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Larsen-Freeman's Writings in Teacher- Preparation Grammar Courses: Indispensable Resources for all Levels

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Abstract

Diane Larsen-Freeman's work plays a crucial role in teacher preparation for second and foreign language instructors. Her work is useful with a variety of populations, including preservice teachers preparing to work with English language learners in elementary and secondary education; graduate students preparing to work in public or private language institutions; students with teaching experience who are preparing to direct teacher training, and others. In particular, her work on “grammaring” continues to be an essential basis for determining which activities are the most beneficial for learner language development. A major strength in Dr. Larsen-Freeman's work is her ability to bridge the gap between theory and practice, to connect to language instructors in a clear, practical way that also gets at the heart of our best understanding of how language learning takes place. In this article, I outline the various ways my courses incorporate Dr. Larsen-Freeman's work, with examples of particular activities that are inspired by her articles, *The Grammar Book*, and *Grammar Dimensions*, the textbook series she directs.

Keywords: *Grammaring, Teacher Preparation, Grammar*

Introduction

The TESOL and Applied Linguistics program at Michigan State University works with a number of different populations: undergraduate students in education programs who are preparing to work with English language learners mainstreamed in their largely native-speaking K-12 classrooms; undergraduate students interested in teaching adult learners abroad; students who want to work with displaced people from Afghanistan, Ukraine or other non-English-speaking countries; graduate students working towards becoming educators in intensive English programs or language schools, and graduate students hoping to become teacher trainers themselves, among other populations. As a faculty member in this program, I've been working with these students for over 15 years. In that time, various trends have come

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and gone; some approaches have fallen out of favor and others have arisen. Even though I have restructured courses numerous times, there is one author who has always been featured in all iterations of these courses: Diane Larsen-Freeman.

Dr. Larsen-Freeman has always had her eye on the big issues in language learning, making her work invaluable to students who are developing their own approaches and styles to language teaching. In this article, I will outline the various ways I've used her writing in my courses, specifically those dealing with pedagogical grammar and grammar instruction. Because the different groups have different needs and goals, I'll discuss the various courses in turn.

Undergraduate Students in the Education Program

The students in the education program at my university are nearly all monolingual native speakers of English, which is quite typical in the United States (e.g., Aus, 2009). They do most of their work in their major (that is, the subject they'll be teaching) and teacher education courses. The work they do in TESOL is generally not the main focus of their studies, and they have little to no background in working with non-native speakers. While most students have taken some language courses in middle school or high school, they mostly ended instruction before becoming fluent, and have never spent time navigating a country where English is not the dominant language. This situation will likely continue, because the amount of language instruction in US elementary, middle and high schools has been steadily and rapidly declining for years (MLA, 2022). Partially due to this lack of experience, this group's conception of grammar is usually limited to the topics that were covered in language arts classes in middle and high school: that is, parts of speech, subjects and objects, compound and complex sentences, proper punctuation, and the like. These students need instruction on the specific needs of English language learners, and how they differ from native speakers (e.g., DeLozier, 2015). In the pedagogical grammar course for this population, a good portion of course must be spent on discerning the difference between the explicit knowledge that they were expected to learn as native speakers, and the types of grammar issues that English language learners might struggle with, and particularly the idea that implicit knowledge of grammar is the goal for the learners (e.g., Pawlak, 2021). Thus some of the first issues that we discuss are the difference between prescriptive and descriptive grammar, how to define grammar (the answer is, broadly!) and so on.

While they will have English language learners in their content courses, most of these students will not teach English classes, let alone grammar lessons, so the particular forms and functions of the tense and aspect in English or the peculiarities of the article system aren't crucial for them to understand. The main issue that these students struggle with is the idea that the goal of learning language—especially grammar—for a non-native speaker is not just to sound erudite or be one of the elite few who can use 'whom' properly, but to communicate with other people who speak English: that is, reaching communicative competence (e.g., Bachman, 1990).

After we cover some of the basic facts of language learning, one of the first things we do is read excerpts from Larsen-Freeman's (2014) chapter "Teaching Grammar". There are few readings that can convey the important issues in grammar teaching better than this text. In particular, we focus on the idea of "grammaring," that is, using grammar in communication

rather than studying it as a subject. This group of students particularly struggles with conceiving of grammar as something you can use rather than something you are taught and reproduce on a test. Therefore we spend several days examining and experimenting with this idea. One way we explore the idea is to bring in grammar activities from the internet, from any website the students find. We then look at each one and decide a) whether it is probably meant for native or non-native speakers, or both; b) whether it seems engaging for students; and c) whether it promotes “grammaring” and to what extent. Sometimes students are misled by activities that seem to be a lot of fun (e.g., games in which students produce various forms) but ultimately do not lead students to use the grammar in this way.

For instance, one student brought in an activity very similar to “Mad Libs,” where a teacher brings in a text with blanks. The blanks are labeled with parts of speech such as noun, verb, and adjective. To be a little more complex, they may include plural nouns, verbs with -ing, verbs in past tense, and so on. The players name words that fit in the category, which the teacher writes in the blanks. When all the blanks are full, the teacher reads out the story, which can be silly or nonsensical. The students from the education program loved this activity and thought it would be fun for their students. It reminded them of the best kinds of teaching they had had in elementary school and they thought it was a good choice for teaching grammar to English language learners. But when we examined whether it was a good example of grammaring, it became clear that this activity was not an ideal choice to promote the use of language to communicate; rather, it promotes labeling parts of language. The concept of grammaring helps make a rather subtle distinction much clearer for this group of students who have very little experience with non-native speakers of any kind. Sometimes, not one of the activities that the students have selected meets the criteria of a communicative activity or grammaring. This is great opportunity to note how difficult it can be to rely on websites to find quality materials, and to make suggestions for better places to find activities.

Students with Experience Mostly in Explicit Teaching and Learning

In our Masters program in TESOL and Applied Linguistics, students are a diverse group with varied experience, as is typical of such programs (e.g., Rui, Lee, De Costa, Yang, & Liu, 2022). One common factor among international students from certain countries is that they have experienced grammar teaching in a traditional, explicit, present-practice-produce framework. However, because our MA program emphasizes communicative and task-based approaches, by the time they come to my pedagogical grammar course, they have had exposure to these other approaches to language teaching. That is, students have had experience creating activities and lesson plans that follow these frameworks. Interestingly, though, when these students come to my course and start thinking about specific grammatical issues, they often revert to taking a very explicit approach to language instruction, creating activities that rely on fill-in-the-blank worksheets, memorizing lists of forms, and so on. It is as if grammar is a completely separate aspect of language from communication. Because this response is fairly common, our goal is to expand these students’ beliefs and practices regarding grammar teaching (see, e.g., Nazari, Boustani & Sheikhi, 2022).

One of my favorite activities to do with this group is a demonstration that I first saw when Dr. Larsen-Freeman came to speak at our university a number of years ago. She talked about ways to work with yes/no questions. The first activity she demonstrated involved choral

repetition. The instructor made a statement, which the students then converted into a question as a group. For example, when the instructor said “I woke up at 8:00,” the students were expected to chorus “Did you wake up at 8:00?” Dr. Larsen-Freeman gave us sentences for a minute or two, until the whole group settled into a kind of drone-like, monotone response. Then she invited us to try a different kind of activity. We closed our eyes while she changed 5 things about herself and the front of the room. Students then asked yes/no questions while they guessed what was different, for example, “Did you take off your watch?” or “Did you close the window?” Dr. Larsen-Freeman asked us to talk about the energy in the room between the two activities, and it was clear that the second one was far more engaging. What’s more, we were actually asking questions that we wanted to know the answer to, instead of working backwards from the answer to the question. In what kind of real-world context would someone take a sentence and convert it into a question? I’ve used this same demonstration in nearly all of my teacher education courses since that visit many years ago, and find that it is far more effective than simply explaining why some activities may be more worthwhile than others. (Note that Larsen-Freeman also mentions this comparison of activities in her 1997 and 2014 articles.)

In fact, I’ve had students do their own demonstrations, comparing a drill-type activity with one that is communicative or at least meaningful. For instance, one student group came up with an excellent demonstration with comparatives. (I frequently have students begin creating activities for comparatives because they are relatively simple in terms of structure and meaning.) First, they went online to find some suggested activities from websites offering free lessons. They selected a drill-type activity and had the class fill out a worksheet that looked something like this:

COMPARATIVES. Fill in the comparative form of each adjective.

1. John is _____ (tall) than Mary.
2. Jane is _____ (nice) than Sandy.
3. The ball is _____ (heavy) than the book.
4. The pen is _____ (big) than the pencil.

Our class diligently filled out the form. (We had excellent accuracy.) Then the team demonstrated another activity, inspired by ideas they saw on the various sites but adjusted to suit their ideas. The instructor announced, “I need some things. Can you help me?” She held up a slim paperback. “I need something bigger than this book. Can you find something bigger than this book?” Someone brought up our rather substantial textbook, not coincidentally also co-authored by Dr. Larsen-Freeman. “Yes, *The Grammar Book* is bigger than this little book. Thank you. Now I need something smaller than this book. Can anyone help me find something smaller than this book?” A student found a mini-notebook and brought it up. The requests became more difficult, so that eventually we were essentially performing a little scavenger hunt with comparatives. “Find something smaller than this eraser.” “Find something softer than this sweater.” Then the students were invited to create their own scavenger hunts for the other students to try out. Afterwards we began speculating on how silly we could make the requests: “Find something smaller than this crumb” or “Find someone smarter than the teacher.” Comparing the energy in the room during this activity to the (lack of) energy during the drill makes the difference very clear.

The concept of grammaring is still surprisingly relevant and even revelatory for many students who have only experienced grammar as a kind of content knowledge, explicitly taught. Despite our best efforts, it can be very difficult to convince students who have themselves learned through drills and memorization that there is another way, even if they have had extensive training (e.g., Phipps & Borg, 2009). Sometimes the demonstrations can bring home this idea in a way that words cannot.

Graduate Students Whose Native Language is English

We have a large number of students who are eager to try out communicative/task-based teaching and who embrace the idea of grammaring right away. However, when their native language is English, they often struggle to understand many aspects of the language. This is particularly the case if they attended a school in which grammar is not taught to native speakers and foreign language learning is not emphasized. This population needs a lot of exposure to pedagogical grammar. There are many reasons for this: first, they have little understanding of the vast amount of implicit knowledge they possess for such complex issues as tense, aspect, voice, definiteness, countability, and so much more; second, they lack the technical vocabulary they need to understand various materials that they may encounter; third, they may not understand why students persist in having difficulty with seemingly innocuous structures until they recognize how complex they actually are; fourth, they may struggle to structure activities appropriately or answer students' questions until they understand the ways that grammar signals meaning in various contexts. Even students with an extensive knowledge of grammar may lack the understanding that grammar does not simply offer rules, but rather alternatives for expressing precise meanings (Pawlak, 2021). For these students, *The Grammar Book* is a crucial resource.

There is no question that *The Grammar Book* can be difficult for students at first, particularly for native speakers. In fact, if students try to read straight through it, they become overwhelmed by the sheer wealth of information contained in it. While I would love to cover the material over multiple semesters, we typically only have time to work with parts of it, although I always recommend that future teachers keep it on the shelf as a reference and guide. There are, of course, other texts that describe English grammar, but the nuance and detail in *The Grammar Book* is unparalleled.

For example, the chapter covering passive voice provides far more background and depth regarding the form, meaning and use of active and passive voice than most other texts for instructors. At first glance passive voice is a structure that is relatively simple to understand and teach. Traditionally, once prospective teachers had learned to identify passive structures, we might have taught them how to switch back and forth between active and passive voice, swapping the subjects and objects. Notably, however, this leads to some very awkward or even ungrammatical sentences:

1. I have been reading a long book. → A long book has been being read by me.
2. My son wants an ice cream. → An ice cream is wanted by my son.
3. My daughter was born in Michigan. → I bore my daughter in Michigan.
4. It is rumored that the new dean is making a visit. → Someone rumors that the new dean is making a visit.

The Grammar Book provides a clear way to approach these issues with analysis of form, meaning and use. Most importantly, it does this in a nuanced and comprehensive way. For instance, it doesn't just discuss the passive with 'be' but also with 'get' and 'have.' Importantly, it clarifies when these two alternative forms of passive are used. For instance, it shows that 'get' passive is typically used for situations with negative outcomes, such as "get locked in" or "get arrested." This makes it much easier for students who struggle with explaining how these similar forms are used.

Especially important are the sections on meaning and use of passive. Some students, especially native speakers, come into the course with the conviction that all uses of passive are to be avoided, a point of view reinforced by style manuals and word processing programs that flag passive constructions as problematic. *The Grammar Book* gives clear examples of why and when English users employ passive. The authors point out that passive "defocuses" the agent, which is why it is used when the agent is redundant (Pineapples are grown in Hawaii, p. 362) or unknown (The bank was robbed yesterday, p. 362). Of course, passive can also be deployed strategically to avoid naming the agent (An error was made in the budget, p. 362).

Interestingly, there is a clear difference in function when the agent is included in a by-phrase. Here, passive is used when the agent is nonhuman (All the lights and appliances in the Albertson household are switched on and off daily by this electrical device, p. 364) or when the agent is well-known as a public figure (The Mona Lisa was painted by da Vinci, p. 364) among other reasons.

The analysis of the passive in *The Grammar Book* makes it possible for students to understand the form, meaning and use of passive in contemporary usage. Perhaps even more importantly, it gives teaching suggestions. The suggestions are particularly valuable with structures such as passive, which at first glance seem particularly difficult to integrate into a communicative classroom. Future teachers struggle so much to come up with activities that they may resort to activities such as: "Write five sentences about your family. Use passive voice." Instead, *The Grammar Book* gives ideas for activities that address different aspects of passive in a natural way. For example, instructors might try a role play in which one learner imagines they are a parent who comes home to find a huge mess. The other learner plays the child, who doesn't want to say who caused the mess. The parent asks questions such as "What happened to the TV?" while the child answers with "It got broken" or "It got knocked over." Another possibility is to adapt the game for yes/no questions to passive, by changing five things in the classroom and then asking the students to try to figure out what was changed, e.g., "Were the lights turned off?" The key is to find natural environments in which passive is typically used and then design activities around that, rather than forcing the use of passive when it may not be normally used. *The Grammar Book* has hundreds of ideas for accomplishing this goal with a wide variety of forms and structures.

After many years of teaching pedagogical grammar and linguistics courses, I am able to answer many of the grammar questions students come up with, and I am pretty good at quickly designing fun, meaningful activities for any level. However, whenever I fail, we always pull out our copy of *The Grammar Book* and find the answers and suggestions that we need. It's an essential reference for everyone in this field.

Advanced Students in the Teacher Preparation Program

In courses with advanced students, we have more time to focus on the reasoning behind the pedagogical decisions we make, as well as to get into more detail regarding curricular decisions. Larsen-Freeman's work in complexity theory (e.g., Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008) can be valuable with this group. One of the most useful concepts that arises from this general approach is the idea that we should focus on what students can do, and the resources they bring to the table, rather than putting so much emphasis on errors and deficits. A simple way to do this is to use "can do" statements in which students report on what they are capable of. Ideally, this is a way for students to visualize their progress. For instance, at the end of a few weeks, a student might agree with the statements "I can make polite requests" or "I can introduce my family", demonstrating progress if they were unable to do that previously. This approach has changed the way we think about grammar and grammar teaching in subtle but wide-reaching ways. The practical effect may be to increase learners' sense of self-efficacy, an important factor in language learning success (e.g., Teng & Wang, 2023).

Another useful aspect of Larsen-Freeman's work in this area lies in the idea of teaching iteratively. That is, teachers return to the same structures or tasks, but not repeat them. Part of the rationale for this approach is that students perform differently in different contexts. This is a natural human feature: performance depends on the multitude of factors in any given situation, including the interlocutors, timeframe, level of familiarity with topic or situation, the amount of distractions or noise, potential stakes of the interaction, and so on. Therefore it is crucial to modify the context and allow the students to adjust and employ their skills in various ways, developing their own agency and confidence. One classic example of this type of teaching is the 4/3/2 storytelling task (Maurice, 1983; Nation, 1989), in which students tell the same story repeatedly, but first in four minutes, then three minutes, then two minutes. Students may become more fluent and more accurate each time they retell the story, but more importantly, they exercise their creativity and flexibility in the use of their language resources.

In my advanced courses on grammar teaching, we explore this idea by coming up with clusters of activities for various forms and structures. For example, one of the topics we frequently work with is wishes, such as *I wish I had more money* or *I wish I was/were taller*. Our future teachers are challenged to come up with several activities in which students produce and comprehend these requests. One cluster of activities that arose in our discussion was the possibility of considering what wishes various celebrities or characters might have. For example, one group came up with three similar activities. First, the learners would consider three possible wishes for each character and choose as a group which wish seemed the most likely. For example, Beyonce wishes she had more money; she wishes she had another Grammy, or she wishes she had more privacy. Then, the groups consider various characters at certain points in their stories and come up with wishes for them, for instance, the Disney character Little Mermaid wishes she had legs; the Disney character Moana wishes she could see the world, and so on. Finally, students share with each other their own wishes. These might be silly (*I wish I could fly*) or serious (*I wish I could see my family more often*), or both. Importantly, the tasks are very similar in each of these activities, but varied in terms of production/comprehension, context, and so on.

Another way to help future teachers develop ideas about iterative teaching is to give them examples of a classroom activity and then suggest they find one way they could alter it to give

their learners another way to explore the material. For example, one useful activity for language learners is to modify rude requests to make them more polite. For instance, learners may see sentences such as these:

1. Tell me the time.
2. Give me your book.
3. Move your chair.

The learner's task is to rephrase these requests to be more polite, such as "Can you please tell me the time?" This is a fairly ordinary activity, but what it lacks in communicative authenticity it makes up for with practicality. Our future teachers can brainstorm small but important ways to alter the activity, to give the learners the chance to employ their knowledge under different conditions. For example, the learners could imagine different interlocutors: a friend, a child, or a professor. The learners could imagine that they are in a hurry and need the request to be fulfilled immediately. The learners could listen to each other and make suggestions for different ways to make the same request. The learners could work in groups and actually respond to the request (or not, if it wasn't polite!), and so on.

Textbook Analysis

With any level of students from any background, it is always helpful to spend some time considering textbooks. So in each course, one day at the start of class I trundle in a pile of grammar texts from various publishers and sources, and we consider them in groups, then as a whole class. Some of the issues we consider are very basic, such as: is it visually appealing (for instance, with colors or pictures) and well organized? What proficiency level is it designed for? Other questions get into broader concerns, for example, is it organized by forms (e.g., a chapter on comparatives and superlatives) or by functions (e.g., a chapter on making requests)? (See Richards, 2013 for a discussion of curriculum design.)

Fundamentally, though, the main thing we're looking for is whether the textbook encourages learners to use grammar in a natural way, as much as possible: that is, grammaring. One of the texts my students always approve of the most is, of course, the series directed by Larsen-Freeman, *Grammar Dimensions*. The textbook is well organized, has clear explanations of grammar that are appropriate for each level, and includes engaging topics that are of interest to learners from varied backgrounds. The best feature is the activities that encourage learners to use the grammar in interesting and natural ways. For example, consider the section in *Grammar Dimensions 3* on causative verbs (Thewlis, 2007, p. 294-309). Learners are invited to consider parenting techniques in a variety of cultures, starting with their own. There are level-appropriate readings that discuss controversial topics such as spanking. As they work with these topics, learners encounter and produce a variety of natural uses of the causative verbs *have*, *let*, and *make*. There are a number of suggestions for possible speaking, writing, listening and reading activities that all engage with interesting ideas. This is exactly the kind of resource that is useful in a communicative classroom.

Even if future teachers are not in a position to choose textbooks, analyzing their approaches, strengths and weaknesses is valuable, because teachers can adapt the material. In particular, we consider the problem with mechanical drills in language teaching—specifically, the fact that

they do not connect form to meaning (Wong & VanPatten, 2003). Even if an instructor's materials contain these drills, modifications can be made. We generally practice this skill by finding a mechanical drill or unengaging activity and think of ways to make it more communicative or meaningful. Recognizing limitations on teachers' time and energy, we try to find ways to do this that do not involve providing new materials or building a whole new lesson. For example, students may find an activity such as this one for comparatives:

1. A rock is _____ (heavy) than a feather.
2. A house is _____ (big) than a mouse.
3. A car is _____ (wide) than a motorcycle.

Quick and easy ways to engage with more meaningful language would be to remove the given adjectives (if possible) so that the learners need to come up with something that makes sense. It could also be turned into a true/false type task, in which one learner makes statements where the answers are reversed (e.g., a feather is heavier than a rock) or left the same, and the other learner agrees or disagrees. Similarly, the learners could substitute in different nouns or adjectives to see if they make sense. None of these changes involve a lot of work for the teacher, but they all require learners to engage with meaning. Other ideas can be discovered quickly by paging through *Grammar Dimensions* and adapting activities for use in any classroom.

Teacher Preparation at All Levels

No matter what population an instructor is working with, Larsen-Freeman will be an essential part of teacher preparation. She has written the seminal articles that we continue to cover year after year; she has worked on the grammatical analyses that we consult regularly, and her ideas have helped build the foundational ideas that shape our teaching every day. Moreover, her materials and concepts are clear and practical, with real teachers and real teaching in mind. Larsen-Freeman's ability to bridge the gap between theory and practice makes her work relevant for anyone who works with language teachers and learners.

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