

What do 49 studies tell us about the effectiveness of grammar teaching?

What this research was about and why it is important

Language teachers frequently make important decisions about how to teach new grammar features. For example, should individual grammar features be taught or can learners pick them up incidentally through hearing/reading and using the language? Should grammar be taught in isolation or as part of meaningful communication tasks? Should grammar teaching be preplanned or happen reactively as difficulties arise in language use? This study systematically compared and combined the results of 49 studies which have investigated the effectiveness of different types of second language (L2) grammar teaching. The study showed that focused grammar practice was helpful for grammar learning, with the benefits lasting beyond the end of the teaching. Further, instruction that drew learners' attention to grammatical feature(s) was found to be more beneficial than simply providing lots of examples of a grammatical feature without drawing learners' attention to it.

What the researchers did

- The authors carried out a systematic search for studies conducted between 1980 and 1998 that had investigated the effectiveness of one or more types of grammar teaching and identified 49 suitable for inclusion.
- The studies were classified according to the following categories for analysis:
 - (1) *Type of teaching*. Classified in two ways: (1) whether the new feature was taught in a meaningful context that drew learners' attention to meaning as well as the grammatical feature; OR was the primary focus and not connected to meaning or a meaningful context; OR was not the focus of the teaching at all. (2) Whether the teaching drew learners' attention to the feature (e.g., the teacher explained the rule) OR gave no instructions to pay attention to a particular grammatical feature were given.
 - (2) *Measures of learning*. Whether the learners were assessed in controlled conditions (involving comprehension/production of isolated words/sentences, e.g., multiple choice / conjugating a verb correctly to complete a sentence) OR in free production activities (focusing on meaningful communication where use of the feature was optional, but not required).
 - (3) *Durability of learning*. How long after instruction the learners were tested.
- Effect sizes (a way to measure the size of difference between two scores) were calculated to measure the change in learning after each type of instruction and to compare learning following different types of instruction.

What the researchers found

- *Overall*: Compared with simple L2 exposure / communication, targeted grammar teaching was more effective.
- *Type of instruction*: Both teaching a grammatical feature in a meaning-focused context and teaching with a primary focus on the grammatical feature only, resulted in large and equal improvements in learning. Teaching that drew learners' attention to grammatical features was more effective than teaching that did not.
- *Measures of learning*: Larger improvements were found for controlled measures than for free production measures.
- *Durability of learning*: Learning was maintained or decreased slightly in tests that occurred several weeks or months after the instruction (although only a small number of studies tested this).

Things to consider

- The vast majority of studies included investigated adult L2 learners (79%). Fewer studies have investigated the effectiveness of grammar learning among young learners (but for example see the OASIS summaries of Kasprovicz & Marsden [2017] and Lichtman [2016] for exceptions).
- Although targeted L2 instruction was found to result in large improvements in learning, the results of individual studies varied greatly, suggesting that the effectiveness of the teaching also varied considerably from one study to another.
- The results regarding how well learning improvements lasted over time should be interpreted with caution because most testing took place soon after the teaching. More research is needed with delayed testing to reach firmer conclusions about the durability of learning.