

How NOT to teach grammar

- **Sample lesson: How not to teach the past perfect**
- **Some rules**
- **Some conditions**
- **Some caveats**

This chapter will be short because a) there are very many more options for teaching grammar well than there are for teaching it badly, and b) it should be clear by now what this book considers to be ineffective grammar teaching, so a lengthy rehearsal of the arguments is probably unnecessary. This chapter, then, will stand as a short summary of what has gone before, and will attempt to answer the question implied in the title, that is: How do you teach grammar?

First of all, let's look at a lesson. The teacher is teaching a group of intermediate level teenagers:

Sample lesson Lesson: How not to teach the past perfect (Intermediate)

Step 1

The teacher introduces the lesson by telling the class that they are going to have a grammar lesson. He writes on the board 'past perfect'. He then explains the rules of formation and use of the past perfect (as in *he had worked ...*), including how the past perfect is used to refer to a time anterior to an established past reference, and how the past perfect is also used in reported speech to transform direct speech instances of the past simple and the present perfect. He also points out that the past perfect functions in conditional clauses to refer to hypothetical past time (as in *If I had known you were coming ...*).

Step 2

He asks if the class understands, and then distributes an exercise, which involves converting past simple and present perfect structures into the past perfect, as:

I went to the beach → I had gone to the beach.

She has seen the movie → She had seen the movie.

The students work on this individually and then take turns to read their answers out aloud. The teacher corrects any errors.

Step 3

In the remaining ten minutes of the lesson, the teacher sets up a game of 'Hangman', the vocabulary game in which the class are allowed several guesses at the gapped-out letters of a word.

Discussion and evaluation

First of all, let's be generous to the teacher and allow him the benefit of the doubt – it probably wasn't his decision to include the past perfect as an isolated item in the syllabus. Nevertheless, the past perfect is rarely if ever found in isolation, but instead co-exists with other tenses, and functions so as to avoid ambiguity, as in marking the difference between:

- 1 When we arrived at the party the other guests left.
- 2 When we arrived at the party the other guests had left.

It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to establish this function without reference to a text or a context. Relying simply on explanation, without examples, places considerable faith in the learners' capacity to create their own contexts. What's more, the teacher compounds the cognitive load by introducing several uses of the past perfect at the same time, again without much in the way of exemplification and using fairly difficult metalanguage to do it with. The only check of the students' understanding is the question *Do you understand?* – hardly a reliable means of gauging the success or not of the presentation.

The practice activity involves a mechanical manipulation, but, in the absence again of much context, there is no way the students could work out what effect on meaning the transformation entails, unless they already knew beforehand. The fact that the practice activity is done individually allows no opportunity for collaborative learning. Nor does the open class check provide students with a high volume of speaking practice. Finally, by switching to an unrelated word game, the teacher misses an opportunity to set up some kind of more language-productive, interactive activity, as a means, for example, of personalising the language. For example:

Use this pattern to write five true sentences about yourself:

Before I _____, I had never _____.

For example:

'Before I went to Brussels, I had never met a Belgian.'

Exchange your sentences with your partner's, and ask each other questions about them. For example:

What were you doing in Brussels?

Was it like you expected it would be?

etc.

In short, the lesson earns low marks for both E- and A-factors. While it was relatively **easy** for the teacher, in that it involved little or no preparation, the failure to use the time available productively to engage the learners, or to

provide the minimal conditions for learner understanding, means that the **economy** and **efficacy** of the lesson are less than optimal. The predominantly teacher-fronted approach, plus the lack of any content – such as a text – to stimulate the students' interest, or of any activity that might involve them in real communication, runs counter to the need to provide a motivating classroom environment. This is especially important for learners of this age group (i.e. teenagers), who may have no specific motive for learning English, but who generally respond positively to purposeful, interactive tasks.

In short, the teacher has adopted a teaching-is-transmission approach to the teaching of grammar. In other words, the lesson is based on the belief that simply by explaining the rules of grammar they will magically be internalised. The evidence seems to run counter to this view.

Some rules What conclusions, then, are to be drawn about the teaching of grammar? Here are some rules of thumb:

- **The Rule of Context:** Teach grammar in context. If you have to take an item out of context in order to draw attention to it, ensure that it is re-contextualised as soon as possible. Similarly, teach grammatical forms in association with their meanings. The choice of one grammatical form over another is always determined by the meaning the speaker or writer wishes to convey.
- **The Rule of Use:** Teach grammar in order to facilitate the learners' comprehension and production of real language, rather than as an end in itself. Always provide opportunities for learners to put the grammar to some communicative use.
- **The Rule of Economy:** To fulfil the rule of use, be economical. This means economising on presentation time in order to provide maximum practice time. With grammar, a little can go a long way.
- **The Rule of Relevance:** Teach only the grammar that students have problems with. This means, start off by finding out what they already know. And don't assume that the grammar of English is a wholly different system from the learner's mother tongue. Exploit the common ground.
- **The Rule of Nurture:** Teaching doesn't necessarily cause learning – not in any direct way. Rather than occurring as flashes of insight, language learning is more often than not a process of gradual approximation. Instead of teaching grammar, therefore, try to provide the right conditions for grammar learning.
- **The Rule of Appropriacy:** Interpret all the above rules according to the level, needs, interests, expectations and learning styles of the students. This may mean giving a lot of prominence to grammar, or it may mean never actually teaching grammar at all – in any up-front way. But either way, it is your responsibility as a teacher to know your grammar inside out.

Some conditions

The Rule of Nurture argues for providing the conditions for grammar learning. What are these conditions? If the answer to this much disputed question could be reduced to a handful of essentials, they would probably be these:

- The **input** learners get: will it be presented in such a way that the learners are likely to engage with it, thus ensuring a reasonable chance of it becoming intake?
- Their **output**: will it be of sufficient quantity and/or quality to ensure that they have opportunities to develop both accuracy and fluency?
- The **feedback** they get: will it be of the type and quantity to ensure that some of their attention is directed at form?
- Their **motivation**: will the content and design of the lesson be such that learners are motivated to attend to the input, produce optimal output, and take account of the feedback?

Some caveats

Finally, the teacher – whether new or experienced – is advised to be extremely wary of methodological fashions. Teaching methods come and teaching methods go. And, quite often, they come round again. These shifts in fashion are often powered by dubious theoretical claims that seem to touch a common chord, but which have a shelf-life of a decade or so at best. Teachers' intuitions, on the other hand, that are developed and fine-tuned by years of thoughtful classroom experience, tend to outlive these swings and pendulums. This is not meant to be an invitation to complacency. As professionals, language teachers have a duty to keep themselves abreast of developments in second language acquisition research, in applied linguistics, in educational theory and practice – both inside and outside the domain of language teaching – in fact in any field that has a bearing on language and on learning.

It is reassuring, perhaps, to read the advice opposite, from an English course (*Essential English for Foreign Students, Book Two* by C.E. Eckersley) that was first published half a century ago, and to realise what little, in fact, has changed.