

**GREEN GRAMMAR:  
WAYS OF LANGUAGING**

Leo van Lier

**ABSTRACT**

In this paper I advocate for a new way of teaching and learning grammar. I do this because I feel the old ways have not worked terribly well. As a graduate student from China recently told me, when describing her traditional language learning experiences: “My experience of learning a foreign language is awful and unsuccessful.” She elaborated: “My first 10 years of English learning history was a nightmare.”

Key Words: language, languaging, translanguaging, grammar, pedagogical grammar, abduction, induction, deduction, classroom teaching

**INTRODUCTION**

In this paper I advocate for a new way of teaching and learning grammar. I do this because I feel the old ways have not worked terribly well. As a graduate student from China recently told me, when describing her traditional language learning experiences: “My experience of learning a foreign language is awful and unsuccessful.” She elaborated: “My first 10 years of English learning history was a nightmare.”

The vast majority of students and teachers struggle with grammar, and they feel quite unwell at times, suffering a great deal of anxiety about how to speak and write correctly. In order to cure themselves they consult grammar books. Unfortunately, this is a bit like reading medical books when you are under the weather. While reading the chapter on the digestive system you will at once become convinced that you have all the digestive diseases that are mentioned there. Your tummy hurts constantly. In the next chapter, on the cardiovascular system, you are beset by palpitations, clogged arteries, pains in places where you never had pains before, and so on. Before the medical tome is finished, you have suffered

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in your imagination from all the diseases that are possible, and some that have yet to be invented, and it is a wonder that in fact you are still alive – if barely. Imagined maladies spawn elusive cures, and I feel the same is true for grammar books, if we go to them as students to find a cure for our “grammaphobia,” or as teachers, for our “grammarhea.” So far as these invented terms are concerned, the former refers to the fear many students have of grammar, a fear of being incorrect, and a fear that the rules, when called upon, may not cooperate. The latter refers to the condition, common among teachers, of going into hyper-explanation mode when called upon to explain a complicated grammar point in class. Let’s face it: grammatical rules are extremely complex. The English system of determiners is just one of them. Of course, Chinese has them too: the LE construction, the BA construction, just to mention two. Actually, even the easiest rules sometimes cause problems for a long time, for example the “third-person s” in English. Even intermediate and advanced learners of English may get them wrong in conversation.

In order to make my case for green grammar I have to redefine language and grammar. I will do so from an ecological perspective. One of the things that need to happen is to define language and grammar as processes, not static objects. First of all, let me clarify the distinction between language and grammar. The former refers to the totality of meaning-making activities in which verbal activity plays a part. The latter, grammar, is everything that relates to the structural (formal) aspects of language. It’s a little bit like a house: you can study it from the perspective of offering a living space, a home for people, with special characteristics such as large windows, colorful spaces, comfortable corners, and so on, or you can look at it with a constructor’s eye, and notice walls, roof beams, door hinges, electrical wires, plumbing, and so on. It’s the same house, but looked at from a different perspective. With respect to language, as with so many other things in the universe, we can say that language consists of *structure* and *process*. Following the theoretical physicist David Bohm, we should see “structure/process” as a single entity, indivisible, not as separate subsystems. In nature and in physics, Bohm (1998) argues, “Movement gives shape to all forms. Structure gives order to movement” (p. 77). Extrapolating to language, movement is the process of language using, and structure is the organization that results. At the same time the organizing structure shapes the process, and this form-meaning connection is indivisible and unstoppable. This explanation may sound very abstract (unsurprisingly, since it is based on theoretical physics), but

it has a set of very practical consequences for teaching and learning, as I hope to show in this paper.

### THEORIES OF LANGUAGE: FORM, FUNCTION AND ACTION

Traditionally, theories of language fall roughly into two kinds: *formal*, or *functional*.

Formal theories, such as structural linguistics in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, focus on linguistic forms and patterns, and rules to describe how words and sentences are put together. So, for example, a sentence like “Robert gave a book to Isabel” can also be formed as “Robert gave Isabel a book.” This illustrates the rule of dative movement. However, the rule has many exceptions: you cannot say \* “Robert explained Isabel the problem.” An exasperated student might well ask, “Why not?”

A functional theory focuses on the reasons or goals for saying one thing or another thing. It concerns itself with speech acts and speech events, and also with the context in which speech (or writing) occurs. It focuses on such phenomena as turn taking and repair (in speech) and genre and register (in written language). In addition to form and function as ways to look at language, there is another perspective, language as *action*.

We are all familiar with such phrases as “Doing things with words” (Austin, 1962) and “The power of language” (Bourdieu, 1991), so it would seem that the functional perspective is an important one to consider. However, we have to *enact* and *embody* those words in order to give them their power, or unleash their inherent power, and this brings us to the realm of language as action, or the notion of *linguistic agency*. Below, I will argue that linguistic agency is similar to the Bakhtinian notion of voice.

I now want to raise an important caveat: the above discussion may give the impression that a structural view of language is bad, a functional perspective is better, and an action-based perspective is best. I think that this is the wrong way of looking at the complexity of language. If we regard language as an expression of (social, cultural) action, it is understood that we have certain purposes and goals we want to accomplish in effective ways (functional), and also that the precise syntactic, prosodic, and lexical formulations of my expressions convey clarity, persuasion, and precision, so that my overall verbal activity has the effects that I am striving for.

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Thus, language as action refers to the totality of sociocultural events involving speech, but we need to realize that function and form are always crucial in shaping it. My overall message, so far, is that grammar is another word for characterizing the overall effectiveness of a person's language use. It embodies precision, flow, and artistry. That is grammar, and it cannot be fragmented. When we get to the topic of teaching grammar, it is clear from the above that we need to redefine it. Here are some points we need to take into account:

- Grammar cannot be separated from other aspects of language for the purposes of teaching and learning
- Grammar does not consist of objects and facts, such as grammar rules and conjugation tables. It is a process of ensuring that what we say is said as precisely as possible, so that our intended meaning comes across
- Rules are rather powerless and sterile unless we can come up with reasons for them.

These new understandings about grammar have been well described by Larsen-Freeman (2003) in her book about "grammaring". We will add to her insights further below. We should also mention that many governments are aware of the limitations of traditional grammar, and have made efforts to focus more on interaction, and less on formal rules, correction and memorization.

#### **THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGING AND TRANSLANGUAGING**

In recent years there has been a trend in applied linguistics and SLA to turn traditional nouns into verbs. We already saw "grammaring" above, but we also have "languaging" and "translanguaging" (I also contributed to this trend by suggesting that "authenticity" should be called "authenticating", van Lier, 1996). I will not go into this too deeply here, but it suggests an interesting move from thinking about *objects* and *products* to thinking in terms of *processes* and *action*.

To many people the word *languaging* may seem like a recent invention. However, one of the early proponents of it, the anthropologist Becker (1988) credited earlier thinkers for coming up with this new verb, in particular the educational philosopher John Dewey, and the biologists Maturana and Varela. However, Li (2010), who works with Chinese

immigrant youth in the UK, credits it to Robert Lado as well.

We thus have to investigate why all these highly respected thinkers found it useful to turn the noun language into the verb languaging. This is how Becker (1988) describes the shift from language to languaging: it is “the shift from an idea of language as something accomplished, apart from this activity we have shared, to the idea of languaging as an ongoing process” (p. 25). So, Becker was uncomfortable with the idea of language as a finished product, ready for analysis. Instead, he proposed we should look at language as it is happening, in human encounters.

Readers will be familiar with the notion of *input*, and in particular, the idea proposed by Krashen (1985), that the only factor that is causative in language learning is the availability of lots of comprehensible input. Swain (1995) showed that another key factor is *output*, which has three important functions: noticing, hypothesis testing, and metalinguistic reflection. In recent years Swain and her colleagues have conducted a number of studies on peer interactions in foreign language classrooms, focusing on such concepts as Language-Related Episodes (LREs) and Collaborative Dialogue. Gradually dissatisfaction with the terms input and output (reminiscent of computing metaphors and cognitive information processing traditions) led to Swain (2006) to adopting the term languaging, as being more reflective of processes of “making meaning and shaping knowledge through experience” (p. 89).

Several researchers working in bilingual and multilingual settings have also begun to use the term languaging. García & Kleifgen define languaging as “the multiple discursive practices that individuals use, which extend beyond the sociopolitical constructions of a “language” as proposed by states and social groups ... and used in schools” (García and Kleifgen, 2010, p. 140).

#### FROM LANGUAGING TO TRANSLANGUAGING

García (2009) defines translanguaging as “multilingual discursive practices in which bilinguals engage in order to make sense of their multilingual worlds” (p. 45). Working with multilingual Chinese youth in the UK, Li (2010) proposes that “translanguaging is both going *between* different linguistic structures and systems including different modalities (speaking, reading, signing, listening, reading, remembering)

and going *beyond* them” (p. 2, my emphasis).

In summary, languaging and translanguaging transform the way teachers and linguists have traditionally looked at language. Zheng (2011) makes a distinction between “Yin” and “Yang” linguistics, where yang language refers to the traditional views of input and output, of ready-made messages that are sent back and forth, and a static body of linguistic rules that is the property of each individual. Yin language, on the other hand, refers to the totality of meaning making processes, the wider systems of meaning making in which language takes a part, or the networks of emergent activities that language, as a bio-socio-cultural phenomenon, participates in. Yin and Yang language, like the original yin and yang principle, form an indivisible unity that must be in balance.

The new view of language as languaging questions the connection between a particular language and a nation state, the distinctions between languages and dialects, the monoglossic ideology that permeates language policies and pedagogies, and the assumptions of a static code alongside other static codes. It therefore also questions the terms “code-switching” and “code-mixing.”

At the same time, the rise of languaging, and the broadening of the frame of research from two languages (or dialects) to multiple sources of linguistic and semiotic meaning making, does make the use of the word “code,” with its connotations of boundedness and fixity, less applicable, and sometimes a bit misleading, nowadays.

For example, people in a Hakka-speaking community in Taiwan may use Hakka, Taiwanese and Mandarin in various dynamic configurations according to different communicative settings. I talked to one graduate student in Taipei who felt that his Hakka identity was discriminated against in the Mandarin-dominated university setting. That may just be one example; one must certainly applaud the efforts of recent policies to promote local languages in schools and the community, and even at the national level. But in general, code-related frictions can be seen worldwide on a daily basis. Students in Austria felt that their Austrian German was looked down upon in certain places. But then, when they spoke High German, they sometimes felt people regarded them as stuck up and alienated. As a final example, the BBC in the UK decided in the 1990s to appoint newsreaders speaking with different accents (Birmingham, Liverpool, Yorkshire, New Zealand, etc.) to appreciate the varieties of English in the Commonwealth. I was in England at the time, and collected a voluminous scrapbook of angry letters to the Editor,

some going so far as to claim that this signaled the end of both the English Language and Britain itself.

There are many similarities between the settings described above and others in other parts of the world. Linguistic variation in everyday settings almost inevitably brings with it arguments, debates, prescriptions and proscriptions of various sorts, of a social, historical, political and institutional nature. In schools, any sign of hybrid language use, i.e. languaging and translanguaging, tends to be frowned upon at best, or outlawed at worst. We will look at (trans)languaging in the classroom next.

#### **LANGUAGING IN THE CLASSROOM**

In light of the above observations, what are the ramifications for the language classroom, whether it is the L1 or the L2 (or L3, etc.) classroom? This is not an easy question to answer, but let us think of some possibilities.

Consider a classroom for English as a foreign or second language, where the students speak different home languages or regional varieties. In a classroom in Vienna, Austria, to choose just one place among a myriad of possible others, students may speak one of several Austrian-German dialects at home and with their friends, High German, Slovak, Turkish, Bosnian, or one of a number of different languages. A teacher in such a class said, in a news report: “I don’t speak those languages. How can I possibly take them into account when I teach?”

This is a very reasonable comment. It is unrealistic to expect a teacher to be proficient in all the home languages of his or her students. So, what is the solution? In practice, seeing no other solution, teachers continue to teach the way they were trained, and the way they themselves were taught: as if all the students were from the same home background, just like in the old days. Teaching and professional development take place in a make-belief world of linguistic homogeneity, in fact, a monolingual fiction. In such a fictional world, if things need to be explained, they will be explained in German, in spite of the fact that for up to 90 % of the students German is a foreign language, and that as a result they will be unable to understand the instruction.

The beginning of a solution might present itself if we just said to the teacher, “you don’t HAVE to know all those languages; you can acknowledge them by allowing the students to work in their language in

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order to understand the task and the cognitive and linguistic work required.”

There are many additional scenarios one might describe to illustrate how the linguistic ecology of schools – and societies – can be a source of conflict. The prohibition of L1 use in immersive teaching contexts, the negative attitude to code switching, the use of dialects in school or at work, and so on.

I’ve given a few examples of how different linguistic scenarios can create diverse institutional and linguistic responses. The common thread that runs through these examples is that educational settings by and large favor or enforce one official language, and disprefer or proscribe dialects or other languages, unless these are taught as foreign language classes. The linguistic purity of the official language of instruction has to be protected and maintained through constant acts of grammatical correction, textbooks that illustrate the correct version, and the vigilance of all concerned to guard against erosion or slippage.

#### **ON THE ROAD TO GREEN GRAMMAR**

So, after all this discussion, where does this leave us as grammar teachers?

Here is an orienting summary of some main points:

1. Languages are not discrete and separate. A language is not the exclusive property of a single nation state. Language x does not correspond to one “flag x.”
2. The fact that some regional varieties are called “dialects” is a socio-historical-political reality, not a linguistic one. This means that the notion of “correctness” is also a socio-historical-political reality, not a linguistic one.
3. Language cannot be “walled off” (Agar, 1994) from other ways of meaning making. It is part of the person’s life space, or what von Uexküll (2011) called the “Umwelt.” In our life space, we have many ways of making meaning: architecture, art, clothing, ways of walking, cooking, using gestures, facial expressions, and so on. All of these are variously intertwined with language; in other words, they are languaged.
4. Using more than one language in any giving setting, including a classroom, does not inhibit meaning making or learning, rather,



it can and does in many ways enhance the array of meanings and learning opportunities available, and the quality of cognitive, social, affective and communicative work (Creese & Blackledge, 2010).

5. Above all, language is a form of human social action, and consists of ways of making meaning. Since grammar is the formal side of languaging, it is also a process, hence Larsen-Freeman's (2003) term *grammaring*.

#### **TEACHING AND LEARNING GRAMMAR**

Up to now I have spent most of my time talking about language and less about grammar. I felt it was important to sketch an ecological theory of language in broad strokes, since grammar is an indivisible part of that language. The question now is, what do these points mean for teaching and learning grammar?

Taking into account the points made above, the business of grammar learning should not primarily be a continuous process of correctional actions (often called "corrective feedback"), but rather the promotion of the success of shared activities in which languaging (and hence *grammaring*) takes a part. The new grammar, which is part of language, which in turn is part of life, which is lived in the real world that we have partly shaped for our convenience (at least we think so, though I sometimes have my doubts), is an expression of human agency and identity. To give it an ecological flavor and an environmental purpose, I call it "green grammar."

Green grammar, rather than being the colorless idea that sleeps furiously (apologies to Noam Chomsky), intends to de-objectify "the object" and make grammar once again part of the *Umwelt* from which it sprang, and where it still lives when we forget for a moment that it is "the object." So, that sketches the instructional task before us: teaching grammar as part of natural, ecological activity. The grammar of language thus in many ways becomes another part of the grammar of life, and connected in every way to that larger life-grammar.

#### **GREEN GRAMMAR**

As I mentioned in the introduction, among language learners (and many of their teachers) the pedagogical apparatus of grammar teaching

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is usually regarded as, at best, a necessary evil, and at worst a constant torture. Others delight in it, perhaps in the same way that they delight in difficult Sudoku puzzles, or constructing suspension bridges out of chopsticks and blades of grass. There are grammar aficionados, to be sure, but for most learners grammar is a never-ending struggle, endured because received wisdom has it that it is “good for you.” Grammar is heavy with structure and inevitability. You have to plod through it, until success (however defined) is achieved, at last. As a striking example of the anxieties that grammar may bring about, here is a quote from a diary by a Vietnamese university student:

I realized that journal really help me to write down my idea without any blocking into my elbow. When I have idea in my head and I start to make it go down my arm to the paper if I think about grammar, structure my idea blocks into my elbow and never goes to the paper (Trang, Viet Nam, cited in Mahn, 2008).

In contrast to the above, Green grammar thrives on discovery and playfulness, on curiosity and expectation; in a word, it is light with possibility. I will now sketch some of its characteristics.

By analogy with eco-friendly environmentalism, and also indulging somewhat in the playfulness that characterizes GG, we can identify some ways in which GG is a logical extension of an ecological theory and practice of learning.

Green Grammar is:

**Free Range**

It is not cooped up in grammar cages (as grammar is in grammar books and lessons). It roams around freely in the learner’s environment. It harmonizes and resonates with the semiotics of meaning making, and connects mind, body and environment.

**All Natural: No Artificial Additives**

Traditional grammar is riddled with arcane and largely useless prescriptive rules, artificially constructed sentences (“The men expected

each other to have left”), and false generalizations. It also creates huge quantities of exceptions, which are not recyclable.

Green grammar focuses on what people actually do with language, scaffolds those “doings,” and reflects on them.

**Sustainable and Recyclable: A Renewable Resource**

A lot of traditional grammar leads to INERT knowledge (Whitehead, 1929), in other words, knowledge that may be recited in class or on tests, but is not useable in real life. Green grammar emerges in use, and remains in use, it is not burdensome, but gives strength to body, mind and action. It is eminently shareable too. Its experiences are memorable, and can be adapted and reenacted in new situations.

**Organic and Whole**

Traditional grammar is divided in to bite-sized pieces that are presented and practiced one after the other, until the whole list is gone through. This is what Rutherford (1987) called “accumulated entities”.

Green Grammar is not dissected in this way. It is not cut into pieces and shrink-wrapped in plastic; in other words, it does not need to be “processed” before it is used. As mentioned above, GG connects language, body, mind and the environment. Also, it uses events, adventures, texts and discourses, not isolated words and sentences.

**Bio-degradable**

The formal knowledge and skill developed through Green Grammar practices (puzzles, games, projects) does not sit around as formal knowledge, stored in notebooks and individual brains, it is recycled or composted for other uses. When we encounter a languaging problem, we will remember how we (together with others) solved such problems on previous occasions, and use those earlier experiences as a starting point. It is not a question of “following the a rules.” In green grammar, we do not follow rules. The rules follow us, that is, we can reflect on them following meaningful experiences in which they played a role.

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### **Low Carbon Footprint**

In most classes around the world textbooks and grammar books are used that are manufactured in faraway places and transported, warehoused and sold at considerable cost. Green grammar uses local grammar explored and assembled in situ. In addition, much time and effort is spent on lengthy and not terribly effective explanations (grammarrhea) that often have to be repeated and arduously studied before their ritual regurgitation on periodic high-stakes tests, after which they are promptly forgotten.

### **Not Genetically Modified**

Traditional grammar includes many rules and regulations that derive from historical notions of “correctness” or “style,” designed to make “standard language” unvarying and identical in all parts (like tomatoes of exactly the same shape, size and color, but without taste). Green Grammar is life – ripened. There may be small blemishes, but the taste is good!

### **No Toxic Emissions or Side Effects**

Traditional grammar often interferes with participation and enjoyment of language play. It is tense, and dominated by the correctness urge. Foreign language anxiety (grammophobia) is the result.

Green grammar is relaxed; it focuses on success, not failure.

### **Not Bland or Neutral**

This may in the long run be the most important change of all. Green grammar is not neutral or grey. Unlike traditional grammar, it does not focus on form alone, in a neutral or disembodied way. A verb conjugation table cannot be mistaken for a political statement or a personal opinion.

It focuses on the effect of wordings: persuasive, invasive, abusive, coercive, deceptive, uplifting, etc.;

It highlights the speaker’s and the hearer’s perspective;

It helps students find their voice, so as to express their identity and

articulate their views;  
It emphasizes that language cannot be analyzed, discussed, taught or learned in politically neutral or morally non-committal ways.

#### **PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES: GREEN GRAMMAR IN ACTION**

##### **Abduction**

Much of the debate in recent years has been around the relative merits of implicit versus explicit ways of teaching grammar. Sometimes the terms inductive and deductive enter into the discussion as well, but this really muddies the waters, since we cannot equate inductive with implicit, and deductive with explicit. I suggest that these two parameters are orthogonal rather than parallel. Briefly, grammar activities can be along a continuum from implicit to explicit (i.e., it is not an either-or pair of categories), and at any point along the continuum inductive and/or deductive work may be carried out.

In addition to induction and deduction, there is a third way of working. Induction investigates “what is”, and deduction predicts “what should be.” The third way is *abduction*, which refers to “what may be”, the exploratory and creative process of trying out tentative solutions to problems, by actively engaging with puzzling phenomena in the environment. The term abduction comes from the philosophy of science, in particular the work of Peirce (1931-1965), who said:

All the ideas of science come to it by way of Abduction. Abduction consists in studying facts and devising a theory to explain them. Its only justification is that if we are ever to understand things at all, it must be in that way.

As an example (see also further below), a lesson can start with a language awareness raising exercise in which learners need to solve some language puzzle. After that, activities may focus on working with the material in different contexts, including finding more data (induction) and checking how emergent patterns may be applied in other contexts (deduction).

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### **Puzzle-based Learning**

A different name for abduction is Dick Allwright's exploratory practice or puzzle-based learning. Allwright conceptualizes learning and teaching as research – in which teachers and learners are participant researchers.

Puzzles that learners can investigate include:

Why does it feel “awkward” to talk in the foreign language in class to our fellow-students?

Does the first language help? Can we find examples? Can it also interfere? Examples?

How do advertisers use language to get us to buy their stuff?

What kinds of things do people write in their comments on YouTube?

A good overview of such puzzle-based learning is Allwright & Hanks (2009).

In addition to such puzzles that relate to language and learning in general, more grammar-specific puzzles can be addressed, and some examples of these are given at the end of the paper.

### **Games and Language Play**

There are many different kinds of language games that can be found in puzzle books and also in alternative grammar books (Rinvolucri, 1984; Thornbury, 2001). Games and language play have their own affordances for authentication, and create their own ZPD. In addition, teacher and students can develop interactive games of word play, impromptu variations on dull textbook exercises, or encouraging humorous variations and innovations.

### **Authenticating Learning**

When a learner can engage fully and freely with an activity, then we can say that s/he authenticates that activity.

Much has been made in the last few decades of the need to use authentic materials. This is indeed very important, because they give an authentic flavor of the language. However, classroom – made materials can also be authenticated, if students genuinely engage with them. And finally, we need to remember that games, by their very nature, are always

authentic (for further ideas on this topic, see Malm, 2008; van Lier, 1996).

#### **SOME EXAMPLES OF ABDUCTIVE LEARNING IN THE GREEN GRAMMAR STYLE**

1. In a Chinese as a foreign language class students are divided into groups and handed a strip with a grammatical problem on it. Each group has to discuss and understand the grammar point, come up with examples, and then teach it to the class.

*Comment: The teacher needs to ensure that the grammatical problem must be within reach for the students, and also, as they work on it, needs to check that the solutions go in the right direction, even though they need not be perfect. Afterwards the teacher can pull things together, for further comments, next steps, etc.*

2. In a pedagogical grammar class for teachers, the instructor asks a student to give instructions to another student on connecting a laptop to the projector and speaker system, using their L2. Other students in the class observe and take notes. This activity is repeated regularly with other student pairs in another (or the same) L2, using the same setup, or another one (e.g., how to download an app on an iPad).

*Comment: The task can be more or less complex depending on the students' level. Gradually, as these tasks are repeated with variations, the students improve in their expertise of giving and receiving instructions, they find the technical vocabulary (instead of just saying "that thing"), and also find words for "connect," "insert," and so on. Note also that no correction is required. The successful conclusion of the task is sufficient. Debriefing in groups may be useful. Students might say, "I couldn't think of the word for "dongle" in French," and, "I should've first asked her to connect the cable before telling her to switch on the projector."*

3. In an ESL class of students from mixed language backgrounds, students are asked how the order of adjectives works in English. After some (inconclusive) discussion, the instructor plays a "Professor Grammar" clip from YouTube about "OPSHACOM," a mnemonic device to remember

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the order of adjectives. After that, the students get in groups to see if “OPSHACOM” works for different languages. (OP=opinion. SH=shape or size; A=age; C=color; O=origin; M=material)

Location of video clip:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySnT\\_5IcWGg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySnT_5IcWGg)

*Comment: This exercise, in addition to containing a humorous clip, will reveal that there are broad similarities in the distance of adjectives in relation to the noun they describe, across languages.*

#### 4. Public notice in Hong Kong (1)



*Comment: 1) If you have speakers of Chinese in the class, ask them to transliterate the Chinese text. 2) Compare the Chinese text to the English translation. 3) Try and rewrite the English text so that the meaning remains clear, but the text “sounds” or “looks” better.*



5. Public notice in Hong Kong (2)



*Comment: During the next class, show the revised text again, and then show the one above. They basically provide a related message, but compare them in terms of information and effectiveness (including the visual element).*

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## 6. Translanguaging



*Comment: Why do you think the sign says “Brand Nuevo,” since “Brand” is in English, and “Nuevo” is in Spanish? Do you think the designer did not know how to say it differently? Or is it aimed at creating a certain marketing effect? Can you design another banner to replace the one on the roof? Follow-up tasks:*

*Find other examples (in your neighborhood, in the newspaper, on the Internet) of such language-mixing, or “translanguaging” and bring them to class for a joint presentation on this topic.*

7. You have a friend who said recently:  
“I fix bicycle.” He’s just started learning English.

*Task 1:* Think of some questions you might have asked him that he replied to in this way.

*Task 2:* Figure out some more precise ways of answering, given the questions you asked.

*Task 3:* You’re a teacher. How can you help him find different ways of

answering?

*Comment: This example allows for some role playing and thinking of plausible scenarios. In addition, it encourages students to come up with various ways of elaborating (“stretching”) short, cryptic messages.*

## CONCLUSION

I started out by saying that traditional grammar has not worked terribly well. A grammar-driven approach tends to terrify students, and a communicative approach simply ignores grammar, or at best inserts periodic “shots” of pure grammar into otherwise meaning-driven work. Either way, the ghost of grammar past, present or future rattles its chains in the dungeons of linguistic obscurity.

I used to carpool high school students to and from school. I sometimes asked them, what is your most hated subject? It was almost always language (whether English or a foreign language). Yet, these students often spent the half hour in the car making up language games, cracking linguistic jokes, imitating the accents of their teachers and celebrities (I remember particularly hilarious impersonations of Arnold Schwarzenegger, who was at the time the governor (or “governator,” as the kids would say) of California. It is mind-boggling to think that those students, with all their linguistic awareness and skill, could not put their natural expertise to use in their classroom.

My message in this paper has been that you cannot teach or learn grammar if you treat it as an object that stands on its own. In a similar way, you cannot teach someone to drive a car by teaching them to memorize the parts of the car engine and all the other phenomena that are located under the hood (or bonnet, as the case may be).

I developed an ecological theory of language and language learning in order to integrate language and life (van Lier, 2004), and in this paper I wanted to suggest that by breaking the shackles that have for so long stopped language and locked it up in airtight containers, we can liberate its creative, playful and critical potential and actually have fun teaching and learning it. The rules (and their exceptions) can take care of themselves.

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