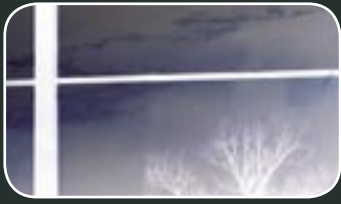


After twenty years of teaching ESL in the classroom, Thomas Leverett is still reflecting on a basic question that all language teachers must face: Should a teacher explain grammar to students?



A QUESTION OF TIME



To some students, the answer may be obvious, but a large number of teachers, perhaps the majority, feel that one should not. Their reasoning goes something like this: learning is inductive; learners learn by experience, and build their own structural understanding of a language based on that experience (much like they learned their first language); therefore, imposing an external structure onto that self-made understanding is counterproductive. It takes time away from using the language, and it imposes a false structure onto the learner. Worst, almost any “rule” that one could conjure up for a language will inevitably be broken by an exception or a group of exceptions, so it is futile to perpetuate the belief that any such rules can be counted on, or that they should even be memorized as rules.

On the other side of this question, however, are the students themselves, who, as a natural product of their learning, come forward with a never-ending stream of grammatical questions, rain or shine, and want the answers, believing or not that we teachers have the correct answers and can help them.

The classrooms I teach in are small, with off-white walls, each room with a huge window replacing one wall on the side. That window faces a beautiful woods with a path in front of it; the leaves change color very slowly all throughout the fall and also in the spring. Language teaching is difficult, and, over the years, many classes have worked hard and learned a lot in those rooms, but the trees have been a gentle witness, giving me a moment of peace sometimes as I work out a problem. Learning a language is not easy, no matter how you do it; my students are from all nations and language backgrounds; they pay close attention to readings, to videos, to various and interesting pieces of language, until they get enough of it to be able to handle larger and harder readings. We write about what we read; we discuss it and learn how to say what we want. But these grammatical questions come up frequently. Why do we say a beautiful day but a nation divided? The questions stump me for a minute or two. The trees may be blossoming in morning’s spring glory; the air warmed by the sun; the woods, of course, will not give me the answer. However, I pause, collect my thoughts, give it my best, and go back to classwork.

I tend to want to answer these questions, whether it’s an appropriate use of class time or not, and I’ve decided to do it if I can, though we are usually very busy with other things.

My reasoning is that if students need an explanation and get it, they can move on to the next problem, or another piece of language, but if they’re stuck, they’ll have trouble moving on, and the sense of having to master something that is incomprehensible will haunt them. This is more a question of their feelings, really, than of use of class time. But it means that, because I answer them, or try, I often get drawn into discussions of why things are the way they are. Sometimes this happens in office hours, after class, or in the hallway, but it happens a lot. It happens when they do group work, when they are in pairs, or speaking to the class about something they’ve studied. It happens when we are reading, taking quizzes, or writing essays in a computer lab. It may be pouring down rain outside, a summer storm, walking students huddled under umbrellas. But inside a student with an inquiring mind will want to know: Why do we use the in sentences like: “the more it rains, the more he likes it?”

I glance outside for a second, planning out my answer. It occurs to me that some of these

I don’t know. But even as they go, new students have arrived, sincere, polite, hardworking. They are struggling with the language, and they are asking the same kinds of questions. The questions are a natural part of the process, and the answers have to come from somewhere. If nouns are singular in adjective positions (like potato soup), why do we say sports car or linguistics test? I glance at the woods, again; it’s fall, a sunny day, leaves a splash of color. I wonder for a second what to do, but I answer.


Linguists also have a running debate about what exactly all languages and all people have in common. In my opinion they have found very little. But reflecting on the teachers’ question, whether or not I should spend my time explaining grammar, my conclusion is that both sides are right: students do need to figure it out for themselves, but also, our answers about why we do what we do help them. I know this from watching their paths toward fluency and understanding. And another curious thing has happened in the process. As I speak in terms

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questions may have more than one right answer; and, that although I’m a native speaker and an English teacher, that doesn’t mean that my explanation is always right. In fact, it’s the TOEFL and the testing culture that has perpetuated the idea of “one right answer,” when in fact, in a language or a given sentence, there could be several, and, some have changed over time. Still, there are reasons for these things, and I’ll try to find them. After all, the system can’t be too complicated, or millions of native speakers would have trouble using it; it has to work in a way that is clear for most of its users. I should, then, be able to find that path of reasoning and work it out.

The classroom, I realize, is a kind of laboratory; we can observe the effects of our teaching and decide what’s best from the results. Over the years, many students have come and gone; they have become fluent; they’ve learned enough language to go on to academic classes and do what they came here to do. Whether they made it because of my answers, or in spite of them,

that will help my students understand, terms that help explain differences between languages, I feel that I’m finding that common ground, using what they know easily to reach an understanding of how a different language works.

As the setting sun shines through the window at the end of the day, it reflects off of a pile of papers for me to grade. Generally I’m so busy with classwork that I don’t really have time to wonder about these questions, and neither do my students; learning a language in that sense is more similar to building a house than it is to studying philosophy. But a feeling of understanding, of order, of being able to make a system work, is gratifying in every field. And if I’ve helped nurture that feeling, I leave the classroom satisfied, and take another stack of papers home to grade. 

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