

# The persistence of grammar

Scott Thornbury  
The New School, NY

‘We shall never improve our ability to create [the] favourable conditions [for language learning] until we learn more about the way a learner learns and what his built-in syllabus is’.

Corder, S.P. (1967) ‘The significance of learners’ errors,’ reprinted in Richards, J.C. (ed.) (1984) *Error analysis: perspectives on second language acquisition*. Harlow: Longman, p. 27.

'Grammatical syllabuses cannot easily accommodate the essential nature of L2 acquisition...'

Ellis, R. and Shintani, N. 2014, *Exploring language pedagogy through second language acquisition research*. London: Routledge.

'Instruction cannot affect the route of L2 development in any fundamental way.'

Ortega. L. 2011. 'Sequences and processes in language learning' in M.H. Long, and C.J. Doughty, C.J. (eds) *The Handbook of Language Teaching*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

“From the perspective of emergent grammar ... learning an additional language is about enhancing one’s repertoire of fragments and patterns that enables participation in a wider array of communicative activities. It is not about building up a complete and perfect grammar in order to produce well-formed sentences.”

Lantolf, J. and Thorne, S. (2006) *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.17.

“Grammar instruction has been relatively unaltered by research findings. It remains traditional for the most part, with grammar teaching centred on accuracy of form and rule learning, and with mechanical exercises seen as the way to bring about the learning of grammar.”

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2015) ‘Research into practice: grammar learning and teaching.’ *Language Teaching*, 48, 363-280, p. 263.

So, why does the grammatical syllabus persist? Why are general English coursebooks almost all organized around a grammatical syllabus? Why do the curricula of language teaching institutions almost all follow a grammatical syllabus?

# To what do you attribute the persistence of the grammar syllabus?

1	Students expect it.	497 / 49%
2	ELT publishers are unwilling to take risks with alternative ways of organizing cours...	483 / 48%
3	Most examinations test grammar, so a grammar syllabus is the best preparation.	437 / 43%
4	Teachers prefer it.	385 / 38%
5	The SLA researchers are wrong: grammar is the basis of fluency, like it or not.	105 / 10%
6	The alternatives (e.g. a task-based syllabus) are unworkable.	99 / 10%
7	other	69 / 7%



## How many years have you been teaching?

999 out of 1042 people answered this question



## Who do you teach?

1010 out of 1042 people answered this question



## *Student expectations:*

- “Students never expect grammar at an early age. However, when they get older they do.”
- “Adults often demand grammar, and see regular grammatical terminology as a sign of a good teacher.”
- “Many students have been told that the only way to learn a language is through grammar.”

‘Since teachers *thought* that students *thought* that grammar was important, this is what they gave them.’

Canagarajah, A.S. 1999. *Resisting linguistic imperialism in English teaching*. Oxford University Press, p. 116.

## *English language teaching publishing:*

- “ELT publishers are usually 20-30 years behind what SLA research says.”
- “The stranglehold of a small number of publishers who also run exams results in the status quo.”
- “Grammar-based books are easier to write and easier to sell.”

## *Examinations:*

- “Some people see testing of grammatical items as best way to measure proficiency in a language.”
- “Without grammar, students won't be able to pass National Exam Tests.”
- “The national curriculum is completely based on a grammar syllabus.”

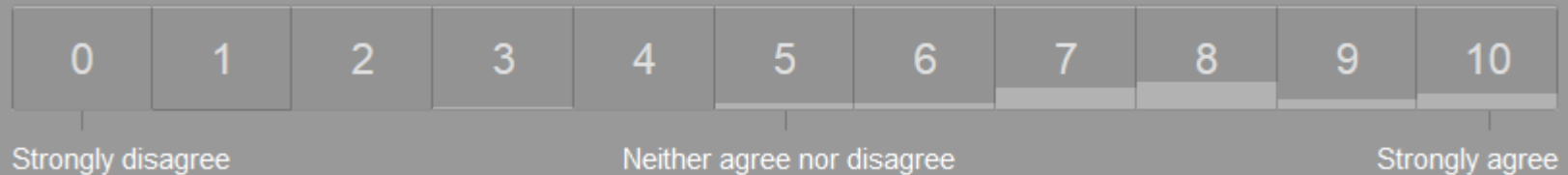
- “Grammar syllabus helps both teachers and students learn a language logically.”
- “Grammar is concrete; other criteria are just too slippery.”
- “It seems to provide a tangible sense of progression for students.”
- “Grammar is the backbone of the language. It is important but it is not the only thing.”
- “It ‘feels’ business-like and thorough, even if it's not necessarily the best way.”
- “Learning a new language is a conscious process and some attention to form is therefore important. Without it, mistakes are more likely to fossilise.”

- “While this may be true in SLA, I don't think it's true in English as a foreign language instruction.”
- “SLA is not an empirical science. So we should not be blindly guided by it.”
- “There seems to be no conclusive evidence to the premise that focusing on grammar is wrong.”

Students expect to be taught grammar because that's what they've always done at school.

249 out of 250 people answered this question

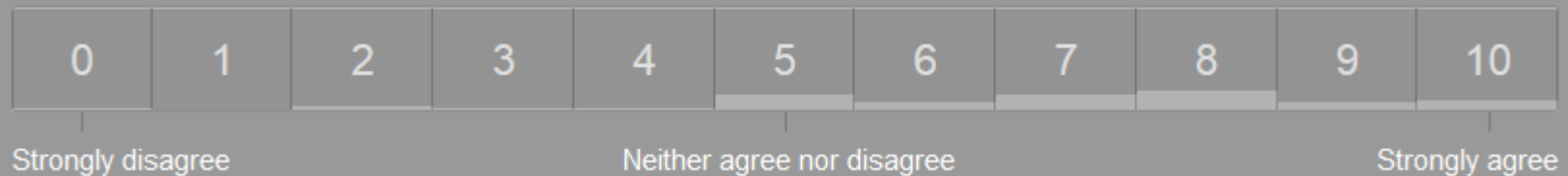
NPS: 5, Average: 7.42



Many teachers are ill prepared to teach anything other than a grammar syllabus.

247 out of 250 people answered this question

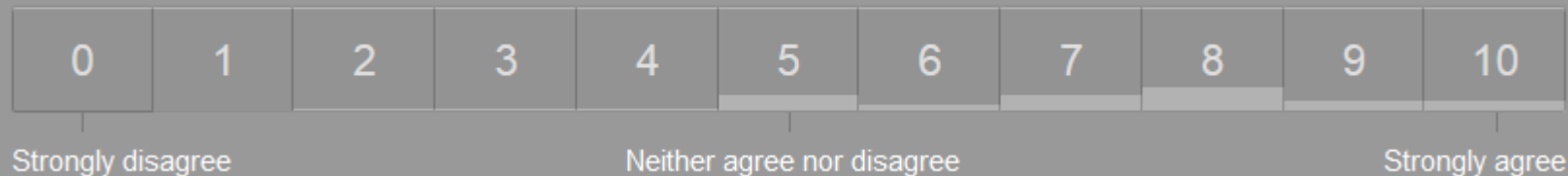
NPS: -21, Average: 6.55



Grammar-based books are easier to write and easier to sell.

245 out of 250 people answered this question

NPS: -12, Average: 6.89

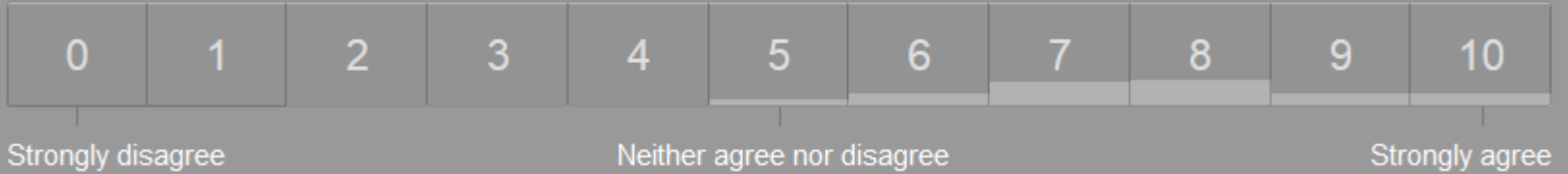




It's traditional. For many people learning a language means learning grammar.

245 out of 250 people answered this question

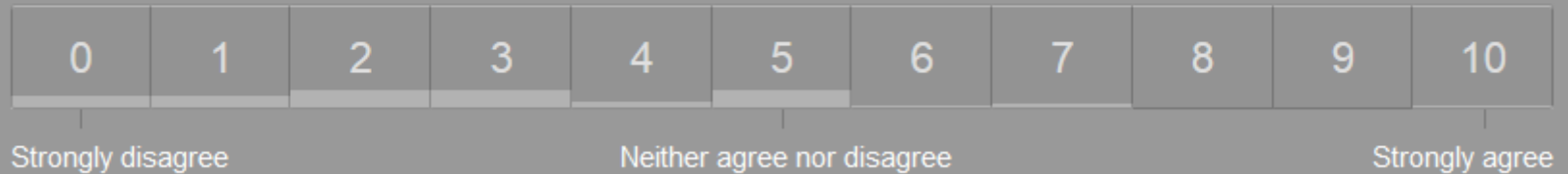
NPS: 1, Average: 7.38



Grammar is the first and the most essential factor in any language.

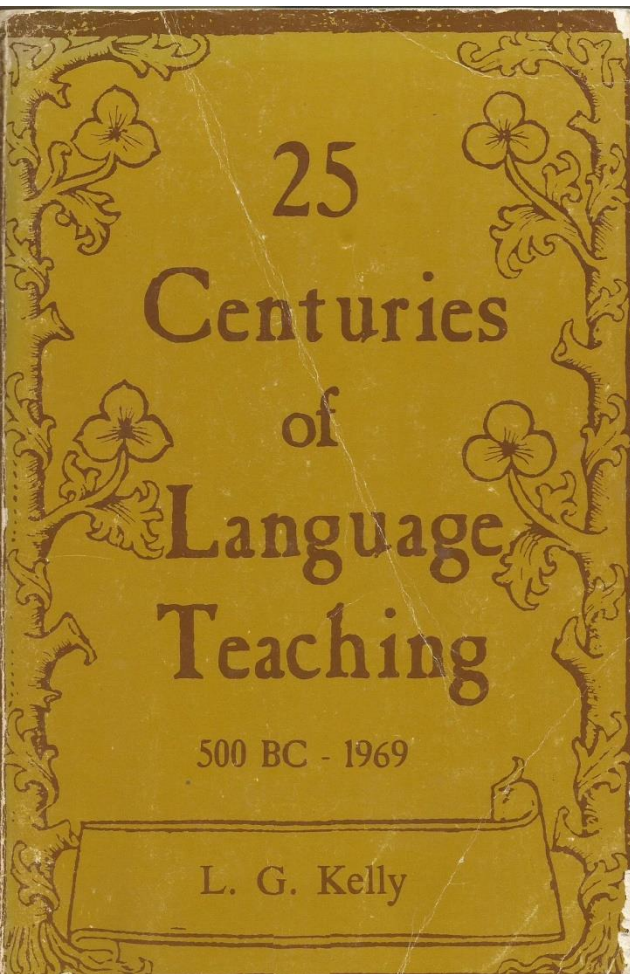
247 out of 250 people answered this question

NPS: -87, Average: 3.19



“Language teaching is increasingly prepackaged and delivered as if it were a standardised, marketable product...”

Lin, A. 2013. Toward paradigmatic change in TESOL methodologies: building plurilingual pedagogies from the ground up, *TESOL Quarterly*, 47/3.



“The place of grammar in the learning process has never been really clear, for even when the tide has been running in a certain direction, some teachers have always tried the opposite.”

Kelly, L. G. (1969) *25 centuries of language teaching*. Rowley MA: Newbury House. p.222.

Thanks!

[www.scottthornbury.com](http://www.scottthornbury.com)

<http://newsmanager.commpartners.com/tesolalis/issues/2018-03-09/3.html>