

TESOL 2008 Notes
Submitted by Jill Kramer

On Saturday I attended a featured session by Betty Azar, Keith Folse and Michael Swan. The title was "Teaching Grammar in Today's Classrooms". The presenters stated that the goal of grammar teaching is to have the students create an interlanguage that is useful. Mastery is not the goal. Rather we want the students to communicate meaningfully. Azar pointed out that students don't learn grammar merely through comprehensible input. Direct grammar teaching is needed. Research has shown that teaching grammar leads to accelerated learning. She contended that grammar teaching can be integrated with the communicative approach.

A good ESOL teacher, Keith Folse said, knows grammar well, knows multiple ways to teach it and understands the student's L1. Textbooks are a tool but only a tool. Good teachers also use drills, problem solving, games and pair work.

Michael Swan stated that research and teachers' professional wisdom shows that grammar teaching makes sense. It is not necessary, he said, to teach all grammar items, but merely to pick out important rules that students need.

This session meshed with one I had attended the day earlier by Betsy Parrish. She spoke about how to choose grammar items to fit into the theme of the lessons.

On Saturday Fred Genesee gave a presentation on "Learning to Read in a Second Language: What does the Research Say?" He reported on the findings of the National Literacy Panel of which he was a member. While most of the research he reported on was based on K-12 students, there are some nuggets of information that can be applied to adult ESOL. He stated that learning to read in an L2 is like reading in L1 - it is complex, hierarchical and cumulative. Yet second language learners can draw on their experiences in their native language. He stated that oral development is critical to reading development. Background knowledge in English is needed. Needed skills are phonemic awareness, vocabulary, grammar skills, discourse skills and oral language skills for critical thinking. A good grounding in phonics is needed as it leads to faster word decoding which improves fluency. Genesee said that research shows it is more effective to integrate small unit skills like phonics with big unit skills like vocabulary and meaning. ESOL students can often master decoding but have poor reading comprehension skills. To develop comprehension, ensure that students have good vocabulary knowledge, develop oral language abilities and build background knowledge.