



Live Moderated Chat Transcript

Grammar – is there any point studying language?

- <Georgina>** Hi Jeremy, welcome once more to the chat.
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Good afternoon Georgina. Yes, it's great to be here ready for the chat.
- <Georgina>** Hope you're up for more gruelling questions on our topic this month!
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Yes, I think I'm ready for that especially since the teaching (or not) of grammar has always been such a difficult topic for our profession!
- <Georgina>** Hi Pogo, welcome to the chat. If you have any questions for Jeremy, please send them in.
- <Georgina>** Jeremy, what have you been up to since the last chat session?
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Well, apart from working away on materials I've been in Warsaw for the 10th annual IATEFL conference - a big occasion with many really interesting presentations. It's great working with Polish teachers!
- <Georgina>** Sounds good. You must get to travel quite a bit?
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Yes, I have the great good fortune to work with teachers in quite a few places. I'm excited to be going to Colombia and Japan next month for example and that should be really interesting.
- <Greta>** Hi Jeremy, Nice to be able to chat to you.
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Hello Greta, welcome.
- <ela>** Hello Jeremy, this is Ela from Argentina!!!!
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Ela, what a great pleasure. Bienvenidos.
- <Georgina>** Hi to everyone entering the room. If you have any questions about grammar, please type them in.
- <ela>** Jeremy: Is Longman considering using corpus based grammar in the textbooks?
- <Georgina>** That's a good one to get us started, thanks Ela.
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Ela, I don't know all of Longman's secrets (!) but I do know that they use corpus discoveries to inform every area of their publishing, and that their authors make use of the information that corpuses now give us, although some of the detail can be a bit overwhelming at times!
- <Greta>** Do you think there are any grammar points worth teaching over others - or perhaps those that are most useful?
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Greta that's a pretty difficult one. We know, for example that in the English tense system the present and past simple are used about 80%% or more of the time so should we teach all the other stuff? I think so for two or three good reasons: students need to understand the system in its totality and it's only when you can use sophisticated grammar that you can sure that you can express yourself with any kind of sophistication (and without ambiguity) - oh, and teachers can't have got it all wrong for the last X hundred years!
- <Barbara>** Have you shifted your attitude to grammar in ELT in any considerable way(s) over your career
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Hi Barbara! Yes, I think I have. I'm a fashion victim just like everyone else!
- <Barbara>** Explain!
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** and there was a time when I thought maybe it wasn't so important, but now I think that was misguided. grammar is centrally (though not uniquely) important to the language. Everything we learn (like lexical phrases, all the corpus-based information) may help us refine and broaden our understanding of language, but grammar remains!
- <barbara>** What does everyone else think about this?
- <Georgina>** Yes, does any one have a view on what Jeremy has said - you can add your

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- own comments as well as ask questions!
- <Greta>** I think it's better these days, more communicative.
- <ela>** Well, yes, I certainly think Jeremy is right and if he weren't who could refute someone like him.
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Ela, nice of you to say that, but grammar has been the site of many arguments over the last decades in which people have held passionate views in many directions.
- <barbara>** I mean, when I learned my first foreign language I felt like I really needed grammar, but when I learned subsequent languages I didn't....why? Does anyone else share this experience?
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Wow! I think Barbara, that a lot depends on the context in which foreign languages are learnt, doesn't it?
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** I have a similar experience to you, but my second language was learnt 'in the street' instead of in the classroom (but I'm sure my EFL teacher brain processed what I heard through a grammar filter as well as other filters).
- <Georgina>** When I learnt my first language at school I didn't even know what grammar was because we weren't taught it.
- <Ela>** Barbara, probably when we learn a third or fourth language we are basically aiming at communication and consider ""accuracy"" less important.
- <jonah>** Grammar is interesting when learning a foreign language, but not absolutely necessary if you have a lot of time and don't care about accuracy in a complex conversation
- <Pogo>** Teachers in other countries e.g. Poland (as you mentioned earlier) put a lot of emphasis on grammar whereas 'CELTA' trained native speakers are moving away from it. The Polish teachers still achieve a pretty good result at the end though!
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Hi Pogo. I think that's a really good point - and pretty topical. The latest edition of the ELT journal has an article by Scott Thornbury in which he argues that teachers should talk more and teach less that teachers need to be 'de-skilled'. Yet people who have taught grammar have not been failures over the years.
- <jonah>** I lived in Egypt for 2 years and learned basic ""taxi Arabic"" - haggling prices, talking about the weather, giving directions, fending off invasive impertinent questions and I only learned 3 verbs - and can't remember those!
- <sophie>** I agree with Ela but many learners still learn to pass exams and there's no doubt about it, that a grammatical approach can give good results as pogo says!
- <Georgina>** Going back to an earlier point on accuracy, how important do think it is when looking at grammar?
- <Ela>** And what are your views on exams such as Trinity where there is much less emphasis on accuracy
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Well, accuracy is desirable, of course, but not absolutely necessary in some (particularly informal) contexts. Yet the more accurate you are, the less ambiguous your message.
- <Georgina>** Hi Manuel, welcome to the chat.
- <manuel>** Hi Georgina. Hi Jeremy. Hi all, that's right Jeremy.
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Hi Manuel. Welcome.
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Ela, everything depends, surely, on what we're using language for. There are times for precision and times for expression (this isn't a very thought-out distinction!) and maybe the obligation for accuracy if less in the latter than the former

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- <ela>** the problem is that not everyone is ready to take risks and concentrating on accuracy might mean not daring to say a word
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Ela, you're quite right that over-accuracy (like Krashen's over-monitoring) can really stop free communication.
- <jonah>** I agree with Jeremy - if you want to make your message less ambiguous, and to ensure that the LISTENER has got the message you intended...
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Jonah, that's it, isn't it. How can I be sure my listener understands what I want him to say?
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Accurate grammar is one (but not the only) way.
- <Georgina>** What kind of training then can we give to trainee teachers what help and advice should we give them?
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** What do you all think of Georgina's question? Especially in the light of Jonah's earlier comment about the downplaying of grammar on some training courses?
- <Greta>** I think that we shouldn't play it down too much because it is important to be able to communicate effectively.
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** I'm pretty clear that trainees need to understand the grammar of the language they want to teach to some extent, and that they should have an understanding of the different ways that students can be made to understand that same grammar and use it successfully.
- <jonah>** Incorrect grammar can be very confusing at times, requiring sometimes very farcical attempts at verification, because the non-native speaker attempts to ""explain"" what they meant using the same incorrect grammar again!
- <barbara>** It can be a real problem to 'skirt' this important area when trainees don't have grammar competence.
- <ela>** Teachers need to be trained in understanding the students* purpose in learning a language to decide whether they will concentrate in communication or accuracy.
- <barbara>** Going back to Scott Thornbury's point. I agree that the teacher talking more will give more opportunity for acquisition - and - as it's in a more personalised context, will have real relevance for the learner. But where does grammar instruction fit in?
- <sophie>** If they understand how language works, this doesn't necessarily mean they have to teach the learners all they know.
- <Pogo>** Don't you think that many trainees though go into their training with little or no grasp of grammar, surely the courses are designed to help you teach and trainees should know the grammar before hand
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Barbara, that's the real question isn't it. My own feeling is that from about puberty onwards most language learners use their brains as well as their hearts to process language, and that an understanding (at least) of some of the basic facts of grammar allows them to build up a picture or scaffold of how the system works
- <jonah>** In my MA TESOL program in the States, most of the native speaker teacher trainers had only the vaguest concepts about English grammar...
- <sophie>** You SHOULD. But in my experience that doesn't happen in a native speaker context. Non-native teachers are much better set up in this regard.
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Sophie, yes I think you've got a really good point. It seems to me that acquisition is great if you have the time for it, and it may suit SOME students completely. But most of us want to try and understand something about the system, don't we? How would you like to learn your next language? Just talk?
- <Georgina>** Interesting question - what do you all think?
- <barbara>** Yes. We're back to your brain / heart analogy.

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- <ela>** No way!! a language is the result of what is going on in people's brains and hearts so it is always interesting to analyse its origin and systematization
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Oh, and by the way, Sophie, I think you're absolutely right that teachers don't have to teach ALL they know - but they do need it to answer questions etc.
- <Pogo>** I learned my second language by just speaking and I have no real idea of why I use the grammar I do and I'm quite happy with that as long as I'm understood and understand.
- <ela>** We are talking about learning a language and we should consider that this language is alive... so how do we cope with this? How should we teach those changes in a grammatical context? are they easy to systematize in order to teach them?
- <Georgina>** Good question Ela.
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Ela, interesting. Look, as I see it grammar study is just one aspect of language study etc etc, AND crucially exposing students to heaps and heaps of language in texts which also includes studying (looking at) vocab, discourse, pronunciation, listenings, teacher talk etc. the question surely is whether denying our students help with grammar analysis of some kind we are doing them a service or not!
- <marty>** I agree that there's so much more to learning a language than the grammar
- <jonah>** ela - I think the changes in a living language are actually quite minor and the grammar is the most stable aspect.
- <ela>** so we are back to corpus grammar and they are doing us a service, or not?
- <manuel>** indeed
- <barbara>** But grammatical building blocks aren't the only useful aid to dominating a language
- <manuel>** Yes. Think of all the people who learned by the grammar translation method and were unable to understand spoken language or to speak with any confidence.
- <marty>** Get the grammar wrong people will still understand, but get the vocabulary wrong and your ability to communicate diminishes.
- <barbara>** Looking at the way course books have been structured as aids to learning over various changes in methodological fashion, it would seem that there is an 'agreed' consistency of grammatical building blocks
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Ela, the problem with corpus information is that it's too rich. Ron Carter was interesting at the Polish IATEFL conference at the w/e saying, in effect, that it is very difficult to know why or how to incorporate the intricate detail that his research was throwing up.
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** What new language do we include? How culturally specific is it? How do you explain a word like 'like' to students etc?
- <manuel>** What were his conclusions, if any? (Ron's I mean?)
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Manuel, something like, we're working on it, but in conversation afterwards we were talking about how this kind of information is additional to (rather than replacing what we have there already.
- <ela>** Jeremy, I'm sorry I have to leave the session now but before I do.....my friends and I would love to see you in Argentina!!! Any plans? May be you can* answer in this chat but think of it.
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Ela, well of course. Un dia de estos! I'm longing to be back in Argentina.
- <barbara>** Can I come?
- <ela>** See you then!!!! Thanks for sharing your views with us. Barbara, yes do come!!
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Barbara, the coursebook argument is quite sharp, isn't it. Why do we keep

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- pushing out the same grammar syllabus?
- <Jeremy_Harmer> I think it's because as on (only ONE) component of modern courses, it has proved its worth over the years.
- <Georgina> How do you all feel about the way grammar is covered in course books? Are publishers getting it right?
- <jonah> Grammar is like a recipe - it lists the ingredients and what order to put them in, but fluency AND accuracy, like a good soufflé, require experience.
- <Jeremy_Harmer> Hey Jonah, a recipe metaphor! I like it.
- <barbara> Is it because it's what teachers want? Is it out of 'fear' or because we don't have another solution?
- <Jeremy_Harmer> Barbara, I don't think 'fear', it may just be the dead hand of tradition but even so, I can't see why anyone wouldn't want to tell their students certain basic facts about grammar, out of which their understanding of language can grow
- <Georgina> But do we all have to eat it?
- <manuel> Every good cook knows instinctively when to use a bit more salt
- <Jeremy_Harmer> Well Georgina, I prefer quite rich meals to soufflés so I'd want lots of exposure, lots of vocabulary and functional type language, lots of talk, talk AND some exposure to 9and analysis of) grammar!
- <manuel> but you might need a bit of initial help about how much before you go your own way. Maybe this is the same with grammar in teaching. Some students need more 'salt' than others.
- <jonah> Course book approaches to grammar come and go like fads - because no-one can agree on any best method but, manuel - ""instinct"" in a foreign language can only come with knowledge and experience.
- <manuel> I think I mean the teacher here not the student. How the teacher doses out the 'salt' / grammar.
- <Jeremy_Harmer> Yes, it's the 'how' that matters, isn't it.
- <barbara> I agree
- <jonah> hmmm.. yes - I think that's right - you ""taste test"" the class/student and add explicit grammar when necessary
- <manuel> Yes Jonah
- <Jeremy_Harmer> Yes, Jonah, something like that surely. Some students only need to have their attention drawn to things, others may need much more explicit teaching and others may not need much of it at all.
- <barbara> If you were writing a new course book, what would your approach be?
- <Georgina> Good question - Jeremy?
- <Jeremy_Harmer> Barbara, I would want to retain some of the features that have stood the test of time, but crucially I would want to give students more exposure to lexical phrases, give them richer input (through texts and things) and lots of chances for talk actually, the success of a coursebook really depends on (a) ease of use, and (b) the content, doesn't it?
- <Georgina> Probably, and some people use books easier than others.
- <jonah> I would like a course that is based on a sound grammar acquisition syllabus, but the explicit grammar presentation and practice are optional
- <barbara> Would one of these features that have stood the test of time be grammar? If so, how would these integrate with exposure to richer input?
- <Jeremy_Harmer> Barbara, I think (taking up Jonah's point) that you would want to draw students' attention to grammar as it occurs in texts and naturally occurring language but that you leave the teacher to decide if they want/need to use the big grammar hammer or whether they feel they can move on to the next (more content-rich_ section.

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- <manuel>** I agree with you Jonah
- <Georgina>** Sorry to interrupt, but just to let you know we only have ten minutes left but you can all feel free to carry on chatting after this time.
- <sophie>** Are you focussing on adult learners here, or is that irrelevant?
- <Georgina>** Good point, course books do differ depending on the target age group.
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** The thing is, Jonah (sorry to keep on about this), that an exposure-only based course (I think that's the sort of thing you're talking about) is absolutely fine. For some students. But not all. Some really do want more direct teaching.
- <chuck>** What course book would you say has covered grammar the best? if any?
- <jonah>** I agree, Jeremy, the direct teaching is the optional part. Everyone needs exposure, so that's the core.
- <ana>** Sorry I'm late. Maybe you already said this. But I agree that students often need more direct teaching.
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Ouch Chuck! Not sure I can answer this question. What do the rest of you think?
- <Georgina>** Hi Ana, welcome anyway!
- <ana>** Thanks
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Hello Ana. Thanks for that.
- <Georgina>** We all have our favourites, and they probably reflect the way we teach.
- <ana>** What do you think Chuck?
- <chuck>** I'm not a big fan of course books.
- <jonah>** chuck - is that because of how they teach grammar? :-)
- <chuck>** no, I like the flexibility and not all books.
- <barbara>** I'm not a big fan of country music but I can appreciate that some singers are 'better than another
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** That's it, Barbara! And I like some country music a lot (but not much)
- <barbara>** Dolly Parton, maybe!
- <barbara>** Was that successful in its approach, do you think?
- <chuck>** For sure, I do like the Cutting Edge approach it gives you the freedom to dip in and out - and has real activities appropriate to the age range I teach.
- <barbara>** Are any of you old enough to remember Cobuild?
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Only just, barbara!
- <jonah>** nice chatting with everyone - I've got to go.
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Jonah, thanks very much for your contribution. Very enjoyable. Bye.
- <Georgina>** Thanks for coming Jonah - the transcript will be on the site in the next few days...
- <ana>** That's useful
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Chuck, you sound like a bit of a coursebook fan after all!!
- <ana>** Yes. You do!
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Seriously I think the big change in coursebooks has been in the type of language and text they offer. the richness of language makes them far less like 'grammar-only' manuals.
- <Georgina>** The next topic - The Internet - will be going live in the first week of October - so keep coming back! Thanks to everyone - especially Jeremy for all your questions and comments.
- <ana>** Thanks to you. I'm sorry I missed the chat.
- <barbara>** Thanks Georgina. Thanks Jeremy. Bye
- <Jeremy_Harmer>** Many thanks, Georgina, for your wonderful moderation. See you next time Ana. Barbara thanks very much for your input. Great. Bye everyone!
- <Georgina>** See you next time, and if you have any questions you can always leave them on the message board - www.eltforum.com/message_board.html !

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