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Increasing learners' grammar awareness

The most effective conditions for language learning come about when students engage in activities on a personal level rather than just going through the motions.

We recognize that learning grammar is a non-linear process — often a case of two steps forward, one step back. All the research suggests that a student's internal grammar is in a permanent state of flux. The constant restructuring necessary to incorporate new rules into the system can adversely affect language already learnt. This characteristic of language learning is perfectly natural and mirrors the process children go through when mastering their native tongue.

The key to learning grammar is to provide students with as many opportunities as possible for meaningful practice. Practice makes perfect. It is only through frequent manipulation of form that students begin to increase the complexity of their output — use more grammar — and in doing so, improve their ability to communicate effectively.

To provide appropriate grammar study, a three stage approach should be introduced: language analysis, practice, personalization.

The language analysis stage promotes noticing of the language features and usage. The language to be noticed almost always comes out of a larger listening or reading text where it occurs naturally in a wider context.

In the practice activities students manipulate or select structures, testing their theories. As they do this, they also become more comfortable with the grammar point.

The personalization stage is not a conventional free practice, where students take part in a role play which requires the target structure. It is based on actual examples of the target structure, which students can apply to their own lives, opinions and feelings.

Personalized, authentic tasks challenge and engage students and this encourages linguistic risk taking. Research into the second acquisition suggests that when students take risks they are experimenting, testing their theories about how the language works and restructuring their internal language system accordingly.