

## Letter from a Successful Language Learner & Teacher

Dear Betty,

Many thanks for your e-mail. I must admit I was not only surprised but also delighted to learn from Carol that you wanted to contact me. As I said after your presentation at the conference, it was a real pleasure to listen to your speech. I enjoyed it even more since I so fully agree with grammar component in a language program. I'd love to share with you some of my experience as a language learner and language teacher.



*Ela Newman*

As I mentioned during our brief conversation, English is a foreign language for me. I'm Polish and moved to the States in February of this year. My adventure with English began when I was about 12, but I developed a soft spot for this language a couple of years before I graduated from my college-preparatory school. I decided then to become an English teacher. In Poland, in order to pursue language studies at a university, you must already be above an advanced level in the foreign language you want to study; such entry level is required, since all the subjects at philology departments are taught in the language of your study. You are also expected to write all the papers in that language, your B.A. diploma paper and M.A. thesis included.

Since, traditionally, grammar is heavily emphasized in language studies in Poland, I soon became familiar with the texts and reference books of Martinet, Murphy, Alexander, Swan, and others. After five years of university studies, I had finished my B.A. and M.A., both in TEFL. These degrees allowed me to go into teaching (about 10 years ago), which I have truly enjoyed.

On several occasions, native speakers of English have told me that they find it hard to believe that I never studied — or even lived — in an English-speaking country before I moved to the States. At such moments I am reminded of how demanding language programs are in Poland, especially regarding the grammar component. Even though the methods of teaching grammar have changed over the decades (from grammar translation to the more communicative approaches involving discovery techniques), the importance of this component has always been fully recognized there. And without a doubt, I have benefited from that.

My views on grammar naturally stem from my experience as both a learner and a teacher. Here are a few points about my views on the usefulness of learning and teaching grammar. Regarding grammar and the language learner (especially academically oriented), it seems to me that

1. knowing grammar provides a sense of safety. A learner feels vulnerable, even somewhat handicapped, having his or her communication skills, so essential to adult life, reduced to single words, and often even to gestures.

2. knowing grammar rules encourages a learner to take risks: risks which don't constitute too much of a hazard. When you experiment, knowing that you have some solid foundations, you feel more stable, more protected, less "naked" and exposed, and therefore, more willing to continue and explore.
3. knowing grammar can provide a tangible record of progress. As a learner, you know that you have learned how to use this and that tense, but that your control of the passive voice is weak, and that you definitely need to work on article usage (a nightmare for Polish learners of English). Progress (or lack of it for that matter) of the type that you can "tick off" is very important for a language learner. Learners want to be able to chart what they have learned because they often have to cope with a feeling of being stuck, which may discourage them from further learning.
4. knowing grammar can satisfy a learner's need for accuracy — and, as we know, adult language learners seem not to be able to live without it! They are not as willing as younger students to "make fools of themselves," they don't wish to offend others unintentionally, and they don't want others to perceive them as semi-literate. Precision in grammatical structure certainly helps them to avoid such problems to some extent.
5. focusing on grammar can facilitate learners' progress when they don't have constant contact with the language being learned. Even if they live in a country where the language is an official one or is spoken by the majority, they aren't always as exposed to it as we tend to think. This is something I've noticed here: many of my students don't use much English outside class. These older beginners depend heavily on grammar, and the English-speaking surroundings do not seem to be playing too big a role in their learning. Language immersion which is rather limited, to my mind, is not enough for them and many others; grammar, combined with work on language skills, helps accelerate their progress.

Regarding grammar and the language teacher, it seems to me that

1. whether total beginners or advanced learners, teenagers or adults, students that I have worked with have consistently appreciated grammar lessons. Their curiosity as to "how and why" is regularly satisfied by grammatical explanations or, most often, by the "grammar-rule discoveries" they make while given the task of analyzing relevant examples. I rarely see more sparkles in their eyes than when they've come to understand the grammar behind the utterances they've heard or sentences they've read.
2. grammar is extremely helpful for both students and teachers when it comes to identifying and correcting interference mistakes or other errors. Within its limits, grammar represents a source of guidance for students and convenience for teachers.

3. students enjoy “discovering” grammar rules through the analysis of examples, and through discussion and individual study tasks. Grammar discovery activities certainly stimulate the development of students’ analytical as well as creative thinking skills. Once they have internalized a new rule, they’re often anxious to use it with new vocabulary.

All in all, I strongly believe that there’s a real need for including a grammar component in, to use your words, a “well-balanced” program. And since it can be incorporated into the teaching of so many skill areas, can add variety to lessons, and can help learners understand language usage in a relatively risk-free, thought-provoking, and structured way, why deny it a place? We cannot forget that teaching grammar does not focus on presenting “dry” rules in abstract and isolated contexts. It no longer means doing grueling drill exercises and frowning at students if they don’t get their articles right.

The idea that grammar is an essential part of the language learning process is certainly validated in my experience. Let my story and views be an expression of support for the “grammar campaign.”

*Very best wishes,  
Ela Newman*

*Are you a successful language learner? If so, how do you view the role of grammar teaching in your learning process? Share your experiences with us on [Teacher Talk](#).*