

7

Teaching grammar

Overview

- 7.1 **What is grammar?** A brief definition.
- 7.2 **What students need to learn: standards of grammatical acceptability.**
- 7.3 **How best to teach grammar.** Explicit and implicit processes; grammar practice; timing of explicit grammar teaching.
- 7.4 **Presenting grammar: explanations.** Some practical guidelines on the provision of grammatical explanations in the classroom.
- 7.5 **Grammar practice exercises.** Different types of grammar practice activities, and the importance of meaningful, communicative practice of grammar in context.

7.1 What is grammar?

The term *grammar* includes *syntax* and *morphology*. Syntax is the way words are chosen and combined to make correct sentences: so in English *I am a teacher* is grammatically acceptable, **I a teacher*, and **I are a teacher* are not. Morphology is the grammar of single words: it includes features like the plural -s of nouns, or the past tense of verbs. English morphology is fairly simple, compared to many other languages: grammatical affixes are all suffixes, and there is a limited number of them. It is the syntax, on the whole, which is more difficult for learners and needs more careful teaching.

Grammar is not just a matter of correct forms; it also carries meaning. The meaning of a particular message in a communicative situation is created by a combination of vocabulary and grammar. We use grammatical items and constructions to express, for example, time (using tenses) or place (using prepositions) or possibility (using modals or conditional clauses). It is often the meanings that create problems for students rather than the forms (for example, when contrasting present perfect simple *I have done my homework* with present perfect progressive *I have been doing my homework*).

7.2 What students need to learn: standards of grammatical acceptability

There is some debate these days as to what standards of grammatical accuracy should be applied to English as it is taught and learned in the classroom. How much should we worry about grammatical accuracy if mistakes do not interfere with meaning? Surely, it is argued by some, the main purpose of language is communication, so it shouldn't matter if you make a minor slip in morphology or syntax, so long as the communicative message is

clear. For example, should we correct a student who drops the third person -s suffix in the present simple (saying *she like* instead of *she likes*)? And should we correct *which* instead of *who* in relative clauses relating to a person (*the man which* instead of *the man who*)? Should we only correct such variants when they actually make the meaning unclear or misleading – for example, when a student uses a present tense verb where a past tense is needed to convey an appropriate message?

Pause for thought

What is your own opinion on this issue? Would you, as a teacher, always insist on the standard forms? Or would you relate to the non-standard ones – where they do not affect meaning – as legitimate learner variants rather than as errors, and accept them?

Comment

We need to make a distinction between usages that are acceptable in general communicative situations, and those that we teach in the classroom. If in a conversation with a speaker of English I hear variants like those mentioned above, it doesn't bother me particularly, and I wouldn't dream of trying to correct them. In the classroom, however, I would try to teach my students to use the conventional forms, and would relate to such variants as errors. This is not because the conventional forms are those used by L1 English speakers – who are today a minority of users of English – but because they are, as far as we can judge, the forms used by the majority of speakers of English worldwide (whatever their first language is). Our students surely have the right to be taught the standard grammar – as well as vocabulary – that is used by English users with whom they will be – or are already – communicating. There are some additional factors that support this general conclusion: substantial evidence that most students express a wish to be corrected when they make grammatical errors (Roothooff and Breeze, 2016); some high-stakes exams, which may penalize departure from standard grammatical forms; the policy of the Ministry of Education of the country where we are teaching or of the institution that employs us, which are likely to support the teaching of conventional grammar.

It is true that there are situations where grammatical accuracy may matter less. First, an error may not matter so much if it does not affect the basic meaning of what is being communicated. Second, accuracy is a lot less important in informal conversation or text messaging than it is in formal writing. The kind of course we are teaching also makes a difference: if we are teaching a course in conversational English with the aim of improving oral fluency, we may well ignore grammatical errors which do not change a message, and not let them affect our assessment of students' performance. Accurate grammar is more important if our course is, for example, aiming for improvement of academic English for participants who are planning to apply to a university and need to be able to write papers and make academic presentations.

The bottom line is that, as suggested in the **Comment** on the previous page, all things being equal, we shall continue in most situations to teach our students to observe the conventional grammatical rules, while remaining sensitive to the need for flexibility in certain contexts.

7.3 How best to teach grammar

Explicit and implicit teaching

Having decided which grammatical features we are going to teach, how should we do this? Should we allow students plenty of opportunities to hear, read and use the correct forms through comprehensible input and communicative interaction, but not explain them (*implicit* teaching)? Or should we provide explanations, focused practice and error correction (*explicit* teaching)? Or should we use a combination of the two?

Stephen Krashen (1999) claims that grammar is best acquired implicitly, through plenty of comprehensible input (listening and reading), and that explanations, focused grammar exercises and corrective feedback have only a marginal effect. Others would add that there is value also to student communicative output: Michael Long (1996), for example, in his *interaction hypothesis*, says that learners learn through interacting with others (both learners and more proficient speakers); Merrill Swain (1995) says it is important for learners also to speak and write in what she calls *pushed output* in order to become more proficient (the *output hypothesis*). In favour of explicit grammar teaching, others have produced evidence that grammar acquisition is facilitated by explanations (Akakura, 2012; Boers, 2021), practice exercises (DeKeyser, 2010) and error correction (Sheen and Ellis, 2011).

A sensible conclusion, supported by the evidence, is that for good learning of grammar in an English course, you need both: communicative input and output, together with some explicit teaching.

Pause for thought

If you learnt English, or another foreign language, in school, how was grammar taught? What kinds of things were helpful/unhelpful in getting you to use the grammar of the language correctly?

Comment

I was taught French in school through the grammar-translation method, so there was a lot of emphasis on getting the rules right and applying them in largely translation-based exercises. These were helpful in getting me to understand and produce grammatical sentences, when I had time to think about it and apply the rules. So I could not speak French fluently as a result of my school studies, but I could read and write it fairly well; and when I eventually spent some time in France, the underlying knowledge of grammatical rules was certainly helpful as I gradually became more fluent.

The timing of grammar teaching

A rather confusing distinction has been made in the literature between *focus on formS* and *focus on form* (Long and Robinson, 1998). *Focus on formS* is the traditional process of teaching grammar according to a grammatical syllabus: the teacher or textbook introduces a rule, students do exercises to practise it, and then move on to the next rule. *Focus on form*, in contrast, takes place when a grammatical feature comes up in the course of a communicative task or text, and the teacher takes time out to focus on it, drawing students' attention to it and explaining as necessary (some writers would include brief practice exercises within this process), before returning to the original task or text.

Approaching the same issue from the point of view of timing, some research has been carried out to try to establish when it is best to teach a grammatical feature: on its own, in a teacher- or materials-initiated process (*isolated*), or in context, in response to a need in the course of communicative activity (*integrated*). In a questionnaire-based survey on this point, Valeo and Spada (2016) asked teachers and learners which they prefer. The majority were in favour of integrated, while also acknowledging the value of isolated.

The conclusion seems to be that there is value to both: I do not see that there is any contradiction between the two models. Many teachers and learners are in favour of the conventional process of a grammar explanation followed by practice exercises; indeed, most coursebooks include them. On the other hand, it is true that a one-off teaching of a grammatical feature, however much practice follows it, will not necessarily lead to effective learning. It is important, therefore, to include also regular incidental focus on form – reactive focus on a grammatical point that comes up in the course of a communicative task. This may be the first time learners have noticed the particular point in question, or may function as a review of something that has been deliberately taught or incidentally encountered earlier.

The guidelines in the following sections are based on the assumption that there is value to explicit explanation and practice of grammar in English courses, whether isolated in a conventional grammar lesson or integrated within a communicative task.

7.4 Presenting grammar: explanations

Grammar explanations may be initiated by the teacher because they are required in your syllabus or come up in course materials. Or they may take place in response to a learning need; you may have noticed that students are making mistakes with a particular feature and might benefit from some focused explanation.

Pedagogical grammar rules

The grammar rules we give students are not necessarily the same as those provided in a formal grammar reference book, such as the *Cambridge Grammar of English* (Carter and McCarthy, 2006). We will need to simplify; and we need to take into consideration the learners' L1, if we know it. In some cases – where the rule is very easily understood, or similar to the learners' L1 – we may not need to spend much time on it; in others, we may need to work harder at clarifying, perhaps emphasizing the differences between it and the L1, where there are liable to be errors based on L1 interference.

Some guidelines on explaining grammar follow below.

- **Provide students with examples of the target feature in meaningful contexts before explaining it.** This sounds obvious, but I have seen teachers start by writing up an isolated phrase on the board and then analysing it immediately, when the students had little or no idea what it might mean in context.
- **Both say and write examples of the target form.** This is important, not only because students might need to use the grammar in both speech and writing, but also because, as mentioned earlier in reference to vocabulary, a new item is more memorable if it is both seen and heard.
- **Teach both form and meaning.** Which of these you emphasize depends on what the target feature is. Some grammatical constructions have fairly easy forms, but rather complex meanings that may have no parallel in the students' L1 and need careful explanation and lots of examples (the present progressive, for example). Others may have very simple meanings, and you need to focus on teaching the forms (the comparative of adjectives, for example).
- **You may or may not use grammatical terminology.** This will depend on your situation and students. On the whole, older or more analytically minded students may find the terminology helpful. Others may not, or may even find it confusing. Remember that terms such as *adjective*, *imperative* are not particularly common in communication in general: so unless you are sure they will help students understand, try to manage without them. With many classes, particularly younger ones, I would try to explain by using actual exponents rather than the abstract definitions: for example, saying *a* or *an* rather than *the indefinite article*.
- **Explain the grammar in the students' L1, if you know it, unless they are proficient enough to cope with English explanations.** The level of English needed to understand a grammatical explanation in that language is quite high – often higher than the grammatical feature itself! – so it may be difficult to understand for many classes. Using L1 can save time which can then be used for practice or communicative use of the target grammar. Use English for explanations with relatively advanced classes who can readily understand them.
- **Compare the English structure with an L1 parallel if you can.** Where there are differences – whether substantial or only subtle – between English and the L1, it can be very helpful to compare and contrast the two. Awareness of such differences can help to prevent mistakes. For example, you might point out that the use of the present perfect in a sentence with *for* or *since* (*I have worked here for six years*) is likely to correspond to the use of the present tense in the students' L1.
- **Keep it short.** With a potentially complex rule, it's best just to give a simple statement of the main, most common, form and meaning – a rule of thumb, as it were – and then move on to using the grammar in context. A long and complex rule is unlikely to be remembered. You can always add further explanations or exceptions in a later lesson.

- **Ask students to work out rules for themselves, based on a set of examples (inductive process), or give the rules yourself, and they later work on examples (deductive).** The deductive process is more common in both textbooks and classroom teaching. However, if the students can work out the rule for themselves, then they are more likely to remember it. The problem with inductive teaching is that if the rule is really difficult, students may waste a lot of time on frustrating guessing or on misleading suggestions. In such cases, it is better simply to provide the information yourself. It really depends on how easily a rule can in fact be correctly induced from examples, and also on students' own preferences.

Pause for thought

Have a look at the grammar explanations below. Are they clear and helpful? Do you have any criticisms? What might you add at a later stage?

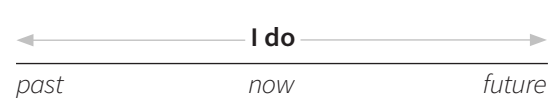
present continuous (I am doing)

We use the continuous for things happening at or around the time of speaking. The action is not complete.



present simple (I do)

We use the simple for things in general or things that happen repeatedly.



(from *English Grammar in Use*, 5th Edition by Murphy, R., 2011)

Comment

The explanations given here are mostly simple, short and helpful: they don't go into unnecessary detail, are clearly accessible to a learner at a fairly basic level of proficiency, and the diagram is easily understood. I'm not sure, however, if the additional fact about the present continuous 'The action is not complete' is very helpful to a learner or adds anything essential: surely anything that is going on at a point of time is by definition in process, and therefore not completed. In the definition of the present simple, the phrase 'things in general' is a bit vague: I'd prefer something like 'general facts or situations'. I also tell my students that, in general, the present simple is far more common than the present continuous, so if they're wondering which to use they should usually opt for the simple! Later on, I would add the use of both forms to express a future action which has already been planned. It may be worth telling students about the slight difference between the form *we are leaving tomorrow*, as a planned, intended action, and *we leave tomorrow* as a more definite and scheduled one.

Practical tips

- **Use pictures.** If you can, use pictures to help your explanation or, if appropriate, mime and facial expression. They help make the explanation memorable.
- **When you've finished, check understanding.** It's not enough to ask, 'Do you understand?' Get students to demonstrate their understanding by giving examples or explaining in their own words. Or try using the next tip.
- **Get feedback.** When you have finished explaining, delete everything from the board, tell students to close their textbooks, and to write down in their own words what the rule was, in English or L1. Then ask them to read out what they have written, or share with one another. This will give you a good idea of how well they have understood the explanation and is in itself a review of the rule.
- **Teach new rules early in the lesson.** As with the teaching of new vocabulary, it's a good idea to plan grammatical explanations to take place towards the beginning of the lesson when students are fresher and more willing to engage with new material.

7.5 Grammar practice exercises

There is some debate about the place of explicit grammar practice in the form of drills or exercises. Again, this is something that most teachers and coursebooks provide, that students expect and that does seem to contribute to learning (see the discussion of explicit grammar teaching above). But all experienced teachers are familiar with the phenomenon that students continue to make mistakes in the target grammar even after extensive practice. Practice does not necessarily make perfect.

One of the explanations for the phenomenon that learners sometimes just do not seem to take on board a grammatical structure they have successfully practised is given in Pienemann's (1984) *teachability hypothesis*. Pienemann observed that learners of German acquire German grammatical structures in a fixed order, regardless of the order in which they were taught; and there is some evidence that this is true for the acquisition of other languages as well. From this, it is hypothesized that the teaching of a grammatical item or construction for which the learner is not developmentally ready will not result in learning. One possible practical implication is the idea of teaching grammar through *consciousness-raising* (Ellis, 2001). Consciousness-raising means that learners' attention is drawn to a particular grammatical rule, without demanding immediate implementation in practice exercises. Then, when they are developmentally ready, it is suggested, they will notice the occurrence of the same grammatical features in input and start using them themselves. According to this model, practice exercises have little value. If the learner is ready to acquire the grammar, they will do so anyway, without practice; if they are not, then practice won't help. On the other hand, other writers, as mentioned earlier (DeKeyser, 2010), have claimed that focused practice does contribute to grammatical accuracy.

The most likely conclusion seems to be that most learners do, indeed, go through a fairly stable order of acquisition of grammatical features, and that some acquisition does occur through exposure to comprehensible input, but that explanation combined with practice may contribute to and speed up such learning. We do, however, need to abandon the exaggerated hope that practice makes perfect and content ourselves with the expectation that practice, like explanations of rules, can make a substantial contribution to good learning and is therefore worth including in our teaching.

Implications for the design and ordering of practice exercises

There remains the phenomenon of students who do all the grammar exercises on a given item perfectly, but then make mistakes in the same item when they are composing their own free speech or writing. The problem here is that the structures have not been thoroughly mastered. The student still depends on a certain amount of conscious monitoring in order to produce them correctly. And when students are concentrating mainly on communicating, they do not have enough attention to spare for such monitoring.

In other words, if students have not mastered the grammatical point to the degree that they can produce it without thinking, then in communicative situations they will make mistakes, often based on L1 interference. Is there anything we can do about this? I would claim that there is: we can encourage students in our grammar practice activities to try using the target structure to make meanings, rather than just to focus on getting it right: to provide practice tasks that encourage them to combine the two.

Grammar drills, whose focus is only on getting it right, are in general disapproved of in the professional literature as meaningless and unproductive of learning (see, for example, an article entitled 'The evidence is in: Drills are OUT', Wong and Patten, 2003), though more recently they may be making a comeback (see, for example, Scheffler and Butzkamm, 2019). It is probable that at the early stages, it may be useful to give traditional exercises like gapfills, transformation, and matching, with definite right and wrong answers. However, if this is all the grammar practice the students get, they are unlikely to be able to transfer their knowledge to their own output. Such conventional exercises, therefore, need to be supplemented by activities that prompt students to use the target features to produce their own sentences, while keeping an eye, as it were, on grammatical accuracy.

On the next page is a description of a number of grammar tasks that provide practice in a range of grammatical features. They move from the less productive, very controlled and very accuracy-oriented exercise at the beginning to a fluency activity giving opportunities for the free use of the grammar in context at the end. The aim of the later tasks is to get students to use the grammar in order to say their own thing, paying attention to both communicative purpose and grammatical form. It is not suggested that this sequence should be strictly followed in classroom teaching, though on the whole, the more controlled exercises tend to come earlier. But it is important that our lessons should overall include a combination of grammar-based tasks that provide both form-focused and meaning-focused practice.

Types of grammar practice:

Type 1: Awareness. After the students have been introduced to the grammatical point, they are given opportunities to encounter it within some kind of discourse, and then do a task that focuses their attention on its form and/or meaning.

Example: Past simple. Look at a text extract, and underline all the examples of the past simple.

Type 2: Controlled drills. Students produce examples of the structure. These examples are predetermined by the teacher or materials and have to conform to very clear, closed-ended cues. They can often be done without understanding.

Example: Past simple. Complete the sentence in the past simple, using the correct form of the verb in brackets.

- a) I _____ to school yesterday. (go) *I went to school yesterday.*
- b) Judy _____ the cake. (eat)
- c) They _____ the lesson early. (leave)

Type 3: Controlled responses through sentence completion or rewriting. Students produce examples of the structure that are predetermined by the teacher or materials by being required to rewrite according to a set cue, or to complete a sentence. However, in either case they will need to understand in order to respond correctly.

Example: Comparative adjectives. Use the adjectives in brackets. Write two sentences for each item.

- a) A computer / a book (cheap / expensive). *A computer is more expensive than a book.
A book is cheaper than a computer.*
- b) A train / a car (short / long)
- c) Walking / skating (easier / more difficult)

Type 4: Meaningful drills. The actual grammar is fairly controlled, but the student can insert some words of their own choice in order to make meaningful statements.

Example: Present simple. Choose someone you know very well, and write down their name. Now compose true statements about them according to the following model: *He/She likes ice cream. He/She doesn't like ice cream.*

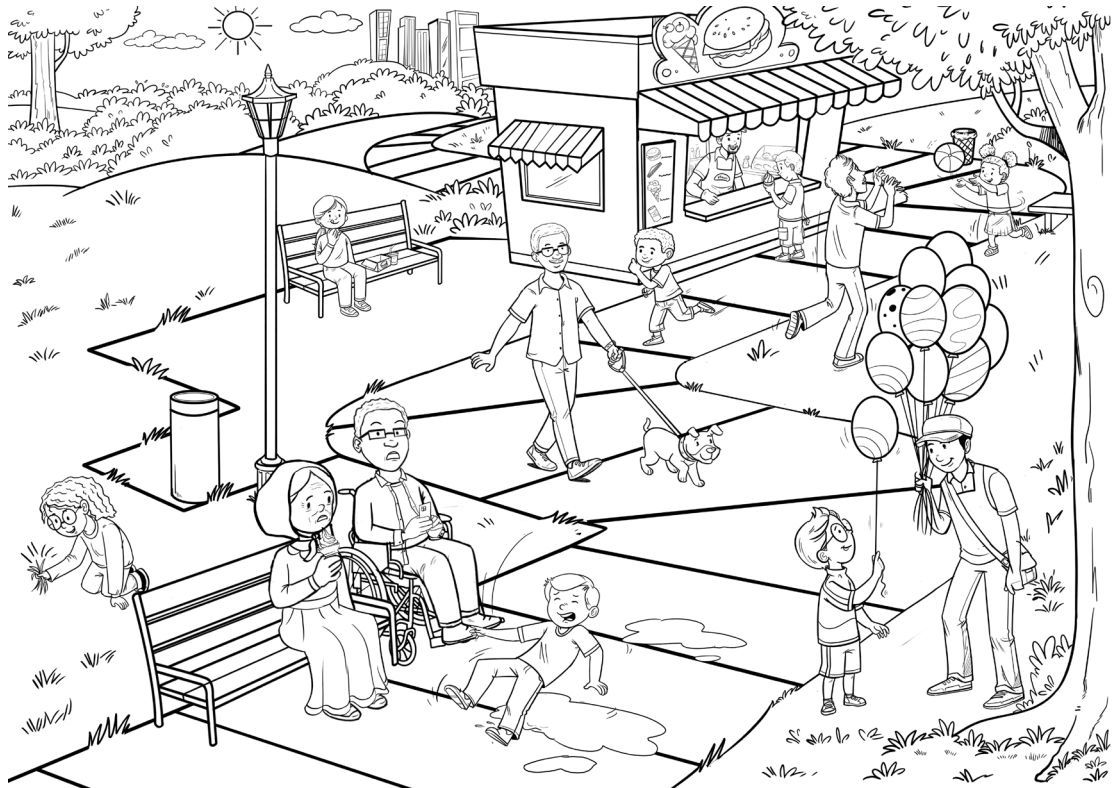
- a) play *She plays tennis. She doesn't play football.*
- b) enjoy
- c) live

Type 5: Guided, meaningful practice. The students form sentences of their own according to a set pattern, but exactly what vocabulary they use is up to them.

Example: Conditional clauses. Look at the following cue: *If I had a million dollars*. Write down at least five things you would do if you had a million dollars.

Type 6: (Structure-based) free sentence composition. Students are provided with a written or visual cue (for example, a picture showing various people engaged in different activities) and invited to compose their own responses. They are directed to use a certain structure.

Example: Present continuous/progressive. Look at the picture below and say what you see is happening, or that is not happening.



Type 7: (Structure-based) discussion and/or composition. Students hold a discussion or write a passage according to a given task. They are directed to use at least some examples of the structure within the discourse.

Example: Modals. You see a good friend of yours cheating in an exam. What might you do? Your recommendations should include modals like *might*, *should*, *must*, *can*, *could*, etc.

Type 8: Free discussion or composition. As in Type 7, but the students are given no specific direction as to what language to use. However, clearly the task invites use of the target structure.

Example: Modals. As for Type 7, but without the last sentence.

Pause for thought

Have a look at the grammar exercises on the next page. What types are they, according to the list above? Can you think of ways you might adapt them in order to make them more meaningful?

7.1 Read the situations and complete the sentences using the present perfect. Choose from these verbs:

break disappear go up grow improve lose shrink stop

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| 1 Tom is looking for his key. He can't find it. | Tom ... <i>has lost his key</i> |
| 2 Maria's English wasn't very good. Now it is better. | Her English |
| 3 My bag was here, but it isn't here any more. | My bag |
| 4 Lisa can't walk and her leg is in plaster. | Lisa |
| 5 Last week the bus fare was £1.80. Now it is £2. | The bus fare |
| 6 Dan didn't have a beard before. Now he has a beard. | Dan |
| 7 It was raining ten minutes ago. It isn't raining now. | It |
| 8 I washed my sweater, and now it's too small for me. | My sweater |

7.2 Put in been or gone.

- My parents are on holiday. They've *gone* to Italy.
- Hello! I've just to the shops. I've bought lots of things.
- Tom has just out. He'll be back in about an hour.
- Alice isn't here at the moment. I don't know where she's
- You're very late. Where have you

7.3 Complete the sentences using the present perfect.

- Sally is still here. *She hasn't gone* (she / not / go) out.
- I can't find my bag. (you / see / it) anywhere?
- I can't log on to the website. (I / forget) my password.
- I sent Joe an email this morning, but (he / not / reply).
- Is the meeting still going on, or (it / finish)?
- (the weather / change). It's colder now.
- (you / not / sign) the form. Could you sign it now, please?
- Are your friends still here, or (they / go) home?
- Paul doesn't know what he's going to do.
(he / not / decide / yet).
- 'Do you know where Julia is?' 'Yes, (I / just / see / her).'
- 'When is David going away?' '..... (he / already / go).'
- A: (your course / start / yet)?
B: Not yet. It starts next week.

7.4 Read the situations and write sentences with just, already or yet.

- After lunch you go to see a friend at her house. She says, 'Would you like something to eat?'
You say: No thank you. *I've just had lunch* (have lunch)
- Joe goes out. Five minutes later, the phone rings and the caller says, 'Can I speak to Joe?'
You say: I'm afraid (go out)
- You are eating in a restaurant. The waiter thinks you have finished and starts to take your plate away.
You say: Wait a minute! (not / finish)
- You plan to eat at a restaurant tonight. You phone to reserve a table. Later your friend says,
'Shall I phone to reserve a table?' You say: No, (do it)
- You know that Lisa is looking for a place to live. Perhaps she has been successful.
You ask her:? (find)
- You are still thinking about where to go for your holiday. A friend asks, 'Where are you going
for your holiday?' You say: (not / decide)
- Laura went out, but a few minutes ago she returned. Somebody asks, 'Is Laura still out?'
You say: No, (come back)

(from *English Grammar in Use*, 5th Edition by Murphy, R., 2011)

Comment

These are all exercises that have been planned so that they have one right answer each and can easily be checked using the key available at the end of the book. In order to facilitate such checking, they are all either Type 2 (Exercise 7.2) or Type 3 (7.1, 7.3, 7.4). There is no preparatory awareness exercise (Type 1), and there are no exercises that give the learners opportunities to say their own thing using the target structure (Types 4–8). It would be unfair to blame the writer for the lack of more meaningful or personalized practice, given the aim of the book, which is to enable self-study and self-checking. If I were using it in the classroom, however, I would try to adapt the exercises in order to provide more practice, more interest, and more personalized responses. For example, in 7.1, I might tell students to ignore the verbs in the box, and tell me what they think *has happened* in reference to selected items in order to produce the situation described. For example, I might ask them what they think *has happened* to produce the situation where Tom can't find his key (item 1). Or what *has happened* in order for Maria's English to be better (item 2).

Review: Check yourself

- 1 What is the difference between *syntax* and *morphology*?
- 2 What are some reasons for teaching standard grammatical forms, even if non-standard variants would not affect meaning?
- 3 What does *explicit* grammar teaching include?
- 4 Can you recall at least four useful guidelines or tips to help explain a new grammar point to the class?
- 5 What is the difference between *deductive* and *inductive* teaching of a rule?
- 6 What kind of practice can help students transfer knowledge of a grammatical rule so that they can use it fluently in their own production?
- 7 Can you give two or three examples of exercises that get students to use the grammar to express meanings, rather than just to get the form right?

Further reading

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(A useful set of guidelines for the explanation of grammatical rules to a class)

Swan, M. (2017). *Practical English Usage* (4th Edition). Oxford University Press.

(A very accessible and user-friendly guide to English grammatical usage, with plenty of examples, including common learner errors)

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(A collection of game-like or communicative activities that provide meaningful practice in grammatical features of English)

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