

Teaching Grammar to Young Learners

BY SHELAGH RIXON, Macmillan Publishers

Every learner, young or old, needs a clear way of organizing the new language he or she encounters, and fitting it into what he or she already knows.

The young learners I have in mind are from about 6 to 11 years old.

By grammar, I mean ways of drawing attention to and talking ABOUT the language your pupils are learning, and ways of helping them organize it in their own minds.

I think that this definition--and I will give some examples of what I mean later on--will be liberating to many teachers who are concerned about being systematic and who feel that they want to do a little more than just presenting language in context and letting the pupils absorb it through experience.

When I say "ways of talking about language" I mean of drawing attention to the facts of language use, but without resorting to too much grammar terminology (the terms for English grammar are practically a new language in themselves, and perhaps at this stage we should concentrate on just teaching plain English!) and without going back to the old DEDUCTIVE ways of teaching: "Teach the rule and then make them apply it." This rarely works well even with most adults, and it is certainly not appropriate for children who have not yet reached the stage of abstract thought. INDUCTIVE methods--"Show them some clear examples and let them try to work out what's going on"--are more appropriate. But even then, I feel teachers need to be selective. Pupils do not have to learn everything about how the English language works at this stage, but there are some problem areas that are important enough to focus on openly. So, for example, it is useful for some of the family of verbs in English which form the interrogative by inversion and the negative by inserting "not", to occupy a large block of time somewhere near the beginning of a course. There is a lot you can do

to express meaning with *is*, *can* and *have* (possessive, but without the complication of adding *got* at this stage), e.g. "I'm Angela." and "This is...." in social language or "There's an ice-cream in the fridge." could be an offer.

I think the way in which the very young organize language is by associating it with the SITUATIONS in which they have met and used it. That, of course, is no good if your situations are not very memorable. For this reason a course in which there are some strong characters and/or a memorable or funny storyline does provide a useful set of "memory hooks" for them, e.g., "What did Peter the mouse say when he met the cat?" as a clue in the native language or just showing the picture in which this dreadful moment is illustrated, will often help them recall the language item. You can then show them that, for example, "Oh, no! What can I do now?", could be used in a new situation, such as when someone in the class has just nearly spilled paint into his school bag. The same technique can be used with things that have happened *outside* the book in class. Recalling a favorite game will often serve to recall the language that's used in it.

For the very young, I still feel that the approach of Direct Contact, and lots of practice in clear contexts in the use of a few structures is the most suited to their stage of development. They do not want, and cannot cope with "abstract" explanations. For these learners, I think part of the art of the teacher, or of the course writer, lies in careful "behind-the-scenes" organization of the language you present to them, which the youngsters probably will not even notice. This means making sure that the language items they meet come in families in a step-by-step progression. There is still the question of how far and to what extent you "draw the attention" of the very young to details of how the language "works." Not making these "nuts and bolts" of English clear at an early stage can only store up trouble for later. Colored word-cards which can be physically moved around to change the order of words in a sentence to make it a question, or a nice red "NOT" card to drop in can make the point about questions and negatives in the "be" family of verbs alone, and it is memorable because the pupils have actually moved them themselves. If you have sequenced your nouns carefully, starting with the ones which form the plural by just taking an "-s" plural and only later moving on to ones adding "-es", and much later the rest, you can easily make use of your "Floating Cards", which can be stuck on the board or moved around the table. Of

course you also need pictures of the objects represented by the noun or the real objects themselves.

Clearing up the awkward *his/her* problem is also worth trying. As you know, in English the possessive adjective agrees with the gender of the person possessing the thing, not with the thing itself. This is so unfamiliar for speakers of many languages, that I feel it must be pointed out. Pupils will not notice, understand or even BELIEVE that "our" language is central, and the difficulties I had, even at the age of ten, in believing this fact about possessive adjectives when I moved the other way from English to languages like French and Latin. The way I try to make this clear to pupils is not by using words like "possessive adjectives" but by drawing or finding two pictures of similar scenes with identical objects in them that a boy or girl might possess. The pictures are different only on that in A there is a girl and in B there is a boy. So, "This is Mark. This is his book, his radio, etc." and "This is Angela. This is her book, her radio, etc." and then presenting it as a sort of puzzle, conducted in the native language. "What's the difference? Why *his* and why *her*? Even if the pupils do not arrive at the right answer by themselves--and the fact that the pictures are identical is a heavy clue--the effort of thinking about the question at least will impress on them that there is something significant going on here. Of course, you should make sure that the right answer is given at some point. Don't leave them in doubt or confused. If they had a good struggle over it or even a quick triumphant solution to the puzzle, they will remember the lesson and what went on in it, and you need only refer back to it if in the future they make slips with *his* or *her*: "Remember the Mark/Angela problem? What did we decide?"

What do you think of SUBSTITUTION TABLES? These are often frowned on these days because of the bad associations they have with the old Audiolingual methods of teaching, and many teachers would say they are not suitable for use with children. Yet they are a great way of helping learners see how similar sentences "fit together" and how their elements can be recombined to make new correct sentences. When used to help learners to express real specific meaning in a clear communicative context, help both less-gifted and quick pupils feel that they can cope with the forms of the language and make good sentences of their own. I have had some success with them with 9- and 10-year olds, but only under very limited conditions. That is, the sentences that can be made MUST be interesting,

dramatic or funny, and they MUST refer to a picture (funny again if possible) so that there is the need to make only true sentences about the picture. Then the pupils can have fun seeing how many amusing sentences they can make.

Here is an example. The pupils are practicing descriptive phrases using *with* e.g., "The girl with the green eyes." I put this into the context of them inventing outrageous titles for a horror film, such as:

The monster		green	blood
spider		hairy	legs
dinosaur		terrible	horns
alien	with the	awful	teeth
		radioactive	tongue
(add your		smelly	eyes
own ideas)		enormous	socks

They like this, though I know they would not like a substitution table practicing the same structure but with more boring subject matter. Of course all the sentences are silly, (that's the point!), but some of them are not very sensible, either, so students can argue over whether you can really say "radioactive legs" (why not, after all?) or "hairy teeth" (well, it is a monster). Then, of course they can draw a film poster to illustrate their inventions.

The above suggestions have been eclectic but what I think holds them together is the idea that for pupils, what holds a course together in their minds is NOT the language syllabus (that's our job) but the events in class and in their books, if they have one. These are the hooks on which to hang your language work.