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978-0-521-73232-1 - Grammar Practice Activities, Second Edition: A Practical Guide for Teachers

Penny Ur

Excerpt

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## Introduction

I decided to write the first edition of this book because I needed it; and as soon as I began to discuss the idea with other teachers, it became clear that many of them felt the same need as I did, and for similar reasons. We all felt that grammar practice was essentially a useful thing to do, but we were dissatisfied with the kinds of exercises we found in our textbooks: mainly conventional form-focused gapfills, sentence completions and matching.

‘What we need,’ a group of teachers told me, ‘is a book that will gather together the most useful of the game-like or communicative grammar-practice procedures that are in the books we know, plus any more you can think of or find, laid out systematically so that we can look up, say, ‘Present perfect’ on Monday morning and find a few good ideas to choose from.’

So that was what I did.

The response was warm and gratifying: the book became one of the best-selling titles in the Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers series, and is still selling well today. It is without doubt my own favourite of the books I have written.

This second edition differs from the first in the following ways:

- *Part 1* (general guidelines) is rather shorter and *Part 2* (the activities themselves) longer.
- A number of activities have been added and a few of the less successful ones in the original edition deleted.
- Subject matter has been updated, as have the illustrations.
- Brief headings have been added to the beginning of each activity to indicate its main teaching point, the age and level for which it is intended, and any necessary materials or preparations.
- Useful tips on language or teaching strategies have been added.
- A CD-ROM accompanies the book, providing PDFs of all the photocopiable material in colour from the book and the artwork.

The symbol © indicates that the material which follows it can be found on the CD-ROM.

*Part 1* of the book is divided into three sections, corresponding to the three words in the title of the book. *Grammar* provides a brief general introduction to the teaching of grammar; *Practice* explains the basic

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principles of effective practice in language teaching in general and grammar teaching in particular; *Activities* lists the main features of the activities in this book, and some practical hints to help you (the teacher) do them successfully in class.

*Part 2* consists of the grammar-practice activities themselves, designed according to the principles outlined in *Part 1*. The activities are grouped into sections according to grammatical category, and these are ordered alphabetically; so you should be able to find any section you want simply by leafing through the book. If, however, you use different terminology from mine, you will probably find your term in the index at the end of the book. Names of specific activities (Questionnaires, Association dominoes, etc.) are also included in the index, in bold print. Where activities are mentioned elsewhere in the text, they are referred to by their section number and name, not by page number (7.1.3 *Questionnaires*, 11.3.1 *Association dominoes*, etc.).

# PART 1 Background theory and guidelines

## 1 Grammar

### What is grammar?

Grammar may be roughly defined as the way a language manipulates and combines words (or bits of words) so as to express certain kinds of meaning, some of which cannot be conveyed adequately by vocabulary alone. These include the way ideas are grouped and related, and the purposes of utterances (statement, question, request, etc.). Grammar may also serve to express time relations, singular/plural distinctions and many other aspects of meaning. There are rules which govern how words have to be manipulated and organized so as to express these meanings: a competent speaker of the language will be able to apply these rules so as to convey his or her chosen meanings effectively and acceptably.

### The grammar practised in this book

The grammar on which this book is based is that which is described in most modern grammar books (see *References and further reading*), p. 317 and which is likely to be known and accepted by most readers. As far as possible, I have tried to avoid language features which are specifically associated with one English variety (British, American, Australian, Indian, etc.), but rather use those forms which are likely to be used internationally by both native and non-native speakers.

Nobody (including native speakers) always uses perfectly correct grammar: the teaching aim of this book is, therefore, not to achieve perfection, but to assist learners to master the most important grammatical usages that will enable them to convey meanings effectively and acceptably. From the point of view of sheer length, moreover, it has not been possible to provide a comprehensive coverage of English grammatical structures; the

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activities focus only on the main items needed for written and spoken communication, and I apologize in advance if you find some points missing that you would have liked to have been included.

**The place of grammar in language teaching**

There is no doubt that some kind of implicit knowledge of grammar is necessary for the mastery of a language at anything beyond a very basic level: you cannot use words effectively unless you know how they should be put together in acceptable sentence or phrase structures. This does not necessarily mean that you have to be able to articulate the rules: native speakers of any language express themselves in their own language (L1) correctly, but can rarely explain what the rules are that govern such expression.

But people learning the grammar of an additional language through a formal course of study probably do not do so the same way as they learnt their first language. There has been some discussion in recent years of how such learning can be most effectively brought about. Some questions discussed in the literature have been:

- Can grammar be acquired only through exposure to plenty of comprehensible input (listening/reading)? Can it be learnt only through communicative activities involving all four skills (listening/reading/writing/speaking)?
- Should grammar be taught only ‘reactively’ (in response to errors or learner uncertainty), or should it be taught ‘proactively’, based on a grammatical syllabus?
- Do learners need to learn grammar rules explicitly – that is, understand and be able to explain why certain forms are correct and others not?
- Are focused grammar practice exercises necessary?

This is not the place to explore in depth the pros and cons of possible answers to these different questions. The approach which forms the basis for this book, based on my interpretation of the research literature and professional experience, is summarized by the bulleted points below. Note, however, that these points are generalizations which may not hold true for all learners in all learning situations: like many practical principles in education they are useful as bases for planning our teaching as long as we remember that there may be exceptions.

I believe, then, that in most situations ...

- ... it is helpful to teach grammar systematically, based on a grammatical syllabus;

*Grammar*

- ... it is helpful to have an explicit rule available for a grammar point being learnt, provided this is simple enough to be grasped by the learner;
- ... learners will benefit from focused practice applying this rule in grammar exercises and activities<sup>1</sup>;
- ... ‘mechanical’ exercises such as gap fill and sentence completion are useful in learning grammar;
- ... more important, however, are activities which provide opportunities for learners to create or understand meanings using the target grammar point;
- ... learning of grammar is enhanced further by occasional ‘reactive’ teaching of grammatical forms during communicative activities (correction of mistakes, for example, or ‘noticing’ by teacher or learner of an interesting form used in a text or activity).

Grammar may furnish the basis for a set of classroom procedures during which it becomes temporarily the main learning objective. But the key word here is ‘temporarily’. The learning of grammar should be seen in the long term as one of the **means** of acquiring a thorough mastery of the language as a whole, not as an end in itself. Thus, although there may be times at which we ask our students to learn a certain structure through exercises that concentrate on virtually meaningless manipulations of language, we should in principle invest more time and energy in activities that use it meaningfully, culminating in generally communicative tasks where the emphasis is on successful communication, and any learning of grammar takes place only as incidental to this main objective.

Note that although I have for convenience presented this model of grammar teaching as if it were a chronological sequence (first learning the rule, then mechanical practice, then meaningful practice, then communication) – it doesn’t necessarily work like that in the classroom. We may well, for example, discover in the course of a communicative activity that some learners have a problem with a specific grammatical point, and at that point decide to take some time out to practise it. Or we may do some grammatical activities and elicit the rule as a result rather than as a preliminary. There are lots of ways of sequencing, though perhaps the traditional sequence implied above is still the most common.

The bottom line here is that I strongly believe in the value of practice as a component of grammar teaching in the teaching of English as an international language in formal courses of study.

<sup>1</sup> The distinction between ‘exercise’ and ‘activity’ is dealt with in *Activities*, p. 11.

## 2 Practice

*Practice* may be defined as any kind of engagement with the language on the part of the learner, usually under teacher supervision, whose primary objective is to consolidate learning. During practice the material is absorbed into long-term memory and the learner enabled to understand and produce it with gradually lessening teacher support. A practice procedure may involve reception (exposure to comprehensible spoken or written input) or production (speaking or writing).

Although it is over-optimistic to claim that ‘practice makes perfect’, effective practice is likely to make a substantial contribution towards mastery of grammatical forms.

But what makes practice effective? There is, of course, no one generalization that will answer this question, but some of the key features that contribute to successful practice are the following.

### Validity

By *validity* I mean that the procedure should in fact practise what it says it practises, and not something else. Supposing our aim is to practise the present perfect, and an item runs as follows:

Two years ago we left the country and came to live in the city. We are still living in the city today. So we \_\_\_\_\_ in the city for two years.

Either *have lived* or *have been living* would be acceptable here: but the point is that in order to fill in the missing verb, the learner has to read and understand two lines of text, with another two verb forms in them, and the time and thought which are actually invested in the target item itself is relatively small. The validity, therefore, of the practice provided by such exercise items is low. For examples of more valid practice procedures focusing on the same teaching point, see 14.3.2 *What has happened?* and 14.3.3 *Oh!*, where pictures or one-word cues give rise to a large number of responses using the target structure.

You may say: why does this matter? Surely reading and understanding the surrounding text is also useful? Yes: but the point is that if a lot of time is spent on reading and understanding surrounding text – or on puzzling out problems, or translating, or discussing, or any other activity that does not

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directly practise the target item – then the *quantity* of target-item practice is correspondingly low.

## **Quantity**

The aim of a practice activity is to provide opportunities to engage with the target structure: if the number of times the learner does in fact have such opportunities is small, then the practice is correspondingly less effective in achieving its main aim.

Even if it is valid, a brief activity that provides very little such quantity of practice will not give learners much opportunity to consolidate their learning. The function of such low-quantity exercises is likely to be mainly in providing the teacher with information about how well the learners have mastered the target item, but not in actually consolidating learning. In other words, the procedure will probably function as an informal test rather than as practice.

## **Success-orientation**

Another important feature of effective practice is that learners' responses should be right, rather than that they should be wrong and needing to be corrected. So the activity should be designed to elicit acceptable and successful responses.

This is not to say that there is no place for mistakes and error correction. But using correct grammar in speech is like any other skill: it involves the swift and effortless production of acceptable and appropriate performance that can be achieved only if the skill has been 'automatized' to such an extent that the learner can perform it without thinking. Such 'automatization' is achieved largely through practice. Thus practice essentially means performing the target behaviour (in this case, using the grammatical feature) successfully again and again: at first, with some thought and application of conscious memorized instructions, but later more and more swiftly and smoothly until the original instruction or rule, as a conscious articulated statement, may even be forgotten. Doing something wrong and being corrected will help raise awareness of what is correct; but it will not help automatization of the skill. Or to put it another way: correcting a learner 50 times may help him or her become more aware of a problem, but it will not improve actual performance. It is only when the learner starts getting it right on his or her own, and does so repeatedly, that he or she is on the way to real mastery.

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Teachers may provide for success-orientation by various means:

- by designing or selecting the activity so that it is reasonably easy: it elicits responses that you know the learners can deal with successfully;
- by providing for pre-learning: review the target grammar point before doing the activity, so that the material is fresh in learners' memories;
- by helping the learners get it right as they are doing it: simply give extra wait-time before requiring responses, for example, or give a hint or some sort of supportive 'scaffolding'.

Besides immediate effectiveness in consolidating learning, the principle of success-orientation has significant general pedagogical implications. A student whose performance is consistently successful will develop a positive self-image as a language learner, whereas one who frequently fails may be discouraged and demotivated. It should also be noted that tension and anxiety are fairly high if learners feel there is a possibility of 'failure' (that is, if they are in a sense being tested), and are correspondingly lowered if they are confident of success. Thus, success-orientation contributes significantly to a positive classroom climate of relaxation, confidence and motivation.

On the other hand, the fact that there is no risk of failure in producing acceptable language lessens the challenge of the activity for some participants, so we have to find other ways of making it interesting (see *Interest*, pp. 9–10).

**Heterogeneity**

A *heterogeneous* exercise, as I am using the term here, is one which may be done at various different levels. Because all classes are more or less heterogeneous, a *homogeneous* exercise cannot possibly provide effective practice for all the students: it will be too difficult for the weaker ones, and/or lacking in quantity and challenge for the stronger. It is, however, possible – and desirable – to design practice tasks that can be interpreted and performed at different levels, so that some students will be able to do more than others in terms of both quality and quantity.

An example of a homogeneous exercise is one based on multiple-choice questions; for example:

- 1) Jenny is a baby, so she \_\_\_\_\_ go to school.
- |           |          |
|-----------|----------|
| a doesn't | c don't  |
| b isn't   | d aren't |



*Practice*

Such an item can only be done by students above a certain level of proficiency: a learner who has not mastered the rules about when you use *do* or *is* with negative verbs in the present will probably get it wrong, or may not even do it at all. On the other hand, a learner who is well on the way to mastering the rule and can use it to create all sorts of meaningful statements has no opportunity to do so, but is limited to the rather boring sentence provided and cannot practise at a level appropriate to him/her.

But supposing we say:

- 2) Jenny is a baby, so she doesn't go to school. What else doesn't she do?

... we have thus not only provided for pre-learning and success-orientation by supplying a model of the kind of sentence we are looking for, we are also opening possibilities for the learners to respond with sentences at all sorts of levels. One might say at a simple level: 'Jenny doesn't read books', while another might use more advanced language: 'Jenny doesn't use a credit card'.

To put it another way: heterogeneous items like 2) above are typically *open-ended*: they are intended to elicit a wide range of different, equally acceptable, responses. *Closed-ended* ones, on the other hand, like 1) above, which have only one right answer, are inherently homogeneous: they provide appropriate practice for only a limited number of the members of the class.

The use of heterogeneous, open-ended exercises, incidentally, not only ensures that a higher proportion of the class get learning value out of the practice; it also, like success-orientation, has a positive effect on learner attitude and motivation. Responses at many different levels can be 'right', hence these exercises provide an opportunity for the teacher to give slower or less confident students the approval and encouragement they need. They are also likely to be more interesting.

## Interest

An otherwise well-designed practice procedure may fail to produce successful learning simply because it is boring: interest is an essential feature of successful practice, not just an optional improvement. Learners who are bored find it difficult to concentrate, their attention wanders, and they may spend much of the lesson time thinking of things other than the learning task in hand; even if they are apparently engaged with the exercise, the quality of the effort and attention given to learning drops appreciably. Moreover, because boredom, particularly in younger classes, often produces unruly behaviour, more valuable learning time may be wasted on coping with

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discipline problems. If, however, the class is interested in what it is doing, its members will not only learn more efficiently, they are also likely to enjoy the process and to want to continue.

For some practical ideas on increasing the interest of classroom activities, see pp. 13–19 in the next chapter.

## Summary

Effective practice procedures, then, are usually characterized by the features of *validity*, *quantity*, *success-orientation*, *heterogeneity* and *interest*. Any one particular exercise may of course display one or more of these features to a lesser degree and still be effective in gaining specific objectives: but if too many of them are absent, the activity may provide very little learning value.

Let us take, for example, an exercise which consists of five sentences with either *have* or *has* missing, and which requires individual students to fill in the missing item.

There is in such an exercise relatively little quantity of practice and no particular success-orientation; the exercise is homogeneous and lacking in interest. You may, by doing such an exercise with a class, find out which of its members know the difference between *have* and *has* (hence it might function quite well as an assessment procedure), but you will have done little to help those whose knowledge is still a little shaky and who simply need practice. In contrast, you might first tell the students about some interesting or unusual possessions of your own ('I *have* ...'), then invite them to describe some of their own to each other, and finally challenge them to remember what possessions another student *has*. This activity is obviously more interesting and more heterogeneous; it is also likely to be success-oriented and valid, as well as providing for quantity of practice (see 17.1.2 *Possessions*).

Unfortunately, exercises like the gapfill described above are extremely common in the classroom and grammar textbooks – probably because they are easy to design and administer – and teachers and textbook authors are often unaware that they are testing more than teaching.

So far we have looked at topics connected with the place of grammar in language teaching, and how it may, or should, be taught; and we have considered some aspects of grammar practice. It now remains to turn to the third word in the title of this book and see how some of the theoretical ideas dealt with up to now can be applied in the design and presentation of classroom activities.