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# Grammar Practice Activities

## A practical guide for teachers

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PART ONE: GUIDELINES

# 1 Grammar

## 1 What is grammar?

*Grammar* may be roughly defined as the way a language manipulates and combines words (or bits of words) in order to form longer units of meaning. For example, in English the present form of the verb be in the third person has two distinct forms, one (*is*) being used with a singular subject, and the other (*are*) with a plural; and if the plural *are* is combined with a singular subject, the result is usually unacceptable or 'ungrammatical'. Thus, a sentence like: *This is a book* is grammatical, whereas *This are a book* is not. There is a set of rules which govern how units of meaning may be constructed in any language: we may say that a learner who 'knows grammar' is one who has mastered and can apply these rules to express him or herself in what would be considered acceptable language forms.

I have not attempted here to describe the structures themselves, nor to define what is grammatically acceptable and what is not; for this you should refer to books of English grammar or usage (see BIBLIOGRAPHY). The function of this book is only to provide ideas for classroom practice.

## 2 The place of grammar in language teaching

There is no doubt that a knowledge – implicit or explicit – of grammatical rules is essential for the mastery of a language: you cannot use words unless you know how they should be put together. But there has been some discussion in recent years of the question: do we have to have 'grammar exercises'? Isn't it better for learners to absorb the rules intuitively through 'communicative' activities than to be taught through special exercises explicitly aimed at teaching grammar?

If you are (voluntarily!) reading this book, then your answer to the last question is probably either a straight 'no' or at least a cautious 'not necessarily'. The fact that a learning process is aiming for a certain target behaviour does not necessarily mean that the process itself should be composed entirely of imitations of that behaviour. In other words, ability to communicate effectively is probably not attained most quickly or





efficiently through pure communication practice in the classroom – not, at least, within the framework of a formal course of study.

In 'natural learning' – such as the learning of a first language by a child – the amount of time and motivation devoted to learning is so great that there is no necessity for conscious planning of the learning process: sooner or later the material is absorbed. However, in a formal course of study, there is very much less time available, and often less motivation, which means that learning time has to be organized for optimum efficiency. This means preparing a programme of study – a syllabus – so that bits of the total corpus of knowledge are presented one after the other for gradual, systematic acquisition, rather than all at once. And it also means preparing an organized, balanced plan of classroom teaching/learning procedures through which the learners will be enabled to spend some of their time concentrating on mastering one or more of the components of the target language on their way to acquiring it as a whole. These components may be things like spelling or pronunciation or vocabulary – or grammar.

Grammar, then, may furnish the basis for a set of classroom activities during which it becomes temporarily the main learning objective. But the key word here is temporarily. The learning of grammar should be seen in the long term as one of the means of acquiring a thorough mastery of the language as a whole, not as an end in itself. Thus, although at an early stage we may ask our students to learn a certain structure through exercises that concentrate on virtually meaningless manipulations of language, we should quickly progress to activities that use it meaningfully. And even these activities will be superseded eventually by general fluency practice, where the emphasis is on successful communication, and any learning of grammar takes place only as incidental to this main objective.

## 3 What does learning grammar involve?

Before planning the organization of our teaching, we need to have clear in our minds exactly what our subject-matter is: What sorts of things are included under the heading *grammar*, and what is involved in 'knowing' a structure?

The sheer variety of all the different structures that may be labelled 'grammatical' is enormous. Some have exact parallels in the native language and are easily mastered; others have no such parallels but are fairly simple in themselves; while yet others are totally alien and very difficult to grasp. Some have fairly simple forms, but it may be difficult to learn where to use them and where not (the definite article, for example);

others have relatively easy meanings, but very varied or difficult forms (the past simple tense). Some involve single-word choices (*a/an/some*), others entire sentences (conditionals).

When we teach any one of these types of structures, we are – or should be – getting our students to learn quite a large number of different, though related, bits of knowledge and skills: how to recognize the examples of the structure when spoken, how to identify its written form, how to produce both its spoken and written form, how to understand its meaning in context, and produce meaningful sentences using it themselves. All these 'bits' may be presented in the form of a table thus:

ASPECTS OF THE TEACHING/LEARNING OF STRUCTURES

| | *Form* | *Meaning* |
|---|---|---|
| *Listening* | Perception and recognition of the spoken form of the structure | Comprehension of what the spoken structure means in context |
| *Speaking* | Production of well-formed examples in speech | Use of the structure to convey meanings in speech |
| *Reading* | Perception and recognition of the written form | Comprehension of what the written structure means in context |
| *Writing* | Production of well-formed examples in writing | Use of the structure to convey meanings in writing |

Some teachers, and/or the coursebooks they use, have a tendency to concentrate on some of these and neglect others: they may spend a lot of time on getting the forms right and neglect to give practice in using the structure to convey meanings: or they may focus on written exercises and fail to cover the oral aspects satisfactorily. It is important to keep a balance, taking into account, of course, the needs of the particular class being taught.

## 4 The organization of grammar teaching

Any generalization about the 'best' way to teach grammar – what kinds of teaching procedures should be used, and in what order – will have to take into account both the wide range of knowledge and skills that need to be taught, and the variety of different kinds of structures subsumed under the heading 'grammar'. Thus the organization suggested here





represents only a general framework into which a very wide variety of teaching techniques will fit. I suggest four stages:

a) *Presentation*
b) *Isolation and explanation*
c) *Practice*
d) *Test*

### a) PRESENTATION

We usually begin by presenting the class with a text in which the grammatical structure appears. The aim of the presentation is to get the learners to perceive the structure – its form and meaning – in both speech and writing and to take it into short-term memory. Often a story or short dialogue is used which appears in written form in the textbook and is also read aloud by the teacher and/or students. As a follow-up, students may be asked to read aloud, repeat, reproduce from memory, or copy out instances of the use of the structure within the text. Where the structure is a very simple, easily perceived one, the presentation 'text' may be no more than a sample sentence or two, which serves as a model for immediate practice.

### b) ISOLATION AND EXPLANATION

At this stage we move away from the context, and focus, temporarily, on the grammatical items themselves: what they sound and look like, what they mean, how they function – in short, what rules govern them. The objective is that the learners should understand these various aspects of the structure. In some classes we may need to make extensive use of the students' native language to explain, translate, make generalizations and so on.

In more academic classes, or where the structure is particularly difficult for the students to grasp, this stage may take some time. However, where the structure is very simple, or very close to a parallel in the native language, or when the students tend to learn the language intuitively rather than intellectually, it may take only a minute or so or be entirely omitted.

### c) PRACTICE

The practice stage consists of a series of exercises done both in the classroom and for home assignments, whose aim is to cause the learners to absorb the structure thoroughly; or, to put it another way, to transfer what they know from short-term to long-term memory. Obviously, not every grammar practice procedure can 'cover' all aspects of the structure as listed in the table on page 6; therefore we shall need to use a series of varied exercises which will complement each other and together provide thorough coverage.

With a structure whose formal rules are difficult to grasp, we might start by devoting some time to manipulation of the written and spoken forms, without relating particularly to meaning. Such practice is usually given through exercises based on 'discrete items' (a series of words, phrases or sentences with no particular connection between them, except insofar as they exemplify the structure to be practised). Commonly found exercises of this type are:

i) *Slot-fillers* (the learner inserts the appropriate item)
e.g. He is ..... boy. We have ..... umbrella. (a, an)
Answer: He is *a* boy. We have *an* umbrella.

ii) *Transformation* (the learner changes the structure in some prescribed manner)
e.g. This is a woman. (put into the plural)
Answer: *They are women.*

The function of such exercises is simply to help make the rules of form clearer and to ensure that they are learnt more thoroughly. A learner who has worked through a series of them may find it easier, eventually, to express him or herself correctly, in language that will be acceptable to a native speaker. But because they give no practice in making meanings with the structure (and are therefore, incidentally, usually not very interesting) these exercises have limited usefulness; so we should move on to meaning-based practice as soon as we feel our students have a fundamental grasp of the rules of form and their application. (They may, of course, grasp these rules adequately as a result of the presentation and explanation, in which case we will not need purely form-based exercises at all.)

Another category of practice procedures still stresses the production or perception of correct forms, but involves meanings as well – though as yet unlinked to any general situational framework – and cannot be done without comprehension. Such exercises are, again, usually based on discrete items, and tend not to be open-ended. Some examples:

i) *Translation*, to or from the native language

ii) *Slot-filling*, or *multiple-choice*, based on meaning,
e.g. He (works, is working, worked) at the moment.
Answer: He *is working* at the moment.

iii) *Slot-filling*, with choice of answers not provided,
e.g. Last night we ..... television.
Answer: Last night we *watched* television.





iv) *Matching*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| e.g. He | | an animal |
| I | is | soldiers |
| She | are | a woman |
| The men | am | a student |
| The dog | | a soldier |

Answers: *He is a soldier*, etc.

The language is still not being used to 'do' things, but merely to provide examples of itself (it is, in other words, not 'communicative') – but at least the exercises cannot be done through mere technical manipulation. They are certainly more interesting to do than purely form-based ones (and this interest can be increased by the introduction of piquant or amusing subject matter, or some game-like techniques), and provide more learning value.

The third, and probably most productive – certainly most interesting – type of exercise is that in which the stress is on the production or comprehension of *meanings* for some non-linguistic purpose, while keeping an eye, as it were, on the way the structures are being manipulated in the process. Such practice may be obtained through information- or opinion-gap communication techniques or through activities based on the production of entertaining ideas. For example, the students might discuss or write about the possibilities arising out of a dilemma situation using the modals *may*, *might*, *could*, *should*, etc. (see 17.8 *Dilemmas*), or make up stories to practise the past tense (23.11 *Cooperative story*).

If all three of the types of practice exercises described here are in fact used, they are likely to come in the order they have been laid out here – though not always. We may in the course of a communicative activity find that the students are making consistent mistakes in a certain structure and decide to return temporarily to an exercise that focuses on correct forms. Or it may be found feasible in some cases to do only one kind of practice (usually the third, as described above), if the structure is very easily mastered.

Most coursebooks and grammar practice books provide plenty of examples of the first and second types. This book, which is meant to act as a supplement to them, therefore concentrates – though not exclusively – on the third.

### d) TEST

Learners do tests in order to demonstrate – to themselves and to the teacher – how well they have mastered the material they have been learning. The main objective of tests within a taught course is to provide feedback, without which neither teacher nor learner would be able to

progress very far. We have to know where we are in order to know where to go next.

Formal examinations, usually preceded by revision on the part of the learners, and followed by written evaluation on the part of the teacher, are only one kind of testing, arguably the least useful for immediate teaching purposes. (I do not give here a list of techniques that can or should be used for formal grammar testing, since the subject is outside my terms of reference.) Most testing, however, is done automatically and almost unconsciously by teacher and learners as the course proceeds, the most valuable – though necessarily impressionistic – feedback on learning being supplied by the learners' current performance in class and in home assignments. Often 'practice' exercises are used to supply such informal feedback, in which case they may function virtually as tests: but if this aspect is stressed, their effectiveness as practice techniques is usually lessened (see the end of Chapter 2).

Of the four stages in grammar teaching described above, the *practice* stage is, I think, the most important, in that it is through practice that the material is most thoroughly and permanently learnt. So let us consider next what a grammar practice technique entails, and what makes it effective.