Dialog on Language Instruction

Article

Process-Based and Learner-Centered Grammar Instruction

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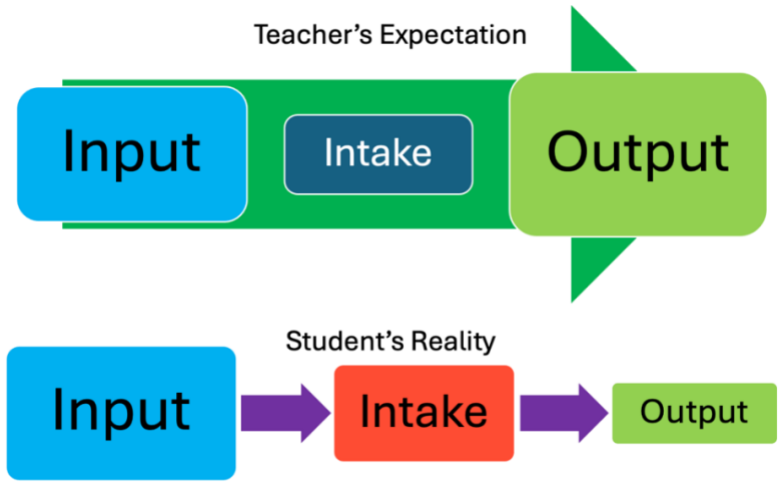
Mastering grammar is not quick and easy for students, but is rather a gradual learning process. This paper proposes a process-based approach to grammar instruction in foreign language teaching, emphasizing a learner-centered methodology. Students need to go through four key phases in the grammar learning process: comprehension, memorization, internalization, and application. This study outlines indicators for identifying which learning phase a student is in based on their performance, recommends specific instructional strategies tailored to each stage, and suggests classroom activities aligned with learners' needs. By offering targeted and meaningful activities, this approach aims to support a successful progression through all phases of learning grammar, enhancing both the learning and teaching experience.

Keywords: *Grammar, Learning Process, Learner-Centered, Pedagogy*

INTRODUCTION

Teachers often have high expectations for their students, which can sometimes lead to frustration when students struggle to apply or retain grammar concepts after instruction. Many teachers expect immediate and accurate student output following input, sometimes even expecting students to produce more than what they have received as input. However, this overlooks the critical intake phase students require. In reality, student intake and output typically fall short of the input provided by teachers. This gap between teaching expectations and learning realities is illustrated in Figure 1. As shown, grammar acquisition is a gradual process, and mastery requires time and effort from students.

Figure 1
Teaching Expectations vs. Learning Realities



Learner-Centered Teaching

Effective teaching must be learner-centered, which requires teachers to adjust expectations that are based on the students' realities and provide targeted instructional support to meet their needs. According to Weimer (2002, p. XVI):

> Being a learner-centered teacher means focusing attention squarely on the learning process: what the student is learning, how the student is learning, the conditions under which the student is learning, whether the student is retaining and applying the learning, and how current learning positions the student for future learning.

This tells us that learner-centered teachers are not only concerned with *what* students are learning but also *how* they are learning it. They have to have an understanding of the conditions that foster successful learning. We need to consider how students retain knowledge, and importantly, how to transfer their language knowledge into skills, or how they can apply what they have learned. In essence, being learner-centered ensures that every aspect of our teaching is designed with the student's learning process in mind.

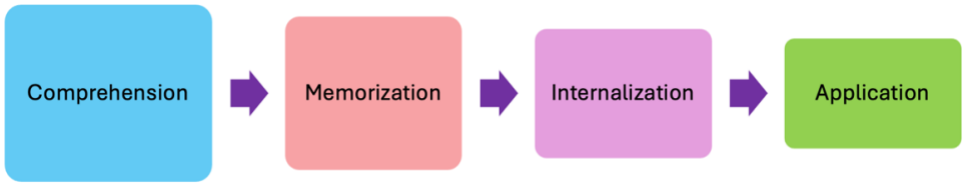
Grammar Learning Process

The Input Hypothesis was proposed by Krashen (1992), highlighting the importance of comprehensible input for language acquisition and outlining how the *comprehension* of input is the first stage in the grammar learning process. Corder (1967) was the first scholar to point out the mismatch between input and output and made a distinction between input and intake. He defined intake as "a mental representation of a physical stimulus" (Corder, 1967, p. 165). Literally, it is what learners take in. Since mental processing is unobservable, it is difficult to

clearly know what the intake is. Although we cannot have a clear and comprehensive understanding of intake, we can at least know that only what learners remember is part of their intake. Many psychological studies have shown that memory is important to learning, so *memorization* is also an indispensable stage in the grammar learning process. Chaudron (1985) refers to intake as "the mediating process between the target language available to the learners as input and the learner's internalized set of L2 rules and strategies for second language development" (p. 1). Chaudron's claim points out that *internalization* is the next stage of learning after intake. Swain (2005) proposed the "Output Hypothesis," which posits that language production (speaking or writing) is part of the second language learning process. Learning grammar is not only for language production, but also for language comprehension, so the last stage of the grammar learning process can be summarized as language *application*.

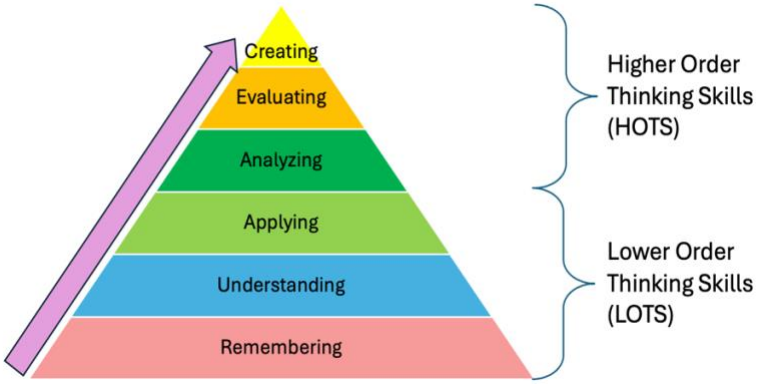
I have summarized my conception of the grammar learning process in Figure 2, which shows the four key phases—comprehension, memorization, internalization, and application. Each time students enter the next phase, the input information they retain will gradually decrease (the size of the boxes indicating the amount of input information students can retain and achieve). Though this process is demonstrated linearly in this figure, in reality the process is often cyclical and iterative, with students moving between phases as needed. Knowing and understanding grammatical rules is only the first step in the process, which means completing the *comprehension* phase. Next, students need to imitate and repeat grammar patterns to *memorize* them. They also need to digest and solidify grammar to achieve *internalization*. Then they can utilize grammar in communications and reach the *application* phase including comprehending and producing language (represented by a smaller box, indicating that students are able to *apply* grammatical knowledge less than they can *understand* and *remember* it).

Figure 2
Four Phases of the Learning Process



This learning process is different from Bloom's Taxonomy. Bloom's Taxonomy was developed to provide a framework for teachers to understand how students develop cognitively as they learn a subject. It is a classification of different learning outcomes and skills. The revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) classifies remembering, understanding, and applying as lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) and analyzing, evaluating, and creating as higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), as depicted in Figure 3. Foreign language learning differs from the learning of other subjects. Comprehension should come before memorization in foreign language learning to ensure "comprehensible input," and internalization is a necessary stage before application in the grammar learning process.

Figure 3
Bloom's Taxonomy



Like other taxonomies, Bloom's is hierarchical, meaning that learning at the higher levels depends on having acquired prerequisite knowledge and skills at lower levels. It is necessary to encourage the use of HOTS activities in classroom teaching. However, only over-emphasizing HOTS and discouraging LOTS will lead to a misconception that HOTS and LOTS are opposite, thus ignoring the fact that moving from LOTS to HOTS is a continuous process. Only from a large accumulation of LOTS can a smaller number of HOTS be developed.

Process-based Grammar Instruction

Often, teachers cannot expect students to use grammar communicatively to complete a real task or comprehensive project immediately after learning grammatical rules. With more complex structures, teachers must provide appropriate scaffolding and meaningful teaching activities to facilitate the completion of all four phases in the grammar learning process, including providing concise and clear grammar content for students' comprehension. This scaffolding process entails ensuring sufficient drills, repetitions, and thorough contextualized activities to help them memorize and internalize grammar, and designing free and real communication scenarios to help them complete the application stage. This means that teachers should provide process-based grammar instruction. Process-based grammar instruction prioritizes the learning process of students; the goal is for students to go through the learning phases. In process-based instruction, the goal is not for the student to just get the correct answer to grammar questions. The goal is that they internalize grammar points and understanding so that when they encounter the grammar structure the next time, they will remember how it works. Product-based instruction focuses on ensuring that students only get correct answers to questions, whether or not the student really understands why. In this paper, I argue that we need to focus on process-based instruction to develop student understanding and internalization.

To provide this instruction, a teacher must identify grammar learning phases using students' performance, select methods and activities for each phase based on the pros and cons of each type of pedagogy, and design activities that cater to students' needs for each phase. How can we identify which stage a student is at in the grammar learning process? Teachers can diagnose their students' learning phases by observing, analyzing, and evaluating their performances in

classroom interactions, grammar exercises, lesson quizzes, achievement tests, etc. In addition to these diagnoses, student self-assessments, reflections, and reports are important indicators for determining learning phases.

Language pedagogy has evolved significantly over time, with the focus now being on choosing the best type of activity or instructional model depending on students' needs. There is no one method or type of activity that meets every student's need; rather, teachers must make educated decisions based on the strengths and weaknesses of a teaching approach or activity. For example, the grammar-translation activities, when used carefully and in moderation, can still be useful in foreign language teaching today because of their simplicity and high efficiency. No single teaching method is suitable for all learning phases, and one method may be more applicable for a certain learning stage. As teachers, it is essential that we understand the advantages and limitations of various pedagogical approaches and apply them appropriately for each phase. The key with teaching is to know which teaching methods are viable options, and to choose the option that seems to best meet students' needs. This principle also applies to the design of activities and the selection of exercises guided by pedagogies or teaching strategies.

Process-based grammar instruction also has its advantages and disadvantages. As an integrative approach that draws on various pedagogies, its primary strength lies in leveraging the benefits of different methods while mitigating their limitations. This approach emphasizes learning grammar as a dynamic process rather than as a set of static rules. It is particularly powerful in supporting students throughout the stages of grammar acquisition, addressing their individual learning needs, and optimizing learning outcomes and experiences. However, this approach also presents challenges, particularly for teachers and curriculum designers. Teachers must possess a high level of expertise, alongside strong observational and diagnostic skills, to design and implement process-based activities productively. As a result, only teachers with extensive experience or specialized training can use this approach flexibly and proficiently. Additionally, curriculum designers must carefully consider the stages of grammar learning to develop activities and exercises that help diagnose performance, assess progress, and provide the necessary support to ensure students successfully navigate the learning process.

Phases of Process-Based Grammar Instruction

The following is an introduction to each phase of process-based grammar instruction, including student performance as an indicator of the phase, instructional strategies tailored to each phase, and the activities recommended based on the student's learning needs during the phase.

Phase 1: Comprehension

Possible indicators of the comprehension phase include students avoiding certain grammatical structures, making incorrect choices, and errors in word order and forms. These students also struggle to understand how grammar, meaning, and pragmatics work together for more complex structures (e.g., strong active voice in Chinese Mandarin) and often misinterpret or avoid structures that are different from the SVO structure used by English.

Appropriate instructional methods for this stage may include the natural approach, cognitive-code approach, and grammar-translation activities. To facilitate students through this phase, both grammar and vocabulary should be provided, with a focus on assessing their understanding of grammatical meaning and form. Activities such as word selection for fill-in-the-blank exercises, sentence construction with given words, word reordering, and translation between English and the target language are recommended. To evaluate whether students have achieved comprehension, teachers can ask them to compare grammar points between the target language and English, and explain, paraphrase, or summarize them. Additionally, students can be asked to match grammar points with appropriate examples to further demonstrate understanding. In these activities, students should be required or encouraged to use the target language as much as possible, resorting to English only when unlearned vocabulary or grammar is encountered.

Phase 2: Memorization

Students who have understood the meaning of grammatical structures but frequently make errors in form (such as in structure, combination, or word order) are in the memorization phase. At this stage, students may use grammar passively but struggle with active application. Instructional methods suitable for this phase include the audio-lingual, direct, natural, and grammar-translation activities. Drill and repetition exercises are necessary for reinforcing grammatical structures, including sentence transformation and expansion, reading and speaking aloud, repeating after listening, answering questions, picture-based expressions, and translation. To expedite students' progression through the memorization phase, instructors can encourage analysis and comparison of grammatical structures and functions or ask students to categorize grammar points according to their respective functions.

Phase 3: Internalization

When students can actively apply grammar points but occasionally make structural or word order errors and can self-correct, they are in the internalization phase. During this stage, the situational method, immersion, silent way, and total physical response (TPR) activities are the most practical. Semi-structured exercises that involve real-world situations are recommended, including sentence completion, sentence construction, role-plays, monologues, dialog creation, summarizing, sentence correction, and pair or group activities. To support student progress, instructors can encourage them to modify their own or peers' grammatical expressions, justify their modifications and usage, and self-evaluate their grammatical accuracy. Additionally, students may be asked to anticipate which grammar points will be required in specific scenarios to prepare them for the application phase.

Phase 4: Application

When students' grammar use is generally active and correct but lacks full accuracy and appropriateness, where structural errors are rare but pragmatic errors are frequent, they have entered the application phase. At this stage, instructional strategies such as the communicative approach, task-based learning (TBL), project-based learning (PBL), and immersion activities are

the most favorable. Teachers should design free, unstructured, real, and meaningful exercises, such as task completion, mini-immersion activities, script writing, skit performances, topic-based speaking activities, daily or weekly journal writing, and comprehension and discussion of authentic listening or reading materials. To support students in this phase, teachers should create diverse situational contexts and set specific conditions that encourage students to apply and use the grammar they have learned. This will help them produce and generate a variety of language expressions using the targeted grammatical structures.

Table 1 outlines the key elements of process-based grammar instruction, encompassing both students' learning and teachers' instructional strategies as I envision them.

Table 1

Key Elements of Process-based Grammar Instruction

Phase		Comprehension	Memorization	Internalization	Application
Learning	Indicator	avoiding use, incorrect choices, errors in forms, meaning confusion or misinterpretation	passive use, frequent errors in structure, combination, or word order	active use with less structural errors, self-correction	active and correct use in forms, pragmatic errors
	Needs	knowing & understanding	imitating & repeating	digesting & solidifying	comprehending & producing
Teaching	Scaffolding	concise, clear & complete rules	sufficient drills & repetitions	semi-structured & contextualized activities	free & real communications
	Pedagogy	natural approach, cognitive-code approach, and grammar-translation activities	audio-lingual, audio-visual, direct, natural, and grammar-translation activities	situational method, immersion, silent way, and TPR	communicative approach, TBL, PBL, and immersive activities
	Exercise	fill-in-the-blank, sentence forming with given words, word reordering, and translation;	sentence transformation & expansion, answering questions, picture-based expressions, and translation;	completing, making, or correcting sentences, role-plays, monologues, summarizing, pair work or group activities;	tasks, projects, immersion activities, writing scripts, skit, topic expressions, authentic materials comprehension and discussion;
	Activity	comparison, explanation, paraphrasing, summarizing, matching, …	analyzing and comparing structures, comparing and categorizing functions, …	modifying, justifying, evaluating, predicting, …	using, producing, creating, …

This table specifically includes indicators for students' learning phases, stage-specific needs, and the scaffolding that teachers need to provide. Additionally, the table highlights appropriate pedagogical approaches and productive exercises and activities tailored to each stage of the grammar learning process. For example, in the Learning Phase of "Indicator," a student at the "Comprehension" phase will either avoid using a grammar structure or may make errors if producing it, while in the "Application" phase, a student will use the grammar form actively and correctly. Looking at the Teaching phases, a teacher wanting to help a student move from the "Comprehension" phase to the "Memorization" phase can have them analyze and compare structures.

AN EXAMPLE OF PROCESS-BASED GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION

This section uses the teaching of the Chinese Mandarin grammar "*ba*-construction" (把字句) as an example to illustrate the process-based grammar instruction. In Chinese, active voice can be expressed in two ways: the marked form (*ba*-construction) and the unmarked form (SVO). The *ba*-construction is commonly used to emphasize the result or effect of an action, thereby conveying a strong active voice.

Teaching for Comprehension

To enhance students' understanding of the *ba*-construction, teachers must first identify its specific challenges and then provide clear, concise, and complete explanations that address these difficulties. As English lacks an equivalent to the *ba*-construction, students often avoid its use or make errors when it is the only option for expressing a certain active voice. To mitigate these challenges, it is important that the *ba*-construction be introduced with examples where its use is mandatory. For instance, teachers can employ actions and visual aids to present the following examples:

(1) 老师把书放在桌子上了。(The teacher put the book on the table.)

(2) 老师把椅子搬到了桌子的前面。(The teacher moved the chair in front of the table.)

(3) 她把美元换成人民币了。(She exchanged the US dollars into RMB.)

(4) 他把"午饭"读成了"牛饭"。(He read "lunch" as "cow's meal.")

When presenting examples (1) and (2), the teacher can perform actions while verbalizing the sentences, allowing students to visualize how the sentences simulate the action processes. For instance, in Example (1), the teacher (subject) holds (*ba*: the grammaticalized verb) the book (object) and places (action) it on the table (position). After introducing Examples (3) and (4) using images or animations, the teacher can explain "*ba*" and the primary pragmatic conditions for the *ba*-construction: *ba* is a preposition grammaticalized from the verb "to hold" to a strong active voice marker (Liu, 2020); it is the only grammatical option when the sentence describes the action that causes the object's positional movement (examples 1 and 2) or the sentence contains both the object's pre-action and post-action states (examples 3 and 4).

Next, the teacher can guide students to summarize the syntactic structure as: "Subject + *ba* + Object + Verb + Complement" and clarify its semantic meaning: the *ba*-construction uses a strong active voice, emphasizing that the action causes a significant change to the object, such as moving its position or transforming its state from A to B. When the action affects the object but does not meet these conditions, the *ba*-construction may be interchangeable with the general active voice, the SVO structure. For example, in the sentence "我把衣服洗好了" (I have finished washing the clothes), the result of the action "好了" (finished/well done) does not involve a change in the position of the clothes, nor does it reflect a physical transformation of the clothes themselves. In this case, the meaning can be expressed using either a *ba*-construction or an SVO structure. However, in the sentence "她把美元换成人民币了" (She exchanged the US dollars into RMB), the action "换" (exchange) caused the object's physical transformation from A to B (from US dollar to RMB). Under such circumstances, the sentence must be expressed using the *ba*-construction, as the SVO structure would not be grammatically appropriate or semantically accurate. At this point, the teacher has provided a clear and explicit explanation of the *ba*-construction's semantics, syntax, and pragmatics.

Following the explanation, the teacher can provide targeted exercises to address common student errors. For example, students may be asked to complete sentences by filling in the complement part, construct sentences using specified words to familiarize themselves with the unique word order, or translate English sentences that can only be expressed using the *ba*-construction into Chinese. These exercises aim to consolidate understanding and highlight areas where students are prone to make mistakes. After completing the exercises, students can be asked to paraphrase its semantics, syntax, and pragmatics to evaluate whether they have successfully completed the comprehension stage.

Teaching for Memorization

The memorization phase reinforces the learned structure through repetition and practice. Drills involving oral sentence transformation, answering questions, picture-based expression, and translation can be employed. For example, teachers can ask students to convert SVO sentences into *ba*-sentences, using the repetitive sentence transformation to aid short-term memory of the structure. To ensure accurate expression of the "verb + complement" part, teachers may use picture prompts and the audio-lingual method. By asking questions like "他把 XX 怎么了?" (What happened to the XX?) and requiring quick responses, students practice both accuracy and fluency. To evaluate mastery of its pragmatic conditions, translation exercises can be assigned. Students translate English sentences into Chinese and mark those that must be rendered using the *ba*-construction.

These activities can transition from classroom exercises to homework, providing scaffolding that supports retention. From sentence transformation to independent translation, progressively reducing prompts encourages students to develop the automaticity of sentence generation. This gradual increase in independence strengthens retention and completes the memorization phase.

Teaching for Internalization

Internalization is achieved through contextualized activities that integrate the *ba*-construction into real-life scenarios. Role-playing and journal-writing exercises engage students in describing actions involving object manipulation, such as tidying a room or organizing a desk. For instance, in a cleaning scenario, students may produce sentences like "我把衣服洗好了" (I have finished washing the clothes) and "我把桌子擦干净了" (I have cleaned the table). These contextualized tasks allow students to practice the *ba*-construction deliberately, enhancing their ability to internalize the structure while building confidence in its practical application.

These activities are most effective when conducted a day or two after introducing the *ba*-construction, allowing students sufficient time to memorize and process the new grammar point. This delayed practice creates a review cycle, enabling students to revisit and solidify the structure, thereby promoting deeper internalization and long-term retention.

Teaching for Application

This phase focuses on facilitating students' use of the *ba*-construction naturally and creatively. Teachers can incorporate problem-solving tasks and mini-immersion activities, such as collaboratively decorating a room and/or preparing dishes for a party, which requires students to give instructions to peers using *ba*-sentences. Following these activities, students are tasked with narrating or describing their experiences, either orally or in writing, to further refine their mastery of the structure. These activities encourage students to integrate the *ba*-construction into their active linguistic repertoire, demonstrating their ability to apply it freely in spoken and written Chinese.

The teaching process outlined above illustrates the instruction of the *ba*-construction, one of the most challenging Chinese grammar points. Given its complexity, allocating sufficient time and providing ample exercises can help students effectively complete the learning process. The learning and teaching processes may vary for different grammar points because of the structure's difficulty and students' proficiency levels. For simpler grammar points, comprehension can also be assisted through flipped classroom methods, and memorization may be accomplished over a relatively short period. Internalization and application exercises can be implemented during class or assigned as homework.

Quality process-based grammar instruction relies significantly on the teacher's expertise and the support provided by the curriculum. Consistent application of this approach is recommended throughout language basic courses, especially during Semester 1, when students begin their foreign language learning. During that time, scaffolding is critical in guiding students as they build their language skills progressively and systematically.

CONCLUSION

Grammar learning is a gradual process, rather than an immediate achievement. In a learner-centered approach, it is essential for teachers to carefully plan what to teach and how to implement process-based grammar instruction. Teachers must anticipate students' learning needs, predict potential challenges and errors, establish clear teaching objectives, and determine learning focuses *before* instruction. Careful observation and analysis of students' grammar use are crucial for diagnosing their current stage in the learning process. Using these assessments, targeted exercises should be selected to effectively support each learning phase, ultimately leading students through the entire process of grammar acquisition.

Some teachers may be concerned that this process is too time-consuming and that in the high-stress environment of DLIFLC, we lack the time to carry out these steps effectively. In my experience, however, this is not the case. I find that using this process decreases overall time spent on key grammar points and increases student learning. I think of it as a redistribution of time. I spend a bit more time at the beginning of instruction for a grammar point, but then less time later in the curriculum, since students need less review of these structures.

Process-based grammar instruction is strongly recommended, as it optimizes learning outcomes and enhances efficiency. It should be aligned with the distinct phases of students' learning. During the comprehension phase, instructors should provide clear, operational, and complete explanations to ensure foundational understanding. During the memorization phase, sufficient repetition and reinforcement are vital to solidify structures. As students progress to the internalization phase, functional situational practice should be incorporated to promote deeper learning. Finally, in the application phase, communicative activities and real tasks should be employed to facilitate the practical use of grammar in real-world contexts.

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