

Grammar Instruction

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Teachers do not associate grammar with the “four skills”, yet most teachers do treat it with equal, or even greater, respect than any of the language skills. The general belief held by many teachers is that grammar is the foundation of language, and therefore, it must be taught first and subsequently learned before any other aspect of language can be understood or learned. The thinking is that grammar is a set of rules to be memorized and used to create language. With this belief comes the grammar translation method, or in other words, explicit grammar teaching.

Both academic research and teaching practice show us that explicit grammar teaching that focuses solely on syntax does not support language learning well, especially in the production skills of writing and speaking. It can also be said that both academic research and teaching practice show inconclusive results on long-term general understanding of grammar, which is often checked via tests. With such uncertainty in our field some ESL/EFL professionals even advocate not teaching grammar explicitly. Therefore, there is no conclusive way to teach grammar, yet some professionals in our field like Rod Ellis do offer some guidelines which have shown some positive effects on learners’ understanding and use of grammar. In this article, I will explore a few of these key points.

The primary conclusion that Ellis comes to is that learners must *notice* grammar, and in order to notice grammar learners need the opportunity to think about how meaning and grammar relate. That is, the meaning of language is essential. In support of meaning and to aid in learners’ noticing grammar, it is recommended that the content of all examples, exercises, activities and test questions be sensitive to the learners’ lives, incorporating the people, places and things they know. By using this background knowledge, the meaning of

grammar is accentuated, and thus, it is noticed. Learners will come to recognize the effect that a change in grammar has. Here is a brief example:

► **Who is taller, Bill or Joe?**

The above must be associated with a picture because no one knows ‘Bill’ or ‘Joe’. Such a picture would show two people labeled ‘Bill’ and ‘Joe’ and each would have a height labeled in centimeters to highlight ‘tall’. The answer would be generally guessable, and the students would not have to care, i.e., notice the grammar. Furthermore, would your students really be interested in this question in the first place? It is suggested that the following would be a better example:

► **Who is taller, Ultraman or Godzilla?**

This question does not need any pictures or information to generate thought within Japanese students. Pictures, however, would enhance their interest, which would benefit this introduction of comparatives. Once students attempt to understand the meaning of the grammar, they then guess at the answer. Students then attempt to formulate an answer, creating a response based upon the grammar they already know and are learning at the time. Teacher intervention then corrects and supports the learning of the new grammar.

However, most all professionals in our field agree that grammar instruction alone is not enough. Learners need a lot of input, at least of the above kind, and learners also need to produce language through engaging new grammar and vocabulary. It is not enough to fill in a blank and move on to the next grammar point. “Only when learners are engaged in decoding and encoding messages in the context of actual acts of communication are the conditions created for acquisition to take place.” (Ellis, 2005)