

## Grammar

I'm definitely in favour of teaching grammar in most classes. The problem is how to do it effectively so that it doesn't take up too much time, doesn't become boring, and helps students use the grammatical features to express themselves.

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- 26 Keep explanations short
  - 27 Use mother tongue to explain
  - 28 Avoid grammatical terms
  - 29 Get students to learn by heart
  - 30 Get students to make meanings
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The first time you explain a grammatical feature, make it short and simple: keep it to a ‘need to know’ basis.

What students need is to get the basic idea of how the grammar works in order to enable them to understand examples in context as soon as possible, and try using it themselves.

Note that there’s a payoff between brevity and truth: the more true and accurate the rule you give, the more difficult and lengthy the explanation. So often it’s worth sacrificing the fully accurate account in favour of keeping it short and simple. Give students a clear, easy and mostly reliable rule and leave any further detailed explanations for when they come across apparent exceptions.

For example, most other languages have only one word for *much/many*, so you need to explain the difference between these. But you don’t have to get into complicated explanations of ‘countable’ and ‘uncountable’ nouns. All you need to say is that *much* goes with singular nouns and *many* with plural, which covers virtually all instances.

Some rules are so complicated and difficult to apply in real time that it’s best not even to try to explain them. For example, expression of future time: *going to* usually implies some kind of plan or intention whereas *will* expresses simple prediction. But who has time when talking about the future to stop and wonder how much planning is involved in any particular instance? So I usually tell beginner classes that both forms refer to the future, and leave it at that. Detailed explanations can wait for later: and often I’ve found I never need to give them, because the students acquire an intuitive feel for the distinction through lots of encounters with examples in context.

For more on this issue, see the reference below.

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Swan, M. (2012). Design criteria for pedagogic language rules. In *Thinking about language teaching* (pp. 45–56). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**It's often helpful to students if you explain the grammar in their mother tongue (L1) – if you know it! – and also compare it with parallel mother-tongue usages.**

With more advanced classes, of course, you can use English: an excellent opportunity for listening-comprehension practice.

But the language you need to explain a grammatical feature is often far more advanced than the feature itself, and can be very difficult for less proficient students. So it can take ages to explain in English a relatively simple point. Normally you can get the idea across in a fraction of the time if you use L1, and then use the time you've saved to let the students hear, read and try using the target grammar themselves.

It also helps students a lot if you contrast how the English grammar works with how a parallel structure works in their L1, particularly if the L1 does not use a structure that English does, or vice versa. Let's take the example of the verb *be*. Arabic and Hebrew don't have a present tense of this verb at all; Spanish, in contrast, has two verbs (*ser* and *estar*), where English only has one. It saves a lot of confusion and mistakes if you tell students about these differences at a fairly early stage. Similarly, where English and the L1 have different forms to express the same meaning, it's worth contrasting: for example, the French *elle est professeuse* as contrasted with the English *she is a teacher*.

In principle, the fact that students have a mother tongue is an asset, not a hindrance. It is not something to be avoided, as you may have heard some people claim, but rather a tool to be exploited where – as in these examples – it can help students learn English better (see the reference below).

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Hall, G., & Cook, G. (2012). Own language use in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching*, 45(3), 271–308.

If you can explain a form or rule in English grammar without using grammatical terminology like *comparative adjectives*, *present perfect* and so on – do so.

When you are talking about grammar in English, some basic grammatical terms that apply to a wide range of structures are useful to teach: words like *form*, *meaning*, *word*, *sentence*, *past*, *present*, *future*. And lot of these will be useful in general communication as well, not just for grammar explanations. But the use of more specific terminology may not be very helpful.

For one thing, an explanation which uses the actual exemplars rather than the terms used to define them is likely to be easier to understand. For example, say ‘We use *the* when...’ rather than ‘We use the definite article when ...’. Or: ‘Use the *-ing* form of the verb after words like *enjoy*...’ rather than ‘Use the gerund...’. When explaining to younger classes when to use *a* and when *an* there is no need to use terms like *vowel/consonant*; I usually show them that it’s just uncomfortable to try to say *a...orange* (demonstrating with a pronounced glottal stop), and much more comfortable if you smooth the way by putting in the *n*: *an orange*.

A second reason is that such terminology is not really very useful vocabulary to learn. How often will the students need to use a term like *past perfect* in real-life communication? It’s simply not a good investment: if you’re going to teach new words, it makes sense to teach more useful ones.

The general principle of using actual examples from the language rather than the terms that refer to them applies to instructions for grammar exercises as well. So in an exercise on relative pronouns, for example, it’s better to say ‘Write *who*, *which* or *that*’, rather than ‘Write the appropriate relative pronoun’.

If students know a few samples of the use of a grammatical structure by heart, they can often create more of their own, intuitively feeling what is ‘right’.

Knowing rules helps students learn to use grammar correctly; but so does learning examples by heart. Which is more effective depends both on the student’s learning style and on the target feature being taught. It’s probably a good idea to use both.

Learning by heart doesn’t have to be boring rote-learning. Here are a few ways of doing it:

- Clichés, proverbs, etc. Teach the students common expressions that also exemplify grammatical features: useful and frequent phrases that occur in conversation, as well as clichés, idioms and proverbs. For example, *I don’t know*; *Let’s call it a day*; *All’s well that ends well*.
- Chants. Learning and performing rhythmic chants – like songs, but without the music, and imitating the rhythm of natural speech – is great fun, and very helpful (see the first reference below).
- Songs. A lot of songs also feature repetitive grammatical phrases. The problem is that the melody distracts from the meaning, and students can often enjoy singing them without paying attention to the actual language features used.
- Dialogues. Having students learn and perform dialogues – preferably dramatic and thought-provoking ones – is an enjoyable and useful way to get them to learn grammar. They can then introduce different vocabulary, or add bits, to create varied meanings. (See Tip 74.)
- Pattern poems. When students create simple poems round a grammatical pattern, they inevitably learn and review the grammar as they write. A student who writes such a poem learns the lines by heart as a side-effect (see <https://www.njcu.edu/cill/vol4/moulton-holmes.html>, or the second reference below).

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Graham, C. (1993). *Grammarchants*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Holmes, V. L., & Moulton, M. R. (2001). *Writing simple poems: Pattern poetry for language acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**In order to learn a grammatical feature, the students need practice in using it to make their own meanings. Conventional grammar exercises are not enough.**

The problem with traditional grammar exercises (gap-fills, matching, etc.) is not only that they are a bit boring, but also, and mainly, that they focus too much on ‘getting it right’, and not enough on creating meanings. The fact that students can do a grammar exercise perfectly is no guarantee that they’ll then be able to use the target feature in their own speech or writing. They need practice in expressing their own ideas with the grammar, not just manipulating sentences someone else has written. I’m not saying that the traditional exercises are useless – far from it! – only that they are insufficient on their own.

The trick is to think about what the grammar means and how it’s likely to be used in real life. Then use this knowledge as the basis for some kind of cue or situation that would invite responses involving use of the target feature. For example: the present perfect is used when the action, state or event has already taken place, but has some relevance to the present. So give the students a present situation, as shown in a picture – for example, an untidy room – and ask them to say what has happened to produce it, or what has not yet happened. Or if you’ve been studying modals like *can*, *should*, *might* – invite students to say what they *can/should/might* do in a particular situation; or what a particular type of person (a teacher, the President of the United States, a baby) *can/should/might* do.

These can easily be made into brainstorming games (see Tip 22).

See the reference below for further similar ideas.

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Ur, P. (2009). *Grammar practice activities* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.