

Guidelines for teachers - Teaching grammar

Teaching grammar, especially for first-time ESL teachers and even for experienced ESL teachers, can often be a tricky business. In fact, it is one of the most difficult aspects of a language to teach. When we think of grammar, we think of a set of word forms and rules of usage that govern how we speak and write. Some teachers tend to focus on these rules and forms in their classroom, believing that their students learn best through rote memorization. While it is imperative that ESL students learn the rules and forms of grammar, this is not an effective method of teaching grammar. It tends to result in a classroom full of bored and uninterested students who know how to produce excellent results in exercises and on tests, but fail badly at using the language in contextual situations.

On the other hand, there are teachers who teach grammar through osmosis. Teaching methods tend to revolve around the assumption that students will absorb grammar rules in communication activities or they believe that children learn their first language without grammar instruction; therefore learning a second language should be learned the same way. Think back, for example, to what you learned about grammar in elementary school and high school. Your grammar lessons most likely focused on identifying the basic parts of a sentence, but you probably didn't learn much about specific grammar forms. This is because we learn these forms naturally as native English speakers. Thus, many first-time ESL teachers and even long-term ESL teachers never really learn how to teach grammar effectively to ESL students because they themselves never learned grammar in that manner. How then, can an ESL teacher teach grammar effectively when the teacher never learned grammar as part of learning a second language?

To teach grammar, teachers have to understand grammar. Generally speaking, there are a lot of first-time ESL teachers that are able to identify different parts of a sentence, but don't have a clue about grammar tenses and specific grammar rules beyond the basics taught in high school. All too often, teachers go into a classroom and wing it by simply going through a bunch of exercises and answers. Moreover, there's no way to make grammar fun if you don't have a clear understanding of what you are teaching.

Our active understanding of what grammar is and how it works will allow you to better understand the errors and challenges that your students face. ESL students don't learn grammar the same way that native English speakers do. It's not enough to look at something that a student has written and say that you can't explain why it's wrong. Our job is to help students understand where

they've made mistakes, when to use specific grammar forms, and the difference between written grammar and spoken grammar.

Overt grammar instruction helps students acquire the target language more efficiently, but we should also incorporate as many communicative activities into our lesson plan as possible to strengthen what we are teaching. Remember: most people learn from learning, observation, and practice. Break our class time down into manageable sections, and make sure that we are introducing and explaining the grammar lesson, demonstrate how it is used in contextual situations, put it to practical use in the classroom, and play an engaging game that reinforces the lesson.

Try the following ideas in this order during the next grammar lesson and see what happens. The following should take no more than 15 minutes to accomplish in class. It cannot be stressed the importance of planning the grammar lesson and the examples we will use to reinforce lessons in advance. Winging it in class can often lead to examples with exceptions, and don't want to introduce an example and then realize that there is an exception to the rule.

Write the target grammar rule on the whiteboard. Introduce target grammar rule/tense and explain when to use the grammar point and why. Go over the rule again.

Present the grammar point in written and oral examples to bring the lesson into context and to address the needs of students with different learning styles.

Providing examples is an important part of grammar instruction. Plan the examples around two basic principles:

a) Examples must be accurate and appropriate. They must present the language appropriately and be culturally appropriate for the setting in which they are used.

b) Use the examples as teaching tools. Focus examples on a particular theme or topic so that students have more contact with specific information and vocabulary. Once we've run through your examples, ask students if they can come up with some simple ideas or sentences that match the rule we are teaching.

Conclude this portion of the lesson by teaching any exceptions to the rule. Don't focus on making sure that your students have mastered every aspect of each grammar point that we teach. Instead, focus on the points that are relevant to immediate communication tasks. Don't focus too much on error correction.

Grammar involves a lot of rules and forms, but there are ways to make teaching grammar fun. Our goal in class is to enable our students to carry out the grammar point that we are teaching for communicative purposes

Of course, what is practiced and the way it is practiced will depend on the nature of the learning challenge. Some structures may need little, if any, pedagogical focus. With others, when the learning challenge is how to *form* the construction, it is important that learners get to practice the target item over and over again meaningfully, for example by using it in a task-essential way. When the challenge is *meaning*, students need practice in associating form and meaning, such as

associating various spatial and temporal meanings with prepositions. Finally, when the challenge is *use*, students need to be given situations where they are forced to decide between the use of two or more different forms with roughly the same meaning, but which are not equally appropriate in a given context. Use would be a challenge for learners, for example, in choosing between the active and passive voices or between English present perfect and past tenses.

Capacity involves learners using lexico-grammatical resources for the creation of meaning. Doing so enables language learners to move beyond the memorized formulas and static rules they employ, especially at the beginning of instruction. This is what accounts for the fact that language changes all the time; it does so due to the cumulative innovations that language users make at the local level as they adapt their language resources to new communicative contexts .

In order to develop capacity, learners need to abstract from frequently occurring exemplars. Higher-level constructs, such as schemata, prototypes, and complex constructions, emerge from the interaction of lower-level forms. As learners master the system at an optimal level of abstraction, they are no longer learning only to conform to grammatical uniformity. They are acquiring a way to create and understand meaning.

Grammar instruction can also help students generalize their knowledge to new structures. Another contribution of grammar teaching may be to fill in the gaps in the input, since classroom language will not necessarily represent all grammatical structures that students need to acquire.

A great deal of the controversy in the teaching of grammar can be ascribed to the general issue of whether an explicit or implicit approach to teaching structure is best. Explicit instruction is where students are instructed in the rules or patterns (deductive) or guided to induce them, themselves (inductive). An implicit approach makes no reference to rules or patterns.

To the extent that teachers can reduce the arbitrariness in grammatical rules (teaching meaning-based reasons rather than solely form- based rules), students' learning burden is eased. For instance, if students understand the theme rheme pattern of discourse organization in English, they will understand a number of different grammatical phenomena, e.g., the form of predicative phrases in sentences with existential there, word order variation with direct and indirect objects, and word order variation with phrasal verbs and their particles. Thus, an additional value to reasons is that they are broader than rules, in that they can be applied to many different structures.

Significantly, although the general assumption behind the non-interface stance, that explicit knowledge cannot become implicit knowledge, may be technically true, it may be overstated. While it is the case that implicit and explicit knowledge are different, it is claimed at the same time that explicit knowledge can influence implicit knowledge. This fact is significant for older learners who may no longer learn as well implicitly as they did as children learning their first language.

Acknowledging the constraints that developmental sequences may pose, but mindful of the accelerated learning that comes with grammatical instruction, Larsen-Freeman (2003)

recommends that teachers adopt a “grammar checklist” rather than a sequence. In this way, teachers have an unordered set of grammar structures they need to teach, but they can do so locally in a way that attends to their students’ readiness to learn. It also means that grammar structures can be worked on as they arise in content or during communicative activities, thus the contextualization that is facilitative of learning the grammar is already present. Finally, using a checklist also prompts teachers to work on certain structures that do not naturally arise during classroom activities, perhaps because students avoid them .

Teachers do not just teach grammar, of course; they teach grammar to particular students. Who the students are will also affect grammar instruction. This point was made earlier with regards to cultural expectations for grammar instruction, learners’ language backgrounds, and the need to “localize” sequencing. In addition, the level of learners’ target language proficiency should inform pedagogical decisions.

A huge issue in grammar teaching, but perhaps the most controversial one, is the question of error correction. While some feel that correcting students errors causes students to experience debilitating anxiety, most research supports the value of giving learners feedback on their non-target like performance in an affectively-supportive way.

However, it is far from clear which error correction techniques are the most efficacious. For one thing, as with other aspects of grammar instruction, providing learners with feedback can be done explicitly or implicitly.

The latter takes place through such means as clarification requests, confirmation checks, and recasts. One problem with recasts, however, is that they can be ambiguous, limiting their acquisition potential. For instance, sometimes teachers repeat correct forms. It is also possible that learners respond to them differently. Some appear to ignore them - at least they do not immediately uptake the correct form , although immediate successful uptake may not be a factor in acquisition. Other learners who respond to recasts do so in private speech rather than social speech. Indeed, the efficacy of recasts may be determined by a host of factors, such as learners level of literacy or their proficiency. It is also the case that recasts may have a differential effect depending on the linguistic target.

A more direct approach, but one that can still be applied while learners are engaged in communicative activities, is a teacher’s use of prompts. Of course, no technique, even giving the learner the correct form, is effective unless the student can perceive the difference between the recast and what he or she has just said.

With language changing as new elements are introduced, grammar is really important. There are certain parts of the English grammar that were not acceptable years ago, but now, these changes are widely used. Grammar is very important, no matter how much the rules change, as it is what makes it possible for us all to communicate and understand what we see, and what we say.

We learn basic grammar when we start to put sentences together as children, but, the

actual „knowing’ of grammar is much more complex. Grammar teaches us how to build sentences, about the types of words that we use and when we should use them. Grammar also tells us what type of word we are using in any particular sentence.

There are lots of different aspects to English grammar, and each is as important as the last. It is English grammar that will allow us to be a better communicator, listener, thinker, reader and writer. Having a knowledgeable understanding of grammar will let us have a potentially rewarding career in many fields of work.

To put it simply, grammar is a way in which we organise words, clauses and phrases into meaningful communication, so the organisation of grammar all depends on the logic. Grammar without logic and organisation means we cannot clearly put across our message. The more grammar rules we understand, the clearer our communication is. This makes it easier for us to be heard and to tell our story. Having an advanced knowledge of grammar is something everyone should have.

We may have amazing ideas, but if we have little to no knowledge of English grammar, how are we going to communicate them? The simple answer is that we aren’t going to.

We will be able to fully appreciate how to get a message across if we can understand English grammar. From reading complex writings to children’s books, grammar will enable us to fully understand what we are reading or writing.

Some people who are learning English as a second language make one simple, but massive mistake; they forget to learn English grammar. Even basic grammar is better than none, and the advance learning can always come later. Don’t limit the way in which you can communicate with others by not learning all about English grammar.

The importance of proper grammar usage is often lost in our increasingly informal society. Texting, e-mail and instant messages are becoming the main forms of communication. The shorthanded "text speak" common to these forms of communication often obscure the need for good grammar among students.