

Donald Freeman, *Series Editor*



# Teaching Language

FROM GRAMMAR TO GRAMMARING

Diane Larsen-Freeman



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## *Thank You*

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# SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

As I was driving just south of White River Junction, the snow had started falling in earnest. The light was flat, although it was mid-morning, making it almost impossible to distinguish the highway in the gray-white swirling snow. I turned on the radio, partly as a distraction and partly to help me concentrate on the road ahead; the announcer was talking about the snow. "The state highway department advises motorists to use extreme caution and to drive with their headlights on to ensure maximum visibility." He went on, his tone shifting slightly, "Ray Burke, the state highway supervisor, just called to say that one of the plows almost hit a car just south of Exit 6 because the person driving hadn't turned on his lights. He really wants people to put their headlights on because it is very tough to see in this stuff." I checked, almost reflexively, to be sure that my headlights were on, as I drove into the churning snow.

How can information serve those who hear or read it in making sense of their own worlds? How can it enable them to reason about what they do and to take appropriate actions based on that reasoning? My experience with the radio in the snowstorm illustrates two different ways of providing the same message: the need to use your headlights when you drive in heavy snow. The first offers dispassionate information; the second tells the same content in a personal, compelling story. The first disguises its point of view; the second explicitly grounds the general information in a particular time and place. Each means of giving information has its role, but I believe the second is ultimately more useful in helping people make sense of what they are doing. When I heard Ray Burke's story about the plow, I made sure my headlights were on.

In what is written about teaching, it is rare to find accounts in which the author's experience and point of view are central. A point of view is not simply an opinion; neither is it a whimsical or impressionistic claim. Rather, a point of view lays out what the author thinks and why; to borrow the phrase from writing teacher Natalie Goldberg, "it sets down the bones." The problem is that much of what is available in professional development in language-teacher education concentrates on telling rather than on point of view. The telling is prescriptive, like the radio announcer's first statement. It emphasizes what is important to know and do, what is current in theory and research, and therefore what you—as a practicing teacher—should do. But this telling disguises the teller; it hides the point of view that can enable you to make sense of what is told.

The **TeacherSource** series offers you a point of view on second/foreign language teaching. Each author in this series has had to lay out what she or he believes is central to the topic, and how she or he has come to this understanding. So as a reader, you will find this book has a personality; it is not anonymous. It comes as a story, not as a directive, and it is meant to create a relationship with you rather than assume your attention. As a practitioner, its point of view can help you in your own work by providing a sounding board for your ideas and a metric for your own thinking. It can suggest courses of action and explain why these make sense to the author. You in turn can take from it what you will, and do with it what you can. This book will not tell you what to think; it is meant to help you make sense of what you do.

The point of view in **TeacherSource** is built out of three strands: **Teachers' Voices**, **Frameworks**, and **Investigations**. Each author draws together these strands uniquely, as suits his or her topic and—more crucially—his or her point of view. All materials in **TeacherSource** have these three strands. The **Teachers' Voices** are practicing language teachers from various





settings who tell about their experience of the topic. The **Frameworks** lay out what the author believes is important to know about his or her topic and its key concepts and issues. These fundamentals define the area of language teaching and learning about which she or he is writing. The **Investigations** are meant to engage you, the reader, in relating the topic to your own teaching, students, and classroom. They are activities which you can do alone or with colleagues, to reflect on teaching and learning and/or try out ideas in practice.



Each strand offers a point of view on the book's topic. The **Teachers'Voices** relate the points of view of various practitioners; the **Frameworks** establish the point of view of the professional community; and the **Investigations** invite you to develop your own point of view, through experience with reference to your setting. Together these strands should serve in making sense of the topic.

To date, the various books in the **TeacherSource** series have examined the key elements of second language classroom education—from dimensions of teaching, including teacher reasoning, methodology, and curriculum planning, to dimensions of learning, including how second languages are learned and assessed, as well as various school models for effective instruction. At the core of all this work however, lie fundamental notions of subject matter: How do we understand *what* is being taught and learned? In other words, how we define language.

Diane Larsen-Freeman's *Teaching Language: From Grammar to Grammaticing* goes to the heart of these questions to address language as the *what* of second language teaching. She weaves together an account which combines definitions of language as they have evolved in the English language teaching profession through the post-Chomskian era, with her own thinking. She outlines how she has moved literally from static descriptive ideas of grammar, based on rules, to more fluid and dynamic notions of reason-driven grammaring, which she defines as "the ability to use grammar structures accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately."

Larsen-Freeman's book is professionally steeped in a wide range of points of view, with equal measures of personal concern for language learning and language learners. Above all, she is passionate about language. She brings to its study the knowledge and tools of a respected applied linguist and a noted scholar in second language acquisition, as well as the know-how and practices of a widely traveled teacher educator and an effective materials writer. This variety of experience, and the plurality of purposes that underlie each area of activity, combine in what is unique to Larsen-Freeman's approach and her work. She clearly loves the order that is hidden in language and the potential explanatory power of frameworks—including her own form-meaning-use paradigm—to unlock that order. But equally, she recognizes the complexity of language and its chameleon-like potential to exceed boundaries, morph new forms, invent meanings, and to happen upon new uses. This facility and fascination with both the regular, predictable elements of language alongside its accidental and creative dimensions are what makes Larsen-Freeman the unique and powerful language practitioner that she is.

In this spirit, the reader of *Teaching Language: From Grammar to Grammaticing* is left not with an encyclopedic group of definitions, but rather with a honed set of tools with which to approach language in language teaching. It is generative, exploratory work... as unruly as it is energizing.

This book, like all elements of the **TeacherSource** series, is intended to serve you in understanding your work as a language teacher. It may lead you to thinking about what you do in different ways and/or to taking specific actions in your teaching. Or it may do neither. But we intend, through the variety of points of view presented in this fashion, to offer you access to choices in teaching that you may not have thought of before and thus to help your teaching make more sense.

—Donald Freeman, Series Editor

# INTRODUCTION

I have taken up in earnest Donald Freeman's invitation to write a personal account of the subject matter of this book. This is a book about language, especially grammar—what it is and what it is not—the product of one person's experience in her pursuit of a deeper understanding of her subject matter. As my education has been enhanced by the observations and teaching of many others, all that I present here did not originate with me—probably even less than I am aware of. This is to be expected. However, while there may be nothing new under the sun in our field, at the level of the individual, there remain many interesting avenues to be explored and new insights to be gained. All my professional life I have remained committed to furthering my own understanding and to contributing to our mutual understanding; in these pages, I hope to convey the excitement of the process of inquiry and discovery.

In 1996, I was asked to participate in a debate on the question, *Is teaching an art or is it a science?* In particular, I was asked to speak on behalf of the proposition that teaching is a science. Of course, few educators would argue that teaching is exclusively an art or a science; however, the debate proved to be a useful means through which to identify the relevant issues. I chose to make my case by suggesting that, as with good science, good teaching is best served when its practitioners cultivate attitudes of inquiry. This, then, is my ultimate hope for this book: that it will stimulate your curiosity to inquire into your own understanding of the nature of language and of grammar, and the nature of its learning and teaching.

However, curiosity is not sufficient. Therefore, I have built into this text questions and tools that will help you systematically inquire at the threshold of your own understanding. Each of the three main components of this book—Frameworks, Investigations, and Teachers' Voices—plays dual roles. The Frameworks serve both to relate what I have learned from my own experience and to offer you what I hope will be a fruitful way of looking at language, especially grammar. The Investigations invite you to begin to cultivate your own attitude of inquiry and to enrich your reading by connecting what you have read to your own experience. Finally, the Teachers' Voices both let you “listen” to the voices of others who have wrestled with some of the issues dealt with here, and encourage you to engage with colleagues in pursuit of deepening your own understanding. Indeed, if you read this book together with others and collaborate on the Investigations, that is all to the good.

Unlike much of my writing, this volume is not filled with a comprehensive inventory of academic citations. To complement the citations that are here, I have listed the works that I have consulted, or have been influenced by, in the section on suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter. Also, in this book, I have curtailed my use of academic terminology. There no doubt still remains too much to suit all readers, but I have tried to be extremely selective in its use, believing that terminology should provide for convenient reference and links to other works, not add scholarly heft.

Finally, a word is in order about the focus of this book. It will come as no surprise to learn that teachers teach based on their conception of the subject matter. While the conception is often implicit, perhaps influenced by their own education as language learners or by the language textbooks they choose or are given to teach from, there is great value, it

seems to me, for teachers to be able to articulate and examine their personal views of language and of grammar—views that, like mine, are doubtless influenced by their experiences both as learners and as teachers and by the views of their instructors, researchers, and colleagues. Thus, by the end of the book, I would hope that readers would be able to complete the following statements: “For me, language is...”; “For me, grammar is...”

I, too, will complete these statements in time. I will also put forth a grammar teaching approach that follows from my definitions. Although the examples in this text are drawn for the most part from English, the ideas and suggestions hold for all languages. I have been reassured in this regard by the many teachers of a variety of languages with whom I have been privileged to work over the years. For this reason, I will use the terms *target language* or *second language* or *foreign language* when generic reference is being made to the language being taught. I also intend to impute no special meaning to the words *learning* and *acquisition*, using them interchangeably sometimes, and at other times conventionally to distinguish tutored from untutored development.

We are ready to begin. To underscore the importance I accord to having you articulate your own views and begin to cultivate an attitude of inquiry, I will start right off with an Investigation. I will also use it as a way to introduce some of the terminology that you will encounter in the remainder of the text. It is my sincere hope that you will find your reading of this text an invitation to continue to explore language on your own, preferably in collaboration with others. I wish you well as you work to define your own personal approach to the teaching of language in general and grammar in particular.



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# 1

## DEFINING LANGUAGE AND UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

### THE IMPORTANCE OF DEFINING LANGUAGE

#### *What Is Language?*

What is language? You may or may not have thought about this question before, but it is an important question that anyone who is or wants to be a language teacher should consider. It is important because your answer to this question will inform your beliefs about language teaching and learning and what you do in the classroom as you teach language. As Becker (1983) put it, “Our ‘picture’ of language is the single most important factor... in determining the way we choose to teach one.” It would therefore be useful to start off reading this book by answering the question for yourself.

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#### **1.1**

*Take a moment to think about what it is you teach: What is language? Write your answer down. Then put your answer aside. I will ask you to come back to it from time to time throughout this book and to amend, expand upon, or reaffirm it.*

Here is a list of other language educators’ answers to the questions about the nature of language, which I have culled and paraphrased from the literature of the past 100 years or so. I present them in the order in which they were first introduced to the field.

#### DEFINITIONS OF LANGUAGE FROM THE LITERATURE

1. Language is a means of cultural transmission.
2. Language is what people use to talk about the things that are important to them, for example, occurrences in their everyday lives.
3. Language is a set of sound (or, in the case of sign language, sign) and sentence patterns that express meaning.
4. Language is a set of rules through which humans can create and understand novel utterances, ones that they have never before articulated or encountered.



5. Language is a means of interaction between and among people.
6. Language is the means for doing something—accomplishing some purpose, for example, agreeing on a plan of action for handling a conflict.
7. Language is a vehicle for communicating meaning and messages.
8. Language is an instrument of power (those who know a language are empowered in a way that those who do not are not).
9. Language is a medium through which one can learn other things.
10. Language is holistic and is therefore best understood as it is manifest in discourse or whole texts.

### *Syllabus Units Corresponding to Definitions of Language*

After reading these definitions, it should be clear why I chose to begin this book by asking you to define language for yourself. Despite some overlap among the ten definitions, each presents a view of language that may be realized in a language classroom in quite distinct ways. For instance, depending upon your view of language, you may choose different elements or aspects of language to foreground. To illustrate this point more concretely, the following are examples of syllabus units corresponding to each definition:

1. *Cultural transmission*: works of literature, poetry, history, and the vocabulary words and grammar structures that constitute them
2. *Everyday life*: talking about family, daily routines, situations (e.g., shopping, going to the post office)
3. *Sound and sentence patterns*: fixed and semi-fixed sentence patterns and sequences such as statements, questions, and negative statements, and sound (or sign) contrasts, intonation, rhythm, stress patterns that result in differences in meaning
4. *Rules*: rules of sentence construction related to permissible word combinations and word orders, for example, forming sentences, questions, negative sentences
5. *Means of interaction*: interactional language (language for interpersonal communication), that is, choosing and using appropriate language within a social context
6. *Means of doing something*: functions such as agreeing, disagreeing, proposing, clarifying, expressing preferences
7. *Vehicle for communicating meaning*: transactional language (language that functions primarily to communicate meaning), especially lexical items
8. *Instrument of power*: competencies such as finding a place to live, interviewing for a job, making medical appointments; sociopolitical skills such as negotiating with one's landlord, writing letters of protest, learning civic rights and responsibilities

9. *Medium*: content such as geography (learning about latitude and longitude, topographical features, climates), along with language learning strategies such as reading a passage for its gist, editing one's own writing, guessing word meaning from context
10. *Holistic*: reading and writing different texts, learning about rhetorical and genre patterns such as what distinguishes the language of narrative from that of expository prose in particular disciplines, working on the cohesion and coherence of language that hold a text together

### *The Link Between Definitions of Language and Theories of Learning*

Not only may your definition of language influence your decisions about syllabus units, it may also shape your view of learning. Although there is not a unique connection between a particular view of language and a particular theory of learning, some theories of learning fit more naturally with certain definitions of language than others. For example, structural linguists, such as Bloomfield and Fries, who saw language as a set of sound/sign and sentence patterns (definition 3), promoted the audiolingual method's (ALM's) mimicry-memorization and pattern and dialogue practice. Consistent with their conception of language was the habit-formation view of language learning, in which it was seen to be the responsibility of the teacher to help students overcome the habits of the native language and replace them with the habits of the second language. Later, the psychologist B.F. Skinner's *behaviorist* perspective contributed the idea that what was important in establishing new habits was the reinforcement of student responses.

In contrast, those who, following Chomsky, saw language as a set of rules (definition 4) might embrace a *cognitivist* explanation for learning and expect students to formulate and test hypotheses so that they could discover and internalize the rules of the language they were learning. Those who defined language as a means of interaction among people (definition 5) probably subscribed to an *interactionist* view of the learning process—one that called for students to interact with each other, however imperfectly, right from the beginning of instruction, believing that such interaction facilitated the language acquisition process.

### *Associating Teaching Practices with Definitions of Language*

In addition to foregrounding certain syllabus units and privileging certain theories of language learning, your choice of teaching practices might also follow from your definition of language. Of course, your definition of language does not prevent you from making use of a range of pedagogical practices; nonetheless, particular practices are consistent with certain types of syllabi. Indeed, each of the ten definitions of language above can easily be associated with common language teaching practices. To cite just an example or two for each:

1. *Cultural transmission*: translation exercises
2. *Everyday life*: situational dialogues
3. *Sound and sentence patterns*: sentence pattern practice and minimal pair discrimination drills

4. *Rules*: inductive/deductive grammar exercises
5. *Means of interaction*: role plays
6. *Means of doing something*: communicative activities and tasks, for example, asking for and giving directions, surveying class preferences
7. *Vehicle for communicating meaning*: Total Physical Response (TPR) activities in which the meaning of lexical items and messages is made clear through actions
8. *Instrument of power*: problem-posing activities in which students discuss solutions to their own real-world problems
9. *Medium*: content-based activities, through which students attend to some subject matter, for example doing math problems, at the same time that language objectives are being addressed
10. *Holistic*: text analysis activities in which students examine the features of texts that promote their cohesion, or process writing, whereby students produce successive drafts of their writing, receiving feedback after each draft

### SOME CAVEATS

So far I have suggested that your definition of language has a powerful influence that extends beyond a conception of language and could affect your view of language acquisition and your teaching practice. However, before we proceed any further, some caveats are in order. First of all, many people's definitions of language are broader than any one of the ten that we have considered, overlapping with some of them, but not quite lining up with any one definition. Because language is as complex as it is, the ten definitions are not mutually exclusive.

Second, the coherence among language, learning, and teaching beliefs is often more theoretical than actual. This is because there are many important considerations in teaching. Primary among these is taking into account who the students are and why they are studying the language. An assessment of students' language needs and how they learn should inform the choice of syllabus units and teaching practices. We are, after all, teaching students, not just teaching language.

Marie Nestingen teaches Spanish in a high school in Central Wisconsin. Here is how she sees the matter of teaching students.



Marie Nestingen

Reflecting back to my first years of teaching Spanish, I can definitely see how the pendulum swings of methods have influenced the way I think of language. And its swinging continues to affect my teaching as I continue to learn. [However] a huge factor for me in my teaching seems to be who my students are and why they are taking the class: their attitude towards a second language, their expectations, and their idea of what is involved in learning a second language play a factor in the class. I had one class of Spanish II students this year who seemed very adamant (more than previous classes) about learning the grammatical points. They wanted the rules! [However], in addition to the students' attitudes are the attitudes of their

parents. The question of why they are or need to take the class and/or learn a second language affects the choices I make as a teacher. I know it does.

As Marie says, students' reasons for second language learning affect teachers' decisions about what and how to teach. Having to prepare one's students to pass a particular standardized examination, for instance, can be a powerful influence on what one teaches. This is why I have been careful to use words such as *may*, *might*, *could*, and *likely* when I have been discussing the links among an individual's "picture" of language, theory of learning, and teaching practice. In language teaching, everything is connected to everything else. It is difficult to conceive of language apart from who one is as a teacher, who one's students and colleagues are, what the demands of the curriculum are, and so forth. Indeed, at the level of practice, most teachers are less likely to adhere to a narrow view of language, learning, or teaching. Most teachers, as well as the texts that they use, are more eclectic, interweaving a variety of syllabus and activity types into lessons.

A third caveat is that presenting definitions in chronological order, as I have chosen to do, makes the sequence seem orderly and lockstep, which is not the case. It is not as though at one time all teachers embraced one of these definitions of language, then suddenly abandoned it when another was proposed. It should also be recognized that, although I have presented the ten in the order in which they were first proposed during the previous century, many of these views persist today. Finally, I do not mean to imply that the stimulus for innovation was always a new definition of language, or that all change emanated from within the language teaching field. Change has often been inspired by new theories of learning or conceptions of teaching and has sometimes originated from advances in related disciplines such as linguistics, psychology, or education, or even technology.

To illustrate the impact of technology, one can attribute many linguists' and educators' recent fascination with multiword strings of regular construction, such as *and all that stuff*, to the fact that powerful computers and million-word corpora highlight the existence of, and facilitate the exploration of, such patterns of language use. Of course, examining language texts to identify patterns of language use is not a new enterprise in linguistics. It is simply that computers allow for principled collection, and systematic analysis, of huge numbers of texts. As a result, we have been able to appreciate how formulaic, as opposed to how completely original, our use of language is. And this appreciation has given rise to instructional approaches such as the lexical approach, which centers instruction on multiword strings and lexical patterns. The acquisition of such patterns can be accounted for by associationist learning, which highlights the brain's ability to process the huge amount of linguistic input to which it is exposed and, from it, to extract and retain frequently occurring sequences.

In all this, the point should not be missed that how we conceive language can have widespread consequences. Indeed, some have gone further than I in suggesting that "A definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world" (Williams, 1977: 21).



## 1.2

*This would be a good time to read over your definition of language and determine if, in the light of the foregoing discussion, you want to make any changes to it. If you are doing this exercise with others, it would be useful to then discuss your definitions and any changes you may have made.*



For histories of the field, see Kelly (1969) and Howatt (1984).

### ACCOUNTING FOR THE SHIFTS IN DEFINITIONS OF LANGUAGE

Despite the caveats above, it is worth attempting to understand what motivated the shifts from one definition of language to another during the previous century. This is not the place to trace the history of the language teaching field, but simply to point out that a major contributor to the shifts was the dialectic between the function of language and its forms. In other words, some of the definitions follow from the conception of language in terms of its function—that is, accomplishing some nonlinguistic purpose (language as a means of cultural transmission, a way of discussing everyday life, a means of interaction, a vehicle for accomplishing some task, an instrument of power, a medium of instruction)—and others in terms of its linguistic units or forms (language as grammar structures and vocabulary words, sound/sign/sentence patterns, rules, lexical items, rhetorical patterns, genre patterns, multiword lexical strings and patterns).

It is essential to note that, regardless of whether a functional or a formal view of language is adopted, language teachers have commonly sought to develop in their students the ability to use the language, whether to develop spoken communication skills, to become literate, or both. Indeed, even those who have advocated a form-based approach to language teaching do so because they believe that mastery of its forms is an effective means of learning to use the language for some nonlinguistic purpose. For example, Robert Lado, an adherent of pattern practice drills, insisted that

Nothing could be more enslaving and therefore less worthy of the human mind than to have it chained to the mechanics of the language rather than free to dwell on the message conveyed through the language (Lado, 1957 as cited in Widdowson, 1990).

Thus, the debate has not been about the goal of instruction but rather about the means to the end. At issue is the question of whether it makes more sense to teach others to use a language by preparing them to do so—systematically helping students develop control of the forms of language, building their competence in a bottom-up manner—or to have students learn in a top-down manner—learning to use another language by using it. In the latter instance, students' use of language may be halting and inaccurate at first, but it is thought that eventually students will gain control of the linguistic forms and use them accurately and fluently.

Now you may be thinking that the form–function dichotomy is a false one and that neither a bottom-up nor a top-down approach should be practiced exclusively, that both means should be integrated. Such an answer is in keeping with the laudable pragmatism of teachers. However, before dismissing the dichotomy, I think that we should recognize not only that the pendulum swing between function and form is characteristic of the field at large, but also that the same dynamic also takes place at the local level within our classrooms. We may include both foci—function and form—but we do not routinely integrate them. Typically, a teacher or a textbook will use both activities that are primarily communicatively focused and activities that primarily deal with the parts of language—yet these will occur in different lessons, or different parts of lessons, or in different parts of a textbook unit. In other words, even at the microlevel of a lesson, the two approaches remain segregated.

### UNDERSTANDING THE “INERT KNOWLEDGE PROBLEM”

I believe that including both means is an improvement over solely practicing one or the other; however, this approach is not without its problems. The first problem has to do with the uneven distribution of student energy. Few students sustain their enthusiasm for learning when the lesson focuses on the parts of language. Indeed, when students are asked to shift from a communicative activity to, say, a grammar exercise, there is often an audible response of displeasure. In spite of the fact that many students find it difficult to muster much enthusiasm for the study of grammatical rules, vocabulary items, and pronunciation points, most students acknowledge the value of studying them and willingly make the effort. Indeed, as we saw from Marie Nestingen’s comments, some students will demand their inclusion if they are not part of what is regularly worked on in class.

Student ambivalence is not difficult to understand. First, although many students do not necessarily enjoy studying grammar rules, memorizing vocabulary, or practicing pronunciation points, learning the parts of a language is a very traditional language practice, one that many students have come to associate with language learning. Second, learning the parts gives students a sense of accomplishment; they feel that they are making progress. Third, learning the parts provides security. Students have something almost tangible to hold onto as they tally, for example, the number of vocabulary items that they have learned in a given week. Fourth, students believe in the generative capacity of grammatical rules, that knowing the rules of the language will help them to create and understand new utterances.

Although some of these beliefs could be challenged, for student-affective considerations alone, there is a reason to focus on the parts of language as well as its function. A greater concern remains, however. As many language teachers and learners will attest, what students are able to do in the formal part of a lesson often does not carry over or transfer to its use in a more communicative part of a lesson, let alone to students’ using what they have learned in a noninstructional setting. Even though students know a rule, their performance may be inaccurate, or disfluent, or both.

Here is what Jane, an ESL teacher in a midwestern U.S. university intensive English program, has to say about her students.



Jane

They oftentimes don't understand the rules. They just read a rule and go, "OK, I've read this since I was eleven years old. I've read it a million times back in my country and here." And they're still not using it right. They all know they need to use the third person singular "s" but half the class still doesn't use it. They use it in the grammar exercises, but they don't apply it while they're speaking or writing. (Johnston and Goettsch, 2000: 456)

It is easy to understand Jane's frustration. The third-person singular "s" on English present-tense verbs has been a challenge to many teachers and students, and no one is absolutely certain why this form presents such a learning burden. The fact is that even if students understand the explicit rule, they do not necessarily apply it. Indeed, as most teachers will attest, Jane's observation is not only true of the third-person singular verb marking in English; it also applies to many other examples, in English and in other languages. Long ago, Alfred North Whitehead (1929) referred to Jane's dilemma as "the *inert knowledge problem*." Knowledge that is gained in (formal lessons in) the classroom remains inactive or inert when put into service (in communication within and) outside the classroom. Students can recall the grammar rules when they are asked to do so but will not use them spontaneously in communication, even when they are relevant. Besides the frustration that this engenders in students and teachers, I would imagine that it contributes to a great deal of attrition from language study. Students become discouraged when they cannot do anything useful with what they are learning.

It would be too ambitious to think that we can solve the inert knowledge problem, a problem that has plagued teachers and students for centuries. However, we can begin by rejecting the dichotomous thinking that has made the problem intractable. This will not be easy to accomplish.



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### 1.3

*To appreciate the magnitude of the change we will need to make, you only have to ask yourself what associations you make with the words grammar and communication. Do so now by completing the following sentences.*

When I think of grammar, I think of...

When I think of communication, I think of...

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Here is what other teachers have said when asked to freely associate with the words *grammar* and *communication*:

**Figure 1.1: Teachers' Associations with Grammar and Communication**

<i>When I think of grammar, I think of...</i>	<i>When I think of communication, I think of ...</i>
• rules	• dynamic understanding
• parts of speech; verb paradigms	• the four skills
• structures; forms	• meaning
• word order in sentences	• accomplishing some purpose
• memorizing	• interacting
• red ink	• establishing relationships
• drills	• small group activities
• boring	• fun

Not everyone I have asked agrees with all these associations, of course. Some educators find the discovery of the workings of a language a joyful process, not a boring one. Even so, I think it should not be difficult to understand why forms (here, illustrated by *grammar*) and use (here, illustrated by *communication*) have so often been segregated in textbook pages and lesson segments. They appear to be completely different, a view embedded in dichotomous thinking.

### CHANGING THE WAY WE THINK

If we aspire to build the bridge between forms and use that our students need in order to overcome the inert knowledge problem, to enhance their attitudes, and to sustain their motivation, we will need to change the way we think. I believe that it is our dichotomous thinking that needs to change, and I will illustrate the necessary change by considering grammar. Thus, for the remainder of this book, I will treat grammar as the forms of the form–function dichotomy, even though I acknowledge that there are more forms to language than grammatical forms. Let me be even more emphatic about this point. I certainly do not equate grammar with all the parts of language, let alone with communication. Two decades ago, in fact, in an article titled “The ‘what’ of second language acquisition” (Larsen–Freeman, 1982), I pointed out the multifaceted nature of communicative competence. I also acknowledge that choosing to focus on one subsystem of the whole has its risks. I have worried for some time about the tendency to isolate one of the subsystems of language and to study it in a decontextualized manner. Nevertheless, it is undeniably methodologically convenient, perhaps even necessary, to attend to one part of language and not to take on the whole in its many diverse contexts of use. At this point in the development of the field and in the development of my own thinking, the only thing I know how to do is to focus on one part while simultaneously attempting to hold the whole.

And I have chosen to work with grammar as the one part because it seems to me that it is the vortex around which many controversies in language teaching have swirled. Further, it is the subsystem of language that has attracted much



attention from linguists, certainly ever since Chomsky, and in second language acquisition, ever since its Chomsky-inspired inception. Above all, I have chosen to write about grammar because I have always been intrigued by grammar and the paradoxes that surround it. It is at one and the same time an orderly system and one that can be characterized by many exceptions. Control of the grammar of a language can be empowering, but following its rules unswervingly can be imprisoning. The study of grammar is both loved and loathed.

In this book, I will be attempting to demonstrate that the associations in the right-hand column in Figure 1.1 are no less true of grammar than of communication. In the next chapter, I will introduce the changes in my thinking about grammar by challenging common conceptions concerning grammar. In chapters 3 to 7 I will present a view of grammar very different from those reflected in the left-hand column in Figure 1.1. In chapters 8 to 10 I will explore the acquisition of grammar in order to arrive at an understanding that will ensure the creation of optimal conditions for its learning and for unifying the form–function dichotomy. Finally, in the last chapter, I will offer an approach to teaching that builds on the insights gained from viewing grammar and its learning in a different way.

### *Suggested Readings*

The particular views of language and common language teaching practices discussed in this chapter are associated with particular language teaching methods or approaches in Larsen-Freeman (2000a). Also, Wilkins (1976) discusses the difference between synthetic syllabi, where students are presented language units, usually structures, with which they synthesize or build up their competence, and analytic syllabi, where language is presented functionally, leaving it to students to analyze the language into its component parts. However, later, Widdowson (1979) pointed out that a syllabus organized by functions is also an example of a synthetic syllabus, not an analytic one. Graves' (2000) book in this TeacherSource series, *Designing Language Courses*, has a useful discussion on syllabus units. The dichotomy between formal and functional views of language presented in this chapter also exists in linguistics. See, for example, the introduction in Tomasello (1998) for a discussion. Finally, although more will be said later about multiword strings and lexical patterns in language, a seminal article in contributing to my awareness of the ubiquity of such patterns is Pawley and Syder (1983).