

## The Final -S Problem

### *Does Teaching Grammar Help? Students Still Make Mistakes.*

by Betty Azar

I'd like to explain what I call "The Final -S Problem." For a lot of teachers, it goes like this:

"I teach my students when to use a final -s, and they can do it fine in a controlled exercise, but then when they talk or write freely, they go and make final -s errors!" Whereupon the teacher throws up his or her hands in despair and determines that teaching grammar does no good because there is no immediate transfer to internalized language.

It seems to me that those who would expect immediate mastery of grammar patterns perhaps confuse teaching language with teaching arithmetic — though, even in arithmetic, students get to make repeated mistakes without all arithmetic teaching judged to be ineffectual.

What gets missed in this equation is that grammar teaching provides a foundation for processing, for conceptual understandings of how a language works, and for developing skills — sort of the way music lessons provide a foundation for learning to play the piano. Learning a second language is far more similar to learning to play a musical instrument than it is to learning arithmetic.

In learning to play the piano, certain students — especially adults who are literate and educated — find cognitive understandings of concepts such as musical key and notation helpful to the process, despite the fact that no amount of cognitive awareness is going to make anyone able to play the piano immediately upon being given abstract information about it. Can you learn to play the piano without cognitive knowledge of musical form? Yes. But is such awareness helpful for many adult students, and does it speed the process for them? Yes, indeed.

"The Final -S Problem" is a metaphor representing the idea that students learn grammar rules and practice them, but then make mistakes using these rules in their output.

Here are the questions I ask myself about "The Final -S Problem," and my answers.

**Q:** *Is it harmful for students to know when a final -s is supposed to be used?*

**A:** That seems highly doubtful.

**Q:** *Do students want to use final -s correctly? Do they care?*

**A:** In my experience, yes.

**Q:** *Is grammar information about the use of final -s helpful to students?*

**A:** Yes. On a practical level, it helps students self-monitor, understand marked errors in their writing, catch a recast (students with a grounding in grammar often show that they "get" a recast with a look that says, "Ah, right."), use a writing handbook, and make sense of

dictionary notations such as *mosquito, n., pl. -toes, -tos*. More importantly, attention to final *-s* raises students' awareness, making them more likely to notice it in what they hear and read.

**Q:** *Are grammar concepts such as singular and plural useful?*

**A:** From my observations both as a language teacher and a language student, yes. If I were to undertake learning Urdu, I know that I would like to understand how singular and plural are marked. And I also know that I'd like to be able to find that explicit information without having to figure it out completely by myself.

**Q:** *Does information about using final -s help students reach fluency and accuracy in its usage?*

**A:** In my experience, ESL students in my freshman English class who had spent four years at an American high school with no grammar component and with fossilized ungrammaticality underperformed (in accuracy within fluency, as well as rhetorical skill in writing and ability to comprehend academic English in readings) compared with students who had had a grammar component in their home countries (as well as in our IEP prior to their enrolling in freshman English). So, in my observation, the answer to the question is yes.

**Q:** *Are there longitudinal studies showing that students who have grammar instruction in the use of final -s develop better usage than those who do not?*

**A:** I think longitudinal studies are very much needed in the area of eventual (not immediate) mastery of grammar structures, comparing ELLs with no grammar component in their long-term instructional program with those who do have a significant grammar component.

**Q:** *Is practice helpful?*

**A:** Practice in a classroom context can instill confidence, encourage risk-taking, give students opportunities for experimentation, and lead to successful communication experiences. (A grammar base can easily lead to communicative activities. A lot of meaningful communication goes on in a grammar-based class.) But does practice guarantee mastery? No. (If it did, I wouldn't still be hitting F-natural when I should be hitting F-sharp on the piano.) Grammar teaching simply lays the groundwork and helps speed the process in adults and young adults. Anyone learning a second language as an adult (which is different in a number of obvious ways from a child learning a first language) needs lots of input and experience using the language. Grammar-based instruction provides just a little help along the way.

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