

# The Grammar Teaching Conundrum—A Reflective Essay

## 文法を教えるという難題から私が学んだこと

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### Abstract

*The debate over how to best teach grammar in a foreign language has raged for decades between two main camps: emergentists and those who teach grammar explicitly. My experience has shown that the best way to teach foreign language grammar lies somewhere in the middle. This paper reviews the viewpoints and methods of both sides in this argument and presents suggestions for teaching grammar based upon my personal experiences as both a foreign language learner and a language instructor. My personal experiences and conclusions are supported by research in the field of second language acquisition provided herein.*

**Keywords:** grammar, foreign language, emergentist, explicit grammar, lexical approach

### 1. Introduction

The debate about whether or not to explicitly teach grammar in the foreign language classroom has raged for decades. Along with this debate, among those proponents of grammar instruction, another debate has raged about exactly how to teach grammar. Larsen-Freeman (2003) confirms that there is no real consensus about the best grammar teaching methodology. All of the better-known language educators have proffered their own beliefs at one time or another and none of them have been able to reach one general conclusion. This debate is a waste of energy because it focuses more on the mechanics of language education instead of on the purpose of language teaching: to teach students to communicate. The grammar debate is a holdover from the days of grammar translation and is based on the fact that a century ago, the reasons for learning a second language (L2) were primarily to translate written works. Today's rationale for learning languages is rooted in communication needs so we must alter our approach to education to align with the current purpose. Because of this, teachers must put grammar in its proper place and context in the classroom. Grammar must be taught as a tool which enables communication and not as the backbone of a language which requires mastery before one can speak. This is why Larsen-Freeman espouses her concept of grammaring: the idea of teaching grammar as a communications modality like speaking, reading, or listening. This paper will explore an optimum method for teaching grammar in a foreign language.

### 2. Dealing with grammatical uncertainty

One of the reasons that the grammar debate has continued is that everyone has a different concept or definition of grammar, so their understanding of its place in the language classroom will vary based upon their personal definition. Ever since Saussure (1916, as cited in Larsen-Freeman 2003) began investigating the internal structure of language, linguists have grappled with establishing the one definition of grammar. Larsen-Freeman is no exception

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and she suggests that grammar is a skill which takes practice just like any other communications skill.

Hopper (1998) provides this analogy:

Language is seen as a conduit, a kind of pipe through which ideas formulated in the head of one speaker are encoded and transmitted to the head of another speaker, where they are decoded and reconstituted as the same ideas. (170).

Grammar gives this conduit structure and the tensile strength needed to be effective in relaying information. My idea of grammar closely relates to Hopper's: grammar is a set of defined patterns of lexical use which shape utterances as needed to convey meaning. The central focus of language is on the lexicon and grammar is but a supporting structure—lexicon has the grammar built into it. These patterns of use are socially defined and accepted, but can also be arbitrarily assigned and loosely enforced because people have the ability to modify or ignore generally accepted grammar patterns and still get their meaning across, such as with the well-known Pink Floyd song lyric, "We don't need no education," which uses a double-negative for effect. Regardless of which specific definition is used, grammar remains an established set of guidelines for language use and communication of meaning; and, therefore, students of language must become proficient in grammar use in order to communicate beyond rudimentary levels of speech.

### **3. Grammar emerges from the lexicon**

If there is no consensus on precisely what grammar is, then naturally, there is no agreement on how, if at all, to teach grammar to language students. One of the common suggestions is to teach grammar without teaching it. The seemingly paradoxical nature of this suggestion is that it is better to allow grammar to emerge from students' experiences and use of a language rather than to explicitly focus on grammar rules and structures before the students have a grasp of the lexicon needed to communicate. Hopper (1998) suggests that grammar emerges in a learner from regular language use, correction, and success in communicating one's ideas. This is in line with Ellis' (2002) lexical hypothesis, which states that students must first be given a lexicon upon which to build the grammar structure. So if students begin their second language learning with words and phrases, their understanding of grammar will not begin to occur until they have amassed a sufficient volume of lexicon. This understanding will first come from their own analysis of grammatical patterns, or "bootstrapping their way to grammar" (Ellis, N. as cited in Ellis, R. 2002: 23). Once students begin this analysis of their language, they will manipulate simple words and phrases into more and more complex structures and learn from the feedback they receive when they test these hypotheses. This is precisely what emergence is and how it relates to grammar learning. The students' knowledge of grammar grows from within them and is refined by the feedback they receive from their interlocutors. So students should be given as many opportunities to use the language and make mistakes in communication from which they can learn.

The problem with this process is that it proceeds very slowly and it requires extensive work by the students to make noticeable gains in language ability. There are some aspects of a language grammar, such as English articles or subjunctive mood, that are difficult to acquire through emergent grammar practices alone because they are too subjective to context or occur too infrequently to learn intrinsically (Akakura 2012, Corder 1967). Therefore, some foreign language educators believe that grammar should be explicitly instructed (Akakura 2012, DeKeyser 2005, Ellis 2002). Given both of these perspectives on how to deal with grammar education for language learners, it would seem that a balance between both practices would be the best option. Leaving students to rely solely on emergent grammar would allow them to reach a point at which the amount of L2 language input is insufficient to provide examples of the grammar structures they are lacking, thereby causing a near halt to their language learning. If the students do not continually build upon their own grammatical knowledge, then they stagnate and eventually fossilize—a concept defined by Selinker (1992) as being the point where a learner's language ability

ceases emerging despite instructor and peer input and instruction. In order to avoid fossilization, it is important for us as teachers to establish a curriculum which allows us to encourage and stimulate the students' understanding of grammar concepts. Long (1998, as cited in Ellis 2002) supports this by recommending some formal instruction which would promote more rapid L2 acquisition and lead to higher levels of language proficiency. Ellis himself furthers this by saying that language production is insufficient to overcome language fossilization and stagnation.

One way for teachers to combat this fossilization is to conduct lessons which use the students' knowledge of the lexicon and their ability to communicate to focus on the language forms. Long (1991) and van Lier (2001) advocate this focus on grammatical form through interactive and task-based lessons. Putting these grammatical forms into context and looking at how they are used will provide the students with a more effective linguistic arsenal. Larsen-Freeman (2003) portrays this in her model of language's three dimensions: form, meaning, and use. All three of these areas are interrelated and depend on each other; and all three can be starting points in teaching grammar. The traditional approach was to begin with teaching the correct form and then proceeding to its meaning and then allowing the students to use it; but modern practices show that students can begin by learning the use of a grammar construction through analysis of authentic speech or texts to discern meaning and the correct form (Behrens 2009). For example, students can be shown an example of a grammatical structure, such as possessive forms, and then told to find examples of that grammatical structure in a given text and write the rules that govern its use based upon what they found in the text. Then students can experiment with these rules by creating their own example which uses the new grammar structure while receiving corrective feedback from the teacher. Students can benefit greatly from having the autonomy to use real instances of language and to learn how to use and experiment with it on their own. This approach breeds autonomy and teaches students independence in their pursuit of language proficiency.

#### **4. Explicit grammatical instruction at an appropriate time**

Combining Ellis' (1996) lexical hypothesis and Larsen-Freeman's (2003) three dimensions will enable student to begin with the basic components of language—the words and phrases—and then use them to create meanings while hypothesizing about forms to express the meanings they want. Adult learners, as Ellis (2002) points out, expect to be taught grammar and view grammar as a vital component of language and, irrespective of the type of instruction they experience, are likely to make strenuous efforts to understand the grammatical features they notice first before they attempt to use them—they prefer a linear progression from being taught a grammatical concept, to practicing with drills, and then to experimenting with it in their own L2 communications. Because of this, it may be difficult to get adult learners to individually hypothesize about forms and meanings having only been given lexical chunks to work with. I have experienced this as a Russian instructor at the Defense Language Institute / Foreign Language Center's (DLIFLC) Russian Basic Course. In the beginning of the course, adult students are given a large amount of vocabulary and phrases to learn. Students were encouraged to try to use the vocabulary and grammar that they knew to create new sentences and express their own ideas. After being shown how to mix and match their words to construct new phrases, they then built those phrases into grammatically correct simple sentences—but only after strong encouragement from the teacher.

However, these students seemed to want to jump further than their abilities would allow them and to use more complex constructions to express meanings. This led them to focus on asking for grammar explanations which would allow them to say what they wanted. Unfortunately, their L2 lexicon and grammar were not sufficient to allow this, so even when grammar rules were provided by the teacher, they could not be applied using the students' limited vocabulary. Such frustrations are common for foreign language learners because most humans have the ability to discern linguistic patterns from an early age; and, as emergentists believe, language learners will attempt

to use and apply newly-observed patterns—with corrections by more-proficient speakers—until they grasp the grammar construct needed to communicate their idea (Poll 2011). Sometimes this emergent grammar process is too slow and hinders learners from saying what they want to. In the case of the DLIFLC students, they were well-spoken in their native language so they lacked the patience needed to establish the basic foundation in their second language before proceeding to use its complex grammar.

### 5. Dealing with unequal grammars

Larsen-Freeman (2003) advocates teaching the reasons for grammatical constructions along with the rules which govern them. She maintains that, in teaching grammar, this is just as important as showing students how things are done. This helps alleviate some of the adult learners' frustrations with grammar constructions that do not directly correlate to those of their native language. For example, in Japanese, the translation for "The teacher scolded me." is *Sensei ni shikarareta* or [by the teacher (I) was scolded (passive)]. The Japanese version uses passive construction with an understood subject "I." Japanese students learning English may have difficulty translating this into appropriate English because of the need to both switch to active voice and to make the subject "I" into the accusative object "me." Another concept that Japanese students of English may find difficult is the need for the verb "to be" in instances where it is dropped in Japanese—one translation of "She is a teacher." is *Kanojo ha sensei*. [she (subject marker) teacher] and the verb "is" or *desu* can be dropped from the end of the sentence. Similar patterns emerge in Japanese present-tense phrases and sentences such as, "He is a teacher." and "That is a bicycle." The Japanese literal translations would be "he teacher" and "that bicycle," so the students needed to understand that while there is no form of the verb "to be" in present tense Japanese, it is required in English. Once this grammatical difference is explained and some examples are provided, then students should have little problem working with such constructions when creating their own language artifacts.

In addition to these non-correlational translations between languages, there are other grammar constructions and regional colloquialisms in English which stem from linguistic influences of immigrants' languages in America. For example, a significant part of the settler population in Pennsylvania was from Germany and there are some colloquial phrases used in Pennsylvania which mirror German lexicon and grammar, such as "Outten the light" (Turn out the light). Besides the above-mentioned nonstandard uses of English grammar, there are other forms of English, such as African American Vernacular English within the United States, as well as variants from other native English-speaking countries. With all of these variants of English, it is impossible to teach all of the grammatical nuances of these variants.

Because these idioms and phrases exist, it is important to explain that idioms often are colloquial and do not follow conventional grammatical rules; students often understand that these forms exist and that they would have to just memorize such patterns. Experience has shown that it is better to try to explain these unusual constructions instead of relying on the often-used, "We just say it that way." If teachers explain different facets of the language to students, then they are less likely to become frustrated with the instances of speech which just do not seem to follow the accepted rules and patterns. If students become accustomed to seeing ambiguities in their target language and know that there is normally a reason for them, then they are less likely to become frustrated that they do not know the direct translations of these ambiguities when they see them in use.

### 6. Dynamism in Language

Another way to ease students' fears and anxieties about their target language is to teach them about the arbitrariness and dynamism of all languages from the very beginning of their course. Using authentic materials in the classroom will provide instances of varied speech patterns and constructions which are used to express similar

meanings. In seeing these and working with them, the students will learn that there is no right way to say everything as well as the fact that there are multiple ways to say almost everything. Allowing students to use these varied patterns will provide them with the examples they need to analyze and test their own hypotheses of the language. Along with these opportunities to test hypotheses, the teacher and other interlocutors must give appropriate feedback to allow the student to self-correct and learn from their experiences. This is a key factor in the process of students gaining autonomy in their target language. As the students become more experienced in using their language and testing their hypotheses, they will move beyond their comfort zones and expand their abilities. Thornbury (2005) promotes this concept of students pushing their linguistic boundaries, and encourages teachers to push their students' boundaries, in order to develop their grammaring skills. In addition to their teachers' encouragement, students require appropriate feedback to guide their development and correct glaring deficiencies. The feedback needs to be balanced so as to not be so explicit and overbearing that it stifles the students' creative urges, but it also must be sufficient for the students to understand their error and learn from the correction. The students must learn from feedback as they continue to negotiate meanings in their interactions with others, otherwise their L2 grammar will stagnate and their second language skills will fossilize.

### **7. Task-based language learning**

The balance of appropriate feedback can only be maintained if a teacher knows the student well and generally understands the student's learning style and needs. One method a teacher can use to gain this knowledge of their students is to provide a curriculum of task-based or activity-based lessons as proposed by Ellis (2005) and Nakahama, Tyler, and van Lier (2001). Ellis states that tasks should focus the students' activities but that instruction still plays a role in their successful language learning; teachers gain a better understanding of their students by observing their activities and providing instruction as they progress. Repeated interaction with the students will indicate how much feedback is necessary for a student to learn from their errors, and having the students all engaged in a project frees the teacher to interact randomly with many students during any given class period. As the teacher interacts with multiple students, they should pay attention to common language mistakes which hinder communication and target these areas for explicit grammar instruction. This is where the divide between implicit and explicit grammar learning is bridged and a task-based syllabus in English classes provides such an atmosphere in the classroom. As the topic is too broad to be adequately discussed in this paper, see Nunan (2004), Ellis (2005), and Nakahama et al. for more detailed information about task-based language learning.

### **8. Personal experience in language learning**

Based on the above information about the various aspects of instructing grammar or teaching students the Larsen-Freeman (2003) concept of grammaring, teachers should work to develop and encourage more autonomy in their students in the future. Using task-based lessons to promote their students' self-confidence in their target language is encouraged because that self-confidence leads to students taking more steps toward greater autonomy in the language (Stoller 2006). Personal experience demonstrates that Ellis' (2002) lexical hypothesis is preferable for beginners because students gain the ability to discern grammar structures from learning lexical chunks. As an example, I will explain how I learned Japanese grammar through emergence. I primarily learned Japanese in this manner and my fluency has blossomed from continuous use and minimal, but appropriately focused instruction. I began learning Japanese when I moved to Japan and picked up useful words and phrases. I soon learned to discern patterns of use and was able to experiment with them to expand my own skills. For example, when I was asked by a friend, *Nani ga hoshii?* [What do you want?] I suspected that I could add any object in front of the pattern *ga hoshii* to state a desire for that object. I tried it out and was successful. These miniature epiphanies were very

motivating to me and encouraged more linguistic experimentation. Teachers should all desire to instill these feelings in their own students and enable them to grow in their foreign language abilities.

This growth can also be achieved by creating a language-rich environment in which students can conduct activities. Living in Japan immersed me in the language and culture, so I had many examples from which I could deduce grammar rules. Such exposure to various aspects of the language and culture, plus the availability of authentic materials for their use, will help students establish a level of comfort in their target language and will minimize their anxiety when using the language. This will allow them to develop a higher level of awareness of their language so that, when working in peer groups, they have more resources to observe grammatical constructs and how they are used, define the rules for these patterns, and then begin to experiment with their newfound language artifact. As students successfully deduce grammar rules and integrate the new structures into their own language reserve, they will have the confidence to solve their own linguistic problems, thus fostering more autonomy in their language studies.

## 9. Conclusion

Creating autonomous language learners should be the primary goal of a teacher because no student can learn everything about a language in the classroom. They must be helped to build a solid foundation in their language on which they themselves can build their own palace of proficiency. Teachers can begin this foundation with a large emphasis on lexical development. My own experience has proven the value of building language from the bottom up and the lexicon is the best place to start. The students will then be shown how to use the lexicon as a tool to employ more and more hypotheses in an attempt to develop their own knowledge of the grammatical structures which give the language its strength. Using activities in which the students practice negotiating meaning, teachers can provide targeted feedback on how students use their knowledge of one structure to test and expand new grammar concepts. When common errors emerge among a class population, the teacher can then focus their explicit grammar instruction on those errors to resolve the failed hypotheses, thereby bridging the gap between explicit and implicit grammar instruction. As students become accustomed to looking within themselves for tools to increase their own linguistic reserves, they will hopefully require less and less encouragement from teachers to improve their language ability themselves. Once teachers have instilled these habits and practices in their students, they can send them off into the world as strong and ever-developing, multilingual speakers who are self-reliant and able to perform linguistic feats with ease.

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