

Ellis, Rod. (2006) "Current Issues in the Teaching of Grammar: An SLA Perspective," in *TESOL Quarterly*, 40, 83-107.

Betty's comments:

To me, Rod Ellis' article in the March 2006 *TESOL Quarterly* is a significant milestone. It would appear that, after all the years of the zero-grammar wars, the academic community has at last reached a consensus that there "is ample evidence to demonstrate the teaching of grammar works." (p. 102) With this consensus, I feel the academic community has come closer to the practitioner community vis-à-vis the teaching of grammar, which, through the eyes of many practitioners, is vibrantly alive and well (and has been throughout our careers), is ever-evolving in innovative ways, and is an effective component of second language instruction.

Ellis states that research has

... borne out the overall effectiveness of grammar teaching. Further, there is evidence that, contrary to Krashen's (1993) continued claims, instruction contributes to both acquired knowledge (see Ellis, 2002a) as well as learned knowledge. There is also increasing evidence that naturalistic learning in the classroom ... does not typically result in high levels of grammatical competence. In short, there is now convincing indirect and direct evidence to support the teaching of grammar. (pp. 85-86)

For someone (me) who 30 years ago investigated and rejected Krashen's claims about the role of grammar in second language acquisition, it is heartening to read a similar rejection in academic literature. It appears that to a great extent our field has moved beyond "zero grammar" and the naturalist movement. I believe we are only now on the threshold of understanding the many exciting and effective ways grammar can be integrated into well-balanced programs of second language instruction.

Ellis' article is highly worth reading. I have just two other quick comments, though, and they have to do with the ordering of grammar syllabi. Ellis does not indicate an understanding of how and why pragmatic pedagogues such as myself determine the ordering of material. At one point he says we text writers order material the same old way over the years because it's "safer." Safety has absolutely nothing to do with it. I weave mosaics appropriate to the students' level and needs.

He also suggests that areas of difficulty for students, such as final -s, are introduced early in a course simply because they are areas of difficulty. That is not so, either. Final -s, problem that it may be, is introduced logically and pragmatically within the larger areas grammatical concepts in which it plays a role: concepts of how English marks number with nouns and verbs, for example, or concepts of expressing possession. I don't introduce final -s when I introduce it just because it's a problem.

Minor misunderstandings of the pragmatics and theories underlying grammar syllabus construction are not infrequent in academic literature in my experience.

Those are just two very minor points. One other I might mention is the old warhorse Ellis brings up that we grammar teachers believe that “the idea that practice makes perfect is the primary justification for the intensive approach.” (93) I don’t believe that is so. I think most of us who are practitioners of Grammar-Based Teaching (GBT) believe we are laying foundations for growth and do not expect immediate mastery nor near-native idiomatic usage of the grammar structures we teach. *The purposes of practice are many* – but immediate mastery, immediate internalization, immediate automaticity are not among them. We GBT practitioners do not pretend to know when or how any particular structure or vocabulary word or collocation will be internalized by any particular student. We provide understanding, noticing, practice. And in our experience, most adult and young adult students find these things helpful on their long road to acquiring a second language. Despite a few minor disagreements I might have, I highly recommend Ellis’ article. As I said, I think it represents a major shift in the field away from zero grammar and toward fuller understandings of the role of grammar in second language instruction.

What are your perceptions of the changing attitudes toward grammar teaching today? What are your views on the naturalist movement and its insistence on zero grammar? Share your thoughts on [Teacher Talk](#).