

Teaching Grammar Using Engaging Contexts

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The teaching of grammar has changed in recent years from a focus on form, which emphasizes the grammatical structure in an isolated manner, to a focus on forms, which presents grammatical structures in a more meaningful, communicative context (Nasaaji & Fotos, 2004). While many teachers embrace the forms-based approach, they often rely solely on a reading with target grammar points to contextualize the grammar. In this article, we will share various ways that you can expand your grammar instruction by incorporating the engaging contexts of music, comics, drama, and technology.

Grammar Using Music

The first engaging context for teaching grammar is music—a meaningful, culturally-rich medium that contextualizes grammar and enhances students’ learning of grammatical structures (Saricoban & Metin, 2000). Music can be presented in three different stages in a lesson: before-listening, while-listening, and after-listening. During the before-listening stage, you can include activities such as using discussion questions to introduce the topic and predict the content of the song, preteaching the vocabulary, including pictures to illustrate the vocabulary, and viewing the muted music video on YouTube to make predictions about the song (adapted from Okello, Piippo, & Wang, 2012).

Some activities that can be used in the while-listening stage include completing a cloze passage, watching a YouTube video, providing textual enhancement of the target structure (such as underlining or making the grammar point bold), doing a dictation, sequencing the lyrics, and reciting the song as a choral reading (adapted from Okello, Piippo, & Wang, 2012).

For the after-listening phase of the lesson, you can present the grammar explanation, discuss the theme of song, do YouTube karaoke, and play the *Guess the Lyrics* game (adapted from Okello, Piippo, & Wang, 2012). *Guess the Lyrics* is a game adapted from a popular game show where you play the YouTube karaoke video with the lyrics on the screen, stopping at a certain point, such as before the target structure. After the song is paused, the students have to remember and sing the following line. One intermediate-level song that illustrates these types of activities and shows the differences between simple present and present progressive is *Lemon Trees* (see handout).

Grammar Using Comic Strips

In addition to music, you can incorporate comic strips, which present a short, manageable context to demonstrate a grammar point (such as tense), given that comic strips present a series of discrete, related events happening in the same discourse context. The authentic language and limited scope of comics enable students to focus on the grammar point. Examples of using comic strips include sequencing cut-up parts of comics, retelling the story, and rephrasing speech in comics using reported speech.

One example of a comic strip activity comes from *Calvin and Hobbes* and can be used to teach various grammar structures for different levels (see handout). For example, beginners can practice modals and complete a table about what Calvin *can* and *can't* do in the comic strip. For

the intermediate level, students can practice reported speech and finish sentences based on the pictures of the comic. Advanced students can practice tense and time adverbs by rewriting the story in the cartoon, using one of the later panels as the focal time. For instance, they could write: *By the time Calvin got into bed, he had experienced a difficult day. First, his teacher had criticized his work at school, and he had been threatened by a bully. Then Calvin had not been allowed to play, and Calvin's dad had forced him to take a bath. After Calvin's mom told him that he was going to have another big day the next day, he sighed.*

Grammar Using Drama

Drama-based grammar integrates linguistic and performative forms by including classroom techniques that can be effective in addressing emotional, cognitive, kinesthetic, and other aspects of learning (Even, 2008). Drama-based grammar activities include performing role plays, writing a script, and participating in improvisational games. There are various role plays that students can perform at different levels and situations, such as making introductions, shopping, chatting at a party, and talking about a bank robbery.

At the beginning level, students can introduce themselves using fake student-made IDs to practice asking questions and giving responses with the simple present, using questions such as *How old are you?* and *Where are you from?* (see handout). Students can write the script for the role play that they perform, which is a good way to integrate the skills of speaking, listening, reading, writing, and grammar. There are various improvisational games that students can participate in, including charades with present progressive where students demonstrate various actions for their classmates to guess. Students can also play a game where you start a story by saying or writing a sentence. Each student must continue the story, practicing the target grammar point. For example, you can start with the sentence, “Yesterday I was walking down the street, and I saw...”

Grammar Using Technology

Another way you can contextualize your grammar instruction is through technology, which has been shown to enhance students' learning of grammar (Rezvani & Ketabi, 2011). Technology-based grammar activities include students watching online videos, playing web-based games, and blogging to illustrate or practice particular grammar points. For online videos, students can watch movie or TV scenes. For example, students watch a movie or TV show clip and have to guess what the characters are saying or enact the scene with a partner or in a group. A good clip to use for this activity is from the television show *Friends* entitled “Thanksgiving with Brad Pitt” which can be found on YouTube. Another activity is dividing students into pairs with one partner's back to the screen. The other partner describes what he or she sees in the movie or TV show clip using present progressive (or another target grammar structure).

There are many interactive grammar websites that include: grammar explanations, games (such as Grammar Jeopardy), exercises, quizzes, videos, and music. (See handout for specific sites). The key in deciding which online resources to use is contextualization. In other words, try to avoid resources that offer only isolated sentence-level practice—even if the technology is making such practice seem fun, language learners' grammatical development is predicated on meaningful and contextualized language use. If you have trouble selecting websites for grammar practice, you may want to explore blogging, which can be an effective medium for practicing the

target structure in writing. Students can write journal entries on the following topics to practice various grammatical structures: their daily activities using simple present; what they did yesterday using simple past; conditional questions such as, “Where would you go if you could go anywhere in the world?”; or future plans such as what they will do this coming weekend, for spring break, summer vacation, etc. Some great free blogging sites are blogspot.com, webs.com, weebly.com, and xanga.com.

Conclusion

The teaching of grammar has shifted from a focus on grammatical structure to a more communicative, meaningful approach. The activities presented in this article can enable instructors to go beyond simply including selected grammar points within a reading by utilizing music, comics, drama, and technology to provide engaging contexts for grammar instruction.

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