Chapter 7 Teaching grammar

This chapter examines what we mean by *grammar* as well as looking at a number of different ways to approach the teaching of grammar.

1 What is grammar?

For many years, 'learning the grammar' has assumed a central role in students' expectations about what learning a language involves. Nowadays, however, there are many different views about what learners need to learn and how best to go about teaching it.

Here are some key questions concerning teaching grammar:

- What is grammar?
- How do people learn grammar?
- How can I analyse form, meaning and use for teaching purposes?
- What are possible component parts of a grammar lesson?
- How can I provide relevant input for learners?
- How can I help learners notice, understand and memorise language?
- How can I help learners practise using language?

But before we decide how we can teach grammar, perhaps our first issue should be to work out exactly what we mean by 'grammar'.

Task 7.1 Defining grammar

When thinking about teaching the grammar of a foreign language, which of these definitions of 'grammar' seems most appropriate?

a Rules about sentence formation, tenses, verb patterns, etc in a reference book
b The moment-by-moment structuring of what we say as it is being spoken
c Exercises (eg fill in the gap, multiple choice) about tenses, etc
d Our internal 'database' as to what are possible or impossible sentences

Commentary

I think all of these are arguably valid descriptions of something 'grammar-like'.

When thinking of 'grammar', many people probably first picture a book full of explanations and rules that tell them which verbs have what endings, how to use adverbs, how to make a superlative, etc. That's certainly one kind of grammar, but it's not really what we are talking about when we say that we are 'teaching grammar'. Let's try a different starting point.

Imagine my friend Leona starts saying *Yesterday afternoon I ...*. What's the next word going to be? Can you predict possible words that might come next? Maybe you think she's going to describe an action or something she did (so the next word might be *went* or *saw* or *broke* or *met*, etc). Or maybe you imagine her describing something that didn't happen (so her next word might be *didn't* or *couldn't*, etc).

How were you able to make such predictions? You could do it because you had a sort of mental list of possible patterns of English. You were able to look, even without thinking about it, at this internal collection of information and know what

sort of words were possible and, also, what kinds of words were not possible. For example, you are probably quite sure that Leona didn't say *Yesterday afternoon I green ...*. Similarly, she probably didn't say *Yesterday afternoon I meet ...*. In grammatical terms, we might say that the next word could be a verb (eg *saw*) or an auxiliary verb (eg *didn't*). We could also say that the next word wouldn't normally be an adjective (eg *green*). We also expect that, whatever the word is, it will be in a form that follows certain other guidelines; for example, if we are talking about the past (*yesterday*), then the verb form will normally be in a past tense.

This, of course, is the kind of information you'll find systematically arranged in a grammar reference book, or maybe in a simplified form in a book for learners. And it's the sort of thing that grammar exercises practise and test. However, instead of being a dry record of facts and rules, the information in your head is a living resource that allows you to communicate and be understood. For this reason, learning rules in a grammar book by heart is probably not 'learning grammar'. Similarly, reciting grammar rules by heart may not be 'understanding grammar'. Even doing tests and exercises may not necessarily be 'learning grammar'. There is actually no hard evidence that any of these things lead to people being able to use grammar accurately and fluently in speech. These things are only useful if there is some way that students can transfer this studied knowledge into a living ability to use the language. The information is not in itself of much use. In real life, people rarely come up to you and say 'Please tell me about conditionals.'

Scott Thornbury, in his book *Uncovering Grammar*, has suggested that we could open up our concept of 'grammar' if we start thinking of it as not just a noun (ie the information), but as a verb as well (ie the active skill of using language). It's probably this 'verby' kind of grammar that we most need to help our learners work with in class.

But, how can our students 'grammar' better? How do people get to that point where they are able to use language competently, fluently and accurately? Is studying and memorising rules a helpful waystage on the route to that goal? Are practice activities helpful? What role does teacher explanation and active 'teaching' have? And do we need to teach grammar at all?

We will look at these questions in some detail, but first I'd like to set out a brief overview of the conclusions you'll get if you read through all the following sections.

It seems likely that learners have to do a number of things to be able to start making any new grammar item part of their own personal stock of language.

They probably need to have **exposure** to the language; they need to **notice** and **understand** items being used; they need to **try using** language themselves in 'safe' practice ways and in more demanding contexts; they need to **remember** the things they have learnt.
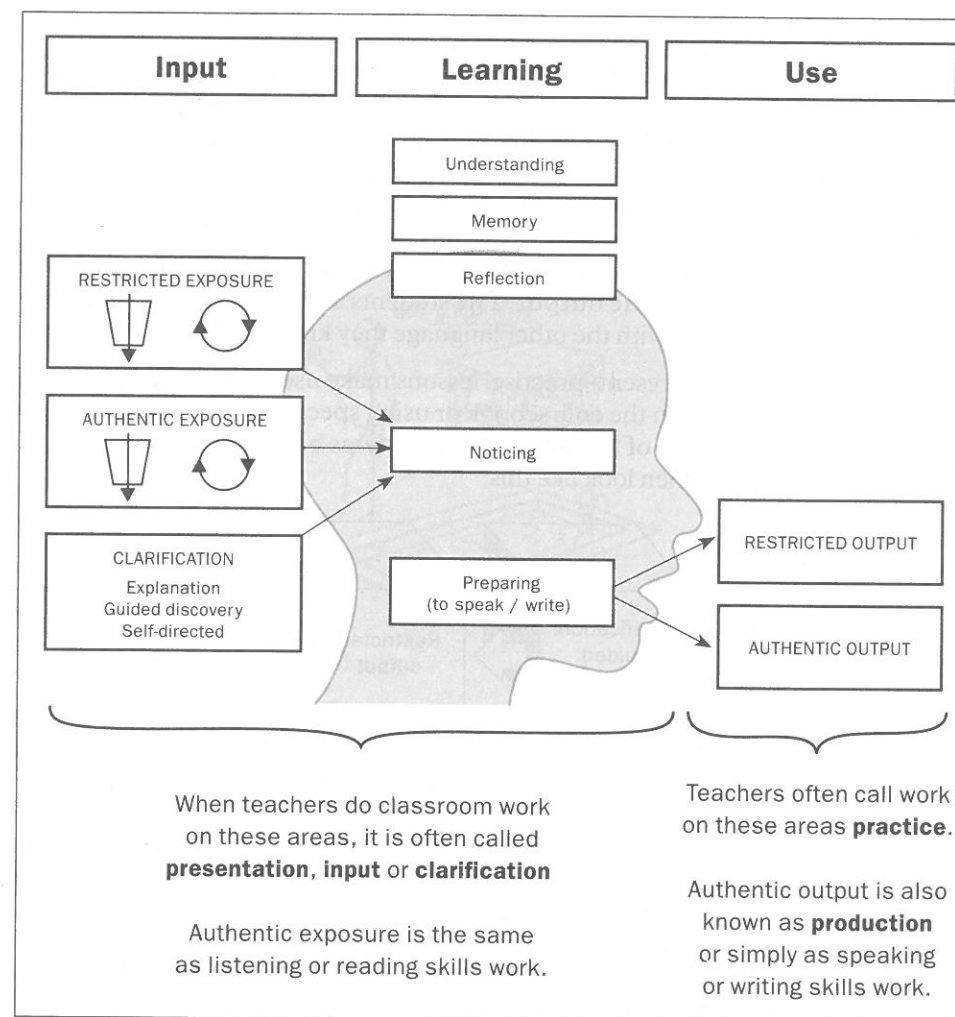
The table on the next page expands on this description. If you look back at the diagram (Figure 6.1 on page 126) showing a hypothesis about how people learn, you can probably draw some connections between the table and that diagram.

To learn a language item, learners need to:	It follows that, in class, you probably need to:
• **be exposed** to a lot of language while reading / listening.	• include lots of reading and listening activities. These should include realistic texts a little above the apparent current language level of learners so that learners are exposed to a lot of comprehensible new language (see Chapter 10).
• **notice** specific items when they are being used, in texts (eg in stories, in conversations).	• provide texts, exercises and techniques that help learners notice specific items. Texts specifically written for learners (eg containing multiple examples of a target item) may be particularly useful (see Section 3 of this chapter).
• **understand** the form, meaning and use of an item. **Form** refers to how the pieces fit together, the endings, etc. **Use** refers to the typical situations, conversations, contexts in which it might be used.	• be informed about form, meaning and use of language (see Chapter 5, Sections 2 and 4). • focus learners' attention on meaning and use by means of exercises, explanations, drills, games, questions, etc (see Section 3 of this chapter).
• **try things out** in a safe environment with limited other linguistic demands. • **have opportunities** to practise new language, to 'get their mouths around' new items.	• give many opportunities to practise, speak and write, with encouragement and feedback (see Section 4 of this chapter).
• **use the new language when speaking and writing** to communicate in different contexts.	• offer speaking and writing tasks that allow learners to make use of all the language they know (see Chapter 9).
• **remember** items.	• pay attention to how learners record items; • return to items again and again with revision tasks.

2 Present–practise

If there is one basic teaching sequence used around the world with classes of all types, it must be 'present then practise'. In other words, the teacher first presents / introduces / explains / clarifies / inputs the language point that the lesson is aiming to work on, and then, when it seems to be reasonably understood, moves on to give learners a chance to practise using the language themselves.

How does this 'present–practise' cycle relate to the image of learning we looked at earlier, in Chapter 6?

When teachers do classroom work on these areas, it is often called **presentation**, **input** or **clarification**

Authentic exposure is the same as listening or reading skills work.

Teachers often call work on these areas **practice**.

Authentic output is also known as **production** or simply as speaking or writing skills work.

If we want to plan a well-focused grammar lesson, we need to decide:

• Which of these areas we want to spend time on;
• How long we want to give to each one;
• What the best sequence is to have them in.

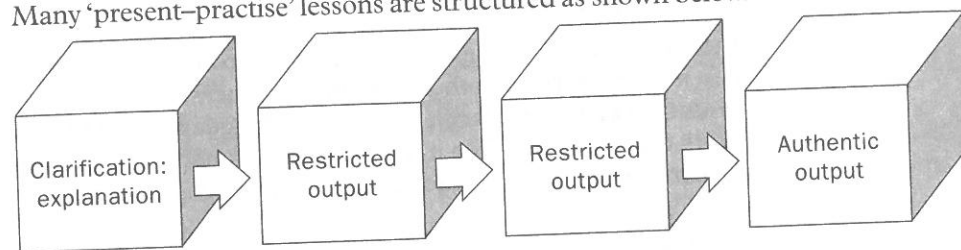Many 'present–practise' lessons are structured as shown below.

Figure 7.1 Present-practise structure

1 **Lead-in:** The teacher shows pictures connected to the lesson topic / context and elicits ideas from students.
2 **Teacher clarification:** The teacher gives / elicits examples of the language and explains / elicits information about them from students. The teacher may use any of the clarification ideas (eg explanation) outlined in Section 3 of this chapter.
3 **Restricted output:** The students work on oral practice of examples of these items.
4 **Restricted output:** The students do a written exercise to practise these items.
5 **Authentic output:** The students are given the opportunity to use these items, along with the other language they know, in communicative activities.

Many 'present–practise' lessons make use of restricted textual material (eg printed in the coursebook or using specially recorded material to provide examples of the target language items being used in context). The lesson structure might then look like this:
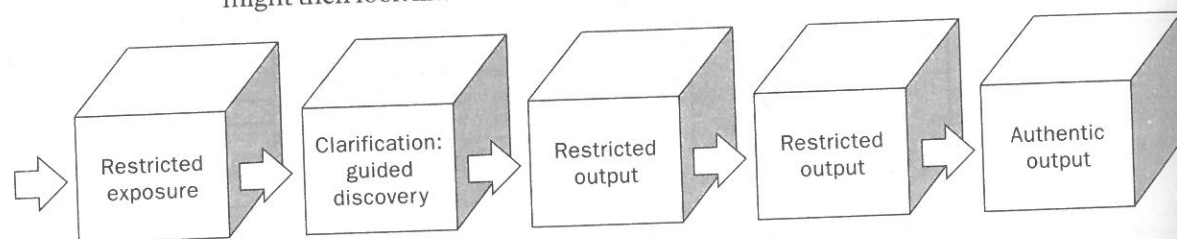

Figure 7.2 Present-practise with restricted exposure

1 **Lead-in:** The teacher shows pictures connected to the lesson topic / context and elicits ideas from learners.
2 **Restricted exposure:** Learners read / listen to a text and get a general understanding of it (maybe via a sequence of tasks and feedback).
3 **Teacher clarification:** The teacher uses the text to give / elicit examples and explain / elicit information about the item of language.
4 **Restricted output:** The students work on oral practice of examples of these items.
5 **Restricted output:** The students do a written exercise to practise these items.
6 **Authentic output:** The students are given the opportunity to use these items, along with the other language they know, in communicative activities.

Of course, many 'present–practise' lessons are more complex than the ones we have looked at so far. In many cases, the stages will not necessarily be clear and distinct. Your use of examples, your explanations and some practice elements may all be integrated, eg a cycle of examples, explanations and learner drills all being offered within a few minutes.

Situational presentation

An interesting example of presentation is the popular situational presentation, in which language is introduced via a context that the teacher has created (using board drawings, for example). Here is a description of a teacher using a situational presentation to teach *used to*.

Establish the context

1 The teacher draws a picture of a country house and a rich man (holding dollar bills). She asks the students to tell her about him and his life (eg *He's rich, He lives in a big house*).
2 She adds more pictures one by one (eg a Rolls Royce, a four-poster bed, a swimming pool) and elicits more statements about his life (eg *He drives a Rolls Royce*). She checks that all students are clear about this context.

Establish the meaning of the target item

3 She adds a picture of an 'interviewer' to the context and establishes that the rich man is being interviewed about his past life.

Figure 7.3 *Used to* board plan

4 She draws a picture of his thoughts about the past (eg a 'thought bubble' with a bicycle inside it). She invites the students to make a sentence about this. She taps the board to explicitly link the Rolls Royce (now) and the bicycle (past). She asks concept questions, eg *What's this?* (a bike) *Does he ride a bike now?* (no) *Did he ride one in the past?* (yes) *But not now?* (no) *Does he ride a bike now?* (no). She has now introduced and focused on the target meaning of *used to* without actually using the target language. Note that the meaning comes first, before the students meet the target form – the students understand the concept being dealt with, and, hopefully, feel the need for a piece of language to express it, before the teacher introduces the target language itself.

Introduce and practise the target language

5 When the 'bike' concept is clear, she asks if students can say the sentence he said to the interviewer, ie that has the meaning of 'I rode a bike in the past, but not now.' If a student produces a reasonable sentence, she works with that; if not, she models it herself (eg *He used to ride a bike*).
6 She gets students to repeat this round the class (a drill) and corrects any problems, especially taking care that she doesn't only notice incorrect words and word order, but also notices unnatural pronunciation.

Generate more sentences from the context

7 She adds more pictures to the 'interview' (eg bottle of water). She elicits further sentences using the target structure (eg *He used to drink water, He used to sleep in the street, He used to be poor*).

Recording in notebooks

8 She recaps sentences made so far and invites the class to help her construct a substitution table which they can then copy into their notebooks.

Moving on to practice stages

9 Now that the class has met a number of examples of the target language and has had a chance to repeat these sentences, she moves them on to practice activities.

See *Situational presentation* teaching technique on the DVD

Task 7.2 **Balancing presentation and practice**

What should be the balance of practice to presentation?

If your aim is to spend an hour helping learners get better at using a particular piece of grammar (for example, *too* + adjective + *to* + verb – *too heavy to lift*, etc), which of these two lesson structures seems, in your opinion, likely to be more useful to the learners?

0   60

Lead-in	Presentation	Practice

0   60

Lead-in	Presentation	Practice

Commentary

Many teachers spend most class time on presentation because they see this as the most important thing they can do to help their learners with grammar. They see a language teacher's job as primarily supplying information. Are they right?

I'd say 'no'. For me, a language teacher's job is primarily to push, encourage and help learners to try using the language themselves. In fact, you don't need very much information before you can try using language yourself, and once you start trying to use it, you can get feedback, correction and help on how to do it better. The primary learning experience is doing the thing yourself, not listening to someone else telling you about how to do it. So, I'd argue that students in many classes do not need long explanations or detailed information. What they tend to need more are challenging opportunities to try using the language items themselves.

Thinking about grammar teaching as primarily 'practice' rather than 'presentation' can help to solve a number of problems that teachers feel they face in class, not least the situation where students say *We have studied this before* or *We know this already*.

Many students think they 'know' certain items; what they actually mean is that information about these items has been presented to them, but the chances are high that, when pushed to use that item, they will make errors. A major problem with many grammar lessons is that they provide too much 'information' and not enough 'expectation' of quality student production. This is not to say that learners don't need the information – they almost certainly need some (and they need it clearly) – but they don't need all of it every time they have a lesson on a certain grammar item. They don't need to always be starting again at Step 1. What makes the lesson challenging is not the level of theoretical knowledge the lesson deals in, but what you ask students to try and do. It's the difference between **up-here knowledge** in the head and **knowledge-in-use**, in other words:
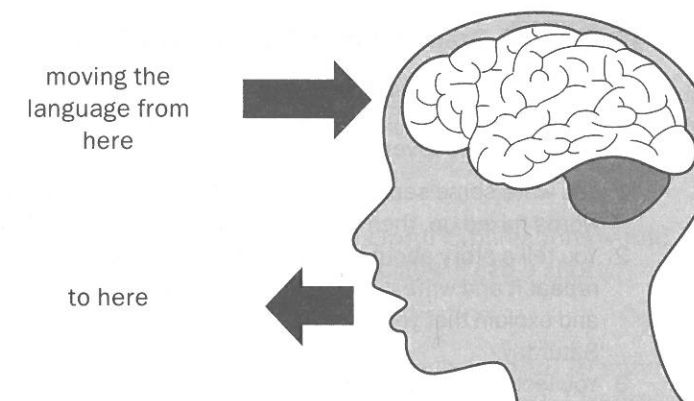

moving the language from here

to here

Figure 7.4 Knowledge in use

Thus, in theory, it is possible to have a really challenging, involving lesson on, say, the present perfect simple, at Advanced level. This is not because you will add more and more complex information, but because you would expect more in terms of quality of student output.

3 Clarification

You have reached a point in your lesson where you want the learners really to focus in on a piece of grammar, to see it, think about it and understand it, to become much clearer on its form, meaning and use. This is what many teachers refer to as **clarification** or **presentation**. However, these are quite broad headings; there is a significant difference between a presentation in which I give you a lecture for 60 minutes and one where I nudge and help you towards discovering much of the same information for yourself via a process of questioning and looking at suggested reference material. We could differentiate three general categories:

1 Teacher explanation
2 Guided discovery
3 Self-directed discovery

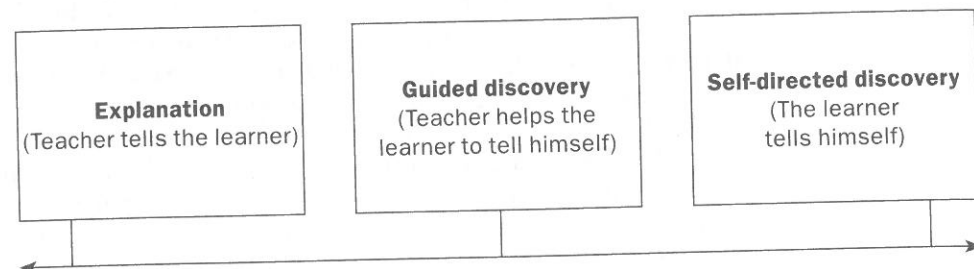We can perhaps see these as falling on a continuum (see Figure 7.5):

| Explanation
(Teacher tells the learner) | Guided discovery
(Teacher helps the learner to tell himself) | Self-directed discovery
(The learner tells himself) |

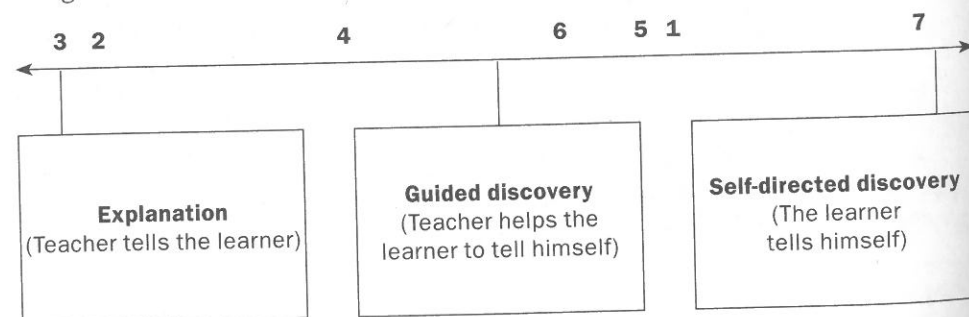**Figure 7.5** Three categories of clarification

Task 7.3 **Grammar clarification activities**

Classify the following grammar clarification activities by placing them on the diagram in Figure 7.5. Are they mainly (E) explanation, (G) guided discovery or (S) self-directed discovery?

1 You write some sentences (all using the past perfect) on the board, but with the words mixed up, then hand the board pen to the students and leave the room.
2 You tell a story about your weekend. Every time you use a verb in the past simple, you repeat it and write it on the board. At the end, you write 'past simple' on the board and explain that you used all these verbs in the past because the story happened last Saturday.
3 You lecture about the construction of conditional sentences.
4 You create a board situation, clarify a specific meaning and then elicit appropriate sentences from the students or model them yourself.
5 You hand out a list of 20 *if* sentences. You ask students to work together, discuss and find out what the 'rules' are.
6 Students discuss interpretation of timelines on the board and try to make example sentences for them. You intervene when answers seem elusive and at one point explain the difference between two tenses.
7 Students decide they want to learn about reported speech. They go to the library or learning centre and find out more.

Commentary

Different people will, of course, interpret these short descriptions differently. I'm sure your positioning is not exactly the same as mine, but is the ordering from left to right the same?

| 3 2 | 4 | 6 | 5 1 | 7 |
| Explanation
(Teacher tells the learner) | Guided discovery
(Teacher helps the learner to tell himself) | Self-directed discovery
(The learner tells himself) |

Teacher explanation

Task 7.4 **Teacher explanations**

Most teachers want, at some point, to give their class explanations about language points. Which of the following guidelines seem appropriate to you?

When explaining language …

1 talk at length;
2 talk fast;
3 use language more complicated than the point you are explaining;
4 bring in as many other language issues as possible;
5 don't give examples;
6 don't ask questions;
7 don't use any diagrams or visual aids;
8 assume that the class is following your points – don't waste time checking;
9 always explain every difficulty before students encounter the problem themselves.

Commentary

My personal list of guidelines for giving helpful explanations would (you've guessed!) be the opposite of that list – especially 'Keep it short'.

Giving helpful explanations

Two minutes of focused explanation can be really helpful; 20 minutes of the same is likely to get students confused, bored and embarrassed. The problem is that it is not necessarily a very involving teaching method; it is easy for a learner to switch off or misunderstand. It can appear successful because there is often an illusion of a large amount of work being covered, but the fact that the teacher has expounded on a particular topic does not mean that the item has been understood or internalised. Remember that they are foreign-language learners, not science undergraduates; lecture is not generally an appropriate style. Explanation will be better as a small component of lessons rather than the driving force. Having said that, a good explanation can often be the clearest and most efficient way to teach something.

The best way to avoid over-long, unhelpful explanations is to prepare them carefully when lesson planning. Decide what information will be necessary to state explicitly. Plan a simple, clear way to convey this information. Plan the use of timelines, substitution tables, annotated examples, diagrams, etc that might make the information easier to take in.

Point 9 in Task 7.4 is really a matter of personal choice; teachers often hope to pre-empt learner problems by pointing difficulties out in detail before they arise. Sadly, many learners don't appear to be helped by this! Explanations given **before** learners really know what is being discussed often seem to make no difference. I find that I generally tend to let learners try using language first and give the explanation that clarifies the issue only when they hit problems.

Guided discovery

An alternative to giving explanations would be to create activities that allow learners to generate their own discoveries and explanations. Tasks at just the right level will draw attention to interesting language issues. Teacher questions (and use of other techniques) will 'nudge' the learners towards key points. In this way, long explanations can be avoided and learners can take a more active role in their own progress.

Your role in guided discovery is to (a) select appropriate tasks; (b) offer appropriate instructions, help, feedback and explanations; (c) manage and structure the lesson so that all learners are involved and engaged, and draw the most possible from the activity.

The key technique is to ask good questions, ones that encourage the learners to notice language and think about it. These questions may be oral (ie asked live in class) or they might be on a worksheet that leads learners in a structured way to make conclusions. This kind of guidance is sometimes referred to as 'Socratic questioning', ie leading people to discover things that they didn't know they knew via a process of structured questions.

You can:

- ask questions that focus on the meaning (concept questions);
- ask questions that focus on the context (context questions);
- ask questions that focus on the form;
- offer appropriate examples for analysis and discussion;
- ask learners to analyse sentences from texts;
- ask learners to reflect on language they have used;
- ask learners to analyse errors;
- ask learners to hypothesise rules;
- set problems and puzzles concerning the language item;
- offer tools to help clarify meaning, eg timelines, substitution tables (but perhaps encouraging the students to use them to solve the problems);
- help them to stay focused if they get sidetracked;
- raise their awareness as to what they have learned.

Guided discovery is demanding on both you and the learner, and although it may look artless to a casual observer, it isn't enough to throw a task at the learners, let them do it and then move on. Guided discovery requires imagination and flexibility. Your job here is not simply to pass over a body of information, but rather to create the conditions in which that information can be learned. This seems to be a particularly fruitful way to work in the language classroom.

See *Guided discovery* teaching technique on the DVD

Task 7.5 Guided discovery questions

Study the following brief transcript from a lesson involving guided discovery techniques and decide what questions the teacher might have asked at the point marked *.

The Elementary students read a text that reviews and compares different dictionaries. The teacher first ensured that learners had a good sense of the general meaning of the text and is now focusing on the use of comparatives (which learners have worked on before) and superlatives (which learners haven't explicitly studied before).

TEACHER   How many dictionaries are mentioned in the article?

STUDENT 1:   Five.

TEACHER: OK. Look at this diagram. What does it show?

STUDENT 2:   How big.

TEACHER: Yes – how big or small the dictionaries are. Where can you put the different dictionaries on this diagram?

The teacher offers a pen to the student to add to the diagram; various learners come up and write the names of the dictionaries on the diagram, placing them to reflect the writer's comments. As items are added, the teacher asks questions about their decisions, such as *

The teacher then works in a similar manner with diagrams showing *light – heavy, cheap – expensive,* etc.

Commentary

The teacher would be likely to ask questions that:

- encourage learners to reflect on and articulate reasons for their choices;
- encourage learners to return to the text and find textual evidence that supports their choice;
- draw learners' attention to the specific language used in the text that leads to this meaning;
- focus on how the language item is formed;
- build on earlier questions and answers to construct a growing picture of the language item;
- ensure that all learners are grasping the issues and not just the faster ones.

Questions might include:

- Why did you put that book in that position on the diagram?
- What does the writer say about that book?
- What were the writer's exact words?
- So, what does *biggest* mean?
- How do you pronounce this word?
- Do *bigger* and *biggest* mean the same?
- What's the difference in meaning between *bigger* and *biggest*?
- Do you know the name for this piece of grammar?
- How do you make a superlative?

Where a question is one that learners do not know the answer to, you can briefly offer the answer yourself. In this way, teacher explanations are only made when they are seen to be relevant and necessary. Later questions can be used to check if learners have grasped this input.

Guided discovery: typical comments, instructions and questions

The following list shows various ideas and examples of guided discovery questions from different lessons.

Questions about form

What word goes in this space?
How many words are there in the sentence?

How do you spell that?
Is that a verb?

Questions about function

Do they know each other?
Is this formal or informal?

Where do you think they are speaking?
How does he feel?

Problems and puzzles

Put these words in the right order.
Fill in the spaces.
Change this into the past simple tense.

Write this sentence again, with exactly the same meaning, but only using seven words.

Reflecting on use

Write down some of the sentences you heard.
Why did you use that tense?

Where was the problem?
Which of those two sentences is correct?

Hypothesising rules

Is this possible?
What will the ending be in this example?

Why is that incorrect?
Can you think of another word that could go here?

Sentence analysis

Mark all the prepositions.
Mark the main stress in the sentence.

How many auxiliary verbs are there?
Cross out any unnecessary words.

Discussion about language

Which sentence do you prefer?
What might help you remember this?

What mistakes are you likely to make with this?
Is this the same in your language?

Contexts and situations

This is Paul. Where does he work? Tell me what he does every day.
Jo's got a full diary. What's she doing tonight?
Look at this picture. What's going to happen?
If I throw this pen at the picture on the wall, what'll happen?

Self-directed discovery

In this book, we will spend only a little time looking at the right-hand side of the diagram. This is what learners do when studying on their own without a teacher – or in a class where the teacher's role is primarily to 'facilitate' the learner's own self-direction. It is the least commonly found in classrooms. Where you want a class to work mainly in this way, it is essential that learners understand and agree with the working method. You need to ensure that the learners have sufficient information and experience to be able to work out their own rules and explanations, and perhaps work out their own goals and learning strategies as well. The obvious danger here is that you will abdicate your real responsibilities.

4 Restricted output: drills, exercises, dialogues and games

Language practice activities are arguably the most important part of any grammar lesson. Although teachers often spend a lot of time on 'input' stages – for example, in giving explanations – **the real learning experience is when learners try to use the language themselves.**

In order to give students intensive oral or written practice of specific language points, you can use activities carefully designed to restrict the language needed and require the use of the target items. Restricted output activities are defined by their focus on (a) limited options for use of language; (b) limited options for communication; (c) a focus on accuracy. Typical restricted activities are oral drills, written exercises, elicited dialogues, and grammar practice activities / games.

Drills

Drills provide intensive oral practice of selected sentences, giving the learners a chance to practise 'getting their mouths around' the language without worrying too much about meaning. The basic drill involves simple repetition:

TEACHER:	*He's going to open the door.*
STUDENTS:	*He's going to open the door.*
TEACHER:	*He's going to drive the car.*
STUDENTS:	*He's going to drive the car.*

Task 7.6 *Drills are so old-fashioned*

You are planning a lesson that includes some drills. Your colleague spots you in the staff room and says *Drills? Surely you don't still do those! They're so old-fashioned, and they've proved they don't work.* Is it worth arguing back? What would you say?

Commentary

Many teachers consider drills old-fashioned and never use them. I think they are wrong and they are depriving their learners of some important chances to learn. The next section outlines some possible reasons for drills.

Why drill?

Drills are often associated with the largely discredited behaviourist philosophy which suggests that we can be trained into automatic responses to stimuli through repetition or restricted response drills. However, I don't think we need to throw drills out with the behaviourist bathwater. We can still argue that our brains need to 'automatise' tasks without having to buy the entire 'stimulus-response' philosophy. It seems reasonably clear from day-to-day experience that we become better at doing certain things through practice – I can feel this myself when trying to learn to say a difficult sentence in a foreign language. I may need to 'rehearse' it slowly and carefully many times before I eventually start to get the sounds nearly right and in the right order. Only after a lot of this 'cutting a groove' in my brain's record can I start to get 'up to speed' with the new item. Eventually, it is so easy for me to say it that I hardly notice I'm saying it and I can stop worrying about it. But my own private 'drilling to myself' has helped.

Drilling is important for 'getting your tongue around it' problems. They can also help with other things, for example on issues to do with selecting the right form quickly (again, something that improves with familiarity).

For many years, some writers encouraged teachers not to offer students any speaking tasks that did not involve an element of 'genuine communication'. Recently, there has been a reassertion of the value of experimenting and playing with language even where the language doesn't represent realistic communication.

So don't worry too much about colleagues or methodology books who tell you not to bother with drills! Certainly there is some danger that students repeating are just making noises with little idea what they are saying, but of all activities in the classroom, the oral drill is the one which can be most productively demanding on accuracy.

When the students speak, you are probably listening carefully. You will use error awareness and correction techniques. You will give clear indications about what needs to be done in order to say the sentences better. You will encourage students to try a number of times to say the sentences with better pronunciation, with the words in the right order, etc. You will keep the level of challenge very high. When teachers are 'kind' and make drills easy (*That's good! Not quite, but great! Perfect! Fantastic! Wonderful!*), the exercise quickly becomes boring; it is the difficulty and the sense of achievement that make drills worth doing. Give precise, honest feedback rather than gushing praise. If the whole aim of a drill is to improve accuracy, it seems to make sense to aim for a very high standard. There is little point in doing a drill if the teacher and students are prepared to accept sloppy or half-good production. Honest feedback is vital.

Task 7.7 Variations on drills

What variations could enliven the basic drill technique (while still keeping the drill as no more than simple repetition)?

Commentary

The following section lists some possible variations. Note that even the apparently silly ones (like doing it with flat intonation) serve to raise awareness of the importance of intonation – sometimes messages are easier to take in when the example is exaggerated!

Factors that can vary a drill

Figure 7.6 summarises a range of drill types. Pick the options you like.

> **Variations on a drill**
>
> 1 Repeat the grammar item on its own.
> 2 Repeat the grammar item in a phrase / sentence.
> 3 Repeat the intonation pattern (as hummed music, no words).
> 4 Repeat the grammar item with exaggerated attention to intonation.
> 5 Repeat only the stressed syllables in a sentence ('get the rhythm'), then later 'put back' the missing syllables.
> 6 Repeat a sentence, building it up bit by bit, starting with the first word(s) / syllable(s).
> 7 Repeat by 'backchaining' (ie build up the sentence bit by bit, starting at the end rather than the beginning).
> 8 You give opening of sentence, students complete it.
> 9 You give part of sentence, students complete it.
> 10 You introduce sentence by repetition, then say new word that must be substituted within it.
> 11 You introduce sentence by repetition. Students must respond with a follow-on 'reply'.
> 12 You introduce sentence by repetition, then give an instruction for transformation of sentence (eg 'Change to the past perfect').
> 13 You say sentence with errors (eg words in wrong order), students put it right.
> 14 You say / show cues (eg some key words, pictures) and students construct a complete sentence.
> 15 You ask real questions about students' lives. Students respond with true sentences, all using the same grammatical item.
> 16 You invent or read a short text (one or two sentences), then ask questions about it, all using the same grammatical item.

Variations on the variations

All the above can be further varied by doing them …
1 as a whole class ('choral')
2 as a half / quarter of a class
3 as an individual in front of the whole class
4 as individuals around the class ('passing the baton')
5 as an open pair (everyone else can hear) next to each other
6 as an open pair across the room
7 as two halves of the class speaking to each other as if they were a pair
   (eg male / female; this side / that side)
8 as closed groups
9 as closed pairs (ie privately, simultaneously)
10 loudly
11 quietly
12 whispering
13 shouting
14 singing
15 slowly
16 fast
17 with exaggerated intonation
18 with flat intonation
19 with a specific accent
20 with exaggerated rhythm
21 with intonation for specific moods
22 walking around (separately)
23 mingling
24 changing places
25 taking on the teacher's role (once any individual drill is established)

Figure 7.6   Range of drill types

Task 7.8   **Designing a drill**

Devise a drill to work on practising *Wh-* questions about the past (eg *Where did he go? What did they do? When did Mary arrive?*).

It's important to insist on accurate pronunciation when you are conducting a drill with students. This is the time to make sure they are saying the words and sentences correctly; pay careful attention to rhythm and stress as well as pronunciation of the individual words.

See *Modelling intonation* and *Modelling connected speech* teaching techniques on the DVD

Also see Chapter 12, Section 1 for more about giving feedback on errors.

Moving beyond repetition drills

Substitution drills

Repetition, though useful for allowing full concentration on pronunciation, can be a little mindless. The following drill demands a little more thought:

TEACHER: *He's going to drive the car.*
STUDENTS: *He's going to drive the car.*
TEACHER: *bus*
STUDENTS: *He's going to drive the bus.*
TEACHER: *taxi* (etc)

Not much more thought, admittedly! But it's not difficult to make it harder:

TEACHER: *He's going to eat the cake.*
STUDENTS: *He's going to eat the cake.*
TEACHER: *coffee*
STUDENTS: *He's going to drink the coffee.*
TEACHER: *film*
STUDENTS: *He's going to watch the film.* (etc)

These drills are based on the principle of substitution. In the two examples above, the noun is being substituted by another – but it could be any word. And to make it really demanding, it could vary sentence by sentence:

TEACHER: *He's going to eat the cake.*
STUDENTS: *He's going to eat the cake.*
TEACHER: *coffee*
STUDENTS: *He's going to drink the coffee.*
TEACHER: *Mary*
STUDENTS: *Mary's going to drink the coffee.*
TEACHER: *make*
STUDENTS: *Mary's going to make the coffee.*
TEACHER: *beds*
STUDENTS: *Mary's going to make the beds.* (etc)

Transformation drills

A completely different kind of drill is based on the students making their own sentence based on a model and information given by you. These are transformation drills, ie the student transforms a sentence of one kind into another form:

TEACHER: *He's opening the cake tin.*
STUDENTS: *He's going to eat the cake.*
TEACHER: *He's standing beside the swimming pool.*
STUDENTS: *He's going to swim.*
TEACHER: *Susan's going into the post office.*
STUDENTS: *She's going to buy a stamp.*
TEACHER: *The students are waiting at the bus stop.* (etc)

True sentences

The most useful drill may be one where the student is giving real information in their answers – in other words, there is communication as well as language practice:

TEACHER: *What are you going to do after school?*
STUDENTS: *I'm going to play football.*
TEACHER: *And tonight?*
STUDENTS: *I'm going to watch TV.*
TEACHER: *Are you going to watch the film?*
STUDENTS: *No, I'm not. I'm going to watch the concert.*

Finally:

- keep the atmosphere humorous but keep the language focus serious;
- personalise some elements;
- jazz it up with mime, pictures, board cues, silly postures, etc;
- don't worry too much about whether it is a 'meaningful' or 'communicative' drill;
- do worry about whether what you're drilling is a realistic piece of real-world language;
- don't drill possible but improbable English;
- keep the challenge high;
- make sure students get the practice, not you!

See *Repetition drills* teaching technique on the DVD

Written exercises

Written exercises are a common and useful way of giving students concentrated practice of language items. How can they be less of a chore and more of an enjoyable challenge?

Task 7.9 **Analysing a textbook language exercise**

Here is a textbook exercise. What area of language is it working on?

(1) ＿＿ computer is certainly (2) ＿＿ great invention, one of (3) ＿＿ wonders of (4) ＿＿ modern world. But late on (5) ＿＿ cold Friday afternoon, towards (6) ＿＿ end of (7) ＿＿ miserable December, I'm beginning to wish that I'd never bought one. All I want to do is write (8) ＿＿ letter to (9) ＿＿ Aunt Diana. But (10) ＿＿ machine seems to have (11) ＿＿ different idea altogether. After (12) ＿＿ two hours' work, all I have to show are (13) ＿＿ torn piece of paper filled with (14) ＿＿ inky, black smudges and (15) ＿＿ computer screen that happily tells me 'There is (16) ＿＿ error. Please restart.' Give me (17) ＿＿ pen and (18) ＿＿ pad of (19) ＿＿ paper! If this is (20) ＿＿ modern world, I'll vote for (21) ＿＿ Stone Age!

Commentary

The exercise is designed to help students become more familiar with the use of articles in English (*the*, *a* and *an* or 'no article').

Task 7.10 **Different ways of using a printed exercise**

The above exercise could obviously be done by students individually in class or at home. What other ways of using this material can you think of?

Commentary

Some ideas:

- Do it as individuals, then compare and discuss answers with neighbours.
- Work in pairs.
- Work in small groups.
- Work in teams – make a competition out of it.
- Do it together on the board – teacher-led.
- Do it together on the board – student-led.
- Hand out a jumbled list of answers to match to the questions.
- Do it orally in a language laboratory.
- Dictate the sentences, leaving spaces where the missing words are.
- Do it at great speed (give them, say, three minutes to do the whole exercise). Then shuffle papers and give to small groups to discuss and mark.
- Cut up the sentences and give one to each student; negotiate arrangement and answers.
- Hand out the exercise with your answers already written in, some right, some wrong. The students must correct your work.
- Make a game out of it, eg 'Auction': divide class into teams; allocate a certain amount of 'money' to each team. The aim is to use this money to 'buy' correct words to fill the gaps. Give students time to read through the exercise, then, starting with Gap 1, proceed to 'auction' pieces of paper with *the*, *an* and *a* on them. The teams must buy the word they need to complete the gap. The team that buys the correct word gets a 'money' prize. Anyone else loses the cash they spent on the wrong word. Keep a record of how much they have 'spent' on the board through the game; the winner is the team with the most money at the end.

Task 7.11 **Making a printed exercise more game-like**

Devise a variation on the following written exercise to make it more game-like.

Choose the correct verb form for each sentence:

1 I want *to see / see / seeing* the film.
2 I'd like *to have / have / having* a coffee.
3 I may *to go / go / going* to London.
4 I enjoy *to watch / watch / watching* TV.
5 I must *to go / go / going* home now.
6 I can *to play / play / playing* the guitar.
7 I suggest *to have / we have / have* a rest.

Commentary

This exercise is working on the difference between *-ing* forms and infinitives and helping students to sort out which ones go with which verbs.

By writing sentence halves on small squares of paper (or blank cards), we could, for example, turn an exercise like the one above into a game of 'Snap'. You deal out all the cards, which the students keep face down, not looking at them. The students (as individuals or in teams) take it in turns to play a card into one of two card piles (beginnings or endings). They must call 'Snap!' when the beginning and ending make a correct sentence. If they call 'Snap!' at the wrong time, they (or their team) must pick up both piles of discarded cards.

I want

to play the guitar
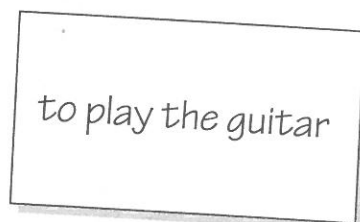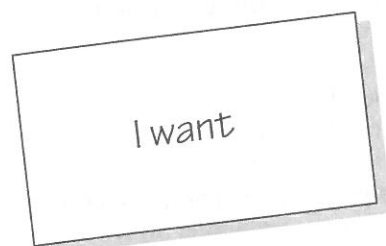
Elicited dialogues

These are short dialogues (four to ten lines) which contain a number of examples of specific items to be practised. Using a dialogue places these items in a typical or useful context, integrating practice of newer grammar with practice of items previously studied, social English expressions and pronunciation. The students will get many chances to repeat the dialogues in class and thus increase their familiarity with these items. They are often an amusing and enjoyable way to enable oral practice of language. The procedure is as follows:

Before the class

Write a short dialogue. Perhaps you have recently taught *It's too* + adjective + *to* + verb (eg *It's too hot to drink*). You can now make a short dialogue, set in a specific situation, that includes a few examples of this language item. For example:

Lazy boyfriend on sofa; girlfriend in doorway.

GIRL: Could you help me, Mike?
BOY: What do you want?
GIRL: Bring me that suitcase, please.
BOY: Oh, I'm too tired!
GIRL: It's too heavy for me to carry.
BOY: (*trying and failing*) And it's too heavy for me, too! What's in it?
GIRL: Your birthday present!

In class

1 Use board pictures (or some other way) to establish the context and the characters very clearly.
2 By using mime, gestures, questions or picture cues, try to elicit from the students each line of the dialogue you have prepared. The aim is to get **them** to produce as much of it as possible.

3 When the students say sentences in response to the eliciting, you need to select a suitable one, correcting it if necessary.
4 You must now establish this line of dialogue (ie every student in the class needs to be able to say it and remember it). This will probably be done through choral and individual drilling and correction; the students are given lots of chances to repeat it, with you helping them to say it fluently and accurately with the best possible pronunciation (especially intonation!). You can help the students remember the dialogue by drawing up simple cue pictures on the board (eg a hand trying to pick up the suitcase).★
5 Steps 2, 3 and 4 are repeated for each line.
6 There are also frequent repetitions of the whole dialogue to date (in pairs, perhaps, or by dividing the room into two halves).

★ It's tempting to make Stage 4 easier by writing up the words on the board and reading it out from there. If you do this, the students won't need to think very much. The fun and challenge of the activity is in trying to recall previous words!

See *Elicited dialogue* teaching technique on the DVD

Follow-on activities

When the dialogue is complete, follow-on activities could include writing it out, acting it out, continuing it, etc.

Grammar practice activities and games

Grammar practice activities are designed to focus on the use of particular items of grammar. The material is designed so that the students have few opportunities for avoiding working with the target language. Here are some examples:

Split sentences

Write out some sentences using the first conditional for warnings (eg *If you touch the dog, it'll bite you!*) and then cut each sentence in half. Hand out these pieces to the students, who have to read out their half and find the matching half amongst the other students.

If you eat that,	you'll be sick.
If you touch the dog,	it'll bite you.
If you steal my boyfriend,	I'll never speak to you again.
If you go out now,	you'll get soaked.
If you don't leave,	I'll call the police.
If you don't book a ticket,	you'll be lucky to get a seat.

Grammar quiz

Run a quiz for two teams. Write a verb infinitive on the board; the first team to put the past participle correctly on the board wins a point. It's not too hard to find variations to make a simple quiz like this more interesting. For example:

• use a noughts and crosses (tic-tac-toe) grid to score on – the team must get three symbols in a row;
• get students to prepare the questions themselves for the other team to answer;
• add in special rules of your own to allow penalties, 'jokers', bonus points, etc.

Memory test

Prepare copies of three pictures showing people doing various things. For example, shopping in a department store; dancing in a nightclub; having a picnic by the river. In class, this material is used as a 'memory test' to work on the present progressive tense (*is* / *am* / *are* + *-ing*). Show the first picture to the students for a length of time, and then hide it. Then read out some true / false questions about the picture (eg for Figure 7.7, 'The cat is walking past the litter bin', 'The policeman is talking to the shop assistant'). In teams, the students discuss them, then give their answers and are awarded points. At the end, the teams are given a different picture and prepare their own list of ten questions to ask the other team.
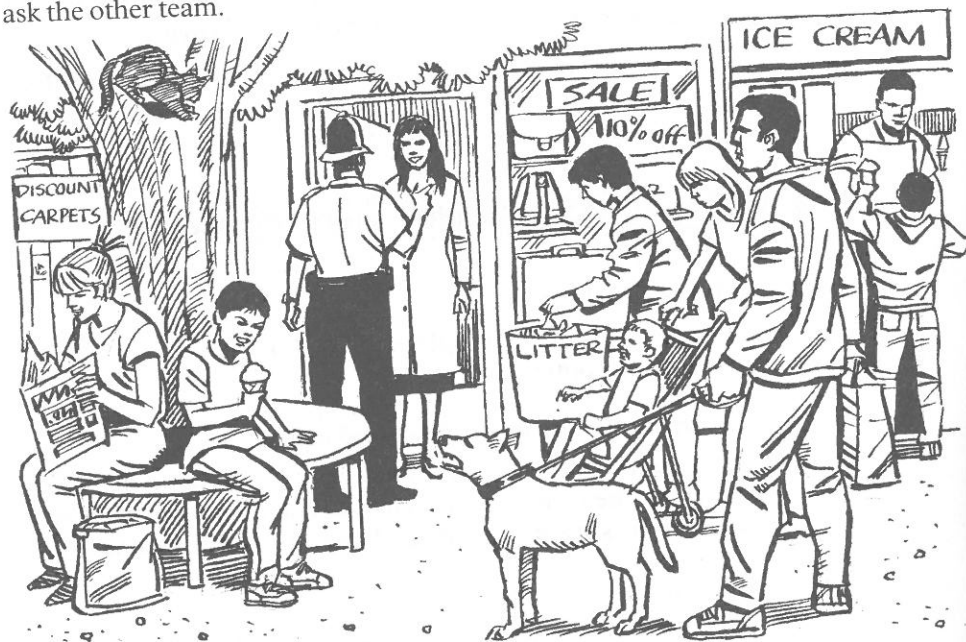

Figure 7.7 Memory test

Picture dictation

The material for 'Memory test' above could be used as a picture dictation (you (or a student) describe the picture while other students, who haven't seen it, try to draw it from the instructions).

Miming an action

Students in turn are given a card with an action on it, which they must mime well enough for the other students to guess. For example, a student mimes swimming and the other students say 'You're swimming in the sea' (present progressive). Depending on your introduction, this could be used to practise a variety of tenses, eg 'Show us what you did yesterday' / 'You swam in the sea'; 'Show us what you were doing at midday yesterday' / 'You were swimming in the sea'. The mimes could also refer to future time. An interesting idea to practise *going to* would be for the student to mime what she would do **before** the actual action, eg mime walking down to the beach, putting on swimming costume, getting ready to dive: 'You're going to swim'.

The game works beautifully with adverbs. Prepare two sets of cards: one set with actions, one with adverbs. The students take one card from each pile. They tell the class what the action is, but not what the adverb is. They then do the action in the manner of the adverb. The others, of course, have to guess what the adverb is.

Growing stories

Storybuilding activities are excellent for work on the past simple. Here are two examples:

1 Start a story by saying one sentence in the past simple tense. The students continue the story by adding one sentence each.
2 Hand out a large set of different magazine photos, which the students, in small groups, look at. Then hand out a pre-written selection of verbs (eg *decided*, *wished*, *exploded*, etc). The students match the verbs to pictures of their choice, and then invent a complete sentence including the verb. When a group of students has ten picture / verb matches, they attempt to invent the other details of a complete story, which they prepare orally and tell the rest of the class.

Questionnaires

Turn your current grammar items into a questionnaire. Get students to survey each other. It's usually better if your questionnaire does not contain fully written-out questions. Give them the 'bones' of the questions so that they need to think and make the sentences themselves (eg *Where* / *go* / *tonight?*). Otherwise it will be you who has had the most challenging language work, and all the students have had to do is read out your work! Even better, get them to write the questionnaire!

Grammar auctions

Prepare a mix of correct and incorrect sentences. Students working in groups are allocated an amount of pretend money. You read out a sentence. They must decide if it's correct or not. They then "bid" on the sentence as if in an auction. They aim to only buy correct sentences (as only these are worth anything at the end). When all sentences have been auctioned, reveal what each is worth (ie nothing for incorrect, variable amounts for good ones).

Board games

A board game such as *The block of flats* resource on the DVD could also be used.

For more on freer practice / authentic use activities see Chapter 9 *Productive skills* and Chapter 10 *Receptive skills*.

5 Other ways to grammar

The lessons in the previous section were all based on the 'present–practise' structure. But let's look again at some possible 'building brick' components of a lesson (see Chapter 6, Section 3) so that we can consider alternative lesson shapes. If we select and then sequence components as shown in Figure 7.8 that seem important to us, we can construct various significantly different lesson structures.
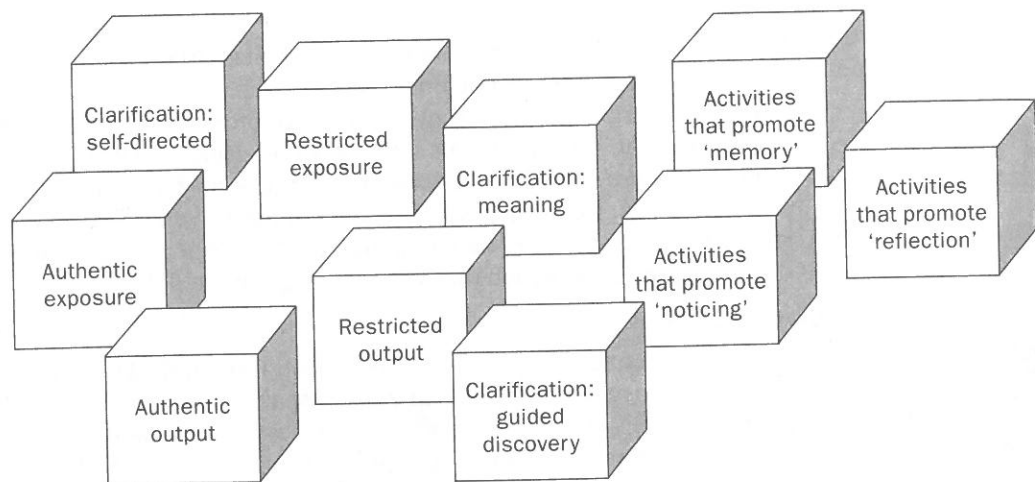

Figure 7.8 Alternative building blocks

Test–Teach–Test

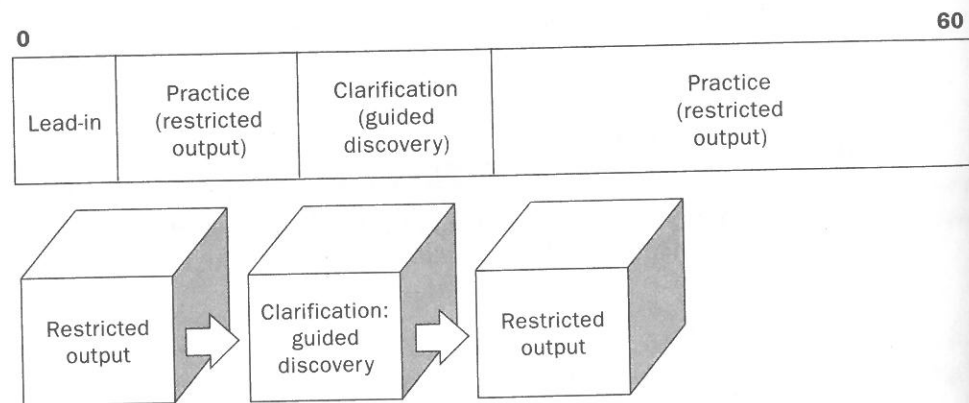What would happen if we 'turned around' the 'present–practise' lesson, and put a practice stage first?

Figure 7.9 Test–Teach–Test structure

What's happening here? This suggests that we set the learners a task to do that requires them to use language and then, as a result of monitoring them while they work, we offer input, correction, explanation, etc. Here is an example lesson in which a group of Elementary learners are studying prepositions of place :

1 **Restricted output:** The students work in pairs. Both students are given a separate picture of the same hotel room (which they do not show to their partner). The pictures are identical, except that five familiar objects (eg a chair, a bottle, etc) are in picture A but not in picture B, and a different five objects are in picture B but not in picture A. Students have to describe where the objects are to each other, drawing items when they find out exactly where they are.

2 **Clarification (guided discovery):** When the activity has finished, the teacher asks the students to compare pictures and recall how they described the various locations. Pairs work together for a while, then some are invited to put their answers on the board. The teacher asks the class to decide together which sentences are correct and which not. She encourages the class to discuss and agree together (using reference books if necessary); she directs the discussion so as to get the class thinking and working together, but only offers specific help with the language problems towards the end if problems remain that the class could not solve.

3 **Restricted output:** Learners do a task very similar to the original hotel task, but involving a different location.

It looks as if we are throwing learners in the deep end and finding out what they need to know by first testing what they can use, then teaching those things that revealed problems or were absent but needed, then letting learners try again to use the language (ie test–teach–test).

The example we have just looked at involved 'restricted' tasks. A test–teach–test lesson could also set learners a general speaking task without restriction of language; in this case, learners may reveal a much more unpredictable set of errors, problems, etc.

This lesson type is much harder to fully plan in advance, as you do not necessarily know what specific language items might come up and require work, information, etc. For this reason, this is a lesson type that teachers tend not to try until they have gained a certain amount of experience and sufficient familiarity with the basics of English grammar and usage.

You may be wondering how either of these lesson structures might be possible. How can learners use language before it has been taught?

When I come to teach many of my students a 'new' grammatical item, I may be surprised to find that they 'half-know' it already. With students studying for a period of time on any course that includes skills work (reading, listening, etc), this effect is even more marked because students have been exposed to a large amount of language on recordings and in texts, and they have often become half-aware of many grammatical patterns. A common example is the present perfect tense: students have often heard and read many examples of this tense before it is actually focused on in class.

From this I can conclude that 'new' grammar is often not completely new for students and they may have met it many times before it is actually 'taught'. Teachers often talk about 'teaching' (or 'presenting') new grammar; what is meant

is that it is the first time that they have focused in detail on a particular item in class. And, in fact, it is extremely hard to do such teaching if learners haven't had this kind of exposure. It's almost impossible to learn something the very first time you meet it, but if it has 'drip-fed' into your brain over a period of time, you have a reasonable starting point. For these reasons, giving students chances to be exposed to, or to attempt to use, language 'above' their apparent level of knowledge of grammar is extremely useful and greatly aids future work on grammar. It both celebrates what students can do and clarifies precisely what still needs to be worked on. Maybe we should call these approaches 'exposure–test–teach–test' rather than just 'test–teach–test' for they will only work if learners have been exposed to language.

Task 7.12 Appropriate teaching strategies for Beginners

Do you think it would be possible to use 'exposure–test–teach–test' approaches with low-level students, say with Beginners?

Commentary

There are few people in the world who know nothing of English. Even someone who has studied no English has probably picked up a number of 'international English' expressions and words (*duty free, no smoking, it's the real thing*, etc). Many adult learners who call themselves Beginners have, in fact, studied English at school for two or more years; most of this has been 'forgotten' or is hard to activate through lack of use or lack of confidence. These are the so-called 'false Beginners'. By providing listening and reading work at an appropriate level, this stock of half-known language will quickly increase. Provided learners have sufficient exposure, it is certainly possible to use 'exposure–test–teach–test' approaches at low levels.

Total Physical Response (TPR)

TPR is, in fact, a whole methodology and has proved to be very successful, especially at low levels. Initially learners are given restricted exposure to a large number of instructions (eg *Walk to the door, Pick up Jolanda's pen*). Gestures and demonstrations quickly help learners to understand the meaning, and learners then do what they are asked to.

Lessons continue in this manner for a long time, with increasingly complex instructions and, later, other sentences. Learners are not required to use the language themselves until they want to and feel ready. Many teachers, while not necessarily adopting the whole methodology, retrieve many teaching techniques from it. If you'd like to try out a lesson, look at the *Script sheet for TPR lesson* resource on the DVD for some sample instructions.
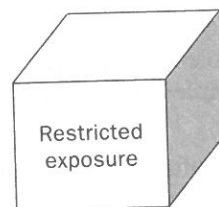
Figure 7.10 Total Physical Response lesson

Task-Based Learning (TBL)

TBL is a general term for some more variations on the 'exposure–test–teach–test' lesson structure.

Lessons are centred round a task, ie the learners have to do a particular assignment (which will probably have a clear outcome). This task will usually be 'real world' rather than 'language focused' (eg 'Plan a birthday party' rather than 'Fill in the gaps in this exercise'). The lesson will often start with the task itself (maybe after some lead-in introducing the theme or topic) and may include other stages such as 'listening to a recording of competent language users doing the same task', 'Learners give a report back on how they did the task' and a 'Preparation of the report' stage.
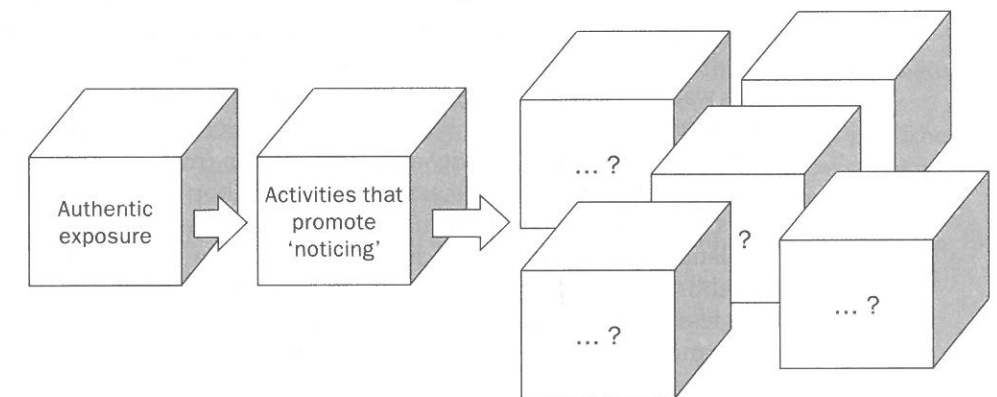
Figure 7.11 Task-Based Learning lesson

Text starts

In the section on 'present–practise', we saw how restricted texts could be used as a way of providing language exposure. You can do exactly the same with authentic texts, though you may need to take more care planning how you exploit them.

Because these texts have not been specifically designed for language students, they will have neither simplified, controlled language nor lots of specially placed examples of a specific target language item. As with the restricted texts, you will probably need to start out as if it were a normal task-based skills reading or listening lesson, following a sequence of tasks from general to specific so that learners get a reasonable understanding of the text before we focus on language points. Note that it's hard to do any useful language work unless the learners have a fair idea of their way around the text.

With an authentic text rather than a restricted one, there may not be multiple examples of a particular grammatical point to study, and individual language items will probably not 'jump out' in the same way as with a restricted text. This suggests that an authentic text will often be more useful for drawing attention to a range of various language points in action rather than a single target point.
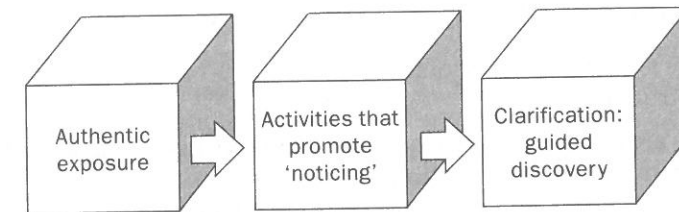
Figure 7.12 Text starts lesson

100% exposure

Someone going to live in a country who does not know the language and does not attend classes may learn by 'picking up' the language, ie they will receive lots of authentic exposure and will attempt authentic output in return (sometimes with helpful feedback from friends, shopkeepers, etc). Some teachers believe that the best way to teach language formally may be to reproduce this approach as far as possible in class. A teacher who wanted to work in this way might therefore engage learners in lots of real activity and conversation (making coffee together, walking along the street and looking at shops, etc) and hope that learners pick up language. Less strict interpretations would allow 'teaching' as well, to give feedback, explanations guidance, etc. A more structured variant would be based on a syllabus where the teacher had chosen a planned sequence of topics and tasks so that lessons had a clear sense of progress and challenge. Whether any of these can be termed 'grammar' lessons is arguable; they are more general 'language' classes.
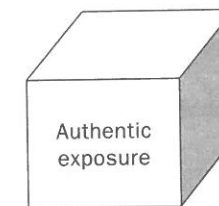

Figure 7.13 100% exposure