

Teaching grammar as lexis

Grammar has traditionally been what made English an academic, school subject. As teachers, we have all invested lots of time and effort in learning the grammatical 'rules' of the language and we probably all feel it's part of our job to pass on this information. However, we have all probably also had the kind of bright students who spot examples of these 'rules' being broken:

"Remember you told us that stative verbs like see, want and feel aren't used in the continuous form," they suddenly ask us - in front of the whole class! "Yes," we answer uncomfortably. "Well," they continue, "you just said 'I'm not feeling very well today.' That's the present continuous!" Sensing our authority slipping away from us, we play our best card and explain: "Ah yes. Well, that's an exception!"

From a learner's point of view, however, how are they supposed to take the 'rule' about not using stative verbs in the continuous form and then work out when a verb is and when it isn't stative, thus working out when the exceptions apply? It's asking a lot of our students!

One major problem with rule-based teaching is that what we consider as 'rules' are rarely more than generalisations. This isn't to say that generalisations about the language aren't useful. It's just that we need to be careful about how we report them to students. It's much better to tell students:

"Well, we generally use that structure like this" or "It's not usually used like that" than to give a hard and fast rule.

A more serious problem with rules is what we expect students to do with them. Simply showing students the various forms of the present perfect simple and continuous and explaining the 'rules' governing their usage is not really going to help them say:

I've been meaning to see that for ages but I just haven't got round to it yet or even So what've you been up to since the last time we met?

If we want students to be able to come up with sentences like this, we need to think much more about teaching grammar as lexis. By this, I mean, giving the whole language to the students - the grammar and the lexis - and not separating language out into structures and words.

We are being too optimistic if we think students can take rules and then generate any of the thousands of common ways in which structures may be lexicalised! If you think about it, the basic forms and meanings are quite simple in comparison to this. A further complication is what we can do in class - or what students can do at home - with rules. When we write on the board:

The present perfect = have / has + past participle

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and tell students we use the present perfect to talk about experience in the unspecified past that has a present connection, how do they then revise this? How can we recycle this?

In fact, whilst generalisations about grammar may well be useful, good examples of how the structures are generally used are far more useful. Being able to see several examples of grammar structures as they are naturally used makes both form and meaning clear. Indeed, it is this that students find most reassuring. One way you could do this is to encourage your students to organise examples of grammar structures they meet in class in their notebooks. After a few classes, their notes might end up looking a bit like this:

Present perfect

Have you been there?

Have you been to see the new Pixar film?

Have you ever been to the States?

Have you ever seen that film, *21 Grams*?

Have you finished?

Have you had enough food?

Have you talked to him about it?

Has she said anything to you about the meeting?

Has *Michael* spoken to you recently?

Where have you been?

What have you been doing?

How long have you been doing that?

How long have you been studying English?

How long have you been here?

How long have you known each other?

Where have they gone?

Where's he gone?

What's happened?

I haven't done it yet.

They haven't decided yet.

I haven't seen him recently.

We haven't been out for ages.

He hasn't finished yet.

She hasn't ever done it before.

I've never met him.

I've never heard of it.

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I've never been there.

I've never really wanted to do something like that.

You've never eaten snake!

These sentences still make the form and the meaning of the present perfect clear, but they do so in a lexicalised way. The sentences above can be gapped and students can be tested on how many of the missing words they remember. Alternatively, the sentences can be translated and students can be tested on how accurately they translate from their own L1 back into English.

One final point to bear in mind is the fact that the past and present simple make up over 80 per cent of all verb tense usage in both spoken and written English. This must mean that they start taking up a much larger proportion of our classroom time than they previously have done. Conversely, we should start spending LESS time worrying about relatively insignificant items of grammar such as dramatic inversion, the future continuous, the past perfect continuous and so on. However, in purely grammatical terms, what is there to say about the present and past simple? They are, as their names suggest, either in the present or in the past and both are pretty simple, apart from the odd irregularity like the third person *-s* or irregular past tenses. Whilst the grammar of these tenses can easily be gone over in a lesson or two, far more problematic for learners is the fact that many of the most frequent verbs in the language are low semantic content words with a vast number of common collocates. Knowing that *get* and *take* have irregular past forms will most definitely not help learners produce items such as:

I got bored / I got fed up with it / We got a quick bite to eat / I got home quite late last night / I took the dog out for a walk earlier / You took advantage / I took it as a compliment.

To assist students in their learning, we've got to start focusing more on grammar as part-and-parcel of such lexical bundles and move away from simple form manipulation into fully grammaticalised lexicon building.

The exercises in *Innovations*, whilst still drawing attention to form and function, are rooted in these kinds of ideas. We believe that good teaching means drawing attention to both the form and the meaning of new language all the time. This means, of course, that when we're going through the answers to grammar exercises, we can concept check the grammar, whilst at the same time also point out and explain lexis that crops up. For instance, the following sentence might be gapped and the verb *hear* is given at the top of the exercise, along with other verbs:

1. I've never of him.

As you elicit the answer, you can drill the sentence, highlighting the way *heard of* elides together and the weak form of *of*; you can also maybe add the question that prompts this answer - or ask the class for a possible question (Do you know a singer called Devendra Banhart? Do you know Aldo Higashi, the boxer? etc.). You could also point out that we say *I've never heard of somebody* - NOT *I've never heard about somebody*. You could also ask what tense the sentence is - the

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present perfect - and explain that we use this to talk about things from the past to now, so *I've never heard of him* - from the past to now. This slowly helps to nail down the basic concepts underlying the grammar. This kind of feedback helps students see the ways in which grammar and lexis interact. It gives them easy access to the ways in which they are most typically going to hear the grammar used - and want to use it themselves.

Hugh Dellar – September 2006