Adventures in Grammar: The Power of Stories

We all know that stories can stimulate thought, reflection, and learning. They can also make grammar instruction more engaging and effective.

In this webinar, we will:

• discuss ways of dramatizing grammar rules to make them memorable
• examine techniques for helping students discover grammar for themselves as they explore popular stories
• consider how to make students the center of their own grammatical stories as we help them share their own experiences and use new forms to tell their tales
Christopher has taught English as a Second or Foreign Language in Spain, Japan, and the United States, and he has worked as a teacher educator in such places as Egypt, Peru, and Laos. He has edited two *Language Teaching Insights from Other Fields* books for TESOL International.

Christopher works with teachers and language learners at University of California, Irvine and the College of the Sequoias. In the past year, he has served as a mentor at Teachers College, Columbia University and as a U.S. Department of State English Language Specialist in Brazil.
Q: Why should we use stories in the language classroom?
Stories can:

- engage
- teach lessons
- improve communication skills
Teaching grammar through stories can...

• make rules memorable
• show how we choose forms to match meanings and situations
• lead to independent learning
Overview: Three Techniques

1. Use students’ own stories for grammar development

2. Help students discover grammar in existing stories

3. Bring grammar to life through drama and story
1. Use students’ own stories for grammar development
Why use learners’ own stories?

• Student-centered
• Motivating
• Personalized
• Adaptable
• Great characters
• Builds community
1. Using Students’ Stories

A. Sharing about their lives
B. Capturing language experiences
Q: What writing prompts do you use to get students to share about their life experiences?
1A. Sharing about their lives

Think about the time when you heard that our school was going to close for Coronavirus. What were you doing?

Challenge: Try to use past progressive in your response
• When I heard about coronavirus I wanted a vaccine. (Joice)

• I was very afraid. (Brenda)

• I thought it’s far away. (Rosalia)

• I was working when the pandemic start in my country. (Mariani)

• When I heard about Covid 19 I was shopping so I had to go home. (Safa)
Call attention to grammar  (What are the simple past verbs?)

- When I **heard** about coronavirus I **wanted** a vaccine. (Joice)
- I **was** very afraid. (Brenda)
- I **thought** it’s far away. (Rosalia)
- I was working when the pandemic **start** in my country. (Mariani)
- When I **heard** about Covid 19 I was shopping so I **went** home. (Safa)
Call attention to grammar  (What verbs are past progressive?)

- When I heard about coronavirus I wanted a vaccine. (Joice)
- I was very afraid. (Brenda)
- I thought it’s far away. (Rosalia)
- I was working when the pandemic start in my country. (Mariani)
- When I heard about Covid 19 I was shopping so I went home. (Safa)
Call attention to grammar (What *time* words do you see?)

- When I heard about coronavirus I wanted a vaccine. (Joice)
- I was very afraid. (Brenda)
- I thought it’s far away. (Rosalia)
- I was working *when* the pandemic start in my country. (Mariani)
- When I heard about Covid 19 I was shopping so I went home. (Safa)
When I heard about coronavirus I wanted a vaccine. (Joice)
I was very afraid. (Brenda)
I thought it’s far away. (Rosalia)
I was working when the pandemic started in my country. (Mariani)
When I heard about Covid 19 I was shopping so I went home. (Safa)
1B. Capturing Language Experiences

- As students share stories, they build community.
- Teachers can help them notice the grammar that makes their communication effective.
- Next, we can get students in the habit of noticing grammar on their own.
- One way to do so is through role plays.
Through **role plays**, students can draw from their own stories and experiences to explore grammar.

Topics may include:
Through **role plays**, students can draw from their own stories and experiences to explore grammar.

Topics may include:

### Giving Advice

A: What should I do?  

B: Well, ...

### Requests

A: Can I borrow your car? I need it because...

...
Through **role plays**, students can draw from their own stories and experiences to explore grammar.

Topics may include:

### Requests and Reasons

A: Can I borrow your car? I need it because...

B: Well, ...

### Predicting

A: I can see your future. Next year, you will...
Through **role plays**, students can draw from their own stories and experiences to explore grammar.

Topics may include:

**Predicting the Future**

A: I can see your future. Next year, you will...

B: Really? What else?

A: ...
Through role plays, students can draw from their own stories and experiences to explore grammar. Topics may include:

Problem: Students may finish a role play without using the intended language, or without noticing it.

After an activity, add a moment to reflect.
Capture role play language by collaborating on a written dialogue.
The Element of Surprise
Unexpected Experience
Another Visitor
Did Phil interrupt your class? What did he say?

Phil wanted to talk to us. Chris said, “We don’t have time!” but Phil said, “I only need a minute.”
We will need to tell the director about this. Could you please write what happened on a piece of paper?
Maybe you can use the papers already on your desk.
Other Surprises

- Student interruptions
- Real announcements from visitors
- Things heard in assemblies, class trips
Q: Do you ever incorporate elements of surprise or mystery into your class? How?
A Habit of Noticing

Invite students to pay attention to language outside of class that interests them or surprises them.

Could be part of a routine:
- Students share in pairs
- Teacher listens and identifies 1-2 examples to analyze with the class.
Technique 2: Help students discover grammar in existing stories
In a dictogloss, students:

1. learn about the context and essential vocabulary
2. listen to a short passage (2x), no writing
3. write what they remember
4. share notes and reconstruct the text
5. look at the original text and compare
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

An adaptation of the timeless novel by Mark Twain. Part of the Ladder Series, this volume has approximately 2000 headwords and is appropriate for intermediate to advanced learners.
Words

Stars
Trees
Shine
Wind
Step 1: Listen Only
Q: What words and phrases did you hear?
Step 3: Compare and combine
Rosalia, Helen, Mariani
• The star was shining and the wind was moving the trees. I couldn’t understand what the wind saying but so far I heard a different sound. I thought that was ghost sound. I became so sad. I wish I had some company.

Brenda, Enrique, Kil-Soo, Joice
• The star was shining. The wind moving the trees. The air was slowly. I became so sad and frighten but I wish and had some company.

Gloria, Maria, Souher
• The star were shining. The wind was moving the tree. Sound like whispering. I couldn’t understand what they say. Far away come to ear the sound and getting sad and afraid but I wished there was someone to talk to me his company.
Rosalia, Helen, Mariani
• The star was shining and the wind was moving the trees. I couldn’t understand what the wind saying but so far I heard a different sound. I thought that was ghost sound. I became so sad. I wish I had some company.

Brenda, Enrique, Kil-Soo, Joice
• The star was shining. The wind moving the trees. The air was slowly. I became so sad and frighten but I wish and had some company.

Gloria, Maria, Souher
• The star were shining. The wind was moving the tree. Sound like whispering. I couldn’t understand what they say. Far away come to ear the sound and getting sad and afraid but I wished there was someone to talk to me his company.
Rosalia, Helen, Mariani
• The star was shining and the wind was moving the trees. I couldn’t understand what the wind saying but so far I heard a different sound. I thought that was ghost sound. I became so sad. I wish I had some company.

Brenda, Enrique, Kil-Soo, Joice
• The star was shining. The wind moving the trees. The air was slowly. I became so sad and frighten but I wish and had some company.

Gloria, Maria, Souher
• The star were shining. The wind was moving the tree. Sound like whispering. I couldn’t understand what they say. Far away come to ear the sound and getting sad and afraid but I wished there was someone to talk to me his company.
Rosalia, Helen, Mariani

• The star was shining and the wind was moving the trees. I couldn’t understand what the wind saying but so far I heard a different sound. I thought that was ghost sound. I became so sad. I wish I had some company.

Brenda, Enrique, Kil-Soo, Joice

• The star was shining. The wind moving the trees. The air was slowly. I became so sad and frighten but I wish and had some company.

Gloria, Maria, Souher

• The star were shining. The wind was moving the tree. Sound like whispering. I couldn’t understand what they say. Far away come to ear the sound and getting sad and afraid but I wished there was someone to talk to me his company.
Step 4: Compare with Original

The stars were shining, and the wind moving the trees sounded as though it was whispering to me. I couldn’t understand what the wind was saying. Far away in the trees I heard the kind of sound that a ghost makes. I became so sad and frightened that I wished that I had some company.

-Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, p. 3 of Ladder Series version

https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/adventures-huckleberry-finn
Technique 3: Bring grammar to life through drama and story

A. Make rules memorable
B. Find story in skills
3A. Making Rules Memorable

• Students often repeat the same mistakes in their writing.
• How to help them remember the rules and avoid frustration?
• Make editing less serious and more memorable through story.
Frame editing as a battle against common enemies that cause common mistakes

The key: Learn and be vigilant

- Define characteristics
- Assign names
- Use real examples
- Develop strategies
- Keep track
# Keeping Track of Mistakes

## Criminals of Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>The Articler</strong> - did you check for articles?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Time Killer</strong> - were your verb tenses okay?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td><strong>Preposition X</strong> - are your prepositions correct?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XX</td>
<td><strong>Miss Spel</strong> - how is your spelling?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XXX</td>
<td><strong>S-Napper</strong> - do you have all your Ss for your 3rd person verbs and plurals?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Grammar rules can give students the ability to do something special.
Question:
How could transition words like “therefore” and “however” give us special powers?
Transition Words Superpower

The power to see the future:
We should study for the test. Otherwise...

The power to see through walls:
I thought my neighbors would enjoy my loud music. However,

The power to understand strange tongues:
Miss Evernice told Sir Antigood not to tell anyone her secret. Nonetheless, *gobbledy gook degoo.*
3B. Finding the story in the skills
Super Language League
Passive Peterson, at the Language Laboratory
Passive Peterson was given a lot of work to do.
Passive Peterson was delayed by many other projects.
Passive Peterson was fired.
ATTENTION

Dr. Engl!sh-
Active-Man is trying to contact you.
He is in trouble. His coworker, Passive Peterson, is also in trouble.

Turn on your super-communicator NOW!
Q- How could an interruption like this be useful for language learning?
Compare with the Original

The stars were shining, and the wind moving the trees sounded as though it was whispering to me. I couldn’t understand what the wind was saying. Far away in the trees I heard the kind of sound that a ghost makes. I became so sad and frightened that I wished that I had some company.

-Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, p. 3 of Ladder Series version

https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/adventures-huckleberry-finn
Passive Peterson was visited by a strange man.
He was brought outside.
And then...
And then... he was hit on the head.
After that he was put into the back of a car, and he was taken away.
Active-Man
I followed them.
I ran after them.
I tried to rescue Passive Peterson.
I found this television equipment, and I contacted you.
Note: Surprises don’t have to be super-dramatic

Student interruptions
Real announcements from visitors
Things heard in assemblies, class trips
Variety

• We all learn in different ways
• Sometimes routines get boring
• Variety makes lessons memorable through another kind of surprise
  • Example: Using a new way to explore stories and language
Life is Lived Twice:
Once as experience...
Life is Lived Twice: Once as experience...

and a second time as story.
Three Techniques

1. Use students’ own stories for grammar development

2. Help students discover grammar in existing stories

3. Bring grammar to life through drama and story
When we show students how to have adventures with language, we create learning experiences that students will be happy to revisit and remember.
Thank you!

Adventures in Grammar: The Power of Stories
References


• Stillwell, C. (2010) “We’re going to Englishland! Class trips abroad at home.” *The Language Teacher, 34*(5), 36-40. https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTTLT34.5-3


Unless otherwise noted, all images in this presentation are the author’s own or are “no-attribution required” under the Pixabay simplified license or the Unsplash license.
Thank you!

Email: americanenglishwebinars@fhi360.org

AE Live - Ning Community of Practice: americanenglishwebinars.com
AE for Educators Facebook page: facebook.com/AmericanEnglishforEducators

AE website: americanenglish.state.gov
YouTube channel: youtube.com/StateAmericanEnglish
AE Facebook page: facebook.com/AmericanEnglishatState
Earn Your Digital Badge

American English LIVE: Teacher Development Series 11
Session 4: Adventures in Grammar: The Power of Stories
Professional Development Attendance Badge

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/2021WS11S4
Thanks for joining us!

The next AE Live session is on June 30th. We hope to see you then.

Questions or comments?

e-mail: americanenglishwebinars@fhi360.org
Reflection Questions

1. How can you help your students notice grammar in existing stories? What strategies have worked well for you in the past?

2. What are some of the ways you can use elements of surprise in your classroom? Do you already incorporate these into your grammar instruction? If so, how?

3. Have you used drama or created characters to help teach grammar in the past? If so, how did your students respond? Are there any grammar points you could use this technique for in the future to help make the rules more memorable?