

Grammar Teaching and Communicative Teaching: A “Hybrid That Works”

by Betty Azar

(Speaking notes delivered at TESOL 2008 during a panel entitled “Teaching Grammar in Today’s Classroom.” The other two panelists were Michael Swan and Keith Folse.)

Today I’d like to talk to you about grammar teaching in relation to communicative teaching. A teacher once called them “a hybrid that works.”¹ I find that an apt description.

First, I want to share with you one of my favorite quotes. This was written by a student newly arrived in the United States as part of a placement exam for our intensive English program at our university.

“I want explain that I know a lot of grammars but is my problem I haven’t enough vocabularies.”

I agree that vocabulary is crucial, even more crucial than grammar, but I love the quote because, in its innocence, it demonstrates that knowing a lot of grammar isn’t the point; being able to use it is.

The goal is not for our students to know a lot of grammar. The goal of grammar teaching is to help students create an interlanguage that is increasingly fluent and accurate in the use of English structures in meaningful communication.

- It’s important to recognize that we are teaching an interlanguage, where it’s helpful for students to be able to manipulate structures and self-monitor. The teaching goal is not native-speaker proficiency or mastery. That will happen long after students leave our classes, if it happens at all.
- Our teaching goal is increasingly fluent and accurate usage. Fluency is just as much a goal in grammar teaching as accuracy. Fluency and accuracy are two sides of the same coin. It’s sometimes good to remind ourselves that fluency does not mean the ability to speak pidgin really, really fast.
- What we want is for students to be able to communicate meaningfully in all skill areas. In other words, the goals of grammar teaching and communicative teaching are fundamentally the same.

Now I want to show you another sample of student writing. This will, unfortunately, look very familiar to those of you who teach Generation 1.5 students. This student’s writing shows some serious fossilized usage problems, not only in this short excerpt but throughout composition. The topic is what should happen to teenagers who commit crimes.

1 The term “a hybrid that works” originated with teacher Toni Hull on the TESL-L listserv, June 30, 2006.

“[I]f the court sente a kid in adult presons will get worse not better, or this, I think the society or the court need to build a new jail for the juveniles that have doing crimes and the court should treate them as adulth but only in court. “ (*Sample of student writing presented by Elaine McCollum, CATESOL, 2006*)

This student immigrated to the United States at age 8, graduated from a U.S. high school with a diploma, and was enrolled in a U.S. college at the time this was written. That’s ten years in the U.S. school system. That’s ten years of comprehensible input, at least enough comprehensible input to earn a high school diploma. That’s ten years of a school system not finding a way to help this student develop good language skills.

This student went to school during the time the naturalist movement was assuring us that a second language is learned in the same ways as a first language; accuracy just happens — which as we all know by now is at best a half-truth, perhaps one of the greatest half-truths ever told. No matter how much theory you wrap it in, there are significant, obvious, observable differences between learning a second language as an adult and a first language as a child. And, as teachers know, accuracy doesn’t always just happen.

This student doesn’t have time to sit around and read novels until someday his brain kicks in and fluent, accurate writing starts to flow from his pen. This student needs a crash course in grammar if he is to have any chance at all to meet his academic goals as a college student. Reversing this kind of fossilization is extremely difficult, as those of you who teach these students know, and requires a great deal of motivation on the student’s part. When working with these students, I’d always say to myself, “Boy, I wish I’d had you in my grammar classes at an earlier stage in your language development.”

By comparison, I consistently observed that second language students in my freshman English writing classes who had a good grounding in basic grammar (nothing fancy, but at least the ability to find a subject and a verb) were much more likely to have the language skills expected at the university level, to have the kind of interlanguage that would at least give them the opportunity to compete successfully at an American university and hopefully reach their academic and career goals.

So when I would come to TESOL and listen to Stephen Krashen and other speakers in the naturalist movement who advocated zero grammar, I would always wonder if those speakers were teaching the same students I was teaching. Were they going to be facing the same students that following Monday that I would be facing? I found that hard to imagine.

I believed then and I believe now that those who advocated zero grammar were simply wrong. And I wasn’t alone. During the heyday of the naturalist bandwagon during the 80s and 90s, the number of teachers actually using grammar-based materials was increasing dramatically, exponentially. There was a disconnect somewhere.

But not only teachers were supporting grammar teaching. A steady stream of research throughout the 80s and 90s, and to this day, shows that grammar teaching works. In my reading of the research literature, much of the academic community today seems generally in agreement that students in second language programs that include both grammar teaching and communicative teaching show accelerated learning and substantial gains in usage ability compared to students in programs that provide only communicative exposure to target structures. Or to say it more simply, much of the research says that when you integrate grammar and communicative teaching, students learn faster and better.

There is always conflicting research and theory in any academic field of inquiry, and that's as it should be. We still have much to learn about second language acquisition. No one has all the answers — and that definitely includes me, and Stephen Krashen as well — but if you're interested in exploring recent research literature on grammar teaching, a good place to start would be an article by Hossein Nassaji and Sandra Fotos. You can find information about the article on my website <http://azargrammar.com>.

Somehow for a while in our field, the term “communicative language teaching” got more or less co-opted by those in the naturalist movement and came to mean that if you engaged in communicative language teaching, that meant you could not engage in explicit grammar teaching. But that's simply not true and never has been.

Grammar teaching can be integrated into a communicative framework or skill-based curriculum. Communicative methods and materials can be integrated into grammar-based teaching. There are a number of good ways of integrating the two.

So the final thought I want to leave with you is this: Communicative teaching and grammar teaching are not mutually exclusive. They are mutually supportive. They fit hand in glove. They are, as I said, what one teacher calls “a hybrid that works.”

There is a link to a video of the entire panel discussion, “Teaching Grammar in Today's Classroom,” on the AzarGrammar.com [Author's Corner page](#).