

Moreland University

M27U1A1 - What is Grammar?

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Part 1: What is Grammar

In seeking a definition of grammar, we considered the idea that we wanted the whole concept from the picture of the whole language, to the picture of individuals.

We especially liked the concepts of descriptive grammar, prescriptive grammar and mental grammar as they describe the different contexts in which one might be thinking about grammar.

Descriptive grammar, as for example described by Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2017) is defined as the big picture overview of all features of a language, include sound patterns and sentence structure.

Prescriptive grammar, as for example described by Huddleston and Pullum (2005) is what we might more associate with grammar – all of the rules which govern how different words can come together. The Collins English dictionary follows this – “refers to the rules in a language for changing the form of words and joining them into sentences. It is also the study of these rules.”

Mental-grammar or native-speaker grammar, as for example, described by Chomsky (1965) and Pinker (1994) is the system of knowledge that native speakers acquire naturally as they grow up and that allow them to use the language.

Another interesting idea was that of usage-based grammar, as for example described by Beckner et al. (2019). This focuses on the idea within grammar as a complex dynamical system that grammar is something that emerges naturally from usage, described as the types of structures and patterns of words that develop from people actually using the language.

Putting these together and trying to encapsulate all key concepts, we arrive at,

“Grammar is every feature of a language that gives the different words and sentences their meaning, with the importance often being how words come together to give meaning and how individual words are impacted when they come together to give meaning. These are defined and developed by the people who actually use the language, through usage, and will be acquired naturally by native speakers allowing them to use the language.”

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Part 2: Teaching Grammar as a Complex Dynamical System

Lead author: Joel

As you read this, take a moment to stop and think. Think about interactions you have had in recent days. Think about the type of words you use. Do it.

Now, as far as you can, look back to a point of choice in your childhood. Try to think about the types of words you might hear and use, and also the types of sentence, are different now.

For me, one of the writers, Joel, this is interesting. There are most certainly words, for example “AI”, or “shared drive” that are part of my everyday usage repertoire now that were not when I was a child. A crucial point is that these also were not part of the English language not too many years ago.

For sentences, perhaps my language is more sophisticated than when I was a child. However, also having several years ago moved to China from the UK, my language has in fact transitioned to being influenced by English from different areas. For example, I will now use “pants” more naturally than “trousers”, and “don’t have” more naturally than “haven’t got”.

Looking here, we see how language on the level of an individual can change. However, going further, looking at the examples of these new words to the English language, and differences in terms of grammar that we see from comparing English of today’s younger generation with the older generation and looking at books or media from the past, we see that this too has changed. In both cases, take a moment to think.

We can note that this is related to language being a complex adaptive system. Put in short terms, a complex adaptive system is something which involves multiple factors involved, and for these factors, the interactions between them and hence the whole system - dynamic and non-linear - can adapt over time.

Regarding a language as a whole, the idea is that the language begins and evolves due to the need for social interaction. Grammars develop naturally due to the human brain’s need for structure and abilities at pattern recognition. Geographical and cultural differences play a large impact, which is why different languages develop. Due to similarities in the working of the brain, there will interestingly be tendencies to some similarities between many languages, for example, many languages use the verbs “come” or “go” to form a structure with the meaning of something you will be doing soon. Nevertheless, each language will have its own unique features. (Beckner et al., 2019)

Focusing on one language, a single language as a whole system is constantly evolving. There are many interrelating factors at play. These include the language repertoires of all individuals, which are all different to each other, and different to the overall communal language. They also include the different types of interaction between individuals. Then we have the idea that individual differences and interactions can all impact the overall language. As examples, creations of new words or patterns by a small group can easily exponentiate to the overall population. The internet makes this easier. Changes are often non-linear, in that sometimes-large changes in the language can happen very quickly, and at other times, much more slowly.

The same is however true for grammar and language on the level of the individual. Our own language is dynamic and constantly evolving as a result of all the interactions we have, our new exposures, our personal usage and experimentation and what we are seeing in society and culture. It is also non-linear in the sense that one day we may learn ten new words, and another day, one. This gives rise to the complex adaptive system model for grammar – part of language as a whole.

The ideas from it are something we can apply to our teaching, using it as an approach. The idea is that we try to take advantage of natural use of the complex adaptive system that they should have as part of natural language development. This can begin with much use of personalized and meaningful materials for input and discussion, as these will mirror how the student might more naturally use and develop the language. Input material can be presented

in different contexts, for example, first in a reading, and second, in a listening. Task-based and project based and natural communication activities, allowing students to interact, experiment with and be exposed to the language and adapt their system gradually. Students can be supported to build their ability to adapt language to different situations. One example is to complete the same speaking task but working with different partners and with different time constraints for example. Using such strategies can also allow a complex adaptive system for use of the language in the class community to evolve.

The teacher can provide correction and drilling, and slowly guide students to build competence in very standard English. However this can be less regular than might be the case more traditionally to allow natural language development. The teacher's key role is to allow the above conditions to occur.

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Teaching Grammar as a Complex Adaptive System

Our Definition of Grammar

"Grammar is every feature of a language that gives the different words and sentences their meaning, with the importance often being how words come together to give meaning and how individual words are impacted when they come together to give meaning. These are defined and developed by the people who actually use the language, through usage, and will be acquired naturally by native speakers allowing them to use the language."

Joel Pape and Echo Yuan



Complex Adaptive Systems

- This is a system which:
- Involves **multiple different factors that interact**.
- Is **dynamic** and changes over time.
- Is **non-linear** - it or its state will sometimes change very quickly in a short space of time, due to an onsetting factor. On other occasions, it may change only very little over a long period of time.
- These features exist in numerous real-world systems. They seem very standard. Hence it is a common type of system. It exists in numerous areas, including nature, for example, the human brain, the immune system, the nervous system and ecosystems. Also social systems, for example, culture and education systems, and organisational systems, for example, the economy.

- Language develops out of the need for **social interaction**, often for collaboration and support.
- Different factors affect the development of the grammar.
 - (1) The natural tendency of the human brain to create order and structure, and to pattern recognize. The needs of efficient production and efficient comprehension, results in recurring rules for how words are put together developing.
 - (2) Balances between needs of speakers who desire as little work as possible, and shorter utterances, and listeners, who require clarity.

- Cultural and geographic borders result in different languages. However the same type of human cognitive thinking result in many similarities between the grammars the use of "go" or "come" to create a near future being one.
- Grammar that develops in a language won't be completely random. Nevertheless, it won't be static. It will be a complex adaptive system.

How the Grammar of Human Language Develops



A Language as a Complex Adaptive System

- Each individual has their own grammar. This is because no two individuals have exactly the same experiences with words or sentence structures.
- There is also however, a **communal grammar**, based on the individual grammars of all users. Because everyone is different, there will be no individual who actually represents this. Users can influence this to change however.
- Whenever interactions occur, the grammars of the individuals involved can change as they will now have new associations with the words and sentences used. There is also the possibility for the communal grammar to change. This can be the case for interactions even between only a small number of individuals, for example when a new internet slang phrase takes off.
- Indeed changes will **generally occur bottom-up**, starting from the level of a small number of individuals, and exponentiating.
- It is **non-linear**. Sometimes, large changes may occur in a short time, for example over times of fast developments of the internet, when internet language takes off. On other occasions, the change is much slower.

- While the grammar of the language as a whole is a complex adaptive system, so is an individual's grammar within their knowledge, understanding and use of the language.
- In your first, second and later languages, your own grammar will constantly adapt over time. This can be based on multiple factors. In some cases it may come from new input, for example new reading or television content. In these cases, it is language you are receiving that has an impact. However, your own language production and experimentation with language can also. Your grammar can also change as a result of new interactions and as you meet new people, and new societies or culture, the grammar of which, different to yours, may have an impact on your own. Multiple factors affect your language and it is dynamic.
- It is very much **non-linear**. Sometimes and individuals language may change much in a short period of time. Sometimes it may only change a little. For example, in the early stages of learning a language, on one day, you may learn ten new words, the next day, only one.

An Individual's Language as a Complex Adaptive System



Using this as an Approach to Teaching

- Support student's language and grammar to develop within this complex adaptive system.
- Expose them to lots of **personalized material** so that they can explore the language naturally. If they have an interest in science, allow them opportunities to explore science content in the new language. This will allow them to work with language in the way they would do so in their first language.
- Provide opportunities for **project based learning** and **task based learning** within the language, as well as problem solving and communication activities. This will allow students to practice necessary and meaningful communication in the language. It will allow for natural experimentation with the grammar. This can also mean the language within the class as a whole can develop as a complex adaptive system.
- Allow students to experience the same language but in new contexts, for example, first a reading, then a video.
- Support students to build their ability to adapt language to different situations. One example is to complete the same speaking task but working with different partners and with different time constraints for example.
- As a teacher, focus on making the above happen.
- Correct and focus on accuracy and drilling only purposefully.

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Part 2: SLA Perspective (Second Language Acquisition) - How does grammar teaching affect acquisition?

Lead author: Echo Yuan

- a. Should grammar be learned naturally or explicitly taught?
- b. What grammar should be taught?
- c. When and how should it be taught?
- d. Should grammar be taught in an integrated or discrete manner?

Everyone learns grammar in their own way. Teachers' strategies are different from one or another.

When I was a child, I grew up in China, first exposed to English when I was 8. Grammar learning was like rules for me to remember, practice and use in the English tests again and again. It was dreadful to me. I never liked learning grammar.

I am 31 years old now. I have been teaching kids English in China for about 7 years, in an International Bilingual School. In our school, I have realised we teach children grammar according to the content-based instruction. We do not practice grammar to let children pass their final semester exams, instead, we just practice those grammar rules to let them communicate better.

Things have changed. The purpose of teaching grammar has changed for me.

Should grammar be learned naturally or explicitly taught?

In my reading about SLA Perspective, according to Ellis, from Auckland University, New Zealand, she supports naturalistic learning based on immersion research, showing that learners can acquire structures like adjective-noun order in Spanish without explicit instruction. People can learn grammar naturally.

Ellis cites Norris and Ortega's (2000) meta-analysis, showing that explicit instruction improves grammatical competence more than naturalistic exposure alone. Explicit teaching facilitates noticing and can prime implicit knowledge development, supporting the weak interface position). For example, teaching the third-person singular "-s" explicitly helps learners notice and use it in speech.

In conclusion, besides naturalistic exposure for language learning, in Ellis's research about SLA Perspective (Second Language Acquisition), she favors meaning-focused tasks for beginners to build communicative ability, supplemented by explicit instruction for intermediate learners to address specific forms. This hybrid approach ensures fluency and accuracy, aligning with usage-based, empirical, and functional SLA perspectives.

What grammar should be taught?

In our school, we teach grammar according to the content-based instruction, there are always a few grammar tips in each unit in the book. We can find them and practice them according to the students' needs and their struggles.

Ellis suggests that using grammar books that explain how forms carry meaning, like how the passive voice ("The cake was eaten") sounds formal or objective, not just its structure. Teaching grammar that matches what learners need and struggle with makes learning relevant and helps them use the language in real situations.

For example, focus on grammar that's hard to use fluently (like adding "-s" to "She walks") or hard to understand (like complex rules for "if" sentences). Or teach things learners get wrong, like English articles for Chinese speakers who skip "a" or "the" because their language doesn't use them.

When and how should it be taught?

From my experience, we teach grammar when learners have some basic language skills and when it helps with their real tasks, like writing or speaking. Do it by mixing grammar into conversations, reading, or writing, with occasional pointers to explain tricky bits. This will be the best. Because you cannot teach kindergarten or primary school 1st graders too much grammar, or always correct them when they make some mistakes. It will kill the fun of learning.

From an SLA perspective, teach grammar when learners are ready and struggling with specific things, like articles or verb endings, that don't come naturally. Or focus on grammar when it helps with real tasks, like reading a story for animals. It's most useful for learners who already know some grammar but need help understanding texts. Gently correct errors during tasks not in a harsh way.


For easy rules (like plural "-s"), just explain them. For harder ones (like "if" sentences), give examples and let learners guess the rule. Teaching grammar at the right time and in real situations helps learners use it naturally instead of an academic way.

Should grammar be taught in an integrated or discrete manner?

When I teach grammar, mostly I weave it into real activities. Integrated teaching makes me feel like part of real communication, like reading or speaking, so it feels natural and useful. Sometimes, a quick, focused lesson on a specific rule is okay and fun for me and students. We practice it like a dance move, but not too much for them at such a young age. I can imagine teaching college students will be a completely different scenario.

Ellis says separate lessons can help with tricky grammar (like verb endings) if followed by real practice, like using them in a conversation. Sometimes it can be a discrete approach. She also mentioned teaching grammar during tasks (like writing a story) helps learners use it naturally. Teachers can plan to focus on one thing (like past tense) or correct mistakes as they happen.

How?



We can empower students to see how grammar is not just a set of rules but a tool that enhances their reading and written work.



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SLA Perspective

(Second Language Acquisition)

Grammar Teaching

Should grammar be learned naturally or explicitly taught?

Research says:

Ellis, from Auckland University, New Zealand, she supports naturalistic learning based on immersion research, showing that learners can acquire structures like adjective-noun order in Spanish without explicit instruction. People can learn grammar naturally.

In conclusion

In Ellis's research about SLA Perspective (Second Language Acquisition), she favors meaning-focused tasks for beginners to build communicative ability, supplemented by explicit instruction for intermediate learners to address specific forms. This **hybrid** approach ensures fluency and accuracy, aligning with usage-based, empirical, and functional SLA perspectives.

What grammar should be taught?

From my experiences:

- Use content-based instruction
- Look at grammar tips in each unit
- Explain how forms carry meaning
- Focus on grammar that's hard to use
- Teach things learners get wrong

Useful Grammar Practices:

Meaning contexts, fluency, accuracy, proper language use and so on.

When and how should it be taught?

From an SLA perspective, Teach grammar when learners are ready and struggling with specific things, like articles or verb endings, that don't come naturally. It's most useful for learners who already know some grammar but need help understanding texts. Gently correct errors during tasks not in a harsh way.

Giving examples and letting learners guess the rule.

Teaching grammar at the right time and in real situations.

Helping learners use it naturally instead of an academic way.

Should grammar be taught in an integrated or discrete manner?

Research says:

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From my experiences:

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