

## EFL/ESL Grammar Teaching

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JULI MÁSSIA

*Graduada em Letras pela Universidade Federal do Rio de Grande do Sul.*

*e-mail: j.massia@ig.com.br*

**Abstract:** This work aims at analyzing the potential advantages and drawbacks of using formal grammar explanation in the EFL/ESL classroom, taking into consideration factors such as age, educational background and objectives for learning EFL/ESL. It ends by bringing the importance of teaching grammar in order to help learners achieve a higher level of proficiency and intellectual ascension.

**Keywords:** ESL/EFL grammar teaching.

**Resumo:** O objetivo deste trabalho é analisar as vantagens e desvantagens potenciais ao se usar explicação formal de gramática em ensino de inglês como Língua Estrangeira ou Segunda Língua, levando-se em consideração fatores como a idade, nível de instrução e objetivos ao se aprender inglês como Língua estrangeira ou Segunda Língua. O trabalho é concluído trazendo a importância do ensino de gramática de modo a ajudar os aprendizes a alcançar um nível mais alto de proficiência e de ascensão intelectual.

**Palavras-chave:** ESL/ EFL ensino de gramática

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Many former studies and researches carried out about three decades ago show that ESL/EFL students tend to bring to the classroom different expectations regarding what they are going to learn and how this learning process is going to be successfully achieved. Learners worldwide tend to rate “traditional activities” such as grammar exercises and error correction much higher than teachers do, whereas these ones rate “communicative activities much higher than students. (Peacock, 1998). This difference in teachers’ and students’ beliefs becomes even clearer when it comes to teaching in a time (from the 1980s) when being able to communicate successfully in an L2 is considered really important, when L2 learners are supposed to be able to use the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) to effectively deserve to be called proficient or fluent L2 speakers, and when the teacher of an L2 is supposed to bring to the classroom activities that aim at developing the students communicative skills, with special concern to activities that demand from the students more productive output such as speaking and writing in a more autonomous way. However, students of L2 tend to rate pronunciation practice (drilling and repetition), grammar rules, translation and error correction as more important than pair and group work, which

would provide the students the necessary tools to be able to carry out a conversation in a contextualized and more meaningful way.

The present work does not aim at underestimating the importance given to grammar rules, to practice and error correction, once most of EFL teachers have successfully been taught this way. On the contrary, grammar is indeed a very important means for the learner to manage to express him/herself correctly, or, to say the least, to be able to be somewhat understood. It is important to bear in mind, nevertheless, that grammar is taught to ease the process of oral and written production, so it should not be studied or taught as an end in itself, apart from a specific case or necessity which would justify such practice.

According to Celce-Murcia (1991), the higher the educational background level of the L2 learner, the more necessary it becomes to work with formal structures in the classroom, which makes even more difficult the teacher's task of balancing the right amount of grammar input that will be dealt with in the learning process, since most of the SL courses do not really separate learners according to their educational level. At most, they are placed in accordance with their level of proficiency in the language, which does not mean, by any means, that their learning processes will be the same, or that these students will acquire or learn the SL at the same speed. Whether explicit grammar instruction has a role to play in the second or foreign language classroom environment is still a very controversial issue, since it is clear that TESOL methodologists have not offered substantially helpful advice to instructors about the real importance of grammar teaching in the second language acquisition process. Even today the situation is still far from clear, given the existence of so many conflicting theories taken at official conferences and in the methodological literature. Despite all the contrary positions it seems really clear that formal grammar teaching helps the students achieve a higher level of accuracy and proficiency both in written and spoken language. However, this higher level of accuracy should not really be the main target in the language classroom before the students achieve an intermediate level of proficiency. Children do not learn formal grammar instruction before they become fluent in their mother tongues, and being fluent in a language does not necessarily mean being completely accurate. In other words, it is really important to consider formal grammar teaching as part of the second language acquisition process, but teaching grammar since very basic levels of proficiency might be a mistake that could result in learning problems for the students, once it could delay their fluency acquisition process. However, as previous studies (RICHARDS, 1985) point out, a grammarless approach, although communicative, could lead students to fossilize mistakes and prevent them from progressing in the language.

Students of a foreign language (whatever it might be), usually come into the classroom with a mindset that there is a magic "formula" that will allow them to speak fluently and very accurately in a short period of time; in fact, it seems to be much easier to believe that the acquisition of a language is much easier than what it really is than facing the fact that learning and/ or acquiring an L2 involves other factors such as age, educational background and specially, the objectives concerning language. According to Celce-Murcia (1991) it might be quite difficult for the teacher to decide to what extent it would be appropriate to focus on form with a specific group of students given

the variables previously quoted, but not impossible. Indeed, the higher the level of proficiency that the learner gets, the more proficient they become and the older they are, it turns clearly necessary to make a broader use of grammar forms explanations; however, something that can also be noticed in ESL/EFL classes is that students who start studying in a very basic level of English and have a higher educational background already look for more formal explanations and ask for more reasons “why” language works that way. The variables that Murcia (ibid) quotes seem to make sense, but only if they come all together in a student, which does not seem to happen in real classrooms, with real students.

To cut short, explaining formal grammar usage is important to help students understand why ESL/EFL is different from their mother tongue, since not only one’s mother tongue is different from the target language, but also the process of teaching/learning an L2 will also present some differences. Grammar should indeed be taught; it comes to the teacher to know how and to what extent he/she is going to make use of this tool in order to provide students with a both social and intellectual ascension. On the other hand, it seems to be a mistake to refuse to students the chance of choosing between having or not further grammar explanation in an L2 classroom.

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