understand some of the ideological implications of grammar in authentic discourse contexts—so that they will understand the ideological implications of their own grammatical choices, as they construct their own texts. In my experience, the key to carrying off such lessons successfully has been finding an issue (and a related text) that is both relevant to students’ community and rich enough for exploring a particular linguistic feature. The nature of the issues explored, and the type of grammar focus, could vary greatly, depending on the teaching context; nonetheless, in all sites of ELT, the learners always form some kind of community—as students, as immigrants, as inhabitants of a particular city, or simply as people who believe English will help them achieve their goals—and there are always local issues to be examined, even if students’ views on those issues differ.

A teacher’s note

Deciding which issues might be appropriate for a given group of learners, and figuring out ways to build language lessons around them, can be challenging; however, in my own experience, the results are well worth the effort. As Gee (1990) has observed: ‘any human language primarily functions to allow speakers to take various perspectives or viewpoints on the world’ (p. 112). By conjoining community-focused teaching with explicit grammar instruction, students have the chance to start formulating these perspectives—their perspectives—in English, with a sharper awareness of some of the ideological implications inherent in their own linguistic choices.

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Notes

1 Morgan’s work (1998; 2002; 2004) may be the most notable exception to this observation.

2 Admittedly, one shortcoming of asking students to consider this question in terms of individual sentences was that they were not able to see the operation of passive voice at the textual level, i.e. as a textual device through which a writer or speaker thematizes new information. However, because I wanted to let the students look at multiple perspectives on the strike, I had to limit the length of the quotes.

References


The author

Jason Schneider teaches ESL, composition, and linguistics to college students in northern California. He holds an MA in Applied Linguistics from the University of California, Davis. Before working in the United States, he taught English in Poland and Egypt.

Email: jasoncschneider@yahoo.com