

# The Structuralist Approach in Teaching English

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## Bottom-Up Theories of the Reading Process

The structuralist approach to learning spans across a broad spectrum of disciplines, including sociology, anthropology and language learning. The principles of structuralism are rooted in the theory that any major concepts within a discipline all fit together in a meaningful way.

Structuralism suggests that there is a specific structure or framework that makes up the total concept. The structuralist approach implies that in order for anyone to fully understand a concept such as linguistics, they first must understand the sub-sets and how these fit into the overarching structure. Additionally, an important factor in the structuralist approach is understanding that these sub-sets all fit and work together collaboratively.

## Structuralism in Language Learning

The *structuralist theory of language* and linguistics says that the components of language are interrelated to one another and get their meaning from that relationship. The origins of the structuralist approach of linguistics come from Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), a Swiss language scholar.

Structuralism in linguistics asserts the idea that all of the parts to learning English are interwoven, and because they are all interrelated, they don't have the same meaning when in isolation. In order for the different parts of the English language to make sense, they need to be working together.

# Principles of Structuralism

The main concepts of teaching English from a structuralist approach include a focus on sentence structure, patterns of sentences and appropriate grammar and composition. Teaching English through a structuralist approach includes a focus on **four main skills**:

- Understanding the grammatical structures
- Speaking properly, according to the rules of proper grammar and mechanics; using proper sentence structure
- Reading properly, according the rules of comprehension
- Writing properly, according to the rules of proper grammar and mechanics; using proper sentence structure
- The overarching focus of these four areas is proper order. Teaching English using this methodology places emphasis on the proper order and structure of understanding, speaking, reading and writing the English language.

For example, a structuralist approach would focus more on teaching the proper order of the following words, with less emphasis on teaching what the words actually mean.

*The girl tasted the cake.*

*The cake tasted the girl.*

## Strengths of Structuralism

As an approach to teaching the English language, structuralism has merits. Specifically, for young English learners, the basic, fundamental approach to the language can make it easy to learn. The heavy focus on mechanics and proper structure make access to the language more concrete, therefore easier to learn.

The structuralist approach to teaching English also supports proper use of the language in verbal and written expression. This increases the likelihood that the English learner will speak and write English in the proper way. Because of the interrelated nature, understanding the foundation first, *students more easily learn more complex grammar* and word use as they move through the curriculum.

## **Weaknesses of Structuralism**

As with any teaching methodology, there are some drawbacks to the use of structuralism to teach English. Because it starts with the early structures first and builds upward, *the structuralist approach is best suited for young students in early elementary*. Therefore, unless this approach has been started in the early grades, it would difficult to introduce it later on in middle or high school.

Additionally, because the focus is often so structured, and often relies on rote memory, there is less focus on the reading and creative writing of the students. Some may argue that creativity comes later during the education process, and the focus on the early years should be learning the foundation of the language. In other words, students will have less success being creative writers if they don't have a mastery of the rules and structures of the proper application of the English language.