

**Senior, Rose. (2006) *The Experience of Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.**

*Betty's comments:*

“This book is about what it is like to be a language teacher today.” That is Senior’s first sentence in her introduction. Through wide-ranging interviews during her research, she is able to describe the realities of being an ESL/EFL teacher. I could barely put the book down. Rarely have I seen teachers’ truths written about so insightfully and honestly. Her research rings true to my experience.

She writes about the importance of a good rapport with your class through knowing your students and responding spontaneously, flexibly and often intuitively to their needs. There’s one sentence (among hundreds) I especially like that ends “... pedagogic eclecticism is, it seems, a key feature of effective teaching.” (p. 141)

Another quote:

Language teachers rarely follow coursebooks in the designated manner, preferring to pick and choose activities from them according to their personal preferences and immediate teaching needs. (p. 166)

That was always my own experience and is one reason why my textbooks have more exercises than any teacher can probably do in the course of term (so teachers can pick and choose) and why they are organized in more-or-less self-contained units (so that teachers can arrange the details of their syllabus themselves).

Senior writes briefly about grammar teaching, noting that even though “current orthodoxy” has it that teachers should “have students engage in communicative tasks before focusing on linguistic forms,” her findings show that many teachers, even those teaching within a communicative framework, and especially more experienced teachers, “continue to follow the more traditional PPP format.” (PPP = Present, Practice, Produce) (p. 254)

One last quote that I can’t resist including:

Common sense dictates that, when teaching beginner-level classes, it is appropriate for teachers to focus on form, feeding in a range of appropriate words and phrases that will enable students to interact with their peers. (p. 254)

It seems to me that somehow it has become “conventional wisdom” in academic writings that grammar should not be taught to beginning-level students. For example, Rod Ellis (citing research) says there is “a strong argument for delaying the teaching of grammar until learners have developed a basic communicative ability.” His perception is that an approach that encourages students to have a “threshold of communicative ability” (by which he seems to mean pidginized utterances such as

“Me no”) “... is to be preferred to an approach that insists on grammatical accuracy from the start and that, as a consequence, may impede the development of this communicative ability.”  
(Ellis, p. 91)<sup>1</sup>

I believe it is a myth that grammar-based teaching “insists on accuracy” above all else and does not encourage communicative language use. I wish our field could just get past this myth. Teaching grammar does NOT mean teaching accuracy but not fluency, focusing on form but not meaning. The truth is, in many teachers’ experience, that a grammar base is a solid place from which to build both accuracy and fluency. Form and meaning are two sides of the same coin. The idea that grammar teachers teach form without regard to meaning is pure myth. They are inseparable.

Communicative methods can be blended with grammar-based teaching even at the beginning level, and a grammar component can get students past the “Me no” stage with increased ease and speed to allow them to say what they mean, which in this case could range from “I don’t have any crayons” (Ellis’ example) to “I don’t know” to “No thank you, I don’t want one,” etc. Teaching a student “I don’t” within the fuller grammatical concept of how one expresses one’s own wants, needs and perceptions, both affirmative and negative, appears to me to of great value to beginning students.

That teaching grammar to beginning students impedes their development and is unhelpful has not been my experience, and clearly, judging from Senior’s book plus the numbers of teachers using grammar-based textbooks with their students, a very large number of practitioners agree with the proposition that grammar teaching is, in fact, quite beneficial and appropriate at the beginning level.

*What do you think? Do you teach grammar at a beginning level? Join us on the [Teacher Talk Forum](#).*

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1 Ellis, Rod. (2006) “Current Issues in the Teaching of Grammar: An SLA Perspective,” in *TESOL Quarterly* Vol 40 No. 1 March 2006 pp. 83-107