

Coping with Grammar and Writing

Ana Clara Sánchez, Magda Caicedo & Gabriel Obando

University of Nariño

Grammar and Writing are two issues that immediately remind us of boring classes, memory, and translation. But, is this true? are listening and speaking the only way to carry out active and cooperative classes?

This article intends to change students' and teachers' minds discovering the bright side of these two basic elements of language.

GRAMMAR CAN BE LEARNED

The Audiolingual method, the TPR, and the Natural Approach among other methods were not too willing to praise the use of grammar. For some teachers, it was not "natural" or it simply was not useful in early stages of learning. The student communicating and producing spoken texts was the biggest achievement in an English class. Errors? of course, but they were not important enough to be corrected through a tedious lesson involving structures.

One can say that this is true for most EFL students, but what about those students who in a few years will become teachers? Here, our point of view changes and Grammar appears as a basic element to be taught along the whole professional training.

The main question here seems to be how can we introduce grammar in our daily lessons? There seems to be only two ways to face it: *inductively* or *deductively*.

But, what if we try out a conjunction of these two approaches? We can combine

them and find out that it works. Nowadays we have extensive access to many resources like videos, songs, documentaries, lab rooms and various INTERNET pages. These elements can provide teachers with a wide range of examples of grammar that can be read, answered, practiced and above all, understood.

The valuable thing about these elements is that they give us the opportunity to deal with authentic texts, they motivate students to learn and they are flexible enough to be used in several ways. Teaching grammar is one of those ways.

On the other hand, "direct" tasks like completing sentences, unscrambling words, changing tenses, and a variety of exercises featured in textbooks and workbooks should not be neglected. They can be used at the beginning or at the end of the class as quick evaluations or introductions to the topic. Future teachers must be able to recognize and handle the different structures of English not only as a part of their training, but also to reach an adequate level of communicative performance in the foreign language.

WRITING SHOULD BE FUN

Although there are basic topics that must be taught in a Writing class (punctuation, parts of the essay, run-on sentences, editing, etc) we must take into consideration the fact that writing is an activity that should be oriented to be another way of communication, but with some specific requirements. Since we are

talking about communicating we should have the students write about real, meaningful experiences. It is no use if you try to develop their skill by giving them an unknown topic to develop. They can look it up in books and copy some ideas on that theme; but, is that what you want?

One writes to tell what one knows, and students know a big deal of issues that can be easily brought into the class and make it interesting for them and for you. Again, the INTERNET can be a good space to express their own opinions and develop their skill by, for instance, writing e-mails to their classmates. Imagination is also a powerful tool in writing and teachers can trigger its use asking students to write on their dreams, expectations, plans, or working with hypothetical situations.

Now that topics are slightly defined, it is essential to have your class know about the basic structure of a paragraph or essay, develop controlled writing exercises and finally, invite your students and future teachers to produce their own material based on the additional material you planned.

Again, audiovisual tools can come in handy to develop activities that combine listening, speaking and writing. The first two abilities can be easily practiced with a quick exchange of questions and answers from the teacher to the students or from students to students. These questions clarify, inform and provide students with the needed structures and vocabulary that will be later used to practice writing in the form of a paragraph, a composition, an essay, a letter and so on.

The exercises shown below can help us picture the way writing can become a more

valuable and rewarding activity in the classroom. Let us take video as the central aid in our class. As a follow on activity students can be asked to prepare a role play, search for additional information on the characters on a web page or write a longer composition including their opinion about the tv show.

In brief, one can say that grammar and writing are to be reinvented, and have all kinds of aids to help the imagination flow are always welcome to keep the students' interests and above all learning.

SOME USEFUL WRITING TOPICS

Here are some topics taken from the TOEFL Information Bulletin 1999 - 2000 and they can be developed in a writing class individually or in groups.

- If you could change one important thing about your hometown, what would you change?
- If you could invent something new, what product would you develop?
- Some people enjoy change, and they look forward to new experiences. Others like their lives to stay the same, and they do not change their usual habits. Compare these two approaches to life.
- Effective advertisement sells products. Describe an advertisement and explain why it is effective.
- Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: books are not needed anymore because people can read information on computers. Use specific reasons and details to support your answer.
- How do movies or television influence people's behavior?
- What is one of the most important decisions you have made. Why was this decision important?

- In the future, students may have the choice of studying at home by using technology such as computers or television or studying at traditional schools. Which would you prefer?

- Every generation of people is different in important ways. How is your generation different from your parents' generation?

Using these topics you can indirectly teach specific topics such as: conditionals, superlatives and comparatives, future tenses and adjectives.

USING TELEVISION TO TRIGGER WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Nowadays, with the introduction of cable television and satellite broadcasting our classes can become active and focused. Recording all types of programs can help you aim your writing assignments towards a specific grammatical structure. For example, recording a news broadcast can help you practice 'Wh Questions', Indirect Speech, Past tenses and retelling actual events. After watching the sequence students are asked these questions:

- . Who is it about?
- . What is it about?
- . When did it happen?
- . Where did it happen?
- . Why did it happen?
- . How did it happen?
- . What important statements did the people interviewed claim?
- . What is the opinion of the people asked about a given situation?

Using a music video can also be a very interesting aid. Teachers can use it to teach the song itself but most importantly to have the students describe what they see. Usually music videos are full of attractive and unusual images that need some type of interpretation. Here are some

steps that can be used:

1. Play the video .
2. Ask students to discover the idea that the video generated. Does it tell a story?
3. Have students discuss if the inspiration was appropriate for the song.
4. Ask students to change the video in any way.
5. Teach the lyrics and compare the images to the words.
6. Finally, sing together.

Using a cartoon can also be helpful in the English class. It is highly motivating for all ages and is usually short enough to be developed in a two hour class period.

To carry out this activity students have studied previously the present simple tense and some vocabulary related to professions, descriptions, places, and the family. The video they are about to watch is a cartoon. It is entirely in English and there are no extra aids like close caption. This video tells the story of a boy who is frozen for one thousand years and wakes up in the future. There he finds new interesting things, among them a cyclops and a robot who become his friends.

The activity is aimed to review and reinforce the topics seen before, improve their listening abilities and make students internalize a grammatical structure and a set of vocabulary which will be used to write a composition at the end of the class. Students first are given a worksheet with a short list of useful vocabulary and a series of questions to be answered orally after watching the episode. The students as a full class read the questions and ask for clarification when necessary. Then, the class watches the video once and makes some notes about the events that occur along the episode.

After watching again, students are now able to answer these questions

- . What are the names of the characters?
- . Was the boy happy with his life in 1999? Why?
- . What is his job?
- . What happens to the boy when he delivers a pizza?
- . Who does he meet when he wakes up? What is the date?
- . What happens next?
- . How does the story end?

This type of worksheet can be applied with any grammatical aspect you want to reinforce just by changing the tense of the questions or by adding sentences referring to a specific issue (descriptions, yes/no questions).

General, open questions are useful for almost any kind of TV shows and luckily you will develop a class combining skills, grammar, class participation and the use of fun, interesting tools.

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