

“What is Mastery Learning, and How Does It Apply to Teaching Grammar?”

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When I present my seminar, “Using Active Learning to Teach Grammar Easily and Effectively,” to home educators, I share that I don’t expect them to LOVE grammar. I do, however, ask them to pretend to love it. After the laughter subsides, I explain that their children usually know how a parent feels about each subject. If you approach teaching English with a ho-hum attitude, it, most certainly, won’t seem very interesting. Therefore, I ask parents to be enthusiastic and energetic about English—even if it requires a bit of acting on their part.

For example, when teaching direct objects, I ask for parents to share the definition. The problem, however, is most students really don’t understand it. In my *Easy Grammar* texts, I suggest that parents “show” the concept. At each grade level, I ask them to provide the definition. Then, I ask them to say, “Now, let me show you an easy way to remember direct objects.” The parent is immediately asked to throw—as dramatically as possible—a plastic bowl across the room. This is immediately followed by, “I threw the bowl. What’s the object I threw.” Obviously, their response is *bowl*. That’s all a direct object is! I encourage parents to “do” other actions to reinforce the concept. This is an example of using **memorable learning!** Students understand, and they remember!

As a beginning teacher, I learned that grammar lends itself to too much seat work (i.e., boring). In addition, my seventh-grade students, when asked to discuss what they already knew the first day of class, could provide little more than the definition of a noun. Wait a minute! How could these students lack speaking and writing skills? I knew that they had studied the subject matter from Grades 1-6. Something was very wrong! The culprit soon became obvious; the texts were not set up for mastery learning!

What exactly is mastery learning? In a nutshell, it’s the ability to understand material at an automatic level. It’s like learning to tie your shoe! It took each of us a multitude of times to perfect the technique, but we learned it at the automaticity level.

In the 1980's, medical experts and other scientists—through CAT Scan Imaging and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)—found a way to see into the brain and to determine the many processes of learning. Until that time, we could only observe and theorize how the brain functioned. This “New Brain Research,” created a magnificent tool for educators. Through imaging, the process of how we learn—though extremely complex—was revealed. (The Lord is amazing!)

In a very simplistic explanation, this is how learning occurs. In the brain, millions of nerve cells communicate by electrical charges called synapses. Picture your hands as neurons and your fingers as dendrites. Wiggle your fingers! (You are now engaging in kinesthetics, which expedite learning!) Touch the tips of your index fingers lightly together. This connection, a synapse, creates an electrical impulse that produces learning. Dr. R., a seminar presenter, provided a visual picture. She asked seminar attendees to imagine an untouched wheat field. Then, attendees envisioned the first villager trampling through the wheat field, which created only a slight indentation. Eventually, after many “uses,” a path ensues. This is a metaphor for how learning occurs.

It is the goal of educators to provide a variety of ideas and strategies to ensure mastery learning. I have already mentioned incorporating memorable and kinesthetic learning. Other mastery strategies include a building-block, escalator-style approach when teaching concepts, cumulative learning, audio-visual learning, and cyclical learning.

As a new teacher, I realized that overwhelmed students (and adults) do not learn easily. It soon became apparent that the texts were teaching too much—too fast. My first goal became the analysis of a concept. After breaking down each concept into discreet skills, I taught the most basic skill for understanding before proceeding to the next discreet skill.

To assure that students maintain their learning for later expansion and application, I included cumulative reviews and cumulative tests **after each unit**. I developed this cumulative paradigm that enhanced mastery-learning in my *Easy Grammar Grades 3-5 & Plus* texts.

Audio-visual learning had already become relevant in 1970. As college students, we were taught that combining seeing and hearing simultaneously increased learning by 50 percent. Then, kinesthetic learning through songs and movement became popular. Children participate in fun activities that embedded learning.

At the beginning of my teaching career, I read the book, *Psycho-cybernetics*, by Dr. Maxwell Maltz. His study of how we change habits led him to theorize that 21-times are needed (on average) to change a habit. (If something is learned incorrectly, some suggest that the person needs 27 times to unlearn it and another 21 times to learn the correct use.) As a new teacher, I applied this to learning. Let me give you an example. A student says *had took* (incorrect), instead of *had taken* (correct). This is difficult to change because the inaccurate usage **SOUNDS RIGHT** to the student! It's my job to provide enough experiences for the student to incorporate the correct verbiage. See application of this on videos at www.easygrammar.com. Yes, you will see me galloping across the stage. I love kinesthetic learning!

Cyclical learning, another strategy, enhances mastery by repeating a concept over a period of time. My *Daily GRAMS* review books and teaching texts titled *Easy Grammar Ultimate Series: Grades 8, 9, 10, 11, & 12* offer this. Throughout the 180 DAYS (lessons), students use, apply, expand, etc., every so many days. Students who use these texts, actually, practice capitalization and punctuation as well as other concepts on a daily basis. This embeds understanding and produces mastery.

For more information regarding learning or to contact Dr. Wanda Phillips about her fun, fast-paced seminar, "Using Active Learning to Teach Grammar Easily and Effectively," contact her at wanda@easygrammar.com!