

Group Grammar

by KAREN ADAMS



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Taki has gone river rafting.

Before becoming a teacher of English to speakers of other languages, I taught French, and too often I saw that impersonal grammar exercises about “Jacques” and “Nathalie” were meaningless to the students. Worse, those exercises led to apathy and stagnation. So I decided to do grammar activities in which students used each other’s names, instead of random ones, and used the grammar to express ideas about their own lives. I hoped that instead of grammar being impersonal and meaningless, it would become a tool to help students get to know one another better. Now, I incorporate group grammar techniques into my lesson whenever possible. In the following activity, I describe ways to use group grammar effectively. In this activity, students practice using the target grammar to do something they naturally enjoy: learning about each other.

WHAT DID YOU DO OVER THE WEEKEND?

This activity is done after teaching the simple past. Sometimes, I do it on a Monday as an icebreaker to reengage the students after

a long weekend. It is a way to review and practice the simple past, but mainly, it is a way for students to learn more about each other, each other’s weekend activities, and even the local community.

First, I tell students to silently write down four to six activities they did over the weekend, using the simple past tense to reply to the question “What did you do over the weekend?” I give them about three minutes to do this. If they have trouble remembering their weekend, I tell them to think chronologically, starting with Friday evening all the way to Sunday night, and list the activities in order. I remind them that no weekend activity is too boring to report. To model this, I give them an example from my own not-so-exciting weekend: “Friday, I went grocery shopping and made a stew. Saturday, I stayed in bed until noon because I graded papers until two in the morning the night before.”

While students are writing their sentences, I circulate around the room to offer help with

vocabulary. I let the students know that they can also ask classmates for help or consult their dictionaries.

When they have finished writing their sentences, I put students into groups. I tell them they must work together to make a master list of all the activities the group members did over the weekend. I tell students that there are two important rules:

1. Do not repeat any simple past verb; each verb can be used only once.
2. You must include the name of each group member an equal number of times.

I give them a specific amount of time to compile their group list, say five or six minutes. Group members will need to decide which group member will write the sentences for the group. The master list may look something like this:

Patricia played tennis.

Akmed saw a great movie.

Taki made sushi for his friends.

Sylvie had a headache.

Patricia ate a burrito.

Akmed did his homework.

Taki wrote an essay for his English class.

Sylvie took a walk.

(This group would have eight correct sentences.)

To determine the winner, I simply ask the groups to read their sentences aloud while the rest of the class counts the number of correct simple past statements. Although incorrect sentences are not counted, during this time we correct them together as a class. The group with the longest list of correct sentences wins.

For larger classes, you can have two or three groups get together and read their sentences, with the “listening” groups counting the number of correct sentences.

Along with giving students a chance to practice the simple past and learn about one another, this activity can help students get ideas about what activities are fun and interesting to do in their community. Some students may discover similar interests and decide later to do things together. For example, maybe Patricia learns that Akmed also loves tennis and will invite him to play a game with her. This interaction builds community in the classroom and makes learning more rewarding and fun.

ANOTHER PROMPT

This activity can be modified to cover various grammar points. For example, as an icebreaker at the beginning of the term, the prompt could be “List new and unfamiliar activities you have experienced since you arrived in your host country” (or “since you started studying here” or “since the semester started”). The students’ sentences might look like this:

Patricia has eaten a burrito.

Akmed has seen snow for the first time.

Taki has gone river rafting.

Sylvie has tried zumba class.

Group grammar activities engage and motivate students because these activities put people and ideas before grammar and correctness. They also help in building a close, friendly classroom environment that includes and values everyone while giving students opportunities to use the target grammar.

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