

Inquiry-Based Grammar Instruction

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It is accepted that language learners benefit from explicit grammar instruction (Ellis, “Current Issues” 85). Norris and Ortega made the same conclusion in a meta-analysis of research in this area. But in the current state of research, teachers still face the question of how to teach grammar (Ellis, “Current Issues” 86–89). Grammar instruction does not lead directly to more correct writing, but some approaches may lead students to look at their errors differently or to understand grammar in terms of communication. Grammar instruction can range from requiring rote memorization of rules to providing a method of analysis for understanding how grammatical structure interacts with meaning.

For a while, early in my career teaching English as a Second Language (ESL), I abandoned teaching grammar. I didn’t find explaining verb tenses in isolated sentences a valuable use of class time since those explanations made no apparent change in students’ use of verbs. Rather, my explanations produced knitted brows and frequent confusion. It became evident that explanations of verb tenses provided only part of a complex picture; in English grammar exceptions seem to be the rule. I found the path for change in *The Ways of Written English* by Lou Inturissi, a book which follows the X-Word grammar approach to analyzing English. X-Word grammar, which emphasizes the discovery of sentence structure and patterns in written English, emerged from Sector Analysis, a grammar developed by the late Dr. Robert Allen, a linguist and professor at Teachers College, Columbia University. Dr. Allen’s graduate students developed X-Word grammar, named after the core of Sector Analysis, English auxiliary verbs (Hart). These future teachers of English wanted to give teachers an accessible, classroom-friendly English grammar that highlights qualities of English “helpful to students” (Haskell 227). The first quality is that words can be categorized into word classes grouped by their function; these different functions fit into identifiable sectors in

English sentences. The basic sectors, subject and predicate, create clauses. Clauses can be expanded with other clauses, adverbials, and inserts, to name a few other sectors. Students identify and observe these different structures through grammar discovery. These grammar elements are more predictable and readily observable than verb tense choice.

X-Word grammar is an inquiry-based approach to teaching grammar that provides the vocabulary and framework to integrate inquiry learning into grammar lessons. In “Methodological Options in Grammar Teaching Materials,” Rod Ellis advocates for wider use of “a problem solving approach” to teaching grammar. He suggests some advantages:

First, it is possibly more motivating than simply being told a grammatical rule and, for this reason, students may be more likely to remember what they learn. Second, it can encourage students to form and test hypotheses about the grammar of the L2, processes that are believed to be central to ultimate acquisition... (164).

Students gain tools to extend their observations and learning beyond the classroom. Ellis continues, “They [discovery grammar tasks] help to develop the skills learners need to investigate language autonomously – to become field linguists” (“Methodological Options” 165). It opens the classroom to conversation about language in the target language. Since I have begun using grammar discovery, students’ questions about grammar are motivated by what students see in the provided text (the input) and their efforts to create rules and order within the text. Students can find answers to their questions by making generalizations from the text.

My grammar instruction begins with a review of traditional grammatical terms, the

parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and determiners. I start with traditional terms but will, throughout the discussion and discovery, add complementary concepts – open and closed word classes – which distinguish two major functions of words. Open classes, also known as lexical classes, are nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Closed classes, also known as functional classes, include grammatical words: prepositions, conjunctions, determiners (an expansion of the notion of article), and pronouns. Nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs tend to carry the lexical meaning of sentences. Closed class words make grammatical connections between the lexical words in sentences. It is possible to write a comprehensible sentence without function words although nuanced relationships will be lacking: “Yesterday went store buy juice.”

In an activity meant to establish a common vocabulary and emphasize that words accomplish different tasks, students read a story written by a former student and use a handout listing the parts of speech (Appendix I & II). The list subcategorizes the parts of speech as open and closed classes. Comprehensible to ESL students, the story has no surface errors, but it does have some non-native speaker weaknesses in vocabulary and sentence variety. After students have read the text, they work together in groups to organize words from the text into lists of the different parts of speech as provided on the handout.

As students try to remove words from context and put them in a list, many questions arise. When taking some words out of context, it is difficult to categorize them into any one list. In this sentence, “One day my friend Cagatay and his girlfriend Sinem went to Macy’s in Manhattan to buy some clothes and a kitchen knife,” students read “kitchen knife” and wonder where to list “kitchen.” They recognize it as a noun but also recognize that it fills a different role in this sentence. The solution is to keep the words “kitchen knife” together and put them in the noun column. Indeed, the two words create a noun phrase.

Thus the concept of phrase is introduced, illustrating that chunks of words work together to fill particular roles in sentences. Students observe that words are more than their dictionary definitions; they can see that words change their functions based on textual contexts and that words work in groups. The lesson covers important grammatical terms and moves students’ observations from word level to phrase and sentence level and shows that understanding of words and phrases must be made in context.

The extended nature of the input, the student story, provides rich data to allow inquiry and acquisition (Ellis, “Methodological Options” 166). It underscores the fact that grammar is not the reason for language learning; it is a means of communicating a message. Real understanding of grammar cannot be achieved in isolated sentences but needs to be extracted from discourse. Students need to observe structures in a larger framework and in relation to other structures (Celce-Murcia 120). Later in the semester when students are comfortable with longer texts, verb tenses will make more sense. It’s important to note that intermediate student texts present limited sentence structures, making them less authentic but accessible to intermediate ESL students. Students enjoy reading these stories but also need to be exposed to more complex and native-like texts at other times.

The next activity leads students to identify basic sentence elements and independent clauses to distinguish them from dependent clauses and other structures. Students transform each sentence of a text into a yes/no question. (In class, I provide a new text, but for simplicity I refer here to the same text that appears in Appendix I.) There are three guidelines: no words can be added, no words can be omitted, and words can be moved. The examples begin with simple independent clauses:

1a. *Two women got in line after them.*

1b. *Did two women get in line after them?*

A clause that transforms into a yes/no question is an independent clause. In the yes/no question, the subject is found between the auxiliary

verb and the main verb. The simple past tense requires the reappearance of the auxiliary “did”:

2a. *The thieves had stolen his wallet.*

2b. *Had the thieves stolen his wallet?*

This is another simple sentence but with an overt auxiliary in the verb phrase. Inverting verb and subject reveals the two major elements of English sentences: subject and predicate.

Sentence three has two main verbs, so the transformation requires that both verbs be changed to the base form. We also see the noun phrase “one of them” revealed as the subject:

3a. *One of them shoved Cagatay and apologized.*

3b. *Did one of them shove Cagatay and apologize?*

Students will ask if they can change sentence four into two yes/no questions, which of course they can. This is a compound sentence composed of two independent clauses:

4a. *Sinem gave them directions to find the knife, and one of them tried to reach into Sinem’s purse from behind.*

4b1. *Did Sinem give them directions to find the knife?*

4b2. *Did one of them try to reach into Sinem’s purse from behind?*

A final example in sentence five illustrates a third sentence pattern:

5a. *As they waited, they looked nervous and jumpy.*

5b. *Did they look nervous and jumpy as they waited?*

Beginning with a subordinate clause, this sentence requires moving the subordinate clause before the yes/no question is discovered. The dependent clause emerges. Students write and re-write their questions, read them out loud to each other, and hear how they sound. Trial and error, intuition, and asking questions are keys to completing the exercise. Writing sentences as yes/no questions reveals patterns students know implicitly but are not conscious of. Students identify subjects, verbs, tense, and the presence of structures outside the independent clause, all prime elements of English sentences. At this point, students are asking questions about sentence structure elicited from a text and

showing their understanding of grammatical concepts. Students use their prior knowledge of English to develop greater explicit knowledge.

X-Word grammar privileges the regularity of word order which English relies on to establish grammatical relationships. After students discover the prime elements of English sentences by making yes/no questions, the next lessons highlight the regular subject, verb, object word order of English. In a very different text (Appendix III), I present sentences of a story individually with the sentence elements – clauses and phrases – scrambled. Students, in groups or pairs, reconstitute the sentences by reordering the elements into correct English sentences. To represent the dominant pattern of English word order, students also rewrite the sentences into a grid divided into the basic sentence sectors – subject, verb, object/complement, and adverbial. Such a graphic illustration shows the rigid pattern of subject and verb and the variations around this base.

As students present their responses to this exercise, I define a hierarchy of features that determine sentence patterns. First, the subject and verb and object (or other structure) must be in the correct position. Second, in a compound sentence, like sentence three (Appendix III), the verbs and objects must match to make sense. This story includes many adverbials of time and place that create the setting and advance the story, “late one afternoon, last summer, at the bank.” In strict grammatical terms these structures go before or after an independent clause. But usage, text cohesion, and style also come into play. We discuss the kinds of choices native English writers prefer and choices that enhance cohesion. Beginning sentence three with “at the bank,” rather than placing “at the bank” in the middle of the sentence, moves the story along more effectively. This grammar lesson, based on student efforts to recreate a text, evolves into a discussion of many issues of concern to writers.

These lessons are the foundation for inquiry-based grammar instruction. This foundation enables students to go on to discover seven basic sentence patterns, characteristics

of verb tense choice, and sentence combining. Inquiry-based grammar instruction leads students to move beyond rule memorization to discover patterns and discuss grammar in context. Advancing past word-for-word analysis to observe groups of words functioning in larger contexts, students progress from focusing on

errors to developing complete, clear writing. Ultimately, using inquiry-based methods, learners will approach grammar as a framework for meaning not found in grammar guides, but in every sentence written and uttered, making all interactions a source for learning.

APPENDIX I

Pickpocket in the Store

One day my friend Gagatay and his girlfriend Sinem went to Macy's in Manhattan to buy some clothes and a kitchen knife. They got Sinem's clothes and went to get a knife. They found a good cheap knife and brought it to the cashier. Gagatay and Sinem got in line with five other people. Two women got in line after them. One of them shoved Gagatay and apologized. As they waited, they looked nervous and jumpy. One of them said to Sinem, "That's a nice knife. Where did you find it?" He thought a second and started to tell them. Gagatay wondered why they didn't have anything to buy while they were in line. Sinem gave them directions to find the knife, and one of them tried to reach into Sinem's purse from behind. Gagatay saw and shouted, so they ran away. Everyone watched what happened. Gagatay wanted to run after them, but Sinem held him because she didn't want any problems. They turned around to pay for the knife. Gagatay had some advice for Sinem about pickpockets who robbed people standing in line. When they were ready to pay for the items Gagatay got a shock. Gagatay looked at Sinem; Sinem looked at Gagatay. The thieves had stolen his wallet. They laughed and Sinem paid for the knife.

APPENDIX II

Parts of Speech

Words are grouped into different classes. Each class has its own role. Find words from the story above and place them in the correct column.

Open classes

Noun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb

Closed classes

Preposition	Conjunction	Determiner	Auxiliary verb

APPENDIX III

The Mugging Scramble Example

Instructions: Organize the groups of words below into correct English sentences and rewrite on a separate sheet of paper.

1. live/, which is a dangerous city/ in Mexico City/ we
2. walked/ late one afternoon/ last summer/ to the bank/ my father/ about two blocks from my home
3. he/ put/ at the bank/ cashed/ the money/ a check for \$350/ in his left pocket/ and

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