

Teaching Grammar: Overcoming the Inert Knowledge Problem

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Alfred North Whitehead wrote about the “inert knowledge problem,” whereby students learn what they are taught in the classroom, but they cannot use it for their own purposes. I think that this problem especially applies to grammar teaching. Students are taught rules, but they cannot apply them in communication.

In this talk, I will suggest that the inert knowledge problem can be overcome, if we think differently about grammar. We need to think of grammar as a dynamic system. Thinking differently will also mean that we will teach differently. We will teach grammaring, not grammar. We will address the learning challenges of our students. We will teach reasons, instead of, or in addition to rules. And we will conduct activities that are “psychologically authentic.”

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Diane Larsen-Freeman is currently a research scientist at the English Language Institute, as well as a professor of education, professor of linguistics, and faculty associate of the Center for the Study of Complex Systems at Michigan. Her interests include second language acquisition, language teacher education, English linguistics, language teaching methodology, and complexity theory. Larsen-Freeman has delivered plenary addresses at conferences in more than sixty countries around the world and is the author of eight books. She was the editor of the journal *Language Learning* for five years.