

Chapter 17

Four Ways to Overcome Persistent Grammar Difficulties

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A. THE CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGE

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, mastery of grammar is often viewed as a key indicator of language proficiency. However, success in grammar instruction does not always correlate directly with learners' ability to use those structures accurately and consistently. The phenomenon of persistent grammar difficulties refers to a situation where learners continue to make the same grammatical errors even after receiving repeated instruction, practice, and feedback. This issue indicates that explicitly knowing a grammatical rule does not necessarily mean that learners are able to access and apply it automatically in real-world language use. Research on second-language (L2) grammar acquisition also shows that explicit instruction can help learners with specific structures, but its effects do not always extend to other grammatical contexts (Wu & Ionin, 2022). Thus, persistent grammatical difficulties should be understood not merely as a lack of knowledge about rules, but as a complex issue related to the processes of acquisition, processing, practice, and the transfer of grammatical knowledge into communication.

This issue has become increasingly relevant as the debate over the effectiveness of grammar instruction continues to this day.

Although there is a tendency for pedagogical interventions in grammar to benefit second-language development, questions remain regarding the form, intensity, timing, and teaching methods that are most effective in producing lasting mastery (Pawlak, 2021; Toth, 2022). Similarly, written corrective feedback (WCF) has been widely used to help improve grammatical accuracy, but research findings have not yet yielded fully consistent conclusions regarding the form of feedback that is most effective in promoting long-term L2 accuracy (Brown et al., 2023). In fact, technological advancements such as automated written corrective feedback do not automatically guarantee improvements in the complexity, accuracy, and fluency of students' writing (Fan, 2023). This situation points to an unresolved problem: why certain grammatical errors persist even after learners have received instruction and correction, and what factors prevent acquired grammatical knowledge from fully developing into stable language proficiency. Therefore, this chapter is important for discussing persistent grammatical difficulties more critically, by examining the underlying factors, the limitations of the learning approaches that have been used so far, and possible pedagogical strategies that can help bridge the gap between knowing the rule and using the rule accurately and consistently.

B. THE PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

Persistent grammatical difficulties require solutions that focus not only on the repetition of rules, but also on grammatical knowledge that is understood, practiced, used, and maintained in the context of communication. Research evidence shows that explicit instruction can have a positive impact on second language development, but its effectiveness is influenced by the type of instruction, the form of practice, the intensity, the duration, and the way learning is implemented (Li & Sun, 2024). Solutions to persistent grammar difficulties need to be systematic and sustained. This section offers four practical approaches: (1) error diagnosis and personalized learning, (2) explicit and contextual grammar instruction, (3) the application of appropriate and ongoing corrective feedback, and (4) repeated practice through the use of grammar in real-world

communication. These four approaches are expected to help bridge the gap between knowing grammar rules and being able to use them accurately in various contexts.

Error Diagnosis and Personalized Learning

The first step in addressing persistent grammatical difficulties is to specifically identify the types of errors learners make. It is not enough for teachers to simply assign grades or mark answers as correct or incorrect; they must conduct error diagnosis to identify recurring error patterns, such as errors in tense usage, subject–verb agreement, articles, prepositions, or sentence structure. This approach is important because the level of difficulty of a grammatical structure is determined not only by the structure’s own characteristics but also by the learner’s proficiency level and first-language background. Schenck (2021) notes that corrective feedback is significantly influenced by grammatical features, proficiency level, and the learner’s first language. Teachers need to analyze each learner’s error profile and determine which structures truly require intervention. In practice, this can be done through diagnostic tests, analysis of students’ writing and speech, error logs, and documentation of recurring errors. The diagnostic results are then used to prioritize learning so that students receive instruction on the material that is causing them difficulty.

Explicit and Contextual Grammar Instruction

The next solution is to combine explicit instruction with practice in using grammar. Explicit instruction does not mean that learning must revert to methods that rely solely on memorizing formulas; rather, teachers can briefly explain the patterns, functions, and differences in the use of a particular structure before giving students the opportunity to apply it (Aprizani et al., 2018). A meta-analysis by Li and Sun (2024) of 28 research reports involving 67 samples showed that explicit instruction has a positive effect on L2 development, although its effectiveness is influenced by the type of instruction, the form of practice, the method of delivery, as well as the duration and intensity of learning. Therefore, learning can be designed in a cycle of

explanation–guided practice–meaningful practice–independent use (Hasbi, 2025). For example, after learning the simple past tense, students are not only asked to complete multiple-choice questions but also to use that structure to recount past experiences, write a short personal narrative, or conduct an interview with a classmate. This approach helps connect declarative knowledge of the rules with the procedural skills needed to apply them.

Specific, Selective, and Ongoing Corrective Feedback

Corrective feedback needs to be an integral part of the learning process, but corrections must be provided strategically. Marking every error does not necessarily lead to long-term progress if students are not given the opportunity to understand, correct, and reuse the incorrect structures. Kang's (2022) meta-analysis shows that written corrective feedback has a positive effect on L2 grammatical accuracy, both on immediate and delayed tests, although the effect tends to be smaller in long-term measurements. These findings highlight the importance of follow-up after feedback is provided. Teachers can use focused feedback, which involves concentrating on a few grammatical errors that are the primary targets, and then asking students to perform self-correction, revision, and retesting. In addition to written feedback, recasts can also be used in oral interactions. Rassaei's (2022) meta-analysis found that recasts have a moderate overall effect on L2 development and can support the development of both explicit and implicit knowledge, particularly in a foreign language context. Thus, feedback should be viewed as a cycle rather than a one-time action: identify → explain → correct → revise → reuse → reassess.

Repetitive Practice Through Communication and Real-World Application

Persistent errors can also occur when learners are able to answer controlled exercises but revert to making mistakes when they have to speak or write spontaneously. Therefore, grammar instruction needs to progress gradually from controlled activities toward more free and communicative language use. After receiving explanations and

targeted practice, students need opportunities to use the same structures in various situations and at different times. This approach is important because research shows that the effectiveness of grammar instruction is influenced by the type of task, the form of assessment, the proficiency level, and the duration and intensity of learning; thus, there is no single approach that can be applied equally to all learners (Hwang, 2023). In practice, teachers can implement spaced practice by reintroducing previously learned structures in new tasks several days or weeks later, for example through speaking tasks, journaling, peer interaction, presentations, or writing projects. Student progress is also measured through tasks that resemble real-world language use, not just through multiple-choice tests. In this way, the learning objective shifts from merely “remembering grammatical rules” to “using grammatical knowledge accurately, consistently, and meaningfully.”

C. THE FUTURE DIRECTION

The discussion on persistent grammar difficulties shows that such difficulties should not be viewed as problems that can be resolved simply by increasing the amount of practice or repeating the same rule explanations. Section A has shown that grammatical errors can persist even after learners have received instruction, while Section B offers a practical approach involving error diagnosis, explicit and contextual instruction, corrective feedback, and repeated practice in communication. Moving forward, the main challenge is how to transform this approach into adaptive, continuous, and language-use-oriented learning. Findings by Li and Sun (2024) indicate that explicit instruction is indeed effective in supporting L2 development, but its effectiveness is influenced by the type of instruction, the form of practice, the method of delivery, duration, intensity, and the type of learning outcome assessment. This means that the question we need to ask is no longer whether grammar should be taught explicitly, but rather how, when, to whom, and under what conditions such instruction is most effective. This perspective encourages teachers to move away from a one-size-fits-all approach and develop

interventions that are more responsive to each learner’s error patterns and needs.

One important point to note is that short-term success does not always indicate long-term learning success. This is evident in research on written corrective feedback (WCF). Kang’s (2022) meta-analysis found that WCF has a positive effect on L2 grammatical accuracy, but the effect decreases from moderate on immediate post-tests to small to moderate on delayed post-tests. The type of feedback and the genre of the writing task also influence these results. These findings have important implications for learning: teachers should not assume that students have mastered a particular structure simply because they were able to correct it immediately after receiving feedback. Instead, delayed assessment, the reuse of the structure in different contexts, and monitoring for the recurrence of the same errors are necessary. Digital technology and computer-mediated corrective feedback can also be promising complements because they allow for faster and repeated feedback, but technology should serve as a supportive tool, not a substitute for teachers’ pedagogical judgment (Fajaria et al., 2026). Thus, the future direction of grammar instruction needs to balance the efficiency of technology with human-centered diagnosis, interaction, and an understanding of individual learning processes.

Ultimately, addressing persistent grammar difficulties requires a shift in focus from “eliminating errors” to “building the ability to use language accurately and consistently.” Teachers need to view errors as diagnostic data that can be used to determine subsequent interventions, while learners need to be engaged in the process of noticing, self-correction, reflection, and monitoring their own progress. The key recommendation for future practice is to establish a continuous learning cycle: diagnose → teach → practice → give feedback → revise → reuse → reassess. This cycle ensures that grammar learning does not stop at the declarative mastery of rules but evolves toward more automatic use in communication. For future research, more longitudinal studies are needed to measure the sustainability of changes—not just immediate outcomes following an intervention—as well as studies comparing combinations of strategies—such as explicit instruction, spaced practice, corrective

feedback, and technology—across different learner contexts. From this perspective, persistent grammar difficulties are understood not only as problems to be overcome, but also as a foundation for designing grammar instruction that is more personalized, adaptive, evidence-based, and oriented toward long-term development,

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