Pedagogy Overview: Grammar

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What is Grammar?

Grammar is the infrastructure, or the system of rules for arranging words, phrases, and clauses, we use to construct meaningful sentences in spoken and written language. Speakers of any language make moment-by-moment decisions when engaged in conversation, and grammar allows them to effectively communicate their thoughts and opinions (Chung & Pullum). A native speaker learns grammar implicitly through listening and exposure to their native language. They don't formally study their own grammar before they can start speaking the language (Chung & Pullum). This natural development is attributed to the Universal Grammar Theory, which supposes that human brains are wired for language with a universal grammar that, with enough input, can be unlocked (Gärtner & Sauerland 2007; Freeman & Freeman 2004). Second language learning has proven to be different. It requires grammar study to learn to communicate accurately and with ease, especially in the context of Emergent Bilinguals who are expected to learn both the English language and subject matter content simultaneously (Cummins 2015; Scarcella 2003).

Why Focus on Grammar?

Expressive language is the foundation for understanding and using English and is directly connected to academic achievement. Spoken language has a grammar, or set of rules, that is used to make meaning. This grammar needs to be acquired by the learner, which is best achieved through a combination of both implicit and explicit methods of instruction (Genesee 2006). Understanding how to construct sentences is important to the learner as they are concerned with learning not only how to derive meaning from written and spoken sources, but also to use a special type of language called "academic language" in the school setting (Cook 1989). Learners can not simply be introduced to vocabulary as a way to learn how to construct meaningful and accurate sentences. This is why teaching vocabulary words alone is not enough. A learner may acquire an extensive vocabulary, but if they are unable to connect the words together in an intelligible way, they will not be able to communicate effectively (Chung & Pullum). Thus, oral grammar, as a point of focus, is essential to an Emergent Bilingual and their knowledge of English.

What is the Role of Grammar in Lexia® English?

Grammar is essential to successful communication. Without it, a person won't be able to construct meaningful sentences (Cook 1989). Speaking practice without any grammar parameters prevents learners from using language in a constructive way. When learners are asked to speak about a subject but don't have a frame of reference in terms of correct grammar, they aren't really learning how to use the language. Even worse, their mistakes may become fossilized as a systematic part of their communication. Emergent Bilingual students will be tested on their language proficiency and if a learner isn't able to construct comprehensible sentences, they won't progress in the language proficiency levels (Cummins 2000). These students may eventually be labeled Long Term English Learners because they are not able to advance to higher levels of language proficiency on standardized tests (Long-Term English Learner Definition 2015). However, studying grammar and reciting rules isn't helpful either. Knowing the rules in an arbitrary and rote way doesn't help a learner actually use the language.

The goal of English instruction is to teach each aspect of the language so that a learner can internalize it and use it in coherent ways while in an academic context (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006).

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Language is a social construct and the intersection of understanding how to create meaningful sentences and communicate information is the goal of Lexia English grammar teaching. Generally, teachers are more focused on subject matter content rather than grammar rules (Folse, 2009). Thus, Lexia English aims to bridge the gap between teaching subject matter content and explicit grammar.

Lexia English aims to help Emergent Bilinguals understand how to construct meaningful sentences within an academic context. The lessons contain embedded, explicit, scaffolded grammar instruction that enables users to have conversations about different academic topics. Language Frames provide learners with portable language that can be used in a variety of school settings. The language frames help learners make sense of—and properly use—grammatical conventions in conversation and academic discussion that go beyond foundational sentence-starters. Traditional sentence starters lack the scaffolds of grammar needed to teach a learner how to construct a meaningful message.

They only provide the beginning of a sentence for the learner, without giving the necessary structure to help the learner complete their thought. For example, a sentence starter might be: *How long ____ ?* This could be a support for present continuous, but without more information, the learner doesn't know how to conclude the sentence. The language frames in Lexia English are carefully crafted to support a learner while leading to a gradual release in addition to exposing learners to a variety of contexts and subject matter topics, and with varying levels of complexity. The same support above is elaborated and taught in a structured way: *How long ___ they ___ practicing?* with the words "have, been" purposefully taught and practiced in this sentence. The language frames are designed to be "portable" or used in multiple contexts so that learners can adopt them as their own and use the sentences with confidence in any classroom situation and any subject area.

Grammar is the foundation of spoken and written language. Lexia English offers learners an opportunity to practice and internalize grammar so as to help each learner advance in their English proficiency.

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