

Teaching grammar the fun way

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Abstract

Grammar seems to be the most difficult part of learning a language so creators of teaching materials must design grammar exercises which will make studying it more enjoyable and fun. This paper presents various techniques which can be employed by material designers to present grammar to students in the most acceptable manner so that they can adopt it easily. More precisely, it offers practical examples from the textbook aimed at teaching English for law enforcement students designed for students at the Faculty of Security in Macedonia. However, the paper offers advice on how these types of exercises can be adapted for teaching English to all levels and for all purposes.

Key words: *grammar, textbook for law enforcement, material design*

Introduction

Grammar seems to be the most challenging aspect of the process of learning and also teaching a foreign language. The general impression is that students do not really like studying grammar and they perceive it as some set of rules they need to adopt. So, teachers need to employ various techniques when presenting grammar to their students in order to make it more fun and acceptable for them. This paper offers some practical examples on presenting grammar parts to students. More specifically, it presents examples from the textbook aimed at teaching English for law enforcement students at a tertiary level and it also offers advice on how these types of exercises can be adapted for teaching English to all levels and for all purposes.

Creation process

Before creating any materials for their students, teachers should always rely on the teaching experience and analyse what actually works best for their students in class. They should take into consideration the level, the age of the students and their needs. Before my colleague and I started creating materials for the students at the Faculty of Security we took into consideration all these factors. The first thing we did was carry out needs analysis (step 1). We created a

questionnaire for the students in which they were supposed to give us information on what exactly they need to know for their future profession. We also distributed a similar questionnaire among people already working at the Ministry of Interior sectors and asked them to state in what circumstances they use the language and what kind of things they need to know. Then, after this first phase, we determined the students' level of English with a diagnostic test (step 2). Two levels were determined, intermediate (most of the first year students) and upper-intermediate (most of the second year students). After that we moved on to the 3rd step i.e. selecting grammar parts to be covered for each level. In addition, we started creating materials for each specific level and we included grammar part in each unit (step 4). One of the greatest issues we had to face was whether the grammar section should be integrated in the content presented or isolated from it. And we decided that it should be integrated in the content presented (see the section below). Finally, after we created the materials we piloted them in class (step 5). After working with those materials for a whole year we distributed one more questionnaire among students to examine their opinion about the materials. The results were highly satisfactory (see Trajkova, 2010). All the students (100%) stated that the materials suit their needs. 85.2% stated that the grammar and vocabulary are presented well and they have no problem with their acquisition. The rest had divided opinions. Some stated that the grammar and vocabulary are too difficult for them, and the other part of students stated the opposite. This is not surprising because not all students from one year are on the same level. The diagnostic test showed that most of the first year students were on an intermediate level and most of the second year students were on an upper-intermediate level. However, there were students who had much higher or lower knowledge than the majority. In addition, 96.3% responded that the materials contain authentic cultural sources and 100% stated that the materials are very motivating and inspire them to learn the target language.

Designing grammar exercises

Before starting to create materials one needs to decide on what type of design principle they are going to use. We decided to use a communicative concept as a design principle. According to McDonough & Shaw (2003: 28), the communicative concept is attractive because it provides a richer teaching and learning environment and it:

- “ - includes wider considerations of what is appropriate as well as accurate;
- handles a wider range of language, covering texts and conversations as well as sentences;
- provides realistic and motivating language practice;

- uses what learners know about the functions of language from their experience with their own mother tongue”

McDonough & Shaw (2003: 29) point out some other questions which also need to be addressed before one begins to create grammar exercises, such as: how will the grammar be presented?; what would be the role of grammar in each unit?; what language skills are going to be practiced? To what extent is the unit going to deal with: a) communicative functions as properties of language and b) communicative behaviour and activities?; Will the learners have any freedom to ‘create’ meanings and language for themselves?

Following Ur (1996) and Doff’s (1991) advice on how grammar should be presented, we decided to use the integrated skills approach, i.e. use the listening, speaking, reading and writing to practice new material – vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, text/discourse (see Lubelska & Matthews, 1997: 16). According to Penny Ur (1996: 78), it is surprisingly difficult to present and explain a foreign-language grammatical structure to a class of learners: “Grammatical accuracy on its own is a dead end, unless used to receive and produce interesting and purposeful meanings within the context of real-life language use”. Doff (1991: 35) also believes that it is important for learners to have plenty of contextualised examples of the structure and to understand them. Meaning should be shown through a situation (from outside the class in which the structure could naturally be used) and several different examples should be given so that students can build up a clear idea of what the structure means and how it is used.

Ur (1996: 84) also suggests a list of types of grammar practice which can be employed to lead students from accuracy to fluency:

1. *Awareness*
2. *Controlled drills*
3. *Meaningful drills*
4. *Guided meaningful drills*
5. *(Structure-based) free sentence composition*
6. *(Structure-based) discourse composition*
7. *Free discourse*

Following this list, grammar in our materials was presented by combining all these methods which ranged from making students aware of the part of grammar presented, to controlled and meaningful drills which just focused on the usage of the appropriate grammatical form presented to creating free sentences and discourse compositions which students had to create based on the knowledge they gained previously. In addition to this, it is also important to note down that we mostly used the inductive method when presenting the

specific grammatical forms i.e. we would make students use the form and thus become aware of its form and usage in context.

Some practical examples

In this section, some practical examples of how grammar was implemented in the English for law enforcement textbooks⁴ are presented. All these examples can be used to create grammar exercises for any type of students who study English as a foreign language at any level. They should just be adapted to topics familiar to the students.

The first example is one in which the third type of conditional sentences (unreal past) is presented. We decided to connect the grammatical term “conditional sentence” with the lexical one (in legal terminology it means: an imprisonment sentence, except that the offender serves the sentence outside of jail, under strict, jail-like conditions), so we called the unit “Conditional Sentence”. After a short discussion to introduce the topic, students are given a text to read, called: “In prison on a wedding day” which is about a person, named Paul, who has a car accident while driving under the influence of alcohol. However, after he explains to the judge that that very day is his sister’s wedding and he was just on his way to the airport to pick up some guests when the accident happened, he is given only a conditional sentence. After students read the text, and discuss it, they do a listening exercise in which a journalist who deals with unusual life stories and events conducts an interview with Paul. Students are supposed to listen and choose one option from the multiple choice exercise. By selecting the appropriate option they create conditional sentences. For instance: *Paul would have sent somebody to go to the airport if his uncle (hadn’t asked him/ had asked him/ didn’t ask him) to keep it a secret*. In this way students are introduced to the third conditional type inductively and are made aware of its form and usage (Ur, 1996: 84). After that, the teacher explains the form and usage of the third conditional, which is presented in the part called: *Focus on Your Language*. After the explicit instruction, students do controlled meaningful drills in which they have to make sentences in the third conditional by putting verbs in the suitable form. After that they are asked to read a text about great escapes from Alcatraz and after each paragraph they have to finish a sentence (conditional one) with a given prompt and based on the text. This presents a guided meaningful drill they have to do (see Ur, 1996: 84). Finally, they are given certain situations and they need

⁴ Two textbooks were created and then published by the Faculty of Security, Skopje: Trajkovska, V. & Trajkova, Z. (2012). *Protect 1, English for Law Enforcement* (for first year students on an intermediate level) and Trajkova, Z. & Trajkovska, V. (2012) *Protect 2, English for Law Enforcement* (for second year students – on an upper-intermediate level)

to read them and say (or write) what they would do if that specific situation had happened to them. This is a structure-based discourse composition. In conclusion, as it can be seen from the example, the grammar in this unit was integrated in the content and all the four skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing) were used to present and practise it.

Another example that could be presented here is the presentation of past modals in the textbook. We incorporated them in the unit about juvenile delinquency. After a short discussion about what a juvenile delinquency is and what types of crimes it includes, students are asked to listen to a psychologist who talks about the reasons for juveniles' violent behaviour and three different cases. They are supposed to fill in the blanks with the missing information. After that they have an exercise in which they are given statements with past modals and they are asked to state which of the three, previously presented cases, each statement refers to. In this way they are implicitly introduced to past modals and their usage and meaning. After that, the teacher explicitly explains which past modals are used in which specific situations. Following this, so called awareness stage, students do controlled drills in which they are explained a situation and they are supposed to fill in the blanks with a correct past modal form. In addition, they are presented with a meaningful dialogue and are supposed to fill it in with a correct past modal form (guided meaningful drill).

Besides grammatical forms, functions were also incorporated in the teaching materials and were mostly inductively presented. For instance, in order to introduce students with "giving advice" as a function, they were presented with a text called "Keep your eyes open" in which parents are given advice on the things they need to do in order to keep their children safe. After inductively introducing students to the different ways one can give advice, they are explicitly made aware of the form. In addition, they are asked to write a text (structure-based discourse composition) and give various pieces of advice to people for safety precautions (e.g. *advice people on what they could do to protect their home or advice how young people could protect themselves when going out in the night etc.*).

To sum up, grammar in all the three examples was integrated in the content and presented via the four skills. The practice part varied from simple controlled drills, then meaningful guided drills, structure-based sentence and discourse composition to free discourse.

Conclusion

This paper aimed at presenting various techniques which can be employed by material designers to present grammar to students in the most acceptable manner so that they can adopt it easily.

More precisely, it offered practical examples from the textbook aimed at teaching English for law enforcement students and aspired to inspire teachers on how they could develop their own teaching materials and present grammar in a fun and interesting manner. The results from the creation process and then from the piloting of the materials among students showed that grammar presented in a meaningful context is more easily acquired by the students. More precisely, grammar should be integrated, either inductively or deductively, in the presentation of the four skills, such as any piece of listening material, reading text or text students need to write or speak about. Thus, students acquire it without being focused on it. They even use the specific grammatical forms or functions without being aware of it. In addition, teachers should also make sure that grammar is presented through a variety of exercises, starting from controlled drills to more meaningful and creative ones. In addition, teachers should also make sure that the topics presented are of students' interest. It is much easier when it comes to teaching English for specific purposes because topics are all connected to the specific area. However, when it comes to general English, a needs analysis at the beginning of the course will always help to select the topics which best suit the specific category of students. Finally, teachers themselves should enjoy teaching grammar and present it as nothing more than a tool to express oneself as accurately as possible. This would relieve the students from the burden and pressure they feel whenever they are told that they have a grammar class.

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