

Changing approaches to teaching grammar

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This paper describes the philosophy and practice of a course which explores why teachers might wish to change their approach to teaching grammar, and how they might do so. It emphasises that change should occur on three levels – materials, actions and beliefs – and suggests ways in which this could be done by teacher educators, or by groups of teachers engaged in autonomous professional development.

Why change?

In many parts of the world, English language teachers have changed, or are changing, from a traditional approach to teaching formal grammar rules to a more communicative approach to teaching how to use grammar meaningfully in context. When asked why this is happening, English teachers studying in the UK answered as follows:

- A new series of textbooks was introduced, and we had to use them.
- I noticed that children in my class can do the grammar exercises, but they don't use this grammar well if they want to say something for themselves.
- I wanted the children in my class to enjoy grammar more. Most of them don't like rules very much. They find them boring.
- I was very good at English at school, but when I came to England I couldn't understand what people said, and I often didn't know what to say.
- In my country we need better English to develop international business contexts.
- In my country we want to expand tourism, so the government wants more people to be able to use English to speak to tourists from many countries.
- My department head studied in England and she taught us all about the communicative approach.
- The Ministry of Education told us we have to change the way we teach.

Interestingly, in some countries there is change towards teaching English grammar more explicitly, and with more of a focus on form. In this paper I shall assume the intended change is towards a more communicative use of English, but the principles of bringing about change would readily transfer to other contexts.

Levels of change: Materials, approaches and beliefs

Just as there are many different reasons for change, so too are there many different kinds, or levels, of change that can take place. Three important levels of change are: **a) Materials, text books, and syllabus:** For example, the prescribed textbook might change; **b) Teaching behaviour:** A new methodology might be adopted; and **c) Knowledge, Understanding and Belief:** A new approach, or philosophy might gain acceptance. It is possible for change to occur in any one of these, or in any two of these levels, but full and meaningful change involves ALL THREE working together. So, how can this happen?

In my course on teaching grammar, I use a range of strategies to try and bring about change on all three levels. First, teachers survey and compare a wide range of materials and resources for teaching grammar so that they learn to identify and critique different syllabuses and activities.

Second, they are required to teach a range of activities to their peers. They are given not only the materials to use with the 'students', but also a step by step procedure which states what they should do and say. Many experienced teachers find this hard because they have to change their teaching behaviour. For example, they may be used to telling students rules, but the instructions might be to ask specific questions so that the students tell the teacher the rules in their own words. In this way, teachers on the course experience not only how to teach the activities, but also what it feels like to be a student in such classes. Following the microteaching, we reflect on the experience, what we've learned, what worked, what issues arose and why.

Third, we read and discuss research and theories about teaching and learning grammar to develop an understanding of concepts, processes and issues related to how grammar is learned. In

order to have an impact on beliefs as well as knowledge and understanding, personal examples from past and current teaching and learning contexts are discussed and evaluated in relation to personal views and experiences, as well as to the research and theories.

Grammar teaching

Below are three examples of the types of grammar teaching used in my course. Traditionally grammar rules can be presented as rules with a focus on *form*. For example, in the present simple tense, regular verbs in English take an 's' on the 3rd person singular (*he walks, she walks, it walks*). This kind of information is very useful, but it doesn't tell you when to *use* the present simple, or what it *means*. Communicative approaches to presenting grammar usually include a focus on *meaning* and *use* as well as *form*. Grammar can be taught in many ways – there is no 'best' way that suits all grammar points.

Using the generative context of a story to present grammar

I have adapted this activity from Thornbury (1999: 59–62) to suit classes of teachers of English internationally. Where I have used it with groups of teachers from a particular country, and located the story in Tripoli, or Karachi, or Beijing, I have had teachers come up to me afterwards and claim to think they have known Simon, which perhaps reflects widespread international experience of English teachers with naïve young native speakers teaching English overseas?

Introduction: Shall I tell you a story?

Step 1: Establish the context:

I have a good friend called Simon who went to teach English in [your country]. He had never been there before and on the plane there he met a young woman called [typical name from country] and fell in love. Unfortunately he was teaching English in [the capital city], and she lived hundreds of miles away in [a remote rural part of the country].

After he had been teaching for a few weeks, there was a national holiday for three days and he decided to borrow the school car and drive to [] to visit her. He had not managed to contact her, but knew her address and set off on the eve of the holiday, full of hope.

Board: (Elicit examples from students)

To to this kind of journey, you should

- take water
- take some food
- take some tea
- check that the car has petrol
- check the car oil and tyres
- take someone who speaks [the local language]
- not travel in the rainy season
- tell someone where you're going
- take some money
- check that she won't be cross
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Step 2: Introduce the problem:

Simon, however, didn't plan his trip, he didn't pack anything, he just set off in the school car. Was that wise? (Elicit examples from students)

Anyway, he set off, alone. He drove all day. Then what do you think happened?

Board:

He got thirsty
 He got hungry
 The car ran out of petrol.
 He got lost
 So what did he do?
 He left his car to go and find water and petrol.
 He didn't leave a note in his car.

Step 3: Try and elicit the target language:

What do you think of Simon?

(he was stupid..)

Why?

(He should have taken water.)

Did he take water? (No.) Was that a good idea? (No.)

He should have taken water. Why?

(So that he wouldn't get thirsty.)

...

It is important to emphasize here that something sensible was not done by repeating these questions – Did he take food? (No) Was that a good idea (No) – and not being tempted to explain the target language.

Step 4: Present and practise (whole class then in pairs) the target language:

He should've taken water.
 He should've taken food.
 He shouldn't have gone alone.
 He shouldn't have left his car.
 ...

Step 5: Use the target language in a dialogue:

The school told the police that their car had been stolen.

The school told the police that Simon was missing.

So the police set out to find him.

What do you think the police officer said to him when he eventually found him?

Police: You shouldn't have taken the school car.
 Simon: I know I shouldn't have. I didn't think.

 Police: You should've taken some water with you.
 Simon: I know I should've. I didn't think.

 Police: You shouldn't have left the car.
 Simon: I know I shouldn't have. I didn't think.

This is one way to present the past modals *should have* and *shouldn't have* in a generative context (i.e. one that allows repetition of the target grammar *should have*). The focus is first on building up the context. It is a good idea to situate the story in a context that is familiar to the students so that they can make sense of the story; then to develop the *meaning* of *should have*, and finally to focus on *use* in a dialogue. The focus on *form* here is limited to writing it out. In discussing the teaching-learning experience with the teachers, it helps to review the functions of each step in the lesson:

Intro	Shall I tell you a story?	Compare this to 'Today I will tell you the rules for the use of modal auxiliary verbs with perfect infinitives?' Or 'Today we will learn to use <i>should have</i> ?' – Most people like to hear a story, so are ready to listen
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		(and learn). They sit back in a receptive mood.
Step 1	Establish the context:	Learners can use the context to help them understand the meaning. Encourage learners to fill in some details. This makes it more memorable.
Step 2	Introduce the problem:	Learners focus on meaning .
Step 3	Try and elicit the target language:	Here learners should be searching for the words they need to express their meaning – create a desire to learn the grammar point.
Step 4	Present the target language:	Focus on form
Step 5	Present the target language in a dialogue:	Practice using target language.

This is an example of using a story to PRESENT a grammar point (the modal verbs *should have* and *shouldn't have* with the meaning of past obligation). Further practice activities would be needed where students could use it in a less controlled way. For example, teachers might ask learners to make up a similar story about what happens when parents go away for a few days and leave their children at home. Using prompts such as:

1. Give the context [the teacher might like to provide this];
2. Describe at least 6 things that the children did or didn't do;
3. What happened as a result?
4. What did the parents say to the children when they returned?

This is a relatively advanced grammar point, but the same generative context technique can be used for more basic grammar. What makes a **story** interesting and memorable is that there is a context (which students should be able to identify with), that something problematic happens, and then there is a solution to the problem. What makes the activity 'work' is that the story creates a need for the target form, which is thus foregrounded, and the lesson provides opportunities for practising with a focus on meaning, form and then use.

Teachers often say that they don't have time in class to spend telling stories. To this my reply is that if students remember the story, and the grammar point, then the time has not been wasted. I think it's a waste of time to teach students grammar rules if they do not remember them and cannot use them appropriately in context.

Using personalisation to practise grammar

In class, as in ELT coursebooks, grammar presentation is typically followed by grammar practice (Nitta & Gardner, 2005). Here is an example of a grammar practice activity from Ur (1988:268) that involves creating personal meanings. This exercise assumes that relative clauses have been presented, and are now being practised.

Likes and Dislikes

On a piece of paper write down and complete the following sentences according to your opinion:

1. I like people who
2. I dislike people who

Once everyone is finished, get students to tell each other in groups what they have written and discuss. Write up some on the board to get a profile of the class!

Variations:

3. I like teachers who
4. I dislike teachers who
5. I like places where
6. I don't like places where
7. I like days when
8. I dislike days when

This activity involves the use of the relative clause to define nouns; composing sentences based on a set pattern; writing and oral interaction. It is simple to prepare, simple to do, can be great fun, but in order to really understand how and why it works, teachers need to DO it. It is not as simple as it may look, particularly when the relative pronoun is not the subject of the relative clause, as in 5–8. When I have used this in class, teachers have realised that this simple but powerful activity has generated the desire to create specific meanings, it has capitalised on the inherent motivation in learning about the values and preferences of others; and is communicative in its creation of information gaps.

Using an authentic text to put grammar into action

Authentic texts from recognisable genres work well when they illustrate the grammar being taught. Usually I start with a basic analysis of the generic stages of a text. Recipes have two main stages: a list of ingredients and a set of instructions, with serving suggestions an optional third stage. The first stage could be used to teach quantifiers; the second imperatives. For example, a web search for 'Pancakes' yielded many recipes,

each with their own comments on associated origins and customs. Here is one by Jill Duplex:

Fine Crepes with Lemon and Sugar

Ingredients

Makes 8 crepes

125g plain flour
Pinch of salt
1 egg
1 egg yolk
2 tbsp caster sugar
2 tbsp dark rum (optional)

Prep: 10 min

Cook: 10 min

225ml semi-skimmed milk
2tbsp melted butter, cooled
Butter for frying
1tbsp grated lemon zest
2tbsp caster sugar for serving
1 lemon, quartered

METHOD

To make the crepes, sift the flour and salt into a bowl. Whisk the egg, egg yolk, caster sugar and rum into the milk, then add gradually to the flour, whisking until smooth, without over-beating. Stir in the 2tbsp melted butter.

Melt a little extra butter in a 15cm non-stick frying pan.

Add a small ladleful of the batter, tilting the pan to help it to spread thinly. Cook for 1-2 min until golden, then use a palette knife to turn (or flip) and cook for 1 min until golden brown.

Loosely roll the crepe and keep it warm while you make the remaining crepes. Mix the lemon zest and caster sugar together, sprinkle it over the crepes, and serve with lemon wedges.

(Source: Times Online accessed 5 February 2008.
http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/food_and_drink/recipes/article511936.ece)

This recipe is deceptively simple, so students and teachers could be encouraged to try the recipe in groups or individually at home, bring in a sample of the results to class, and explore the causes of the differences that are bound to occur. This provides reasons to carefully review the instructions, or the accompanying tips (omitted here).

Some recipes are culturally embedded, and a websearch reveals different perspectives on related customs, which could also be used for language work:

'In the UK, Shrove Tuesday is also known as Pancake Day (or Pancake Tuesday to some people) because it is the one day of the year when almost everyone eats a pancake'. (Barrow, nd)

'If you are like most Britons, you will not know that today is Shrove Tuesday, or Pancake Day, as it is often called. The Christian festival — which marks the beginning of Lent — falls particularly early this year, and four fifths of people surveyed admitted they didn't know it was coming up'. (Times Online, 2008)

'TODAY became known as Pancake Day because of the English habit of using up the eggs and milk in the house on Shrove Tuesday before the 40 long days of Lent. For most people it is now simply a good excuse to indulge in a feast of pancakes'. (Dupleix, 2008)

The grammar in these views is complex, but it would be possible to return to the focus on quantifiers and compare registers in the nominal groups quantifying people (*almost everyone, most Britons, four fifths of people surveyed, most people*) as part of a discussion of the claims made.

The process of change

It is possible to change 'on the surface' by endorsing certain goals, using specific materials, and even imitating the behaviour *without specifically understanding* the principles and rationale of the change. Moreover, with reference to beliefs, it is possible to value and even be articulate about the goals of the change without understanding their implications for practice. (Fullan 1991:40)

So change has to be worked at on all levels: materials, approaches, understandings and beliefs. It will affect teachers' professional identity, their sense of competence, self belief and abilities. It can be exhilarating, and unnerving.

If teachers want to or are expected to change their approach to teaching grammar, they could be encouraged to meet regularly with a group of colleagues and DO some 'communicative' exercises themselves (e.g. try some from a local coursebook, or the resources listed below), then discuss if they work, why they work, how they could be adapted for the local context, etc. This is the only way to really understand what change entails. It can be done with the guidance of teacher educators, or by groups of teachers autonomously.

Questions to ask after doing communicative exercises:

What did I like about this / what worked?

What did I not like / what didn't work?

Where is the focus on *meaning*? Is it clear? Is there enough help to understand the meaning? (i.e. the meaning may be explained in English, but it should also be clear from the context, or from pictures, or from actions.) How can we check students have understood the meaning?

Where is the focus on *use* in context? Is it clear? How can we check that they can use the form in similar contexts?

Where is the focus on *form*? Is it clear? Is there too much talk *about* the language, or was it all helpful? How can we check that they can use the form accurately?

Are there opportunities to develop accurate language use?

Are there opportunities to develop fluent language use?

Are there opportunities to use the language meaningfully in context?

Are there opportunities to personalise?

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This same process would apply to teachers wishing to move from a communicative approach to one that focuses more on awareness of form, for example. If teachers truly want to change their grammar teaching, they will have to change not only their textbooks, but also their behaviour and their beliefs.

Notes

This paper was first developed for the British Council English Language Teaching Contacts Scheme (ELTeCS) Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Teacher Training Conference in Tripoli in March 2003. It outlines the philosophy behind a module developed and successfully taught at Warwick University entitled Approaches to Grammar Teaching, which involves experimentation with a range of approaches (including communicative approaches), all with a focus on changing materials, behaviour and beliefs.

Useful resources

There are dozens of books with ideas for communicative grammar teaching. These are some that teachers changing from a traditional to communicative approach have found useful. For descriptions of grammatical form, meaning and use the corpus based grammars, such as those from Cambridge (e.g. Carter & McCarthy 2006) and Longman (e.g. Biber et al. 2002), provide rich information on authentic English, while some teachers' grammars (e.g. Parrott) are also popular. The tried and tested grammar practice or 'grammar in use' books from Oxford (e.g. Eastwood 1999) and Cambridge have moved towards using grammar increasingly in context (e.g. Nettle & Hopkins 2003). The following have some insightful discussion and examples of

different approaches to teaching grammar – Frodesen and Holten (2005), Hinkel and Fotos (2002), Larsen-Freeman (2003), Pennington (1995) and Thornbury (1999, 2001) – with the latter three also including detailed descriptions of lessons for teachers to experience.

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