TEACHING GRAMMAR FOR COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

AE TEACHER'S CORNER

When language learners think of grammar instruction, they often recall lectures of lengthy explanations about grammar points; boring grammar drills, and translation exercises. Perhaps no other aspect of language learning has been as controversial as teaching grammar. For many years, researchers and teachers have argued over whether we should even teach grammar. In spite of the long-standing

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grammar debate, the fact remains that we do not use language without grammar. Perhaps, then, the problem is not grammar itself, but the ways that grammar has been taught and learned.

Early approaches to foreign language instruction, including the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), often taught grammar separate from the larger contexts in which language is used. While these approaches were often effective for developing a receptive (reading) knowledge of a language, they sometimes failed to provide students with the ability to use language communicatively in speaking and writing. As a result, a number of approaches to language instruction since Audiolingualism (ALM) have focused on developing communicative competence. Communicative competence does not mean an absence of grammar instruction but rather grammar instruction that leads to the ability to communicate effectively. This month's Teacher's Corner focuses on teaching grammar communicatively, teaching grammar in large classes, and teaching grammar in context.
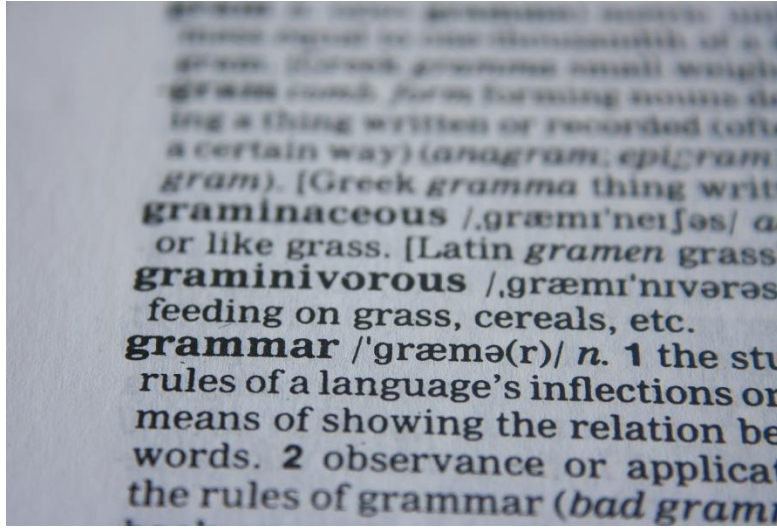
Teaching Grammar Communicatively

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So, what does "teaching grammar communicatively" mean? It means that grammar instruction and lessons are not limited to introducing a grammar item or items, having learners do controlled exercises, and then later assessing students on their ability to understand grammar items. It means designing grammar lessons to include a communicative task or activity. A communicative grammar lesson might start in very much the same way as a traditional approach with presentation of a grammar item and examples, followed by controlled exercises to practice the grammar item.

However, a communicative grammar lesson does not stop there. Following the presentation and practice stages, a communicative grammar lesson gives students the opportunity to practice the target

*A **communicative grammar lesson** gives students the opportunity to practice the target grammar item through specific communicative tasks and activities*

grammar. The beginning stages of a communicative grammar lesson often focus on accuracy while fluency becomes more important during practice stage. Communicative tasks are important because, as DeKeyser (1998) has described, they allow learners to practice the target grammar feature under "real operating conditions." Communicative grammar practice has often focused on speaking activities; however, writing activities are also an important and valid way to practice using grammar communicatively.

Whether focused on writing or speaking, a communicative task should provide students the opportunity to use language to communicate. Some of the activities that often take

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place in the communicative stage of a grammar lesson are games, role-plays, and discussion activities. Games are an excellent method of communicative grammar practice because they allow students the opportunity to practice and develop language skills in an enjoyable and low-stress manner.

Here are some resources to get started on using games for communicative grammar:

- "Grammar Games" on Teacher's Corner focuses on using games for grammar practice: https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/teachers-corner-grammar-games
- *Activate: Games for Learning American English* has many fun communicative grammar games: https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/activate-games-learning-american-english
- A great way to develop practical skills for teaching grammar communicatively is through the Teaching Grammar Communicatively MOOC: https://www.aeeteacher.org/MOOC.

Teaching Grammar Communicatively in Large Classes

As teachers, we ideally want our students to practice using language communicatively. In some large classes, however, communicative practice can be challenging; putting students in pairs and groups and monitoring their activity can be difficult with many students. With large classes, teachers should not feel guilty if they cannot make each lesson a completely communicative experience; rather,

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they should focus on what they can do. For instance, in a large class, a teacher might not be able to do an entire communicative lesson but might be able to do one or two interactive activities.

Teachers can also find ways to set up situations for productive grammar practice outside the classroom. One way to give students more opportunities for communicative practice is English clubs, where students meet regularly for communicative practice and other fun activities such as poetry contests or singing competitions. Here are some resources on English clubs:

- "English Clubs: Introducing English to Young Learners" in *English Teaching Forum* https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/english-teaching-forum-2006-volume-44-number-2#child-676
- "Community-based English Clubs: English Practice and Social Change Outside the Classroom" in *English Teaching Forum* https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/english-teaching-forum-2016-volume-54-number-3#child-2162
- *The English Club Manual* https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/english-club-texts-and-materials#child-2498

Another way to provide students with more opportunities for communicative practice is to give them out-of-class assignments that require using the target grammar point. For instance, if students are practicing the present simple for routines, they might practice the grammar point in class and later, for homework, write a short paragraph about their daily routine. If students have cell phones or other devices, they can record themselves producing the target language either with another classmate or on their own. For

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example, students might make interview questions based on the target grammar point and interview a partner, or they might write a script using the target language and record themselves acting it out. For students with Internet access, there are numerous possibilities for productive communicative practice. Students could correspond with e-pals,[1] record podcasts, or write blogs. All of these activities can be carried out with a focus on target grammar points that relate to in-class lessons. With large classes, teachers might have to think a bit differently about how they plan classes, but there are still many ways to provide students with opportunities for productive, communicative language practice.

Teaching Grammar in Context

Traditionally, language instruction has focused on teaching grammar at the sentence level. Sentence-level grammar refers to parts of speech, tenses, phrases, clauses, and word order. However, current teaching approaches recognize that it is important to include grammar in context. In other words, it's one thing to understand a grammatical item in certain examples or to be able to choose the right form in a grammar exercise, but it's another to see how a language item works within a conversation or piece of writing.

> *Sentence-level grammar refers to parts of speech, tenses, phrases, clauses, and word order. While grammar instruction might start with sentence-level instruction, it should also incorporate grammar in context.*

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[1] An e-pal is a friend you make by exchanging e-mails. An e-pal exchange is a fun way to practice language with speakers of other languages.

Let's look at an example that shows how context can influence grammar. Imagine that you are teaching students about classroom objects, and you want then to make sentences with the new vocabulary items. You teach them *It's a(n) _____.* Your students practice sentences such as *It's a pencil*, *It's a book*, and *It's a notebook*. This is fine, but look what happens with article use in context: *A boy put his book on the table. The book has an orange cover.* In the first sentence, the first mention of *boy*, we use the indefinite article *a*, but in the second mention, we use *the*. Without using context, we could not show this relationship. This is just one example, but it serves to show how grammar in context often functions differently from how it works in isolated examples.

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A grammar lesson might start with a context with the target grammar item that students work to understand or explain. For instance, if your target grammar item is the simple present for routines, the lesson might start with a paragraph of a daily routine. The teacher would then prompt the students to explain the verb tense in the example, providing guidance and explanations as needed. However, a lesson that makes use of context does not have to start with a context. It can start with the rule and examples and then later show use of the grammar item in context. Some teachers start with rules and later move to context, and other teachers start context and more toward rules. Many teachers use both approaches. When deciding whether to present the context first or later in the lesson, consider students' proficiency levels and previous experience with the target grammar item as well as their learning preferences. For some grammar items, showing the context first might be the best approach, and for other grammar items, starting with rules and examples might be a better choice.

Teaching in context does not mean that you have to use an authentic text (any text, spoken or written, not made for the purpose of language teaching or learning). When teaching

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grammar in context, it's important to consider students' proficiency levels as well as their previous experience with the target grammar item. Higher-level students can often benefit from using authentic texts, but lower-proficiency students will often need a text specifically prepared for the purpose of language learning. Many great examples of

grammar in context come from textbooks. If you do not have a sample text that shows grammar in context, you can create your own. For example, if you are teaching daily routines, you could use your own daily routine as a sample text. Teaching grammar in context means that providing a context is a part of the lesson, but it does not mean that it is the whole lesson. Depending on your students' level of proficiency, a full or partial explanation of the grammar form and a certain amount of practice with the target grammar item will still be needed.

- The Teacher's Corner resource "Making Grammar Fun" focuses on making grammar fun by teaching it in context:
https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/teachers-corner-making-grammar-fun

Consciousness-raising

Consciousness-raising is a related aspect to teaching grammar in context. Consciousness-raising means making students aware of the properties of a certain grammatical feature by highlighting them or helping students to notice them in some way (Ellis, 2015). For instance, with the science report example, consciousness-raising might start with asking students to identify the passives in model texts. Students might read a model text and then circle every instance of the passive voice. Once students have identified passives in the model text, instruction could move on to

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meaning: What does it mean when a writer has chosen to use the passive voice in this context? Next, *use*: How is the passive voice used in the given genre? Consciousness-raising tasks can help students later identify target features in subsequent encounters (Fotos 1993).

Conclusion

In this month's Teacher's Corner, we've discussed teaching grammar communicatively, teaching grammar communicatively in large classes, and teaching grammar in context. Now that you have explored these concepts, what do you think? Do you have new ideas about how you will design future grammar lessons? How will you teach grammar communicatively? How will you teach grammar in context?

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