

Grammatically Speaking

by Michelle Jackson

How to Teach Present Tense To Be

Research states that students retain more information when they engage in active learning. That is to say, there are more learning gains when students are asked to apply knowledge and complete activities within a discipline. One of the inherent beauties of the language classroom is that it is ripe with opportunities for active learning. We can always find creative ways for students to practice new vocabulary, test their understanding of grammar, or develop spoken fluency. There are innumerable ways that we can structure our courses so that students do more and thus learn more.

The following activity not only taps into this research, it also focuses on the present tense verb *to be*—one of the most often used conjugations. Furthermore, it allows students to apply grammar in context as they interview their peers, thus strengthening classroom community.

Materials Required

- A copy of the interview questions (below) and writing utensils for all students
- Chalkboard, whiteboard, or doc cam and writing utensils

Timing: About 30 minutes

Step 1

Explain to students that the present tense of the verb *to be* is used to express age, nationality, and health, as well as to describe people, places, or objects. Students will practice this tense as they interview their classmates. (3 minutes)

Step 2

Provide each student with a copy of the interview questions (below). Students will walk around the classroom, asking each question to two different classmates. They will write down their peers' names and responses to share later. (15 minutes)

Step 3

After all students have two responses to each of the interview questions, the whole class reviews the activity. Call on students individually to share answers they gathered from their peers for Questions 1–8. Note the proper use of the present tense *to be*. Draw connections between patterns of answers (e.g., “A lot of us come from large families,” or “Many of us own a dog.”) (15 minutes)

Optional Extension

During Step 2, there are a few options available. If you feel that students may benefit from modeling, you can have your own sheet of questions and walk around the room gathering answers just like the students. Conversely, you can walk around the room listening to students' utterances and noting instances in which they get the present form correct or incorrect. These patterns can be reviewed during Step 3.

If your classroom does not readily allow for students to move around, students could interview a partner in-depth, asking him or her all of the interview questions. These responses could be written into a paragraph and submitted for a grade, or students could introduce their partners to the class.

The Interview Questions

1. How are you doing?
2. How old are you?
3. Do you have siblings? How old are they?
4. What is your nationality?
5. What is your family like?
6. What is your house or apartment like?
7. What is your best friend like?
8. Do you have pets? What are they like?

Happy teaching,
Michelle

Dr. Michelle Jackson is the associate director of teaching at New Mexico State University's Teaching Academy. She designs, develops, and delivers workshops on a variety of teaching and learning topics. Prior to NMSU, she was the manager of the English Language Institute at UT El Paso. She has taught English as a second language at UT El Paso and Harvard University as well as Spanish at UT Austin.