

# What are your high school language students complaining about today?

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One of my friends is a high school language teacher, and I used to ask her, “So, what are your students complaining about today?” That was back when her school used the traditional “First we learn the personal pronouns, then we learn the present tense of regular verbs, then we learn nouns in nominative case...” grammar-based language acquisition system. That system works reasonably well for me (although I prefer to learn the major points all at once rather than in pieces), but it requires an appreciation for rules (and their exceptions) that most high school language students don’t really have.

That’s why I like to ask her what her students are complaining about. One day it’ll be “Why do I have to learn noun genders?”, another day, it’ll be “Why do we have to change the form of the verb depending on who the subject is?”, and another day it’ll be “Why are there two different past tenses?” These students usually fail to realize that their own native language suffers from the same (if not more) “Why?” questions. Why does English have both a simple present tense and a present tense with progressive aspect? (And why are there so many exceptions? For example, why can’t you say “He is owing me five dollars”?)

Anyway, one day, when I asked her, “What are your students complaining about today?” I was expecting another point of grammar. What I wasn’t expecting was, “They want to know why they need to learn synonyms.”

I guess they figured that once they learned the word *big*, there would be no need to know words like *large*, *huge*, *grand*, *massive*, or *vast*.

I no longer ask this question, because my friend now teaches based on the principle of comprehensible input, wherein students are exposed to the language by means more closely mimicking the natural way language is acquired: employing stories and conversations, and using contextual or visual cues to infer the meanings of unknown words and tenses instead of learning them from a vocabulary list and a rule sheet. And it’s working fantastically. Now I don’t have to ask her about how the students are doing: She happily volunteers it! A few years ago, she was excited about students in their sixth week of class reading a story that would have stymied second-year students under the old system. Another story that stands out for

me was students who knew where to put accent marks in relatively unfamiliar words even though they were never formally taught the rules on accent marks; they just used their gut feeling.

Most recently, it was “I formally introduced the past tense and asked one student to give me a sentence in the past tense. He said that when he was younger, he once took his dad’s car for a joy ride. Well, that quickly led to a game of one-upsmanship with students fighting to tell their own stories of juvenile delinquency. And they all used the past tense.” Sure, they didn’t get the irregular verbs quite right, but hey, they didn’t get the irregular verbs right when they were learning English for the first time, either.

Happy birthday, Rebecca!

Raymond Chen

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