

The MENTALIST APPROACH

A FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR



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This book does not present the mentalistic approach as a new invention. The idea that language learning should involve logic, meaning, comparison, and conscious reflection is probably as old as language learning itself.

Modern structuralism partly defined itself against older logical and mentalistic approaches to language. Later, Chomsky returned the mind to the centre of linguistic theory, yet in practical language teaching this perspective never fully recovered a central place.

This book is an attempt to bring that perspective back into language teaching. It does not claim to offer a finished system. It is a beginning. Its main purpose is to show that a principled mentalistic approach to English grammar is possible.

The Author, Ilya Lapin

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Part I. Background and the Problem

Why ordinary exposure, communicative practice, and surface grammar lists do not make the conceptual structure of English visible enough for many adult learners.

Chapter 1. Background and the Problem

1.1 Why We Need to Separate the Components of a Method

There are many theories and methods in language teaching. But a method is never a single, indivisible thing. Any method is a combination of assumptions, priorities, classroom techniques, and beliefs about language and learning. For that reason, before we discuss methods, we need to separate their main components.

Following Richards and Rodgers, I distinguish two central parameters:

- A view of language — what we think language is.
- A view of learning — how we think language is acquired or learned.

These two parameters are related, but they should not be confused. A teacher may have one theory of language and another theory of learning, and different combinations produce different teaching styles.

For orientation, I will describe four broad views. They are not mutually exclusive. In practice, they often complement one another. Nothing prevents us from combining general practice with narrow, focused work on specific aspects of language.

Structuralism

From a structuralist perspective, language can be divided into linguistic components: grammar, vocabulary, phonology, morphology, and syntax. Grammar can then be divided into smaller patterns: tenses, modal verbs, conditional sentences, passive constructions, and so on.

This view is useful because it gives teachers clear objects of instruction. We can isolate a pattern, present it, practise it, and test it. But the danger is reductionism: language begins to look like a mechanical construction set, while meaning, context, and mental representation are pushed into the background.

The Cognitive / Mentalistic View

From a cognitive perspective, language is not simply learned as a list of external patterns. In some sense, we discover language. We do not learn our native language the same way we learn a school subject, just as we do not learn to walk by memorising rules. This is the general direction associated with universal grammar, generative grammar, and other mentalistic approaches.

The important point is that the learner is not a blank slate. The learner already has cognitive structures, a native language, concepts, expectations, and a developing internal grammar. Teaching should therefore not only present forms; it should help the learner reorganise the internal system through which forms are interpreted.

Pragmatism

Language can also be divided by function. We can organise teaching around the ability to perform specific tasks: booking a hotel room, apologising, asking for directions, passing an exam, writing an email, or taking part in a job interview. This is the logic behind functional syllabuses, CEFR categories, and many communicative coursebooks.

The advantage is obvious: each lesson has a practical goal. The student learns something immediately usable. But the danger is that language becomes fragmented into situations and useful phrases, while the deeper grammatical and semantic system remains underdeveloped.

The Holistic View

The holistic view starts from the opposite intuition: language learning is an extremely complex process. Any division of language into grammar, vocabulary, skills, functions, or situations inevitably reduces something. Natural language is idiomatic, context-dependent, socially embedded, and partly unpredictable.

From this perspective, learning should happen through meaningful exposure, communication, reading, listening, and task performance. The learner should focus on meaning rather than on linguistic forms. This family of ideas includes input-based approaches, task-based language teaching, Dogme, and other emergent or usage-based views.

This view captures something real: language is too complex to be fully taught item by item. But taken to an extreme, it becomes methodologically vague. If we simply say “communicate more,” we still have to explain why many adults communicate for years and remain fossilised.

1.2 Language Learning: Habit, Study, Practice, and Natural Development

One of the central questions in language teaching has always been this: why do children acquire their first language relatively easily, while adults, despite discipline, analytical ability, and an existing native language, often struggle with a foreign language?

During the behaviourist period, language was understood mainly as habit. The native language was often seen as a bad habit that interfered with the target language. The solution seemed simple: do not explain too much, do not encourage translation, and do not make students think about rules. Instead, drill the patterns of the target language until they become automatic.

This view was primitive because it was linear. It treated language as stimulus and response. But it was not entirely useless. Associative memory exists. Repetition works. Spaced repetition works. Drilling can work. The army can train behaviour through repeated commands. The sergeant is not interested in what the soldier is thinking; he is interested in the visible results, which are expressed in behaviour. To achieve this, the sergeant provides the necessary incentive in the form of assignments and leave. Apps such as Pimsleur, Glossika, Rocket Languages, Rosetta Stone, and many modern “immersion” tools still rely on some version of this logic.

The problem is that behaviour alone cannot explain a system as complex as human language. Tolman’s maze experiments, for example, showed that even rats do not simply memorise a linear sequence of turns. They build a mental map. Human language obviously requires much more than habit.

After Chomsky’s critique of Skinner, behaviourism lost much of its theoretical authority. But in classroom practice, the change was less radical than it may seem. Teachers still needed techniques. They still needed syllabuses. They still needed exercises. The old structural approach did not disappear; it was simply mixed with meaning, context, and communication.

This eventually produced PPP — Presentation, Practice, Production — and later the weak version of Communicative Language Teaching, represented in many familiar coursebooks.

At the other extreme, input-based and task-based theories argued that language should develop implicitly. The learner should focus on meaning, not on form. If the learner is absorbed in a task, a conversation, or a book, natural acquisition processes are supposed to take over.

Pattern practice is useful because many practical goals do not require full grammatical understanding. A learner can use fixed frames such as *I've never been to...*, *Have you ever...?*, or *I'd like to...* as ready-made chunks. For many classroom and survival goals, that is not a defect; it is exactly what the learner needs. Communicative training is also useful when the target is a practical task, such as ordering food, asking for directions, or handling a simple conversation. The problem begins when we expect chunks and task routines to reorganise the learner's whole grammar. They can make speech more fluent and more useful, but they do not necessarily teach the learner how English distributes meaning across aspect, articles, auxiliaries, particles, word order, and larger constructions.

1.3 Empiricism and Rationalism

The deeper theoretical split behind many teaching methods is the old philosophical opposition between empiricism and rationalism.

In its radical form, empiricism claims that knowledge comes from experience and the senses. Its preferred methods are observation, experimentation, and induction.

Rationalism, by contrast, claims that logic, mental structure, and the ability to reason are not derived entirely from experience. They are necessary conditions for organising experience. Its preferred methods are deduction, analysis, and theoretical explanation.

These views do not have to contradict each other. Kant, for example, tried to synthesise them: knowledge requires sensory experience, but it also requires mental structures that organise that experience.

In ELT today, empiricism dominates. Methodologists often appeal to corpora, classroom observation, psycholinguistics, and measurable performance. This gives their theories the appearance of scientific grounding. But there is a danger: as with behaviourism, what is measurable is not necessarily what is most important. Many theories remain at a rather primitive level because they focus on external performance and avoid the internal organisation of language.

The opposite danger is rationalism detached from reality. Highly abstract theories may become difficult to test or apply. This is one reason many teachers found Chomsky's ideas hard to use directly. His theories moved deeper into formal grammar and biolinguistics, while teachers needed practical classroom tools.

The point is not that one side is right and the other is wrong. The point is that different methods inherit different assumptions. Some begin with observable usage. Others begin with mental structure. Some describe what learners do. Others try to explain the hidden system that makes language possible.

1.4 Structuralism and the Linguistic Sign

Modern empirical approaches to language teaching have deep roots in structuralism. Ferdinand de Saussure is usually treated as one of the founders of modern linguistics. His work helped turn linguistics into an independent discipline and influenced many later approaches to language.

Saussure treated language as a dynamic semiotic system. Elements of the system acquire their value through their relation to other elements. Language is not just a list of words attached to things in the world. It is a structured system of differences.

The Arbitrariness of the Sign

There is no natural reason why a *dog* is called *dog* in English or *собака* in Russian. The sign is arbitrary. At the same time, form and meaning are inseparable: a linguistic sign consists of a sound or written form and the concept associated with it.

This principle remains central in modern ELT. Construction grammar expands it by saying that the form- meaning pairing does not apply only to individual words. Larger patterns and constructions can also be signs.

Signification and Value

Some words have relatively clear referential meanings. A word like *giraffe* points to a recognisable kind of animal. Other words depend much more on their relation to neighbouring words, synonyms, antonyms, and context.

For example, *assume* and *presume* may both be translated into Russian as “предполагать,” but they are not identical. The same applies to *reach*, *accomplish*, *achieve*, *obtain*, *gain*, *attain*, and *get*. Their meanings are shaped partly by the fact that they exist in contrast with one another.

This is the difference between a word’s general signification and its value in the system.

Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Relations

If we take the word *fate* and replace the first letter, we get *date*, *gate*, *late*, *rate*, and *hate*. The relation between f, d, g, l, r, and h is paradigmatic: they are possible alternatives in one position. The relation between f and ate is syntagmatic: they combine in sequence.

These two types of relation appear at every level of language: phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics.

Lexical approaches often rely on paradigmatic manipulation. A learner can begin with a chunk such as:

I haven’t seen you for ages.

Then the pattern can be varied:

- I haven’t seen him for ages.
- I haven’t seen him since high school.
- I haven’t heard from her for ages.

This is useful, but it is still structurally limited. It shows how chunks can become productive, but it does not fully explain the underlying semantic system.

Langue and Parole

Saussure also distinguished between *langue* and *parole*. *Langue* is the shared abstract system of a language. *Parole* is individual language use.

We all speak slightly differently, but we understand one another because we participate in the same language system. I may read Tolstoy or Dickens without difficulty, but I cannot write like them. Their style belongs to *parole*. The shared system that makes their language understandable belongs to *langue*.

For most learners, it makes sense to idealise the language to some degree. Slang, jokes, regional speech, and small talk belong more to the periphery. A teacher does not have to treat every possible usage as equally central.

1.5 The Structural Approach and Behaviourism

Before the twentieth century, grammar-translation dominated much of European language education. Students studied Latin and later modern languages through rules, translation, and isolated sentences. Spoken ability often remained weak.

The Direct Method arose as a reaction against this. The native language and formal study were blamed for failure. Language began to be seen as a habit to be developed naturally through use.

Harold Palmer's Oral Approach in the 1920s was less radical. It allowed some use of the first language and some explicit instruction, but it still prioritised listening, speaking, idiomatic language, and substitution tables.

The structural approach reached its peak in the 1950s, when behaviourism had strong influence. The basic idea was that language learning meant practising the patterns and structures of the target language until the correct response became automatic. The audiolingual and aural-oral methods grew out of this logic.

The classroom metaphor was simple: language is like a construction set, or like beads on a string. Students build sentences by combining pieces.

Chomsky's generative grammar challenged this metaphor. Even morphemes do not behave like simple beads on a string. Their form and interpretation depend on a deeper computational system. Language is creative and unbounded, not merely a finite set of trained responses.

This created a problem for teachers. The existing methods were clearly insufficient, but the new theories were too abstract to apply directly. Teachers needed a practical alternative.

1.6 Communicative Language Teaching

Before discussing Chomsky's influence on SLA, it is useful to look at Communicative Language Teaching, because it became the dominant practical response in many classrooms.

After behaviourism declined, teachers needed broader theories that could take into account meaning and use. Functional linguistics, associated with Michael Halliday, and sociolinguistics, especially Dell Hymes's concept of communicative competence, helped provide this foundation.

Hymes introduced communicative competence as a contrast to purely linguistic competence. Later, Canale and Swain divided it into several components:

- Grammatical competence: knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, sentence structure, and phonology.
- Sociolinguistic competence: the ability to use language appropriately in social context.
- Discourse competence: the ability to combine forms and meanings into coherent spoken or written texts.
- Strategic competence: the ability to compensate for communication breakdowns and make communication effective.

The main idea was to replace purely linguistic building blocks with functional ones. Instead of organising the syllabus only around grammar, teachers could organise it around situations, functions, and notions.

Situations

Examples include: at the airport, at the restaurant, at the doctor's office, in a hotel, in a shop.

Functions

Examples include: apologising, thanking, expressing an opinion, asking for help, giving advice.

Notions

Examples include: time, place, quantity, quality, duration, frequency, possibility.

This new syllabus had an obvious advantage. Practical situations can be divided into lessons quite easily. A lesson can have a clear goal: after this lesson, the student can book a hotel room or ask for directions.

Basic grammar, by contrast, is abstract and slow to acquire. It cannot always be divided into neat lessons that students fully master before moving on.

However, Communicative Language Teaching did not survive in its original form. It split into two branches. The weak version mixed communication with older grammar-based teaching and eventually produced the familiar coursebook model: a bit of grammar, a bit of vocabulary, a text, a listening task, a speaking task, and some functional language.

The strong version developed into Task-Based Language Teaching.

The weak version of CLT is practical, but theoretically thin. It often looks like a mixture of structuralism, pragmatism, and a little holistic practice. It gives teachers an organised classroom routine, but it does not provide a deep account of how abstract grammar becomes part of the learner's internal system.

1.7 Saussure, Chomsky, and Two Visions of Language

The broad contrast can be summarised as two different orientations.

On one side, we have an empirical, Saussurean, usage-oriented tradition:

- bottom-up
- community-based
- descriptive
- functional
- focused on form-meaning mappings
- interested in corpora, discourse, patterns, associations, and usage

On the other side, we have a rationalist, Chomskyan, mentalistic tradition:

- top-down
- mind-based
- explanatory
- formal
- interested in rules, computations, transformations, deep structure, and mathematical rigour

This contrast is not absolute, but it is useful. ELT has mostly remained on the Saussurean side. It focuses on usage, functions, patterns, chunks, and performance. It asks what learners can do visibly.

Chomsky's approach asks a different question: what kind of internal system makes language possible?

This is why the issue of language and thought becomes important. Language is not only a tool for communication. It is also connected to thought, planning, abstraction, and mental representation.

Saussure argued that without language, thought is vague and indistinct. Wittgenstein famously wrote that the limits of language are the limits of the world. Chomsky went further in a different direction: for him, language is a mental organ, more fundamental than communication. Communication is partly a side effect of an internal computational system.

This view is difficult to translate into classroom method. But it raises a crucial point: if language is partly an internal generative system, then teaching cannot be reduced to external usage, communicative functions, or chunks.

1.8 The Mentalistic Period in SLA

When Chomsky's ideas became influential, teachers and researchers tried to apply them to second language acquisition. This produced a cluster of related ideas:

- error analysis
- interlanguage
- natural order
- U-shaped learning
- acquisition vs learning

Error Analysis

S. P. Corder argued that learner errors are not random. They are systematic and cannot always be explained by interference from the native language. He distinguished between errors and mistakes.

Errors reflect the learner's developing system; mistakes are slips.

This idea made learner language look more like child language. When a child says something like *this mummy chair*, we do not treat it as a meaningless failure. We treat it as a normal stage in development.

Interlanguage and Natural Order

Selinker's concept of interlanguage developed this idea further. Learners build an internal language system that is neither their native language nor the target language. This system develops in stages.

Researchers also looked for natural orders of acquisition, both in first and second language learning. The idea was that certain structures are acquired earlier and others later, regardless of the order in which they are taught.

This led to the distinction between **teachability** and **learnability**. Not everything that is taught can be acquired immediately. A learner may not be developmentally ready for a structure, even if the teacher has presented it clearly.

This became one of the main critiques of PPP. The external grammar syllabus and the learner's internal syllabus do not necessarily match.

U-Shaped Learning

U-shaped learning shows that development is not linear. A learner may first use an irregular form correctly, then overgeneralise a rule, and later return to the correct form.

For example:

- The learner does not mark past tense: eat.
- The learner uses the correct irregular form: ate.
- The learner overgeneralises: eaten.
- The learner may produce a hybrid form: ated.
- The learner stabilises the correct form: ate.

This supports the idea that learners are not simply imitating. They are constructing and reconstructing rules.

Krashen and the Acquisition/Learning Distinction

Stephen Krashen made these ideas popular, but also pushed them to an extreme. His most controversial claim is not merely that acquisition and learning are different, but that learning does not become acquisition. In other words, explicit grammar explanation and correction do not significantly contribute to acquired competence.

According to Krashen, acquisition is subconscious and childlike. It happens when attention is focused on meaning. Learning is conscious: for example, when a student thinks explicitly about whether to use *is*, *was*, *do*, or *does*.

There is a real issue here: abstract grammar is difficult to teach explicitly. But the stronger claim — that conscious learning and explanation do not help acquisition — is not convincing. It does not fit classroom experience. Students do benefit from explanation, correction, comparison, and structured practice, even if these are not sufficient on their own.

1.9 Cognitive Linguistics and Emergent Views

Chomsky's early work left semantics in a secondary position. Some of his students wanted to make semantics central and developed generative semantics. That project became too complex and eventually failed as a formal programme. But it helped lead to cognitive linguistics, especially through figures such as George Lakoff, Charles Fillmore, Leonard Talmy, Ronald Langacker, and others.

Cognitive linguistics rejected the idea of a separate language faculty and tried to explain language through general cognitive abilities:

- attention
- categorisation
- chunking
- memory
- analogy
- pattern recognition
- association
- social cognition

This marked a return toward a more Saussurean, bottom-up view: language grows out of human experience, usage, embodiment, and communicative needs.

Later, emergent and connectionist models pushed this even further. They tried to explain complex language behaviour through the interaction of many simple processes. This view received a major boost from connectionist models such as Parallel Distributed Processing. Modern artificial intelligence has made such models look more plausible in some respects, although it does not follow that the human brain works in the same way.

Emergent theories often take a strong position: they try to explain as much as possible through brain plasticity, experience, environment, and general cognition, without assuming specialised innate mechanisms.

This perspective is useful because it reminds us that language learning is complex, dynamic, and context-dependent. But it can also become too vague. Saying that language emerges from many interacting factors may be true, but it does not by itself tell a teacher what to bring into class, which examples to use, or what the students should actually practise.

1.10 The Cognitive Period in SLA

In SLA, the cognitive period developed partly as a reaction against Krashen. The most important idea here is Richard Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis.

The basic claim is simple: in order to learn something, the learner must notice it. Noticing is conscious, or at least attention-dependent. This directly challenges the strongest versions of Krashen's unconscious acquisition model.

A large number of studies followed. Norris and Ortega's meta-analysis is often cited as evidence that explicit instruction has positive effects. In ordinary language: if students are taught something, they often learn something. This is not surprising, but it matters because it weakens the claim that explicit teaching is useless.

After this, CLT effectively divided into two camps.

The first camp followed the coursebook and PPP route: begin with a form, practise it, then use it.

The second camp kept the idea that implicit learning is primary. Instruction and feedback may help, but only partly. This produced Task-Based Language Teaching. The idea is that students cannot acquire target forms simply because the teacher decides to teach them. Instruction must respect the learner's developmental readiness.

This is a useful warning. But again, the conclusion should not be that explicit teaching is pointless. The better conclusion is that explicit teaching must be timed, meaningful, and integrated with use.

1.11 The Problem with Modern Coursebooks and Pure Communication

Modern coursebooks often give the impression of being carefully designed systems. They contain grammar, vocabulary, texts, listening tasks, speaking activities, recycling, attractive visuals, and practical goals. They are certainly better than nothing.

But the theoretical foundation is weak. The coursebook model often aims at visible performance: can the student complete the task, answer the question, produce the target phrase, or participate in a controlled conversation? Competence — the internal semantic and grammatical system — receives much less attention.

The holistic principle sometimes appears in the form of a belief that if learners are engaged in solving communication problems in the target language, language learning will take care of itself. This sounds attractive, but in practice many learners remain stuck. They can get through conversations by simplifying, avoiding difficult forms, relying on familiar phrases, and guessing from context. Communication continues, but many English distinctions remain outside their active system.

The problem is especially clear with adult learners. Adults are not blank slates. They already have social intelligence, communicative competence, and a fully developed native language. They do not need to learn communication from zero. What they need is to map their existing conceptual and communicative system onto the structures of English.

The difficulty is not that grammar is abstract. The difficulty is that grammar is usually explained badly. It is often presented as a formula connecting usage and form:

Use this pattern in this situation.

The learner is then expected to produce new sentences by analogy, without understanding the internal semantic components. This is structuralism in a modern form.

Form does connect with meaning, but not directly. It connects through semantics — through an abstract generative system in the mind, not simply through social usage.

For Russian-speaking learners of English, the central task is therefore contrastive semantic analysis. We need to compare English grammar with Russian grammar and reduce complex structures to smaller semantic units. The goal is not to give students longer lists of usages. The goal is to give them a deeper model of how English structures meaning.

This is where conceptual semantics becomes central. The method I propose will draw on linguists such as Talmy, Langacker, Pinker, and others, but the goal is practical: to help learners speak, not merely fill in grammar exercises.