

## Awakening Grammar Awareness in Children

Jennifer Seidl addresses the importance of grammar

In this article, Jennifer Seidl addresses the importance of grammar awareness by discussing, for example, current teaching methods and the level at which children learn to conceptualize.

Teaching young learners can be extremely rewarding. A wide range of games and fun activities have long been standard classroom procedure with young learners at primary and early secondary level. We usually make extensive use of visual stimuli, total physical response, songs, chants, rhymes, etc. The material content consists for the most part of basic word fields and standard structures in the form of phrases which enable learners to talk about themselves ask simple questions or make basic statements about their environment. We provide learners with an immediately accessible pool of language, upon which they can draw without a lot of effort.

### Is what we are teaching enough?

All of this is fine; it's fun and it effectively gives learners a sense of pride and achievement in their ability. But is it enough? Does it not leave young learners somewhat unprepared for the serious business of language learning which lies ahead at secondary level? What else then, besides 'lexical chunks', should we be teaching young learners in order to lay a solid foundation upon which they can profitably build?

### Problems at secondary level

At secondary level learners are soon expected to come to terms with the abstract concept of grammar. Metalanguage poses a problem. Grammatical labeling for parts of speech, word classes, tenses, number, case, modality, etc. mostly presents difficulties which have to be overcome. Experience shows that young learners who have no grammar awareness before secondary level meet with problems, because they have not been equipped for the task of dealing with abstract language concepts. On top of these difficulties, writing, spelling and listening skills suddenly become much more important at secondary level. Learners can become frustrated, and English can stop being fun.

### Learning to conceptualize

We should not underestimate children's learning abilities or intelligence. Just because teaching is taken more slowly since learners are *young*, it does not automatically mean that young learners *learn* more slowly or that they do not have the capacity to conceptualize. On the contrary, psychological research on the child's learning process maintains that children are, in fact, mentally equipped to deal with abstract concepts and systems at a much earlier age than secondary level. Surely then, as teachers, we are obliged to acknowledge this fact and meet these learning needs of young learners too. There are, indeed, benefits of introducing grammatical concepts to waken the learners'

awareness of grammar early on. If they have to learn grammar anyway, why not give them an early start with it instead of trying to protect them from it?

In fact, we seem to be very well equipped to deal with grammar at an early age. A three-year-old who says 'I goed', 'I wented' or 'I seed' is forming and applying his/her own 'rule', internalized from previously experienced situations in which he encountered 'I walked' or 'I played'. Parallels to this can be drawn in any language. So why should we not credit young learners with this ability to conceptualize in a *foreign* language?

### **Why should grammar be dull?**

The word 'grammar' has mostly negative connotations for older secondary learners and adults – grammar is dull and difficult. But why should young learners see grammar as something negative? Grammar can be taught in a number of fun ways in order to give it positive associations. It's simply a question of making learners aware of what in fact they are learning, why they are learning it, and making sure that the learning is fun.

### **Ideas for promoting grammar awareness**

How then can we nurture grammar awareness in young learners? It's not a question of changing methods, but simply a question of going that little bit further. For example, when we choose a song or a rhyme, perhaps we should do this with the grammar of the song or rhyme in mind. Once new vocabulary, pronunciation and meaning is clear and fun activities, TPR, etc. have been exhausted, the teacher could take time out to simply talk about the language of the song.

In the L1, ask the class which words they think are important and why, tell them that each kind of word has a label, e.g. 'noun' or 'verb', and that there are lots of other words which they already know with the same label. Ask them first about the nouns in the song. For example, in 'Old MacDonald', which is everybody's favorite, ask them to name all the animals – in the awareness that the words they give are all nouns. Make comparisons in the L1. Then give them a fun activity in order to associate the learning of nouns with something they like doing, e.g. collecting, labeling, and pasting. For a start, give each student an envelope in which to collect examples of concrete nouns that they already know in English.

They can cut out small pictures of things and people from magazines and advertising material. They will easily come up with pictures e.g. for *man, boy, girl, chair, flower, egg*, etc. This activity could slowly be extended to a second envelope for plural nouns – now finding pictures which display two or more of the same thing. Alternatively, they can paste pictures of singular, then plural nouns in a scrapbook, which can later be extended to examples of other concepts e.g. aspect, as in the present progressive. Here they could paste in pictures of people and animals doing things.

### **Hands-on experience is invaluable**

Pictures - and more so reality - are also of great value in conveying the concept of countable and uncountable nouns. For example, display small amounts of salt or sugar before the class. Ask how the substances can be counted. The teacher trying to count single grains of salt or granules of sugar will raise a laugh. Similarly, ask students how they can count water or juice. They will soon come up with the fact that you can only count salt, sugar, water or juice by counting separate quantities in packets, glasses, etc. Ask them what kind of 'containers' they know - bottles, jars, cartons, tubes, bars, bags, etc. Ask them to find and write down articles in the supermarket that can only be counted in containers. Ask them, for example, what you can buy in jars or bottles so that they learn to associate the substance with the way it can best be counted.

Compare these results with countable - an apple, a sandwich, which they can most likely produce from their school bags. Make the point that these things can be counted separately as they represent an item. To consolidate this learning, students could be asked to draw and label pictures of countable and uncountable foodstuffs, or to cut out corresponding pictures and stick them in their scrapbooks to label.

This kind of hands-on experience is not likely to be immediately forgotten, and we are one step further towards helping students to understand the concept of (non-accountability).

### **'Gentle grammar'**

The scope of this article does not allow for more examples, but it has hopefully given a little food for thought. I call the approach described above '**gentle grammar**'. Perhaps it demonstrates that we can go that little bit further along the way towards helping young learners to understand and form grammatical concepts, to differentiate and transfer - with fun and with ease.

### **Related Title**

Grammar (NEW EDITION)

### **Source**

Oxford Teacher's Club – Resource Book for Teachers

[http://www.oup.com/elt/catalogue/teachersites/trig/grammar\\_seidl?cc=gb](http://www.oup.com/elt/catalogue/teachersites/trig/grammar_seidl?cc=gb)

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