

Trinity CertTESOL

Study Resource 7: Teaching Grammar in Context

When we teach grammar, we not only help our learners to express themselves, but we also fulfil their expectations of what learning a language involves. Many of us probably think back to our grammar lessons at school with dread, but these days, with a focus on using the language for communicative purposes rather than completing exercises and conjugating verbs, a grammar lesson should be both engaging and stimulating.

This Study Resource will take a closer look at teaching grammar in context for the Teaching Skills and Language Awareness components of the course:

- Why do we need grammar?
- Grammar in context
- Approaches to teaching grammar
- Getting students to practice
- Do I know enough about grammar?

For each **Reflection Task**, take a moment to think and make notes mentally or in writing before you continue to read.

WHY DO WE NEED GRAMMAR?

Reflection Task 1

1. Why is it important to support learners with grammar?
2. In this [YouTube](#) clip, Jack C. Richards, an expert in the field, talks about grammar as a “communicative resource”.
 - a. What do you think he means by this?
 - b. Watch the clip and see if you were right.

Grammar helps us understand and arrange lexis (words or chunks) in a sentence with sufficiently correct form so we can communicate effectively and accurately. The ultimate goal of teaching grammar is to help our learners understand the way language is used and constructed and apply this to what they are learning.

In listening and reading, understanding of grammar plays a crucial part in helping learners work out the meaning in a spoken or written text. In writing and speaking, use of grammar allows learners to put their ideas into intelligible sentences so that they can communicate successfully.

Grammar that conforms to the conventions of a particular recognized variety of English helps achieve both the above and shows listeners and readers that we have a good command of English. This is especially important if a learner wants to use English for work or study.

We break the language into manageable pieces, so we can talk about patterns and structures. We categorize these pieces into sentence components (subject, verb, object, complement, adverbials) and into parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions, etc.).

GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT

Before we look more closely at what context actually entails, let's consider what the teacher needs to highlight when planning to clarify a grammatical item: use and form.

Reflection Task 2

Think about the following questions for a few minutes then read the information below and check your answers.

1. The present continuous is used to talk about an action that is in progress at the moment of speaking, e.g. 'I'm working in France this week'. Can you think of any other uses?
2. What do you think would be a good context for teaching present continuous?
3. How is the present continuous formed? S + ? + ?

Use

It is important to identify the concept of your target language: to work out what it actually means and what function it expresses. Many language items can have different uses or functions.

The present continuous can be used to describe an action that is in progress at the moment of speaking, for example, 'I'm working on my computer at the moment.' However, it can also be used to refer to a future planned arrangement, such as, 'I'm seeing my mother next weekend.'

We need to be clear on which use we are highlighting to the students, as well as anticipating any confusion the different uses may cause.

Context

All clarification and practice of grammar, both use and form, should start from a context – a situation where the language is naturally used. The features of the context can be identified by asking 'wh' questions:

- What are they talking about?
- Where is the conversation taking place?
- Who are the speakers?
- Why is the conversation taking place?
- How do the speakers sound?

If you are planning a lesson on the present continuous, you need to think of a situation when we would use this language in real life. This is essential as it helps the learners understand why the language is useful, and shows them how and when they could use it. In a lesson on the present continuous for future plans, the context could be someone looking through their diary trying to set up a meeting. A lesson focusing on present continuous to describe an action in progress could have a context of two old friends meeting by chance and telling each other about their life.

At the beginning of the lessons, the context could be set by using pictures, realia (real life objects), a situation, a written text, a recorded dialogue, a video clip, etc.

The context should be interesting and engaging for your particular group of learners, and it should also provide a useful model for how learners can go on to using the target language in a personalized and meaningful way.

Form

Once the students are clear on the meaning and use of the language item, their attention can be drawn to how it is formed. This refers to what the grammatical structure is, how it is pronounced and written, as well as how negatives, questions and plurals are formed if appropriate.

For example, the present continuous is formed by:

Subject + am/is/are + the present participle (-ing form)

I am reading...

For this, a traditional **substitution table** is often used to show the pattern. It can be very helpful to focus on this with learners, who often make mistakes such as '*she are reading*'.

I	am	(not)	writing walking	an email. in the rain.
You	are			
He / She / It	is			
We / You / They	are		writing walking	an email? in the rain?
Are	you			
Is	he / she / it			

Most English teaching course books have excellent descriptions of use and form in the Grammar Reference section at the back of the book.

APPROACHES TO TEACHING GRAMMAR

A Deductive Approach

The deductive approach is often thought of as a more traditional way of teaching. In this approach, the teacher presents the rule, and the learners then use it to produce the language themselves. Some students feel more comfortable with this approach as it is closer to the expectation of typical teacher/learner roles in the classroom. Other advantages are that it is efficient and straight to the point, and the teacher has more control of the learners' understanding of rules. Many course books use this approach, and it fits in well with many syllabus structures.

An Inductive Approach

An inductive approach involves providing learners with examples of the target language in context. By focusing on the structures, learners draw their own conclusions, form hypothesis and discover rules. The role of the teacher is to provide the language the learners need to discover the rules, to guide them in discovery if necessary, and then to provide more opportunities to practice.

The inductive approach involves discovery techniques, encouraging independent learning and building on existing knowledge. It is memorable, stimulating and motivating for many learners. Often exploiting authentic material, it is learner-centered, and the focus is on usage rather than rules.

Your best choice may be a combination of the two, depending on your experience, the grammar structure you are teaching, and the study habits of your learners.

Reflection Task 3

1. Think back to any language classes you have attended. Was the teacher using a deductive or an inductive (discovery) approach, or a combination of the two?
2. Which approach do you think you would prefer as a language student? Why?

GETTING STUDENTS TO PRACTISE

Once new language has been introduced to the learners, they need to have an opportunity to try it out for themselves. **Restricted practice** activities focus on accurate use of the target language, giving the students repeated opportunities to use it. Some examples of restricted practice activities are gap-fills, sentence completion, quizzes and information gaps.

The purpose of restricted practice is to allow the learners to internalize the new language so that they know how and when to use it and how to produce it. It helps to fix the language in the learners' minds so that they can go on to using it in more appropriate and natural ways. Make sure your restricted practice is varied and doesn't go on for too long, as students could become bored and lose interest. When the class is ready, you should move on to freer and more personalized real-world activities.

Freer practice is more authentic and focuses on the learners' fluency and communicating a message. To improve fluency, learners need to have the chance to activate their language through activities and tasks that encourage them to use a wide range of English as naturally as possible. During such activities the teacher's job is to monitor the class, listen and help, and give feedback at the end of the activity. Some freer activities are: role-play; problem solving; discussion; sharing or comparing ideas, information and experiences, and writing emails or compositions.

DO I KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT GRAMMAR?**Reflection Task 4**

1. How confident do you feel about clarifying grammatical concepts to students?
2. How can you improve in this area before starting the CertTESOL course?

Even if English is your first language, you may feel that your grammatical knowledge is quite limited. You might feel that you know what sounds right and wrong but don't know how to explain why. If you have learned English as a second or foreign language, you will probably have studied English grammar previously, but you may still worry that you don't know enough or that you are not able to get the concept across.

On your Trinity CertTESOL course you will have lessons on language awareness (functional language, grammar, lexis and phonology), but the more prepared you are in this area the better. You will be given suggested titles of grammar reference books to work with before the course, and if you enroll for a short intensive course, you will also be provided with a pre-course task to work through.

As you prepare to teach each grammar point, you will do your “research” with an aim to understanding the meaning and use of the grammatical structure, the context it is naturally used in, how it is formed, and how it can best be highlighted to your students.

Useful links

- Trinity’s TESOL’s Youtube channel of teaching clips:
www.trinitycollege.com/tesolvideo.
- For more information on inductive and deductive approaches to teaching grammar, go to OUP English Teaching Global Blog:
<https://oupeltglobalblog.com/2015/04/24/inductive-and-deductive-grammar-teaching/>
- Anthony Gaughan’s great site about teaching techniques:
<http://teachertrainingunplugged.com/>

We hope you have enjoyed this introduction to teaching grammar in context for the Trinity CertTESOL course and found it useful.