

Overview

The sections in this unit are:

- 6.1 **What is grammar?** A brief definition.
- 6.2 **What students need to learn: standards of grammatical acceptability.** What grammatical forms are acceptable, or unacceptable, in the different contexts in which English is used today.
- 6.3 **How best to teach grammar: explicit and implicit processes.** The pros and cons of explicit grammar teaching (explanations, practice) as contrasted with implicit (intuitive acquisition through communicative activity).
- 6.4 **Presenting grammar: explanations.** Some practical guidelines on the provision of grammatical explanations in the classroom.
- 6.5. **Grammar practice: consolidating and automatizing grammatical knowledge.** Different types of grammar practice and the importance of meaningful, communicative practice of grammar in context.
- 6.6 **Grammar assessment.** A set of test items that can be used to assess grammatical knowledge, divided into closed-ended (one right answer) and open-ended (a number of possible right responses).

6.1 What is grammar?

Grammar is sometimes defined as 'the way words are put together to make correct sentences'. So in English *I am a teacher* is grammatical, **I a teacher*, and **I are a teacher* are not. This is a good starting point, but the definition needs expanding to include all the aspects that the term *grammar* covers and that we need to teach.

First, it is not just a question of correctness. Grammatical forms nearly always carry meaning: the meaning of a particular message in a communicative situation is created by a combination of vocabulary and grammar. We use grammatical items and constructions to express, for example, time (using tenses) or place (using prepositions) or possibility (using modals or conditional clauses). It is often the meanings that create problems for our students and need careful teaching, rather than the forms (for example, when contrasting present perfect simple *I have done my homework* with present perfect progressive *I have been doing my homework*).

Second, we can apply the term *grammatical* to units smaller or larger than sentences. A brief phrase said or written on its own can be grammatically acceptable or unacceptable in its own right: *a tall woman* sounds right; **a woman tall* does not. The grammatical components may not be whole words; for example, the *-ed* suffix indicating the past tense of a regular verb in English, or the *-s* plural of nouns. And sometimes it is not even a question of just arranging and combining words or parts of words; some items may actually change their spelling

and pronunciation as a result of a change in grammatical form (for example, *go* becomes *went* in the past tense). At the other extreme, the term *grammar* can be used to relate to passages longer than sentences; we can talk about a 'story grammar' for example.

Grammar may involve grammatical words or affixes (*morphology*), or their combination in phrases or sentences (*syntax*). Morphology includes words like *she*, *that*, *our* and suffixes such as the plural *-s*, and syntax includes things like the formation of the negative, or relative clauses.

6.2 What students need to learn: standards of grammatical acceptability

One of the points discussed in Unit 1 was the importance of both accuracy and fluency in language teaching. There is, however, some debate as to whether we should worry about grammatical accuracy when it does not interfere with effective communication of a message. For example, should we correct a student who drops the third person *-s* suffix in the present simple (saying *she like* instead of *she likes*)? And should we correct a student who uses *which* instead of *who* in relative clauses (saying *the person which* instead of *the person who*)? Or should we insist on accuracy only when it affects meaning, for example correcting a student who uses a present tense verb where a past tense is needed?

In practice, of course, most of us teach the conventional grammatical forms and meanings of English because that is what the coursebooks we are using do, or because that is what the exams test, or because that is what the school policy, the parents or the students themselves demand.

However, you sometimes do have some measure of flexibility, and in any case it is important to clarify your own professional approach to the teaching of grammatical rules. So you need to ask yourself: All things being equal, and if the decision depends only on my own judgement, will I in principle insist on forms like the third person *-s*, or will I not?

Task

What is your own opinion on this? Where would you insist on correct forms and where would you not? And what are your arguments in support of your position?

Teaching standard grammar

Although the use of the variant forms mentioned above (such as *she like* and *the person which*) does not affect meaning and will not cause a breakdown in communication, it is arguable that we should mostly treat them as errors and encourage our students to use standard grammar (for exceptions see below). I use the term *standard* here to mean the usages which are seen by most speakers of English as internationally acceptable, not necessarily the usages associated with the 'native' varieties of English.

The main reasons for this are as follows:

- These forms are preferred and actually used by the majority of competent speakers of English, including those for whom English is not their L1 (Seidlhofer, Breiteneder & Pitzl, 2006). This group obviously includes most teachers, who are often the main English-speaker model for their students.
- Even if the variant forms are sometimes used in informal speech, they are rarely used in writing.
- As a matter of professional standards, most teachers feel they should aim to have their students achieve internationally accepted levels of accuracy and fluency in their speech and writing.
- Students also on the whole wish to be accurate, in the sense of using standard forms, and to be corrected if they make errors (see Unit 7: Error correction, pp. 91–4).
- Most high-stakes English exams require responses from candidates that use standard forms, and may penalize errors.

Task

What is your own opinion about the desirability of teaching standard grammatical forms? Do you agree with the arguments above? Are there any you have reservations about? If you are with a group, exchange opinions with others.

We need to be aware, however, that there are situations where grammatical accuracy matters more, or less. It obviously matters much more if errors actually result in miscommunication than if they do not (as with the examples given at the beginning of this section). They matter more in formal written communication, and less in informal chat. For example, if we are teaching a course in conversational English with the aim of improving oral fluency, we may well ignore grammatical errors which do not affect meaning, and not let them affect our assessment of students' performance. This would not be appropriate, however, if our course is aiming for improvement of academic English for participants who are planning to apply to a university.

The bottom line is, I suggest, that all things being equal, we shall continue to teach our students to observe the conventional grammatical rules as laid out in our textbooks, while remaining sensitive to the need for flexibility: where we need to be more, or less, fussy about how these are applied.

6.3 How best to teach grammar: explicit and implicit processes

Having decided which grammatical features we are going to teach, how should we do this? Should we allow our students plenty of opportunity to hear, read and use the correct forms, but not explain them ('implicit' teaching)? Or should we provide explanations ('explicit')? Or should we use a combination of the two?

Stephen Krashen (1999) claims that grammar is best acquired implicitly, through plenty of comprehensible input (listening and reading). But he has been outvoted:

the research literature provides a large amount of evidence against this view. For example Norris and Ortega (2001), in a survey covering a large number of studies, came to the conclusion that on the whole students who receive some explicit instruction in grammar perform better than those who do not. Teachers and students also generally feel that grammar instruction is helpful.

However, there is still a place for communicative input and output, and the possibility of acquiring some grammatical features through intuitive acquisition. As with vocabulary, we need both kinds of procedures, implicit and explicit, for effective teaching and learning.

Task

If you learnt English, or another foreign language, in school, how was grammar taught? What kinds of things were helpful/unhelpful in getting you to use the grammar of the language correctly?

There is some discussion of the place of explicit grammar practice in the form of drills or exercises. Again, this is something that most teachers and coursebooks provide, and that students expect. But all experienced teachers are familiar with the phenomenon that students continue to make mistakes in the target grammar even after extensive practice. So practice does not necessarily make perfect. Should it therefore be abandoned?

One of the explanations for the phenomenon just described is Pienemann's (1984) *teachability hypothesis*. Pienemann observed that learners of German acquire German grammatical structures in a fixed order, regardless of the order in which they were taught. And there is some evidence that this is true for the acquisition of other languages as well. From this he hypothesized that the teaching of a grammatical item or construction for which the learner is not developmentally ready will not result in learning. Ellis (2001) proposes the solution of *consciousness-raising*. He suggests that perhaps it is enough to raise learners' awareness of what a rule is, without demanding immediate implementation in learners' own speech and writing. Then, when they are developmentally ready, they will notice the occurrence of the grammatical features in input and gradually start using them themselves. Ellis suggests that practice exercises are, therefore, pointless. If the learner is ready to acquire the grammar, they will do so anyway, without practice; if they are not, then practice won't help.

However, there is evidence that practice does substantially improve performance and has an important place in formal, course-based language learning (Dekeyser, 2007). It seems that most learners do, indeed, go through a fairly stable order of acquisition of grammatical features, but that explanation combined with practice may speed up this process. We need to abandon the exaggerated claim that 'practice makes perfect' and content ourselves with the expectation that practice, like explanations of rules, can make a significant contribution to good learning and is therefore worth including in our teaching.

The practical guidelines in the following sections are based on the premise that there is value in explicit explanation and practice of grammar in English courses, as well as in providing our students with opportunities to use it for communication.

6.4 Presenting grammar: explanations

Grammar explanations may be initiated by you because they are indicated in your syllabus or course materials. Or you may be responding to a learning need; you may have noticed that students are making mistakes in a particular feature and might benefit from some focused explanation. In any case, below are some guidelines on how to explain. See also Swan (1994) for some useful practical principles for presenting grammar rules in the classroom.

Presenting and explaining grammar

Provide students with examples of the target feature in meaningful contexts before explaining it. This sounds obvious, but I have seen teachers start by writing up an isolated phrase on the board and then analysing it immediately, when the students had little or no idea what it might mean in context.

Both say and write examples of the target form. This is important, not only because students might need to use the grammar in both speech and writing, but also because students vary in their learning styles and preferences. Many find it difficult to grasp a sequence of language if they only hear it; others have similar problems if they only see it. In either case, both spoken and written forms are needed.

Teach both form and meaning. Which of these you emphasize depends on what the target feature is. Some grammatical constructions have fairly easy forms, but rather complex meanings that may have no parallel in the student's L1 and need careful explanation and lots of examples (the present progressive, for example). Others may have very simple meanings, and you need to focus on teaching the forms (the comparative of adjectives, for example).

You may or may not use grammatical terminology. This will depend on your situation and students. On the whole, older or more analytically minded students will benefit more from the use of terminology. With younger students, try to manage without it.

Explain the grammar in the students' L1, unless they are proficient enough to cope with English explanations. The level of English needed to understand a grammatical explanation in that language is quite high, so it may be difficult to understand for many classes. Using L1 can save time which can then be used for practice or communicative use of the target grammar. Only use English for explanations with relatively advanced classes who can easily understand them.

Compare the English structure with an L1 parallel if you can. Where there are substantial differences between English and the L1, it can be very helpful to compare and contrast the meanings of the English structure with an L1 parallel. Awareness of such differences can help to prevent mistakes. For example, you

might point out that the use of the present perfect in a sentence with *for* or *since* (*I have worked here for six years*) is likely to correspond to the use of the present tense in the students' L1.

It is often useful to provide an explicit rule. But you have to think about striking the right balance between accuracy and simplicity. The explanation should cover the great majority of instances students are likely to encounter. Obvious exceptions should be noted, but too much detail may confuse and mislead. As a rule, a simple generalization, even if not entirely accurate, is more helpful to students than a detailed grammar-book definition.

You can ask students to work out rules for themselves, based on a set of examples (*inductive process*), or you can give the rules yourself, and they later work on examples (*deductive*). The deductive process is more common in both textbooks and classroom teaching. However, if the students can work out the rule for themselves, then they are more likely to remember it. The problem with inductive teaching is that if the rule is really difficult, students may waste a lot of time on frustrating guessing or on misleading suggestions. In such cases it is better simply to provide the information yourself. A compromise might be to provide very obvious examples, and then lead the students towards the formulation of a rule by guiding questions and hints.

Action task

Watch an experienced teacher explain a grammatical point to a class, perhaps using the items above as a checklist. In what ways did the teacher's explanation follow, or differ from, these recommendations? Were there any other interesting ways, not mentioned here, in which he or she helped the students understand the explanation?

Practical tips

1. **Use pictures.** If appropriate, use pictures to help your explanation; or, even better, realia. They help make the explanation memorable.
2. **Don't just say 'Do you understand?'** Students will often say 'yes' out of politeness or unwillingness to admit they haven't really understood. Ask them to demonstrate their understanding by giving examples or explaining in their own words. Or try using the next tip.
3. **Get feedback.** When you have finished explaining, delete everything from the board, tell students to close their textbooks, and to write down in their own words what the rule was, in English or L1. Then ask them to read out what they have written, or share with one another. This will give you a good idea of how well they have understood the explanation.
4. **Teach early in the lesson.** As with the teaching of new vocabulary, it's a good idea to plan grammatical explanations to take place towards the beginning of the lesson when students are fresher and more willing to engage with new material.

6.5 Grammar practice: consolidating and automatizing grammatical knowledge

I have already mentioned (in Section 6.3) the phenomenon of students who do all the grammar exercises perfectly, but then make mistakes in the same items when they are composing their own free speech or writing. The problem here is that the structures have not been thoroughly mastered. The student still depends on a certain amount of conscious monitoring in order to produce them correctly. And when students are concentrating mainly on communicating, they do not have enough attention to spare for this monitoring. If students have not mastered the grammatical point to the degree that they can produce it automatically, then in communicative situations they will make mistakes, usually based on L1 interference.

What we can do as teachers is to help our students make the leap from form-focused grammar exercises to fluent production by providing tasks that encourage them to combine the two. At the beginning it can be useful to give the traditional gapfills and matching exercises, with definite right and wrong answers. However, if this is all the grammar practice the students get, they will not be able to transfer their knowledge to their own output. Therefore, such conventional grammar exercises need to be supplemented by activities that prompt students to use the target features to produce their own sentences, while keeping an eye on grammatical accuracy.

Below is a description of a number of grammar tasks that provide practice in a range of grammatical features. They move from the very controlled and accuracy-oriented exercise at the beginning to a fluency activity giving opportunities for the free use of the grammar in context at the end. The aim of most of them is to get students to use the grammar in order to 'say their own thing', paying attention to both communicative purpose and linguistic form.

It is not suggested that this sequence should be strictly followed in classroom teaching, though on the whole the more controlled exercises tend to come earlier. But it is important that our lessons should overall include a combination of tasks, providing both form-focused and meaning-focused practice.

Type 1: Awareness

After the students have been introduced to the grammatical point, they are given opportunities to encounter it within some kind of discourse, and then do a task that focuses their attention on its form and/or meaning.

Past tense. Look at the extract from the newspaper article and underline all the examples of the past tense you can find.

Type 2: Controlled drills

Students produce examples of the structure. These examples are predetermined by the teacher or materials and have to conform to very clear, closed-ended cues. They can often be done without understanding.

Present simple tense. Write or say statements about Eva, modelled on the following example:

Eva *drinks tea* but she *doesn't drink coffee*.

- a) like: ice cream / cake b) speak: English/Italian
c) enjoy: playing football / playing chess

Type 3: Controlled responses through sentence completion, rewrites or translation

Students produce examples of the structure that are predetermined by the teacher or materials by being required to rewrite according to a set cue, or to translate a sentence from L1. (For the benefits in principle of the use of L1 in grammar teaching, see the discussion at the end of Section 6.6.) In either case they will need to understand in order to respond correctly.

Passive. Rewrite the sentence so that it means more or less the same, but using a form of the word in parenthesis.

I received a lovely present. (*give*)

Type 4: Meaningful drills

Again the responses are very controlled, but the student can make a limited choice and needs to understand in order to answer.

Present simple tense. Choose someone you know very well, and write down their name. Now compose true statements about them according to the following model:

He/She *likes ice cream*; or He/She *doesn't like ice cream*.

- a) enjoy: playing tennis b) drink: wine c) speak: Polish

Type 5: Guided, meaningful practice

The students form sentences of their own according to a set pattern, but exactly what vocabulary they use is up to them.

Conditional clauses. Look at the following cue: *If I had a million dollars*. Suggest, in speech or writing, what you *would* do.

Type 6: (Structure-based) free sentence composition

Students are provided with a visual or situational cue (for example a picture showing various people engaged in different activities) and invited to compose their own responses. They are directed to use the structure.

Present progressive. Look at the picture and describe what is going on.

Type 7: (Structure-based) discourse composition

Students hold a discussion or write a passage according to a given task. They are directed to use at least some examples of the structure within the discourse.

Modals. Recommend solutions to a social or ethical dilemma. For example: You see a good friend of yours cheating in an exam. What might you do? Your recommendations should include the modals (*might, should, must, can, could, etc.*).

Type 8: Free discourse

As in Type 7, but the students are given no specific direction to use the structure. However, the task situation is designed so that instances of it are likely to appear.

Modals. As above, but without the final direction.

Task

Have a look at a locally used coursebook or its workbook component, find ten grammar tasks, and classify them roughly according to the types above. Is there a reasonable balance of types, or are there some missing? Do you think the teacher would need to introduce or change tasks in order to make up for any missing types?

For more ideas for meaningful or communicative grammar practice, see Ur (2009).

6.6 Grammar assessment

Grammar assessment, as with vocabulary, is done in most classrooms primarily through written tests. Many of the actual task formats used as the basis for grammar tests can be used also for practice: for the differences between a learning or practice task on the one hand and a test on the other, see Unit 5: Teaching vocabulary, pp. 69–70.

Grammar-test items require students to respond to cues in order to prove that they have understood and can apply a grammatical rule, and they should be designed to be quickly and easily assessed and graded. They are very often 'closed-ended': require one predetermined right answer. But a similar problem arises in grammar testing as that discussed above with regard to practice: if a student fills in all the right answers in such a test, this does not necessarily mean that they are able to produce the target grammar in their own unguided output. It just means that they can get the grammar right *when they are thinking about it*.

If we give tasks that ask students to invent their own phrases, sentences or longer passages ('open-ended' items), this will give a truer picture of how well they know the grammar. But it will be more time-consuming and sometimes difficult to assess. There is a payoff between how valid the test is in providing reliable information on how much the learner knows, and how practical it is to administer and check.

Closed-ended test items

Closed-ended test items include the following, some of which are similar to those described in the section on vocabulary testing (see Unit 5: Teaching vocabulary, pp. 71–3).

Multiple- (or dual-) choice

Have you (1) _____ heard of Aconcagua? (*never, sometimes, ever, often*)

How *do you pronounce / are you pronouncing* this word correctly?

Guided gapfills

If I _____ (know) the answer, I _____ (tell) you.

Transformation

They sell mobile phones in that shop.

Mobile phones _____.

Matching

I've never played _____ computer games recently.

I haven't been playing _____ a computer game like that before.

Rewrite

Katia began to learn English about three years ago.

learning

Katia _____ three years.

Correct the mistake

*I saw the girl which I used to know.

(Examples from *Active Grammar*, Levels 1 and 2, W. Rimmer and F. Davis, Cambridge University Press; *Active Grammar*, Level 3, M. Lloyd and J. Day, Cambridge University Press.)

Open-ended test items

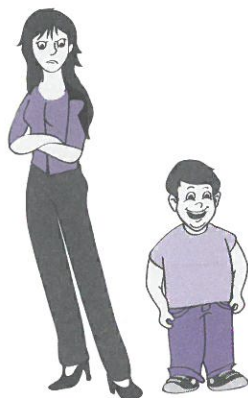
Test items of this type, as illustrated below, require less predictable responses and are more difficult to check, but they arguably give a clearer picture of how well the student can communicate using the target grammar.

Open-ended sentence completion

If I could fly _____

Sentence-composition

Compose three sentences comparing these two people, using comparative adjectives.



Ella

Max

Translation

Translation is a little-used testing technique, but an interesting one which merits a more extended discussion. It is open-ended up to a point: there is usually a limited range of correct responses. The reason it is rarely exploited is the widespread but mistaken assumption that students should be encouraged to think in English only, and discouraged from relating English to their L1.

Very often, errors in English grammar are rooted in the L1. Students naturally think first in their L1, and when trying to express something in English are likely to be influenced by the way their L1 expresses the same idea. Paradoxically, the best way to combat such interference is by using deliberate contrast to make students aware how it occurs. This makes it very useful during explanations and is why I have included it in the previous section as the basis for a practice item. Similarly, a good way to test whether students have overcome the temptation to imitate L1 and can express ideas through acceptable English grammar is to require them to translate something from L1 into English.

For more on the topic of assessment and tests, see Unit 12: Assessment and testing.

Review

Answer as many as you can of the following questions, and then check answers by referring back to the relevant passages in this unit.

If you are working in a group, note down your own answers first alone, and then share with the other members of the group. Finally, check the answers together.

What is grammar?

1. Why is 'the way words are put together to make sentences' an inadequate way to define *grammar*?
2. What is the difference between *syntax* and *morphology*?

What students need to learn: standards of grammatical acceptability

3. Give some reasons for insisting on standard grammatical forms in our teaching, even if non-standard variants would not affect meaning.
4. When, or why, might we wish to ignore such non-standard variants/errors?

How best to teach grammar: explicit and implicit processes

5. What are some reasons for including explicit grammar teaching (explanations and focused practice) in our teaching?
6. What is the *teachability hypothesis*?

Presenting grammar: explanations

7. Can you recall at least four useful guidelines when explaining a new grammar point to the class?
8. What is the difference between *deductive* and *inductive* teaching of a rule?

Grammar practice: consolidating and automatizing grammatical knowledge

9. What kind of practice can help students transfer knowledge of a grammatical rule so that they can use it fluently in their own production?
10. Can you give two or three examples of exercises that get students to use the grammar to express meanings, rather than just to get the form right?

Grammar assessment

11. What is the difference between closed-ended and open-ended tests?
12. Why might we design test items based on translation from L1 to English?

Further reading

Swan, M. (1994) Design criteria for pedagogic language rules. In M. Bygate, A. Tonkyn and E. Williams (eds.), *Grammar and the Language Teacher* (pp. 45–55), Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall International.

(A useful set of guidelines for the explanation of grammatical rules to a class)

Swan, M. (2005) *Practical English Usage*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(A very accessible and user-friendly guide to English grammatical usage, with plenty of examples, including common learner errors)

Ur, P. (2009) *Grammar Practice Activities* (2nd edn), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(A collection of game-like or communicative activities that provide meaningful practice in the different grammatical features of English)