

Shepherd, R. (2005) “The Naturalist Fallacy and the Demise of Grammar Instruction.”  
*The Newsletter of the Core Knowledge Foundation*, Vol 18, No. 4

---

*Betty's comments:*

I ran into [this article](#) on the internet and found it quite worth reading. The author's comments are directed toward teachers of native English speakers in U.S. schools, but his observations are relevant to our field, too. The naturalist movement in language teaching has affected both L1 and L2 grammar teaching.

It was not until the second half of the twentieth century . . . that the anti-grammar camp came into possession of the big guns that would blow grammar out of the classroom. Beginning with the publication of *Syntactic Structures* in 1957 and continuing to the present day, Noam Chomsky of MIT led what can only be described as a revolution in linguistics, one consequence of which was the widespread belief that language acquisition is largely an autonomic process dependent upon unconscious interactions between an innate, internal language acquisition device and the raw material of the child's linguistic environment. (3 of 15)

The author discusses how the concept of universal grammar and a human being's “innate neural machinery for language learning” led education theorists to adopt the naturalist theory of language learning, which he describes thus:

Just stand out of the way, expose kids to lots and lots of interesting language, and *voila*, they will learn grammar. (4 of 15)

However, the author then goes on to say

Chomsky was right about language acquisition, but the theory developed by the education professors in Chomsky's name is wrong in ways that turn out to be crucial. (4 of 15)

The author calls the idea that grammar develops naturally through simple exposure to language a “half truth.” (6 of 15) He discusses what researchers now know about age-related neural connections involved in language learning and concludes that explicit grammar teaching is beneficial, indeed necessary, for L1 students and calls upon teachers to include grammar in their language teaching. Many of his insights are also applicable to L2 teaching.

In L1 language teaching, grammar instruction largely disappeared from U.S. and U.K. school curricula starting in the 1960s; the baby was thrown out with the bathwater. In ESL/EFL, there was also a strong zero-grammar movement, but large numbers of us hung onto the baby (while changing the bathwater). We trusted our own observations about grammar teaching and were wary of ideological bandwagons. Today grammar teaching is stronger than ever in our field and is solidly supported by twenty years of [research](#).

*Please weigh in on [Teacher Talk](#) if you find points of interest or disagreement in this article. We'd love to hear from you.*