

# Developing effective pedagogies of grammar: The two-in-one approach

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Teaching grammar at tertiary level can be challenging because students' language repertoire is comparatively higher than at any other level of teaching and learning. While there is a great demand for grammar teaching in Academic Language Learning (ALL) contexts (and, consequently a broad range of materials to facilitate grammar teaching), the teaching of grammar has attracted much controversy. As a result, many teachers adopt their own techniques and some of these may be under-theorised. The approach proposed in this paper, incorporates Sfar's (1998) "two metaphors of learning" as a framework to underpin grammar teaching pedagogy. It also encourages ALL practitioners to encompass characteristics of Csikszentmihalyi's (1990, 2004) "flow" in language learning. By embedding cognitive as well as socio-cultural or participatory learning principles when creating grammar learning tasks, and by stimulating learners for "goal orientation", the approach outlined in this paper aims to facilitate students' grammar learning through an analytical learning technique. Grammar proficiency is a necessary part of language proficiency standards for non-native speaker students in Australian universities, and so analytical and self-exploratory learning techniques will benefit students in their thesis writing process and later in their careers as researchers and academics.

**Key words:** grammar teaching, learning metaphors, the flow theory, Two-in-one approach.

## 1. Introduction

The role of grammar teaching has long been at the heart of a controversial debate in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts. A small number of teachers seem to be confident in teaching grammar while the majority are sceptical about its effectiveness in learning and in developing language competency. The process of grammar teaching and learning has "customarily been thought of as the most daunting and unpleasant part of language learning" (Little, 1994, p. 120). This is often because of the existing contentious debates and negative reinforcements that many teachers have experienced. Research into grammar learning has moved away from an examination of whether grammar should be taught or not, towards the exploration of the issues that impact grammar teaching, such as its pedagogy and other influential factors (Ellis, 2006; Barnard & Scampton, 2008). This paper reports on an exploratory approach to grammar teaching that was developed by integrating Sfar's (1998) "two metaphors" of learning with "flow theory" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 2004).

The focus of this paper is not to suggest a 'one size fits all' pedagogy but to demonstrate how theories can enhance our perspectives on teaching grammar in ALL contexts. As Sfar (1998) argues, methods and theories of teaching and learning come and go like the theories in physical sciences: they are nurtured for a period of time and then abandoned. This tendency for constant

changes to teaching approaches could disorient practitioners unless they develop autonomy in their teaching.

The two-in-one approach proposed in this paper acknowledges Sfarid's (1998) view of pluralism in grammar teaching and accommodates flow theory in learning grammar. First, the paper will highlight the dilemmas of teaching grammar at tertiary levels and benefits of grammar instruction for thesis writing to heighten the need for an effective teaching approach. It will then introduce the theoretical perspectives outlined in Sfarid's (1998) paper demonstrating the significance of incorporating combined metaphors in grammar teaching and learning. The paper will highlight the key principles of flow theory by Csikszentmihalyi (1999, 2004) illustrating their significance in developing effective and sufficiently challenging learning tasks. Finally, the paper will present the design of the two-in-one approach and will discuss the significance and the advantages of adopting such an approach in teaching grammar.

## **2. Impact on grammar learning for thesis writing**

Anyone who has completed a thesis, either on a large or small scale, would know how daunting and challenging it is for both native and non-native speaker (NNS) writers. Thesis writing is a complex process which involves numerous skills such as interpreting, critical thinking, synthesising, arguing and summarising. Language is a property that facilitates such skills. Grammar teaching sometimes can be redundant and there is little evidence of its contribution to native-speaker writing, but indisputably grammar is an essential element in ESL writing (Frodesen & Holten, 2003). Even though there is limited empirical evidence to show how grammar contributes to improvement in ESL writing, there is continuous support for language-focused issues in ALL teaching. Dunleavy (2003) claims that PhD authors need to pay careful attention to sentence composition as they are "important as fundamental building blocks" (p. 116) for the whole thesis. Otherwise, misstating, misinterpretation and incomprehensibilities can occur when students fail to advance the necessary arguments in their theses. This paper argues that ESL and EAP writing instructors have a role to play in developing effective grammar pedagogies (Frodesen & Holten, 2003) rather than just fixing grammar problems incidentally.

Teachers hold strong beliefs about grammar teaching which can impact on their practice (Borg, 2006) and unlocking teachers' negative beliefs is challenging. Crème and Lea (2008) suggest that too much emphasis on grammar may result in students feeling insecure about their writing; they state that only ineffective writers pay attention to grammar at their early stage of writing and effective writers reserve it until the editing stage. On the other hand, studies that investigate students' preferences for grammar learning indicate a discrepancy between what teachers believe and students want (Gunawardena, 2011; Schulz, 1996). It could be argued that consistent attention to grammar helps ESL writers to deal with complexities of English language use and communication styles. Nowadays, with apparently increasing numbers of money-making editorial services, many Higher Degree Research (HDR) students may not pay attention to their English grammar as they can hire editors to correct their grammar in thesis writing, but this may later impact on them in the workforce, and consequently reflect badly on the universities that qualify them. NNS students should be able to access constant support in learning activities that sensitise and raise awareness of writing techniques in English.

Furthermore, students and language teachers are now pressured by language policy and academic integrity standards in Australian universities. University entry level English, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) 6.0 or 6.5 is a relatively low standard and students are expected to improve their language proficiency while completing their studies. On the other hand, there have been some concerns around the predictive value of IELTS scores of international students on their subsequent academic achievements (Woodrow, 2006). Hence, Barrett-Lennard, Dunworth, and Harris (2011) emphasise that students' language proficiency needs are crucial and thus, universities need to establish "a coherent and cogent approach to the development of students language capabilities" (p. 100). Many HDR students seem to struggle with limited time to work on their language related skills, as they undertake a heavy workload such as completing laboratory experiments and other research related tasks; as a result, they can

put off their thesis writing. As research identifies, most academic problems occur due to language proficiency issues and many international students in Australian universities are challenged with their insufficient language skills (Müller, 2011), even though most of them have mastered declarative knowledge of English grammar in their initial language learning courses.

In Barnard and Scampton's (2008) study, the majority of EAP teachers thought that their students found it difficult to "transfer their grammatical knowledge into communicative language use" (p. 66). And most mistakes occur due to interlanguage transfer and translation and such mistakes can often hamper communication. Effective communication is a significant aspect of thesis writing and students often have an opportunity for improvement by reflecting on their current language skills and extending them. They can improve their sentence building skills by employing various structural patterns permitted in English language. Avoiding repetitive sentence patterns, using sentence variety to engage the reader, keeping cohesion and coherence and using the correct tense and concord to make the meanings clearer are challenging aspects for a novice writer. Therefore, covert or overt instruction in grammar is necessary to raise students' awareness of these matters in writing. As "better language equates to better academic performance" (Müller, 2011, p. 16), ALL practitioners are often involved in developing effective strategies to raise language proficiency standards of university students in Australia.

Developing 'one size fits all' pedagogy is impossible but enhancing the effectiveness of one's pedagogy in a particular context is promising. In their study, Barnard and Scampton (2008) found EAP teachers preferred "discourse based approaches, rather than decontextualised presentation of grammar items, with an inclination towards the use of authentic, full texts and real-life tasks for practice" (p. 77). NNS students, in particular, are interested in developing grammatical accuracy and there is a demand for explicit grammar instruction (Gunawardena, 2011). Some other studies highlight students' preferences for communicative activities in grammar learning (e.g. Fotos, 1998; Nunan, 1998). Hence, implementing Sfar's (1998) suggestions for combination would accommodate both types of learner preferences. As Larsen-Freeman (2001, p. 7) argues, pedagogical grammars should be eclectic, and should include a multifaceted approach where teachers could use different techniques for three dimensions of form, meaning and use. Moreover, students should be able to develop their own strategies in learning grammar for them to "play an active role developing their proficiency during their studies" (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2009, p. 5). The mixed methods approach where students engage in active and collaborative learning and inquiry is productive and facilitates optimum learning outcomes. The two-in-one approach suggested in this paper acknowledges the successful combination of explicit, implicit and contextual meaning focused techniques and also the value of developing independent strategies for grammar learning. The pedagogy proposed in this paper adopts Sfar's (1998) metaphors as a framework to enhance the effectiveness in grammar learning and teaching.

### **3. Sfar's two metaphors of learning**

The main focus of Sfar's (1998) paper is to discuss the nature of two major paradigms in traditional cognitive theories and modern socio-cultural theories of learning and to warn practitioners of the dangers of isolating them in their teaching. Modern participatory theories seem to inspire practitioners, but there is a real danger when certain valuable principles of cognitive learning theories are ignored.

Sfar uses the term 'metaphor' rather than the more common term 'theory' and, for her, metaphor means deep-rooted beliefs about teaching. She discusses two major metaphors of learning: the acquisition (AM) and the participation (PM) metaphors. AM describes a domain of learning that involves knowledge accumulation wherein learners are considered as concept or knowledge builders and teachers are facilitators and informants. PM, on the other hand, describes participatory learning where the learner is viewed as "a person interested in participation" (Sfar, 1998, p. 6). As Sfar (1998) observes, learning theories generally fall into

one of these two categories: “One glance at the current discourse on learning should be enough to realize that nowadays educational research is caught between two metaphors” (p. 5).

After almost a decade since her paper was written, Sfarid’s observation remains relevant, particularly when examining the evolving theories in the field of language learning and teaching. Most language learning theories are based on these cognitive or interactive principles. Sfarid also warns of the dangers of being strongly attracted to one side of the debate when in fact, these two metaphors play complementary roles in the learning process. Sfarid suggests that teachers should not isolate traditional acquisition and modern participation methods but should combine these two approaches for optimum learning outcomes.

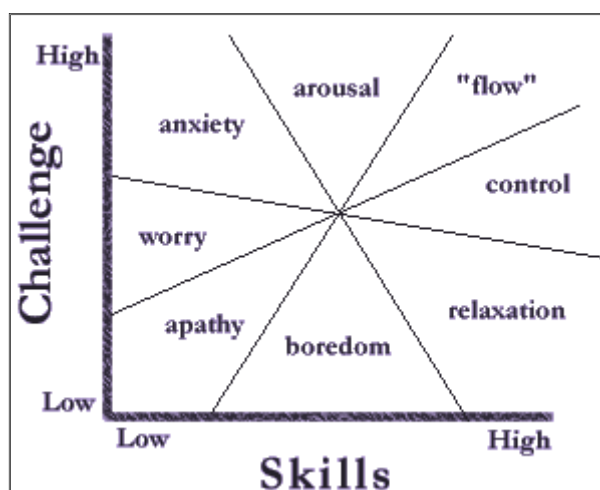
Grammar teaching in ESL is one area where much controversy has risen based on explicit, implicit and participatory learning principles. Research and practice seem to embrace one approach over the other, when there are ample opportunities and advantages of combining the above approaches or metaphors in learning. Hence, Sfarid’s (1998) suggestion for a combination of explicit, implicit and participatory principles is useful for grammar teaching and learning and could be used to eliminate problems encountered through adopting a single approach in teaching. Therefore, the proposed two-in-one approach, in this paper, acknowledges the contribution of both teacher-fronted explicit instruction, as well as learner engagement in task-based and participatory learning. As many teachers favour teaching grammar in integration (Borg & Burns, 2008; Barnard & Scampton, 2008), the pedagogy illustrated in this paper demonstrates how integration can happen in real classroom contexts, and the effectiveness of such a pedagogy to engage students in their learning. Thus, it elaborates the relevance and effectiveness of perspectives of flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 2004) in language learning.

#### **4. Flow theory in learning**

Flow is not a new concept in behavioral psychology. Flow is a state of deep absorption or intense concentration in an activity. Hungarian psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi introduced the concept of flow in 1989. Subsequently, Csikszentmihalyi and others conducted experiments to investigate the effect of flow in various fields such as sports, dancing, reading, mathematics, arts, and other various fields (Egbert, 2003). Csikszentmihalyi argues that a person who experiences flow is completely absorbed by an activity for the pleasure that it provides, by motivation, and the levels of challenge and as a result, he or she can demonstrate a “higher level of performance” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 74) and in learning contexts, deep levels of absorption can “promote optimal learning experience” (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003, p. 161).

Research supporting flow theory suggests that flow has nine significant characteristics: intense concentration, clear task goals, doable activity and adequate skills, timelessness, a lack of self-consciousness, self-control, and intrinsic motivation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 2004; Egbert, 2003). For example, when playing computer games, players seem to experience these characteristics, so that they can remain focused and engrossed, ignoring the external environment while playing the game. Similarly, when learning, if students experience increased engagement by the perceived challenge of the task and their own skills (high and in balance), they take the learning environment under their control and maintain full concentration (Shernoff et al., 2003). The following diagram demonstrates how flow occurs in a particular task and how one can stay focused.

Interest or motivation is fundamental in entering flow and staying in flow. Any individual can experience flow in almost every activity provided the activity is challenging enough and it falls within one’s skills. Shernoff and Csikszentmihalyi (2008) claim that insufficient attention to motivation is a major flaw in modern classrooms. If the learning task keeps the learner engaged and focused, learners may experience flow, which will lead to success and enhanced performance.



**Figure 1.** Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2004) on Flow.

Even though limited research has examined whether flow exists in language learning (e.g. Egbert, 2003; Schmidt & Savage, 1992), findings have been positive, suggesting a “hypothetical relationship between flow and language learning” (Egbert, 2003, p. 501). These studies indicate that “a learning task” needs to be designed in such a way that students understand the purpose and goal for motivation, and it should also adequately challenge and engage students (Dornyei, 2005; Egbert, 2003). As Egbert shows, many SLA researchers have already addressed some of these characteristics of learning in their research. Krashen (1982) and his followers discuss the importance of the level of challenge, “comprehensible input”, in learning a language. Advocates of task-based teaching (e.g. Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996) have considered learner engagement and other flow characteristics when learning a language through a task-based approach. Moreover, learner motivation is without any doubt a key aspect of learning (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Pintrich, 2003) that leads to optimal performance. Recent research has identified the value of the flow perspectives in teaching contexts. Choi, Kim, and Hie Kim (2006) found that flow experience in a web based e-learning system had direct and indirect impact on students’ learning outcomes.

Flow theory explains how one achieves optimal performance in a task through extreme consciousness which should be a key phenomenon in language learning. Consciousness can be both intrapersonal (cognitive) and interpersonal (social) and van Lier (1998) argues that there is a strong relationship between language learning, consciousness and social interaction. The two-in-one approach suggests techniques for grammar teaching to fuel consciousness by combining both traditional cognitive and modern participatory methods of teaching to overcome problems which arise from simply isolating them. Hence, grammar lessons should be organised in such a way that students understand the relevance and usefulness of grammar items as a stimulus to drive their intrinsic motivation. Csikszentmihalyi (2004) explains the need for having such a strong stimulus to drive students in their learning. Therefore, goal orientation in each micro learning task is useful and critical in grammar learning: when students see the functional use of a grammatical component, their motivation increases and therefore they actively engage in learning. An empirical study by Gunawardena (2011) found an increase in learner motivation when students can connect their grammar lessons with their communicative use. Ames and Archer (1988) suggest that the “classroom goal orientation may facilitate the maintenance of adaptive motivation patterns when mastery goals are salient and are adopted by students” (p. 260). Therefore, the two-in-one approach emphasises the need for classroom goal orientation and shows strategies to stimulate learner interest.

Moreover, the reason for embedding flow theory, in this paper, is to underline the need for flow in language learning, particularly in learning grammar because it is often considered as arduous. Grammar teaching needs more research in order to make it more effective and engaging for learners. Therefore, this paper encourages practitioners to develop tasks that incorporate a multidimensional approach to engage learners. As Egbert (2003) claims, language-learning tasks

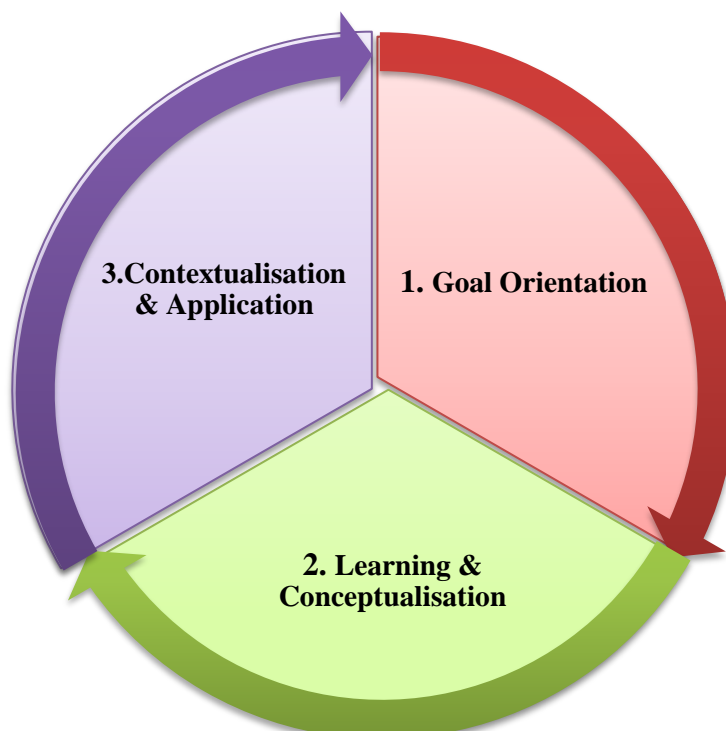
should have “a balance between the challenge and the individual’s skills” (p. 502); learner attention; learner interest; learner control and some degree of enjoyment for the learner to experience flow. Many people misinterpret this ‘enjoyment’ as ‘fun’ but the enjoyment may not be the kind of fun inherent in games; rather, it is a pleasure gained from successful task completion.

How do we know whether learners experience flow in their learning? Most studies that examined flow used a participant-recall survey or Experience Sampling Method (ESM) consisting of 45 items which were validated and tested by Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000; Shernoff et al., 2003). The Experience Sampling Form (ESF) is a long questionnaire that consists of open-ended questions, Likert-scale questions and semantic differential scale questions (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000). This questionnaire is suitable for experimental studies and may not be practically used in action research due to participants’ involvement in completing this form. Therefore, teachers can use a simple questionnaire that includes the features of flow to examine whether students have experienced flow in their learning (see Appendix). This type of questionnaire may not provide the descriptive statistics for analysis generated by other studies mentioned in this paper, but it would provide some indications of the flow experience of learners.

## 5. The design of the approach

The two-in-one approach was designed to teach grammar for thesis writing based on the philosophy developed through the theories discussed in the previous section of this paper. As mentioned earlier, this approach acknowledges the complementary roles of cognitive and participatory approaches to teaching and also the role of learner engagement and motivation that is desirable for optimal learning. Existing research views, theoretical perspectives and the author’s experience in teaching grammar have been of much use in developing these effective techniques in grammar teaching.

The approach is mainly task-based and each major grammar teaching task consists of three micro tasks: a task for goal orientation; a task for learning and conceptualisation; and a task for application and contextualisation. Figure 1 demonstrates the sequential order of the task organisation in this approach based on the rationale provided in the theory section of this paper.



**Figure 1.** Task organisation and design of the two-in-one approach.

### **5.1. Stage 1: Goal orientation**

According to flow theory, 'goal orientation' is a significant stage in learning (Ames & Archer, 1988). The purpose of this stage is to provide a stimulus and capture students' attention for learning a particular grammar component. In this stage, by engaging in a task either individually, in pairs or in small groups, students are provided with an opportunity to consider the relevance and usefulness of what they learn for application purposes. Hypothetically, this understanding of their gap in knowledge or skills will lead students into the other set tasks. Simply telling them about the topic of the lesson may not capture every students' attention. Therefore, the task in goal orientation leads towards self-realisation of students' own learning needs which, hypothetically, leads to a flow of learning. For example, if students perceive that they have a need to address, then they will pay attention (Egbert, 2003). Task-motivation is thus intrinsic and it will be more effective than simply telling them about the usefulness of a lesson.

### **5.2. Stage 2: Learning and conceptualisation**

Now that students have identified a gap in their grammatical repertoire, the task in this stage provides active learning time. Students can explore a grammatical concept examining rules or patterns, either explicitly or implicitly, with or without direct instruction. In this stage, teachers can expose students to authentic samples such as parts from theses and journal papers providing necessary linguistic information about a particular grammatical component: about its form, meaning and its functional use. Teachers also can direct students to use helpful resources such as English style guides, thesauruses, dictionaries and other online sources such as language corpus databases (e.g. the British National Corpus) so that they can become independent explorers in grammar learning. For example, if the students are exploring verbs followed by English prepositions, they can see existing uses through a database such as corpus data by examining its concordances. Teachers can draw their attention to frequently used or acceptable patterns of prepositions in English. In this manner, students pay conscious attention to the component being studied.

### **5.3. Stage 3: Contextualisation and application**

As has been seen, the first task motivates students to learn a particular grammar component and the second task provides opportunities to explore rules and patterns consciously. Now in the third stage, students apply a particular component in their own writing context. The task in this stage allows contextualising of what they have just learnt. Teachers need to be strategic to select a task that incorporates frequent use of the grammatical item learnt. This is also an opportunity for students to compare and contrast their writing with good examples and samples from their peers, and receive feedback from teachers and other students. Getting effective feedback about their language use in writing is an essential aspect of grammar learning as their research supervisors basically concentrate on the issues in relation to the content of their theses. These kinds of individual and participatory learning enhance student engagement in a highly supported learning environment. Teachers need to be skilful to provide appropriately challenging tasks for students to experience flow in language learning.

### **5.4. The main characteristics of the two-in-one approach**

People teach grammar in numerous ways (Derewianka, 2001; Thornbury, 1999) and they may be comfortable with those methods. On the other hand, many people master grammatical competency in numerous ways. One of the most challenging tasks for a teacher is to develop an approach that attracts most learning styles and engages all kinds of learners such as motivated, unmotivated, high level and low level learners. The proposed approach was developed as an alternative to the inconsistencies observed in three of the most widely adopted grammar teaching methods used by teachers. Table 1 below summarises such methods characterising the potential problems in using them.

**Table 1.** Popular grammar teaching methods and potential problems.

| <b>Method</b>  | <b>Potential problems</b>  |
|--|--|
| Teaching grammar as a list of items (this may be based on a diagnostic test or common grammar problems). | This may be a list of things that the teacher thinks is useful – not necessarily what the students want. Therefore, there may be a disconnect between teaching and learning. |
| Using self-learning grammar books as classroom based activities (e.g. Raymond Murphy series).            | The activities are tedious and decontextualised; there is too much overt instruction; only focuses on declarative knowledge.   |
| Addressing grammar problems which occur in context (incidental grammar teaching).                        | The students may not learn; they can just fix problems there and then.   |

The above three approaches are usually regarded as boring and repetitive (Nunan, 1998; Thornbury, 1999). On the other hand, the task-based approach that many advocates propose (Long, 2001; Nunan, 1993, 1998) does not incorporate any learning theories, but over-emphasises the communicative aspect of learning, seemingly isolating cognitive theories of learning. As Kumaravadivelu (2003) suggests, in this ‘post method’ era, teachers need to explore the possibilities and practicalities of context-based teaching techniques based on their experience, reflections and research in teaching.

This approach not only embraces task-based learning but also incorporates explicit instruction in learning, while acknowledging relevance and usefulness as stimulating factors that enforce student engagement with classroom endeavours. In summary, the two in one approach acknowledges and advocates the following principles in grammar learning and teaching:

1. Grammar teaching should involve both implicit and explicit learning techniques.
2. The learning tasks should be relevant, adequately challenging, and engaging for students to experience learning flow.

Teachers can obtain indicators of students’ flow experience by using a simple questionnaire such as that provided in the Appendix.

## **6. Conclusion**

Making grammar learning interesting and useful is often regarded as a challenge for ALL practitioners. Grammar teaching should involve not only examining the accurate form, but also exploring meaning in context which affects the overall communication. With the increasing numbers of international students studying in Australian universities, developing an effective pedagogy for grammar is an essential task that will benefit both students and ALL practitioners. The rationale for the approach proposed in this paper suggests a promising connection between theory and practice. Building teacher cognition and awareness of key theories from key thinkers and thinking about their application in practice can assist ALL teachers to develop a “coherent and cogent approach” (Barrett-Lennard et al., 2011, p. 100) in language proficiency development. Achievements made in the fields of ESL and EAP practice result not only from the experience and insight from practitioners, but also from the research and consideration of multiple perspectives of the behaviourist, cognitive, social learning, and socio-cultural learning theorists. As Albert Einstein is reported to have said “in theory, theory and practice are the same. In practice, they are not”. Therefore, ALL practitioners are challenged to adopt theory wisely in practice. Pluralism is demanding but it has promising potential effects in diverse, multicultural, and multilevel language learning classrooms.



This paper has therefore proposed an approach that embeds Sfard's (1998) two metaphors of learning. It has also considered incorporating characteristics of flow in grammar teaching to make learning pleasurable and engaging. If learners can experience flow, as Csikszentmihalyi states, they can demonstrate optimal performance in their learning by maintaining their utmost concentration, ignoring external and internal distractors. As students' grammatical competence is one of the criteria in developing their language proficiency standards, ALL practitioners should be equipped with innovative and effective strategies to assist students to improve their grammar skills, as well as to develop students' independent exploration of English grammar use and functions to facilitate their communicative competence in both speaking and writing.

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## Appendix

### Grammar for thesis writing

**Day/date:**

**Please tick the relevant box about the workshop today.**

**Please tick the appropriate box:**

| Criteria  | Agree | Not sure | Disagree |
|---|-------|----------|----------|
| I was completely involved in the lesson: focused and concentrated.                        |       |          |          |
| I had a sense of joy of (being outside everyday reality).                                 |       |          |          |
| The tasks were clear: I was sure what to do and knew I was doing it for my own good.      |       |          |          |
| Activities were doable and we had enough skills to do them.                               |       |          |          |
| I did not have any personal worries when I was doing the tasks.                           |       |          |          |
| I did not really feel time running.   |       |          |          |
| I realised that the activities were for my own good and I was feeling good all this time. |       |          |          |

**Other comments about the tasks and topics you learned**

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