



# The grammar dilemma

**Carmen Garrido Barra** heeds the experts and makes informed choices.

**T**he final goal of teaching English to children should be to enable them to interact in real-life situations. To achieve this goal, teachers must decide whether to teach grammar or not. If they *do* decide to teach grammar, the next question is *how* to do it. A number of experts provide useful insights which can help us to make the right decisions.

## What is grammar?

Before deciding whether to teach it or not, we first need to define the term *grammar*. What do we mean by grammar? For this question, there is more than one answer.

Ronald Carter and Michael McCarthy define grammar as the part of language which is concerned with acceptable and unacceptable forms and the distinctions of meaning these forms create. According to Scott Thornbury, grammar is a description of the rules for forming sentences, including an account of the meanings that these forms convey. For Mary Spratt and her colleagues, grammar is that aspect of language which describes how we combine, organise and change words and parts of words to make meaning. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages describes the grammar of a language as the set of principles governing the assembly of

elements into meaningful labelled and bracketed strings (sentences).

Even though there are many definitions for grammar, there seems to be agreement that the term does not only refer to form, but also to meaning.

## Should we teach grammar?

There are two main points of view regarding the formal instruction of grammar. Some experts argue that it is unnecessary, while others argue that a student cannot become a competent user of a language without receiving formal instruction in grammar.

According to Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell, students learn grammar as part of the acquisition process and therefore formal instruction in grammar does not play an important role in developing language competence. However, Krashen's rejection of formal instruction of grammar in ELT classrooms has been questioned by grammarians such as Scott Thornbury, Diane Larsen-Freeman and Rob Batstone, among others.

Scott Thornbury puts forward several arguments in favour of teaching grammar. First, he explains that grammar is a kind of sentence-making machine which offers students the possibility of limitless linguistic creativity. Second, he mentions the 'fine tuning' argument: since grammar

allows for greater subtlety than just words, formal instruction of grammar would serve to avoid ambiguity. Third, he offers the 'fossilisation' argument, which claims that learners without formal instruction of grammar may be at risk of error fossilisation sooner than those who receive formal instruction. His fourth argument, the 'advance organiser' argument, suggests that the study of grammar may have a delayed effect because it can help students notice how native speakers use the same grammar structures that they have studied in class. Fifth, he gives the 'discrete item' argument: teaching grammar helps make language digestible because students learn discrete items instead of a mass of language.

Thornbury's sixth argument is the 'rule of law' argument: that grammar offers a structured system that can be taught and tested in methodological steps.

Diane Larsen-Freeman also provides a number of arguments in favour of teaching grammar. To begin with, she mentions that the conditions of learning are different when learning a foreign language: students learning English as a foreign language are usually exposed to the new language for only a few hours a week. For her, motivation, attitude and aptitude are important aspects to be considered and she claims that teaching grammar effectively can help all students, not only the gifted and motivated ones, learn a foreign language.



Finally, Rob Batstone believes that *'by focusing on particular grammatical forms and their associated meanings, we can help learners to develop their knowledge of the grammatical system, and the meanings which it helps to signal'*.

Taking all this into consideration, we can conclude that there is a good case for the argument that formal instruction of grammar does play an important role in the development of communicative competence.

## Grammar and young learners

If we agree that grammar plays an important role in the development of communicative competence and that its formal instruction is necessary, then the next question is *when and how* we should teach grammar. Should it be taught only to teenagers and adults? Should children be excluded from receiving grammar instruction?

As language teachers, our aim should be to help children communicate successfully in the target language. If this is our goal, there is no reason to exclude them from grammar instruction. However, it is important to remember that grammar should not be taught explicitly, because young learners are not cognitively ready for abstract explanations. Another key aspect to remember is that activities should be motivating and appropriate to the students' age and level.

Rob Batstone proposes a three-stage model that can guide the process of teaching grammar. The three stages are noticing, structuring and proceduralisation. The teacher needs to plan each stage carefully to help young learners become competent in English.

### Stage 1

In the noticing stage, the teacher provides opportunities for the learners to see a particular structure and appreciate the relationship between form and meaning. To do so, teachers create contexts where there is a real need for communication. According to Lynne Cameron, *noticing* activities have the following characteristics: they

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support meaning as well as form; they present the form in isolation, as well as in discourse and in a linguistic context; they contrast the form with other structures which are already known; and they require active participation from the learners. Noticing activities should be at a level of detail which is appropriate to the learners – a series of noticing activities may 'zoom in' on specific items. In this stage, students notice the structures but don't yet manipulate them.


### Stage 2

In the second stage (structuring), controlled practice is introduced. The teacher designs activities in which learners have the opportunity to practise certain grammatical patterns, but which do not ask them to express their ideas freely. As Wendy Scott and Lisbeth Ytreberg put it, activities of this kind provide *'the basis for oral work, but do not always produce "real" language at once'*. It is important to give young learners sufficient opportunities to practise the new language. However, repetition should be done through different meaningful and motivating activities. Lynne Cameron proposes the use of questionnaires, surveys, quizzes and drills. If the teacher decides to use drills, these must require more than simple repetition. Scott Thornbury advocates adding repetition and variable substitution drills to imitation drills. In repetition drills, one element is replaced each time, and in substitution drills, the response varies according to a series of prompts. This structuring stage is important because students are actively involved in manipulating structures to express meaning.

### Stage 3

In the proceduralisation stage, the learners can express themselves in a more natural way. The activities must, however, be designed so that the target grammar pattern is crucial to convey meaning. Activities such as descriptions which require specific grammatical structures provide opportunities for more spontaneous use of grammatical forms to express meaning. Batstone argues that it is through proceduralisation that learners organise their knowledge in such a way that it can be activated quickly and efficiently in communicative tasks.



Grammar is essential to convey meaning. Teachers can help young learners become more competent in English by designing activities which move from noticing grammar patterns (and the meanings they convey) to those which practise the structure in controlled conditions and, finally, to activities which require the correct use of the target structures to participate in real-life communication. 

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