

Nassaji, H. and S. Fotos (2004) “Current Developments in Research on the Teaching of Grammar,” *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 24, 126-145. Copyright © 2004 Cambridge University Press. *Portions reproduced by permission.*

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*Betty’s comments and notable quotes:*

This 2004 article by Nassaji and Fotos surveys twenty-plus years of recent research and concludes that grammar teaching is effective and beneficial. In the conclusion, the authors state that a grammar component in L2 teaching “is necessary in order for language learners to attain high levels of proficiency in the target language.” (137) I believe this is an informative and important article in today’s discussion of the teaching of grammar. In brief, here are some of the more salient points.

... [A] large body of research [points] to the inadequacies of teaching approaches where the focus is primarily on meaning-focused communication, and grammar is not addressed. Extensive research on learning outcomes in French immersion programs by Swain and her colleagues<sup>1</sup> showed that, despite substantial long-term exposure to meaningful input, the learners did not achieve accuracy in certain grammatical forms.

... This research suggested that some type of focus on grammatical forms was necessary if learners were to develop high levels of accuracy in the target language. Thus communicative language teaching by itself was found to be inadequate. (128)

... [A] large number of laboratory and classroom-based studies as well as extensive review of studies on the effects of instruction over the past 20 years ... indicate that grammatical instruction has a significant effect on the attainment of accuracy. ... [A] recent [study] concludes that explicit instruction (presenting the structure, describing and exemplifying it, and giving rules for its use) results in substantial gains in the learning of target structures in comparison to implicit instruction (usually consisting of communicative exposure to the target form) alone, and that these gains are durable over time. (128-129)

The article notes that a number of researchers have argued that “grammar and communication must be integrated. ... [and that] the challenge is to find the best ways of doing so in L2 classrooms ... and to maximize the opportunity for a focus on grammar without sacrificing the focus on meaning and communication.” (131)

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1 See the article for full bibliographic citations of the Swain research, or [Contact Us](#) and request them.

In their survey of the research supporting grammar teaching, the authors report that "... most SLA investigators agree that noticing or awareness of target forms plays an important role in L2 learning," and that without such noticing students "process input for meaning only" and "consequently fail to process and acquire [the target forms]." (128)

Other research reports that "... it is possible to influence sequences of development favorably through instruction if grammar teaching coincides with the learner's readiness to move to the next developmental stage of linguistic proficiency." (128)

The authors also say that there is "... a large body of research pointing to the inadequacies of teaching approaches where the focus is primarily on meaning-focused communication, and grammar is not addressed." (128)

Of research in support of grammar teaching, the authors say that grammar teaching has "... facilitative effects on both the rate and ultimate level of L2 acquisition." (128)

The authors note that "... focus on form can be achieved in many different ways," and I recommend reading the entire article for an overview of these ways. But, interestingly, the authors choose not to explore [\*Grammar-Based Teaching\*](#) (GBT), at least as I define it and thousands of teachers currently practice it, as a valid pedagogical option to grammar instruction. I know of no academic literature, current or past, that demonstrates an understanding of GBT as it has developed in innovative and eclectic ways to blend communicative teaching with grammar teaching.

The authors say (131) that no research has directly compared more traditional approaches to organizing grammar instruction (called, confusingly, Focus on FormS) with Focus on Form (FonF) approaches. However, the [\*2000 meta-analysis of research into L2 instruction by Norris and Ortega\*](#) does compare the two approaches and concludes that Focus on FormS (i.e., approaches that spring from a grammar syllabus) and Focus on Form (i.e., approaches that spring from content or tasks) are **equally effective** as long as some type of explicit grammar instruction is included.

I disagree with the authors that "traditional structure-based grammar teaching approaches *have been replaced* [emphasis mine]" by FonF approaches. That's a tricky use of the passive: "have been replaced" perhaps in academic literature and research foci, but certainly not replaced in thousands of classrooms. Input I get from teachers and my data on the numbers of GBT practitioners indicate to me that those of us using a GBT approach do so because we find it effective, not because we are simply unaware of other approaches to including a grammar component in our programs of instruction. Teachers often find GBT preferable to FonF, depending upon their teaching situations. I believe the academic community would do the entire field a service by researching current-day GBT and comparing its effectiveness with that of FonF teaching. A longitudinal study would, of course, be ideal.

In their concluding paragraph, the authors indicate that it is not known at this time which of the various FonF approaches to grammar instruction in L2 classrooms might be the most effective, but they conclude that:

... among the essential conditions for acquisition of grammatical forms are (1) learner noticing and continued awareness of target forms, (2) repeated meaning-focused exposure to input containing them, and (3) opportunities for output and practice. It is also recognized that, because the acquisition of grammar is affected by internal processing constraints, spontaneous and accurate production cannot be instantaneous but will naturally require time as learners move toward mastery. (137)

I appreciate the authors' final reminder that second language acquisition "naturally require(s) time." The fact that students do not immediately internalize the structures we teach them should not make us conclude, as some do, that teaching grammar "doesn't work." Grammar instruction builds foundations and provides learning opportunities that research clearly says produce favorable results over the time-consuming process of learning a second language.