

Tuning in to grammar in discourse: activities to promote noticing and “grammaring”

When I ask my students, “what’s grammar?” they usually answer, “Grammar is rules.” When I ask them, “what’s the goal of studying grammar?”, they usually tell me, “So I can stop making mistakes.”

**Is this the right way to think about grammar?
What are we missing?**

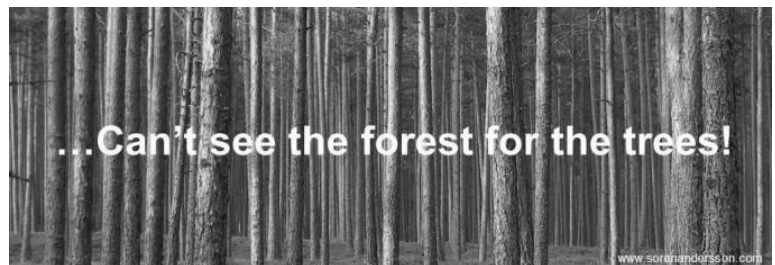
Grammar = rules.

Goal of studying grammar = stop making mistakes

Some points to ponder:

1. Grammar isn’t just a set of rules we have to follow... it is part of the meaning-making resources we use in creating and also in understanding complex messages.

2. Less proficient language users do not process all the grammar patterns efficiently when reading/listening to language. There’s so much to take in! Less proficient readers/listeners use STRATEGIES that prioritize processing vocabulary (content words), very basic grammar patterns, and using real-world knowledge to make sense of the meaning. Processing grammatical markers (function words, inflections, morphology) doesn’t have a big pay-off in increasing understanding, so in wrestling with complex texts in a language we don’t know well, we may actually tune out the “noise”... the grammatical markers and the meanings they convey. (If we know the language well, all of this grammatical processing takes place automatically and effortlessly, without requiring any extra effort from the reader/listener)



3. A key factor in gaining full control over the grammatical system operating in a language is converting INPUT into INTAKE. We see/hear grammar patterns in use in all of the written and spoken language we encounter; but if we are “tuning out” the grammar by strategically paying attention to the big picture, we lose the opportunity to observe and absorb meaningful patterns.

4. An important area in current 2nd language acquisition research is devoting to exploring the role of attention and noticing in learning. This research, drawing on brain-based research, cognitive psychology, and information processing theory as well as SLA, suggests that paying attention to patterns... noticing them... is an important contributor to adult 2nd language acquisition.

5. What can teachers do to help learners to process grammar, so that they get the full benefit of being exposed to natural input in their reading and listening?

- We can add text-focused grammar activities to our repertoire of grammar-teaching techniques.

- We can help learners extend their understanding of grammar patterns they have studied, by directing attention to how grammar is used in the natural discourse of a reading or listening.

- We can design activities that focus learners' attention on a bit of grammar they may be tuning out, as a small part of a lesson primarily focused on understanding a reading or listening text.

Three ideas for adding grammar awareness activities to lessons focused on reading/listening:

1. Grammaring a text

After reading/listening to a text and doing meaning-focused activities, ask learners to reconstruct a portion of the text, putting the grammar back in.

1a) Give learners, or have them brainstorm, a list of key content words. Work in groups or individually to reconstruct the text. Compare versions, discuss alternative possible grammar structures; is there more than one way to say it? (Dictogloss: R Wajnryb)

1b) Create a written cloze where you've removed all examples of one type of structure (for example, a/the/_ before nouns; verb forms; prepositions). Learners fill in the blanks (or choose from alternatives you've put in the blanks), compare with the original text, and discuss the grammar

2. Textual enhancement

(works best for written texts that you have in electronic form) Choose a grammar structure that occurs several times in the text and that you think students are likely to "tune out" when reading for meaning. Call attention to the structure by highlighting or bolding the relevant text. Ask students to read for meaning and do meaning-focused activities; then ask them what they noticed about the enhanced text (discuss grammar), or do a text reconstruction activity. Check if the textual enhancement helped them notice and remember the form.

3. Processing instruction (B. Van Patten)

Focus on a grammar structure that has a significant contribution to meaning in a text (for example, verb tenses, passive vs. active voice, complex noun phrases) . Restructure the text to remove other cues that allow learner to bypass the grammar (for example, time phrases, lexical cues). Ask learners to do a task focusing on the meaning that requires them to process the grammar in order to get the meaning.

A grammar “noticing” activity based on a reading or listening text

I use this low-prep activity near the end of a lesson focused on a reading or listening/viewing, after comprehension and discussion of the topic. It takes 5-20 minutes of class time depending on how interested students are in discussing the exercise.

Aims: Students will focus attention on how grammar is used in real spoken/written language; students will notice features of a text that they may not be processing when reading/listening for meaning.

Prep:

Take a 5-10 line section of the text. Choose a grammatical feature to focus on: for example, verb forms or tenses, determiners (“a” “the” or no determiner), singular versus plural nouns. Ideally, there should be several examples of this feature in the text. Copy the text, leaving blanks for students to fill in the relevant grammar form, or giving a choice of forms for them to choose from.

Activity:

Have students try to re-create the text without looking at the original. They can check their work by comparing with the original text.

Discuss as a group:

- Are there any places where you think there is more than one possible answer?
- Why is this grammar form used here? Why not the other grammar form?
- When you were completing the exercise, did you think about grammar rules, or did you just put in what sounded right? Does the right form generally sound right to you? Do you ever think about grammar when you’re reading/listening for meaning?

An example: (transcript excerpt from CBC Manitoba’s Learning English lessons, January 2014, <http://www.cbc.ca/manitoba/eal/2014/01/lesson-95-making-new-years-resolutions.html>)

Research shows that fewer people make New Year’s resolutions now than they did a few decades ago. It also shows that less than one in two people are able to keep their resolutions past the six month point. But many of us keep trying, setting and re-setting goals all year long. We try to learn from our failures and achieve our objectives. We all want to be among those who can say, “This year, I did it!”

Research shows that fewer people make New Year’s resolutions now than they did a few decades ago. It also shows that less than one in two people are able **(keep, to keep, keeping)** their resolutions past the six month point. But many of us keep **(try, to try, trying)**, setting and re-setting goals all year long. We try **(learn, to learn, learning)** from our failures and achieve our objectives. We all want **(be, to be, being)** among those who can **(say, to say, saying)**, “This year, I did it!”

Notes:

- You can create an online quiz instead of a paper-based one using Hot Potatoes freeware (download and information available at <http://hotpot.uvic.ca/>) If you don’t have a site to upload your quiz, you can put it up temporarily at hotpotatoes.net using a demo account.

Man Angry at English on Japanese TV June 29, 2013

http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/1306/130629-japanese_language.html#ixzz2XkyodfPd

Exercise A: What word goes in the blank? Finish the story by filling in a preposition in each blank.

A Japanese man is angry _____ Japan's television company NHK. He is tired _____ hearing so many English words _____ TV. Mr. Hoji Takahashi, 71, says he is stressed every time he hears an English loanword _____ NHK. He is taking NHK _____ court. He wants the TV company to pay him 1.4 million yen (\$14,300) _____ his "mental distress". Mr. Takahashi's lawyer told the AFP news agency that Japanese TV is too "Americanised". Takahashi doesn't understand why NHK uses words borrowed _____ English instead of Japanese words. He said NHK should use Japanese and not loanwords _____ vocabulary such as "toraburu" (trouble), "risuku" (risk) and "shisutemu" (system). He said this would help protect Japanese culture.

Exercise B: Choose the best expression from the list on the left to fill in the blank in each sentence. Put the letter in the blank. Read the sentence out loud.

A Japanese man is angry ____.

He is tired ____ so many English words ____.

Mr. Hoji Takahashi, 71, says he is stressed every time he hears an English loanword on NHK. He is taking NHK ____.

He wants the TV company to pay him 1.4 million yen (\$14,300) ____.

Mr. Takahashi's lawyer told the AFP news agency that Japanese TV is too "Americanised". Takahashi doesn't understand why NHK uses words borrowed _____.

He said NHK should use Japanese and not loanwords _____ such as "toraburu" (trouble), "risuku" (risk) and "shisutemu" (system). He said this would help protect Japanese culture.

a) to court

b) for his mental distress

c) of hearing

d) instead of Japanese words

e) for vocabulary

f) with Japan's television company NHK.

g) on TV

h) from English

Exercise C: For the article that we just read, can you fill in the blanks to complete the prepositional phrases? (There is more than one correct answer. You don't have to use the exact words from the article)

A Japanese man is angry **with** Japan's _____ NHK.

He is tired **of** _____ so many English words **on** _____.

Mr. Hoji Takahashi, 71, says he is stressed every time he hears an English loanword on NHK. He is taking NHK **to** _____.

He wants the TV company to pay him 1.4 million yen (\$14,300) **for** his _____.

Mr. Takahashi's lawyer told the AFP news agency that Japanese TV is too "Americanised". Takahashi doesn't understand why NHK uses words borrowed **from** _____ **instead of** _____.

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