

## TEACHER'S CORNER – MAY 2015

### COMPARATIVES AND SUPERLATIVES: ADJECTIVES

---

We compare, contrast, and rank things in everyday life whether we are talking about our favorite things, shopping, or analyzing academic material. A solid understanding of comparative and superlative adjectives will help EFL learners perform tasks involving these critical thinking skills while using English. This month's Teacher's Corner explores ways to help learners discover general rules related to these grammatical forms and also shares ideas for encouraging learners to use comparative and superlative adjectives during communicative activities. Before we dive into this month's activities, let's briefly review (and compare!) these two forms.

#### Comparative Adjectives

When comparing a characteristic of two things, the information can be expressed in three ways:

- **Inferiority:** A displays the characteristic *X* to a lesser degree than *B*
- **Superiority:** A displays the characteristic *X* to a greater degree than *B*
- **Equality:** A and *B* display the characteristic *X* in the same manner or quantity

This month we will examine the first two comparison categories. According to corpus-based studies (e.g., Knoch, 2004), superiority comparisons are used more frequently in English than inferiority comparisons.

Inferiority comparisons, the less common structure, take the following form:

A is less adjective than B      Example: *The black suitcase is **less heavy than** the red suitcase.*

Superiority comparisons take one of these two forms:

1. A is adjective + -er than B      Example: *The red suitcase is **lighter than** the black suitcase.*
2. A is more adjective than B      Example: *My Physics class is **more difficult than** my Art class.*

General "rules of thumb" for deciding which of the two forms to use in a superiority comparison depend on factors such as the number of syllables in the adjective and the adjective's spelling.

Please see the first Teacher's Corner activity for more information on these rules and a task in

which learners use language examples to inductively determine the guidelines. While such “rules of thumb” are helpful, teachers should also let learners know that they may encounter native speakers who use the forms interchangeably (for instance, *Tom is sicker than Katie.* or *Tom is more sick than Katie.*, although the first sentence is prescriptively correct). Teachers must also make students aware of irregular forms that are exceptions to the rules. These irregular forms must be memorized. Common examples include: **good** -> **better**, **bad** -> **worse**, and **far** -> **farther**.

### Superlative Adjectives

Unlike comparatives, which provide only relative information about the two things being compared, superlatives compare one thing in relation to all other items in a group. The focus item in a superlative comparison is either ranked at the absolute top or bottom of a descriptive scale. Consider the following examples:

1. **Comparative:** *The brown house is more expensive than the red house.* (We don’t know how the brown house compares to any other house in terms of cost.)
2. **Superlative:** *The Carolina Reaper is the hottest chili pepper in the world.* (We know that compared to every other chili pepper, the Carolina Reaper ranks highest on the “heat” scale.)

Superlative adjectives fall into two categories, **inferiority** and **superiority**, which take the following forms:

- **Inferiority:** used for the “bottom of the scale” in relation to the quality being discussed
  - A is the least adjective Example: *Sam is the least **experienced** candidate for the job.*
- **Superiority:** used for the “top of the scale” in relation to the quality being discussed.
  - A is the adjective + -est Example: *The cheetah is the **fastest** land animal.*
  - A is the most adjective Example: *In 2014, vanilla was the **most popular** ice cream flavor in the United States.*

The guidelines for determining which superlative adjective form to use in a superiority comparison are similar to those for comparative adjectives; see the first Teacher’s Corner activity for more details. As with comparative adjectives, teachers should draw learners’ attention to

common irregular superlative adjectives forms that require memorization such as **good -> best**, **bad -> worst**, and **far -> farthest**. Also, it can be helpful to highlight the use and placement of the definite article *the* with superlative adjectives (the *brightest star*, the *most challenging course*, the *least expensive car*).

Reference:

Knoch, U. (2004). A new look at teaching comparisons – a corpus-based approach. *Journal of Language Learning*, 2(2), 171-185.