

The grammar used in the English language

Predicting

Familiarity with a language helps a person predict what word or words will be coming next in a text – spoken or written. Being able to guess a word or to predict a word or words is an important skill, necessary for reading. Fluency results from predicting what will come next, based on a knowledge of the language patterns in that language.

Word order

For people who have English as their first language, it seems easy to say or write words in the correct order. For those who are learning English as a second language, it is much more difficult. Usually people from language backgrounds other than English transfer some of the language patterns from their first language to English.

Word order varies from language to language. In Italian the adjective comes after the noun (*table wooden* rather than as it is in English, *wooden table*).

What is important is that, in English, word order matters a lot. Word order helps us understand the meaning of the sentence. If the word order is incorrect, misunderstandings can occur. *The dog bit the boy* has quite a different meaning to *The boy bit the dog*.

Teaching grammar (if you think the student needs grammar)

Clauses and phrases

A group of words is called a **clause** if it has a verb in it, as in *The moon rose above the mountain*. If a group of words does not have a verb it is a **phrase**, for example *under the stars*.

Parts of speech

These include nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, pronouns, conjunctions and more. Teach the students some parts of speech (grammar) so that they have a language to use to talk about language.

1. Nouns and adjectives

Teach them to recognise nouns, both proper nouns (the nouns with capital letters because they are the name of a person or a place) and common nouns such as *dog*. When teaching nouns you can also teach adjectives because adjectives describe nouns. You cannot have an adjective alone. For example, *The woman drove the slow car along the dirt road*.

Teach them that the adjective comes before the noun in English. If possible, talk about the order of noun and adjective in other languages they know of.

2. Verbs and adverbs

Teach students that every sentence needs a verb, and that a verb is a doing word or an action. It can also be a form of the verb ‘to be’: *is, was, are, were, am*.

At the same time, students can be taught that adverbs describe a verb. They tell us what colour, what time, how. For example, *The snake moved slowly across the yard*. The verb is *moved* and the adverb is *slowly*. It tells us how it moved.

Reference items and cohesive devices

Other parts of speech that are useful to teach are pronouns and joining words (conjunctions).

3. Pronouns

Not every language differentiates between male and female when it comes to pronouns, so it is necessary to teach students to use pronouns correctly. These include: *he, she, it, they, we, you* (both singular and plural). They also include *me, I, us, them*.

To explain pronouns teachers need to help students understand that they refer back to someone or more than one who has already been mentioned in the text. In the first sentence we might read that *Jessica has drawn a picture of a butterfly* but in following sentences, or even later in the same sentence, we can use the word *she* instead. It get boring to say *Jessica did this* and *Jessica did that* all the time.

One useful strategy is to give students a piece of text and tell them to underline any pronouns they find. Then they can draw or rule a line from each pronoun back to the noun they refer to. Sometimes the noun will be a long way back in the text. This is a reliable ESL strategy and is known as ‘reference items’ to some people.

4. Conjunctions

Conjunctions join two ideas, or two clauses, each having at least one verb. They include *because, as, when, and, but*. For example:

*The men went to the store **because** they had been given their pay.*

One way to teach students how to use these joining words is to give them two sentences or two clauses and ask them what word can be put in between to join them—to be a bridge. Teachers can write the joining words on cards so that the students can physically insert them between the two pieces of text.

5. A couple of other activities to try

Funny sentences

Use cardboard strips and play games where the order of the phrases and words are mixed up. Try to make funny sentences and demonstrate what they mean. For example, *The boy bit the dog* could be acted out as well as *The dog bit the boy*. The children could illustrate these two sentences. Also try placing the verb (in this case it's the word *bit*) in different places.

Silly sentences

Cut up a sentence that is written in large print on card. Give each child a different word and ask them to stand in a line, making sure the words are in an incorrect order. Read it aloud together and laugh at how silly it sounds. Then ask them to sort themselves out so that the sentence makes sense. Write it correctly on the board and then talk about the different words, explaining what their purpose is. These purposes will be linked to whatever parts of speech they are. See below.

Secondary students

The academic language of text books

Texts books used in secondary schools are often difficult because they use words that are not used in everyday life. Often the information is totally separate from what is familiar to the student. Try to find pictures or objects to illustrate the words, or find another way to show the meaning in real terms.

Read a passage from the text book to the student and then get him to tell you in his own words what it was about.

Then help the student write the key words and use these to write sentences. 'Movable maps' is a useful approach.

Movable maps

This is a strategy that is useful for older students who are writing a report or some other type of non-narrative writing that involves research. It can be used in many subjects.

1. Gain some knowledge of a topic: maybe watch a video or go on an excursion.
2. Brainstorm to record ideas at random. Write each idea on a Post-it slip.
3. Move these ideas around so as to arrange them in some sort of logical order. Draw attention to any duplications and any gaps that need to be filled. The arrangement will be the basis of sub-topics and/or paragraphs in the final report.

4. Look for supporting evidence in library books, newspaper articles or on the internet. Then make a note of what has been found on the relevant Post-it slip, including the page number so that it will be easy to find it at a later date. Tell the students they won't have room on the Post-it slips to write many words so they just write enough information to help them find that useful resource later.
5. If there are any gaps in the information, research this and record where the information can be found on blank Post it slips, inserting these into the arrangement described above in point 3.
6. Using the resources found in step 4, write the report using paragraphs and subheadings. Show the students how to write using their own words (paraphrasing) rather than just copying what they find. This is quite difficult. Tutors who give students a lot of practice in paraphrasing are doing them a big favour.

Maths

When helping a student with maths homework, the main task is to help them *understand the question*.

Help them find the words to tell you what they know or understand, and then help them find the words to explain what they need to find out. Only then should you take them go through the steps needed to reach the answer.

It is often the words used during maths that confuse a student.

Use objects to demonstrate words such as *beneath, above, around, in between, on top of, under*.

Use objects to demonstrate adding and subtracting (taking away).

Make sure they understand any symbols used.

© Rosemary McKenry 2016