

SCOTT THORNBURY

Plenary Talk Grammar as Growth: A Metaphor?

The study of emergence - the idea that certain systems are more than the sum of their parts, and that "a small number of rules or laws can generate systems of surprising complexity" - is a relatively new branch of science. It is closely associated with complexity theory. A key feature that language shares with other complex systems is that it exhibits emergent properties. As Diane Larsen-Freeman puts it, 'Language is not fixed, but is rather a dynamic system. Language evolves and changes ... [it] grows and organises itself from the bottom up in an organic way, as do other complex systems.' The processes by which language 'grows and organises itself' are thought to be processes that - rather than being language-specific - are basic to human cognition and hence to all learning. Second language learning, too, probably shares many of the emergent properties of first language acquisition, and, if left to its own devices, will "just grow". But for most learners, direct intervention on the part of the teacher is necessary, if the full potential of this complex and dynamic system is to be realised.

Bio

Scott Thornbury has an MA (TEFL) from the University of Reading and is currently Associate Professor of English Language Studies at the New School in New York, where we teaches on an on-line MATESOL program. His previous experience includes teaching and training in Egypt, UK, Spain, and in his native New Zealand. His writing credits include several award-winning books for teachers on language and methodology, including About Language: Tasks for Teachers of English, Conversation: From Description to Pedagogy (with Diana Slade) and The CELTA Book (with Peter Watkins), all for Cambridge University Press. He is series editor for the Cambridge Handbooks for Teachers.

Who is Scott Thornbury?

"The brother I see every two years or so" (Trish); "my erratic co-writer" (Luke); "the best teacher I ever had" (Nancy); "a tax-payer" (Spanish Government); "my best friend at school" (Murray); "the man who complains about the dog" (the neighbours).

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