

## Module 4 – How to Teach Grammar

---

I. Evaluating students' grammatical knowledge .....	2
1. How to evaluate students' level .....	2
2. Grammatical problems .....	2
II. Ways of teaching grammatical structures .....	3
1. The key aspects of a grammatical structure: form, function and phonology .....	3
2. The 'test-teach-test' method as a jumpstart .....	4
3. Examples of testing exercises .....	5
4. Teaching through contexts: a lesson sequence .....	5
5. Context in grammar exercises .....	6
III. Checking understanding of grammatical structures .....	8
1. The significance of concept questions .....	8
2. Some examples of concept questions .....	8
IV. Focus on tenses .....	11
1. Teaching the form and the meaning of tenses .....	11
2. Time lines .....	12

## I. Evaluating students' grammatical knowledge

### 1. How to evaluate students' level

In this module you will start to look at ways you can introduce grammar to your students.

When you start teaching any new students, you will need to evaluate their level of knowledge. This will help you decide what grammatical structures they could benefit from learning (see information about student levels in module 3). To evaluate their level, listen for mistakes in their speech and spot the structures they avoid using. On balance, it's easier to identify their language problems in a written text as you have more time to take notes and make conclusions, so assign a written task to do in class or for homework. A diagnostic test will also work, but it's best not to put too much pressure on students from the start.

### 2. Grammatical problems

You may have to deal with certain problems of using a particular grammatical structure. For example, you may find that your students need an explanation of the structure 'going to + verb' because they are doing the following:

#### Using an incorrect form

A student might be saying 'He going to do it' (incorrect form, the verb 'to be' is missing).

#### Using the structure in inappropriate contexts

This could be due to misunderstanding the function or meaning of the structure, or failing to use the structure where it would be appropriate.

They might say 'I'm going to open the window' for an on-the-spot decision (instead of 'I'll open the window') or say 'I'll visit my relatives tomorrow' talking about a plan (where they could have said 'I'm going to visit my relatives').

#### Not being able to pronounce the structure correctly

A student might be pronouncing 'going' as 'gone.'

## II. Ways of teaching grammatical structures

### 1. The key aspects of a grammatical structure: form, function and phonology

As you have already seen, teaching any new grammar element requires you to ask yourself the following questions:

- What is its form?
- What is its function?
- What is its phonology?

#### Form

This refers to how the piece of grammar is put together - the words it consists of.

Example: You should have worked harder.

The form is: **should + have + past participle** form of the verb.

Other examples: should have gone, should have eaten, should have woken up.

The form shows us the order of the words and the patterns that are possible.

*Practical consideration* - the teacher can point out the form on the board in a table or the students can work out the pattern from a series of examples.

#### Function

This is also referred to as **meaning**, or **concept**.

This refers to what the speaker means when he/she uses that particular grammar structure. E.g. 'You should have worked harder' means: a) you didn't work hard enough, b) that wasn't a good idea. The function of this structure then is to express regret about a past action/event by discussing what is presently viewed as the better alternative. There is no focus here on how the sentence is put together; we are only interested in what it means.

*Practical consideration* - the function can be checked or worked out by asking students concept check questions (asking questions to check that students have understood the meaning and function of a grammatical structure).

#### Phonology

This refers to the sound of a particular grammar structure when you say it, e.g. "You should have worked harder." Native speakers tend to connect 'should' and 'have' together to form 'should've'.

Students need to be taught how to say the structure naturally in its contracted form so as not to sound stilted. It is also important for them to be aware of how the structure sounds when spoken naturally to help them with listening comprehension. Pronunciation work is best done when the structure is being presented. You will find more about teaching pronunciation in module 7.

*Practical consideration* - students can build confidence and improve their pronunciation skills through drilling and repetition.

The following example analyses the form, function and phonology of the structure "used to + verb" in the sentence "She used to have long hair."

**Form:** used to + base form of verb (or 'used + to-infinitive').

**Function:** Expresses past habits and states that are no longer true in the present.

**Phonology:** The final 'd' in 'used' is elided (i.e. not pronounced).

The 'o' in 'to' is often pronounced in its weak form and can sound like 'ta'. This is represented with the phonetic symbol /ə/ which is called a schwa.

## 2. The 'test-teach-test' method as a jumpstart

The test-teach-test method is a three-stage approach to presentation of grammar. It allows you to:

1. Determine what your students already know using a test or practice activity. It should be challenging, but not overly difficult.
2. Teach them what they need to know by introducing new grammar or clarifying existing knowledge.
3. Check what they have learned using a second (different) test or activity.

This method can be used for all levels but it is especially useful for more advanced levels (for beginners, consider skipping the initial test).

It allows you and your students to identify weaknesses, and your students to feel challenged and encouraged to draw on their knowledge base. It also maximises student involvement and minimises teacher talking time.

### 3. Examples of testing exercises

This is an excerpt from a test which checks your students' knowledge of the difference between the present simple and the present continuous:

Choose the correct verb form:

1. I **take/am** taking a bus to school every day.
2. Mary **plays/is playing** with her friends right now.
3. Michael **has/is having** two dogs.
4. He usually **eats/is eating** at home but tonight he **eats/is eating** in a restaurant.

Here is another type of exercise for the same tenses. It is supposed to be more challenging for students than multiple choice, as they have to write the correct form themselves, which means they have to think not only about the tense but about the subject/verb agreement as well.

Open the brackets and fill in the gaps with the correct verb form.

1. Paul and Chris \_\_\_\_\_ (chat) on the phone at the moment.
2. We \_\_\_\_\_ (go) to the night club every Saturday.
3. He is very clever. He \_\_\_\_\_ (speak) five languages.
4. Anna is in her room. She \_\_\_\_\_ (do) her homework.

### 4. Teaching through contexts: a lesson sequence

In the classroom you will always need to show your students how the language is used, and the best way to do this is to present language in a clear and interesting context.

Learning through contexts can be a powerful way of bringing grammatical structures alive. Contexts can either be real and connected to the learners' world or simulated.

For example, here is how you might use contexts to teach the conditional structure: "If I were you, I'd..."

#### Step 1 - Setting the context

A good context to use would be giving advice to a girl about her boyfriend.

- Firstly, check your students understand what advice means
- Discuss with them if they are often in need of advice
- Ask if they prefer to give or receive advice
- Discuss who they would normally approach for advice

#### Step 2 - Creating a scenario

Once the scene is set, you can present the scenario.

- Tell the story of a girl who thinks her boyfriend doesn't love her anymore
- Let the students read the girl's letter to the problem page of a magazine

- Elicit the structure 'you should'
- Brainstorm what would be the best thing for the girl to do; elicit sentences using 'should'

### Step 3. Establishing the grammar

Now it's time to present the target language.

- Elicit other structures used to give advice (such as 'you ought to...', 'it's best to...')
- If nobody mentions 'If I were you,...' try to elicit it from the class by saying 'if...' and pausing
- Present the structure and drill it using the pieces of advice previously given to the girl
- Write example sentences on the board
- Drill again if necessary
- Present a new scenario and let the students work in pairs giving advice to the people involved using all the structures they know (or you may require that they only use the new structure)

Learning through contexts is effective because:

- It allows students to relate to the situation, which stimulates their interest and keeps them motivated
- It demonstrates that grammar is taught not for its own sake but in order to help them deal with real life situations
- The focus shifts from formal grammar study to problem-solving or information exchange, which makes learning less 'painful'; in this way students may learn a grammatical structure without realising they are actually learning grammar.

## 5. Context in grammar exercises

Formal grammar exercises are good for testing students' understanding of form and meaning but they should be used as well as context-based learning rather than on their own (the traditional method). Try to create or find exercises that use interesting context.

Let's take the following two sample sentences from a text, for example:

1. If you \_\_\_\_\_ (want) me to do it I \_\_\_\_\_ (do) it for you.
2. If Newcastle \_\_\_\_\_ (lose) another game, I \_\_\_\_\_ (never go) to their games again!

Evidently, it's the second sentence that students are more likely to find interesting as they should be able to identify with the dismayed supporter of a team who have lost several games. The first sentence is too abstract.

Luckily, most contemporary authors of grammar textbooks understand the importance of using interesting contexts so you can find a lot of examples of the second type in modern grammar textbooks.

### III. Checking understanding of grammatical structures

#### 1. The significance of concept questions

When we teach our students what a grammar structure means, how do we know if our students have understood? One way, of course, is to ask them and it is very tempting to propose something like 'Do you understand?' or 'Is this clear?'.

The problem with these questions is that despite feeling unsure about what they have just been taught, most students when confronted with a question like this are unwilling to admit they don't understand. They will most likely answer 'yes'. As teachers it is our job to check if students have understood rather than simply ask them.

Concept questions can prove very useful in establishing how well students have grasped a concept that has been introduced. They are designed to highlight (for the students) the meaning/function of the new language item, be it vocabulary or a grammar structure.

By nature, concept questions should be simple to understand and to answer and they should contain familiar structures. They should not contain the structure/word being taught. Most concept questions have Yes/No answers.

You can repeat concept questions anytime during the lesson, especially if you think your students haven't really understood the meaning. You can also write them on the board when you write up the structure to serve as a reminder.

To work out what concept questions you should ask in order to teach a particular structure/word, you, as the teacher, must first identify the concept, i.e. meaning, for yourself.

#### 2. Some examples of concept questions

Imagine you are teaching the meaning of the structure 'to manage to do something'. You present it to students in a sentence like this:

I **managed to open** the window.

This sentence means: I opened the window but it was difficult. So your concept questions need to address this meaning.

##### Useful concept questions

You could ask:

- Did I open the window?
- Was it easy?



If a student answers these questions ‘yes’ and ‘no’ respectively, we can make the conclusion that they probably understand the grammatical structure ‘to manage to do something’. If they answer them in a different way, they may require an additional explanation.

### Types of questions to avoid

Consider the following questions. They may be interesting, but they are not useful. They don't help us to get to the heart of the meaning conveyed by the structure ‘managed to do’.

- What colour was the window frame?
- Was anyone else in the room with me?
- What was I wearing?
- What could I see out the window?
- What did I do next?

Now, take the following sentence:

I'm **going to watch** that James Bond film tonight.

Here, the speaker is using the grammar structure ‘going to + verb’ to express a **planned decision** that refers to the future. The decision to watch the film was made before speaking – it is **not** a **spontaneous decision**. (A spontaneous decision might be "Good idea, I'll watch it too". This could be in response to the previous sentence.)

### Useful concept questions

Here are some useful concept questions you could pose to check student understanding of the sentence about James Bond.

Teacher: Are you talking about the future or the past?

Student: The future

Teacher: Did you decide to watch the film before 'now'?

Student: Yes

Teacher: Is this a plan?

Student: Yes

### Types of questions to avoid

The following questions would not help your students understand the meaning of the structure “I'm going to watch that James Bond film tonight” or the context in which it might be used.

- What's the film about?
- Why are you going to watch it?

The questions also cannot be answered using the information provided in the original sentence, so think carefully about the answers you expect to hear before you ask the questions.

Finally, imagine you want to teach the **third conditional**. This is a complicated structure both in terms of form and meaning.

An example of a third conditional sentence is:  
If I hadn't got drunk, I wouldn't have got the sack.

Third conditional sentences are used to talk about a hypothetical past. They discuss what could have happened but did not. In reality, the speaker got drunk and got the sack. When thinking up concept questions it can be helpful to first pinpoint what the structure means.

In this case:

1. He did get drunk.
2. He did get the sack.
3. He regrets this.
4. The second action is a result of the first.

#### **Possible concept questions**

1. Teacher: Did he get drunk?  
Student: Yes.
2. Teacher: Did he get the sack?  
Student: Yes.
3. Teacher: Is he happy about this?  
Student: No.
4. Teacher: Why did he get the sack?  
Student: Because he got drunk.

## IV. Focus on tenses

### 1. Teaching the form and the meaning of tenses

Native speakers already know the usage of each tense. Even if they have never studied the tenses formally, they know very well which tense is appropriate in which context. That is because for years they have been listening to the tenses used by other native speakers.

The main challenges for teachers of English, especially those who are native speakers, are

- identifying and remembering the name of each tense structure
- explaining the meaning of each tense to non-native speakers.

The challenges for learners are:

- remembering and using the correct form of the tense
- understanding the meaning of the tense and, consequently understanding when to use it.

#### Identifying the tense

To be able to identify and name the tense in a particular sentence, you need to look at the form of the verb phrase, e.g. 'am/are/is + present participle' is called 'present continuous'; 'had + past participle' is called past perfect.

#### Establishing the meaning

Different languages rarely have tenses with exactly the same meaning, even if the tense constructions are similar. For example, the French 'j'ai écouté la radio hier soir' can be translated word for word as 'I have listened to the radio last night'. Therefore, using the Present Perfect tense for an event happening at a defined moment in the past is a common grammatical mistake with French speakers.

It is important for a teacher to explain the meaning of each tense we teach through an appropriate context.

English tenses have the following essential meanings (click here to be reminded about the form of each tense):

- Present Simple: Regular actions/events or permanent states in the present.
- Past Simple: An action or event occurring at a specified time in the past, a regular action/event in the past or a permanent state in the past.
- Future Simple: Something the speaker intends to do in the future, on-the-spot decisions for the future.
- Present Continuous: Something going on now, a temporary action/event.
- Past Continuous: Something going on at a specified moment in the past.
- Future Continuous: Something going on at a specified moment in the future.

- Present Perfect: An action completed at an unspecified time in the past or a summary of events up until the present moment.
- Past Perfect: An action completed before a specified time in the past.
- Future Perfect: Something which will be completed by a specified time in the future.
- Present Perfect Continuous: A non-stop activity which started in the past and either has just finished or is still continuing.
- Past Perfect Continuous: Something which started before a specified moment in the past and was continuing non-stop until that moment.
- Future Perfect Continuous: Something continuing non-stop until a specified time in the future.

## 2. Time lines

When demonstrating how we use tenses and structures to refer to or talk about the past, present and future, it can be helpful to illustrate these time references by drawing time lines.

To create a time line, draw a horizontal line from left to right to represent past and future time, and a vertical line to represent present time (now).

An 'x' represents when an action or event occurred, a wiggly line represents a continuous action and very small vertical lines on the time line represent periods of time - for example days, weeks, months or years.

Look at the following examples:

### Past Simple



I went to London 2 days ago.

The 'X' here represents a completed action in the past.

### Present Continuous



He's watching TV.

The squiggly line represents a continuous action that is going on now.

## Present Perfect



They have lived in Leeds for five years.

Here the vertical lines represent a five-year period. The question mark indicates that it is not known whether the action will continue into the future.