

# NOTES FOR TEFL TEACHERS

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### TEACHING GRAMMAR PART 1

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This is part of a series of documents on ELT teaching. Hope you find it useful.

Please note that these are only MY opinions.

I would love to hear feedback (and be informed of any typos): [adrian.wallwork@gmail.com](mailto:adrian.wallwork@gmail.com)

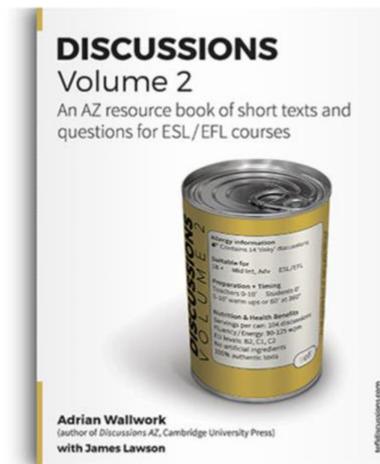
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## **1 How important is grammar?**

Whatever you personally feel about grammar, students themselves think grammar is important. They expect grammar. They were fed grammar at school, both with regard to their own language and foreign languages. Some feel stupid or inhibited if they can't formulate a sentence with correct grammar.

In Anglo countries we tend to place more emphasis on teaching kids and students practical skills, rather than focusing primarily on theory. In many other countries - South America, Mediterranean, Germany and much of Asia, theory tends to come first and occupies around 80% of the time spent studying a subject, with 20% on practically applying it (the statistics are the reverse for Anglo countries). This means that at the University of Pisa, where I work, a medical student may not actually touch a patient until their sixth year!

This focus on theory also explains why in many non-English newspapers, articles tend to begin with a lot of background information. Again in Italy, some of my students recommend reading an article bottom up!

So for students, grammar is expected. It is something clear and definite. It has rules that they can cling on to.

However, one of the dangers of TEFL is trying to teach too much grammar. For teachers teaching grammar can be like a crutch helps you keep in control and give structure to your lessons and which can take up a considerable proportion of the lesson. Overtaching grammar means that you don't have get your students to do other things and their other skills (oral, listening) consequently suffer.

Don't confuse rules with a consequent inevitable ability to write and speak in English. You can in fact learn to speak a language without consciously knowing any of the rules (it is after all how we learn our own language).

You might find it helpful to remember that:

1. You don't need to teach everything.
2. You do need to master the rules of whatever grammatical point you teach.
3. It really helps if you actually like grammar.
4. You shouldn't just explain the rules to your students, but also the reason why the grammar point is useful for them to learn.

## **2 I am new to EFL. The only grammar I know is what we touched on in the Celta course. Where should I start in terms learning grammar for myself?**

You cannot be expected to learn all the grammar straight off. Most textbooks follow a very similar order of grammar presentation. So you could set yourself a task to learn one grammar point per week in correspondence with the course book.

In any case if you are planning to teach for more than a couple of years, you really need to learn your stuff! This will make your interest in teaching grow, will save your face during lessons, and will have obvious benefits for your students.

### **3 When I start a new course, do I need to find out what grammar my students know?**

You do not need to do this yourself by testing your students. If you work for a serious language school, then students are likely to have been tested by the director of studies before being allocated to a particular level / class.

However you do need to know what students are supposed to have done to qualify for attending your course.

Students' knowledge of English is divided into levels (see <http://www.icaltefl.com/index.php/how-to-teach-english/learner-levels.html>). Coursebooks too, are divided into levels, typically:

- beginner
- elementary
- pre-intermediate
- intermediate
- upper-intermediate
- advanced

Look at the grammar syllabus of the coursebook of the level under the level you are going to teach. For instance, if you are about to teach a pre-intermediate class, you can check the grammar they should know by looking at the grammar syllabus for the elementary (i.e. the level under pre-intermediate) coursebook that your school adopts. This will enable you to see what grammar the students should already know (and consequently the grammar that you too should also know).

Your school may also have its own grammar syllabus for you to check with.

### **4 What is the traditional way to teach grammar? What do I need to be aware of?**

The traditional way is to follow the three Ps - present + produce + practise (produce and practise can be inverted). With this system you present the grammar item directly, generally through some example sentence.

A typical example of this can be found here: <http://busyteacher.org/3679-how-to-teach-present-perfect.html>

This webpage describes how to introduce the present perfect 'for the first time', i.e. when you have not 'officially' exposed your students to this tense before.

The instructions (under the heading 'How to proceed') for the teacher on the above webpage are:

1. Introduce the Present Perfect - Regular verbs

2. Contrast finished and unfinished time
3. Introduce the Present Perfect - Irregular verbs
4. Introduce the Present Perfect - Negative forms
5. Introduce the Present Perfect - Interrogative forms
6. Introduce the Present Perfect - Short answers
7. Provide extended practice

When following this kind of procedure, bear in mind:

- if the students have not covered the present perfect before, this is a lot of information to give them in one lesson and requires a lot of concentration on their part
- the procedure doesn't take into account the fact that the present perfect may be used in very different ways in other languages (or may not exist at all), or it may be formed in a different way (e.g. sometimes with the verb *to be*) - thus again the mental effort required may be quite high
- the procedure may take up an entire lesson - students will have only heard grammar explanations from you and asked and answered a few questions using the present perfect. They won't have done any listening, reading or writing, i.e. there will have been no variety in the lesson

However, the procedure would work very well to revise the present perfect with, for example, a pre-intermediate group who had already been introduced to the present perfect when they were at an elementary level. You could get through the procedure quite quickly and in the process verify that all the class are up to speed with this aspect of the present perfect. You could then move on to the more conceptually difficult aspects of the present perfect (i.e. to express duration).

Moral of the story: When introducing a new tense with low level students, just do it in short simple easy stages. This is particularly important if you are giving the explanation to them in English rather than their native language - they have to work doubly hard i) to understand the words of what you are saying, ii) to understand the meaning behind the concepts you are explaining.

### **5 What preparation do I need to do before I present a new grammar item?**

Imagine you want to introduce the *going to* construction, as in *I am going to start yoga lessons*. Here is a possible procedure to follow:

1. consult a grammar to check you know how the *going to* form is constructed and used, and how it compares to any other tenses with similar meanings that you have already taught, e.g. *going to* vs *will* vs *present continuous*
2. consult a couple of coursebooks to see which usage/s of *going to* they introduce first, i.e. *going to* has two main uses: i) intentions *I am going to start yoga lessons* ii) predictions *It looks like it's going to rain*. Then decide which usage/s to go for

3. analyse what problems there might be: for example in a monolingual class, does the same structure exist in the student's language? If it does, does it have the same meaning? If it doesn't what will students make of the structure (e.g. what does 'going' mean in the *going to* construction, do they actually need to understand what it means? - no, they don't!)
4. decide whether you want to compare the new construction with something students have already learned - in the case of *going to*, do you want to immediately compare it with *will* and the present continuous? or might it be better to just stick with *going to* alone at the beginning?
5. decide how you are going to present the item. Will you let it come up naturally (e.g. in a reading exercise) so that you can get students to see and analyse a few examples and work out the form and use for themselves? Or are going to introduce it directly yourself by writing the construction on the board at the beginning of the lesson?
6. choose example sentences that only contain very familiar words, so maybe *I am going to start Italian lessons* is better than *yoga lessons* - i.e. *Italian* is more likely to be familiar to them than *yoga*. You only want students to focus on *going to*, and not be worried by unfamiliar vocabulary items
7. choose non-confusing examples. The following is not a good example: *I am going to start going to the gym* (two different uses of *going to* with two different meanings)
8. think how you will enable students to easily personalize the grammar item - what sentences will they be able to invent for themselves containing the relevant structure?

If you take into account the eight points above, you will have got the problems and solutions covered. You will go into the lesson feeling much more confident.

## 6 How selective can I be when introducing a new piece of grammar?

Imagine you are going to teach the present perfect. Which of these uses (forget any vocabulary items contained therein) do you think would be essential to teach in the first introductory lesson and which could you happily leave out?

1. *Have you [ever] been to London?* (interrogative form)
2. *Haven't you [ever] been to London?* (negative interrogative form)
3. *You've been to London, haven't you?* (question tag)
4. *Have you been to London? Yes, I have. / No I haven't.* (short answer)

The first one is essential. Students clearly need to be able to ask questions.

The second one might be useful at higher levels, but it is used fairly infrequently (i.e. only when expressing surprise or when asking for clarification).

The third one (question tags) you can leave out. Question tags are actually quite difficult for students to get their heads round (one half of sentence in the affirmative, the other part in the negative). Although question tags are very commonly used by native speakers, they can be easily replaced with another form that students might find to be more manageable. For example *You've been to London,*

*haven't you?* can be replaced with: *You've been to London, right? You said you've been to London. I remember that you have been to London.*

Regarding the fourth one (short answers), students could equally reply *yes* or *no*. One problem is that they might reply *Yes, I've*, which means you then have to go into a discussion of when you can and you cannot use the contracted form (*I've, he's, they've* etc).

Short answers are commonly taught in EFL classes simply because they are in all the books (coursebooks and grammar books). They may have been useful 50 years ago when the reason a student wanted to learn English was to talk to a native English speaker. Given that now most students are far more likely to speak to another non-native, saying simply *yes* or *no* will be adequate and not conceived as being too direct as it would be in English. In fact, the short answer (*yes/no* + auxiliary verb) is fairly unique to English. In most languages people just answer with one word - *yes* or *no*, so that's why it won't seem strange to them either to say it or hear it. More useful would be to teach students to say *yes ... I had a great time*, and *no ... but I want to go*, i.e. something that might help to keep the conversation going.

In addition, other books also suggest teaching the position of adverbs typically used with the present perfect, and also spelling and pronunciation rules for the past participle. So there's a lot that you could teach if you were going for the fully comprehensive approach.

But I believe that when you are introducing a grammar item for the first time, you should reduce the number of rules that you give your students. Make it as manageable as possible.

Also, think about the consequences of NOT teaching something. Will it really impede communication?

## **7 What do I need to be aware of when choosing my example sentence?**

Which of the following do you think would be the best sentence to introduce the present perfect for the first time?

1. Have you ever made a cake?
2. Have you ever seen the sun rise?
3. I have never eaten sushi.
4. I have had two cups of tea today.
5. I have lived here for six months.
6. I have received three emails today.

The difference between the first and the second, is that the second contains a verb that students may not be familiar with (*to rise*), and thus instead of focusing on the function of the present perfect students may be distracted and focus on the vocabulary.

In any case, the first two contain the present perfect in the interrogative, it makes more sense to begin with the affirmative.

The third example assumes that students are familiar with the word *sushi* - this is a cultural problem. In those countries where sushi restaurants do not exist, sushi is unlikely to be known by students.

The fourth could be a good starting point as *today* highlights the connection with the present (the name of the tense is the *present* perfect). It also enables you to make a comparison with the past: *Yesterday I had five cups of tea*. But you have chosen an irregular verb for your example - *I have had*. It is best to start with a regular verb.

The fifth example is dangerous. It contains a use of the present perfect that does not translate literally into the students' own language. In nearly all languages they would say: *I live here for six months*, even though they mean that they began living here six months ago.

The typical form of the present perfect is *have/has* + the past participle (which for a regular verb always ends in *-ed*). This means that the sixth example, which contains a regular verb (*have received*), would be the best choice and is in fact the same verb given on the webpage quoted in the previous subsection.

Avoiding the problems the first four examples is a matter of common sense. Knowing not to begin with the fifth example entails you having a good English grammar book and finding out what typical mistakes students tend to make with the present perfect. In any case, course books normally get it right, and tend to introduce the easier uses first.

### **8 What if a student asks me a grammar related question and I don't know the explanation?**

Relax. 99% of the time you will know what is right and wrong even if you can't necessarily explain it. There is no pressure to explain things immediately. You cannot know everything. Don't try to wing it.

For instance, here is a student mistake:

I considered *to go* there yesterday.

Instinctively, you will know that the correct version should be:

I considered *going* there yesterday.

You can write the correct form on the whiteboard.

But you may not know why.

Say you will find out and get back to them next lesson.

There are hundreds of sites on the web where you can find grammar explanations for very specific points. Here are some informal explanations from WordReference:

## I considered to go

slovak · Sep 21, 2012



**slovak**  
Senior Member  
Bratislava, Slovakia

Sep 21, 2012

Please it possible to use this sentence in English: I considered to go.  
I want it to mean something like: I was invited to go on party but I was not sure if I would go. So I start considering of it.



**dingenc**  
Senior Member

Sep 21, 2012

This sentence is grammatically wrong because in English the verb "consider" is followed by a gerund. So, the correct form of it is "I considered going (to the party)."

<https://forum.wordreference.com/threads/i-considered-to-go.2494886/>

So according to the 'Senior Member' *consider* is followed by a gerund.

However if you look here you will see that this 'rule' is not actually true:

## TO-infinitive or gerund: CONSIDER, IMAGINE

*Consider* and *imagine* can be followed by either (a) a gerund or (b) a noun phrase or pronoun + *to*-infinitive but with different meanings:

*I am **considering working** abroad.* (I am thinking of working abroad.)

*Everybody **considers him to be** the best person for the job.* (Everybody thinks that he is the best person for the job.)

<https://www.grammaring.com/to-infinitive-or-gerund-consider-imagine>

But even the above is not exactly clear. In both cases the examples in brackets use the word 'think' as a synonym for *consider*. In reality in the first case the speaker is informally reflecting on an idea (mulling something over). In the second case *consider* means 'people judge him to be' it is a more formal kind of evaluation - it refers to their opinion of something.

See also: <https://www.englishforums.com/English/ConsiderConsiderDoing/bvImpg/post.htm>

What all this highlights is that in reality you could get yourself involved in very complex explanations whose validity you yourself may not even be sure of. Essentially, *consider + inf vs ing* is a sticky / hazy area.

As a teacher you need to make both your own and your students' life simple. I suggest that you avoid these sticky areas unless you are teaching highly advanced students who want their English to be totally accurate.

You need to be able to distinguish between what is and is not really important in terms of grammar. In the case above, there is no ambiguity in *I considered to go* the reader or listener will understand in any case. So in the scale of important grammar items to teach, this ranks pretty low.

If by doing a little research it turns out that explanations for a grammar item are not particularly clear or are contrasting or are really hard to understand, then you can simply tell students:

"I have done some investigation into the difference between consider going and consider to go. I honestly don't think there is a clear benefit of explaining the difference in class as it is quite complex and would take quite a long time. But if you are interested then here are some good links ..."

By doing this, you have shown your students that you take your job seriously and that you realise that in terms of priorities, this grammar item is not important.

Clearly, the story would be very different if a student made a mistake such as:

I am here from one month.

Instead of

I have been here for one month (I came a month ago and am still here)

Or

I am here for one month (I will be leaving within a month)

In such cases there is clear ambiguity and there is a fundamental misunderstanding of the usage of the simple present vs the present perfect. This is a big area of English grammar since it involves ALL verbs, whereas the issue with *consider* basically involves only the verb *to consider* (and a few other verbs that follow the same logic).

So if you discover that the mistake your students have made is a major mistake, then next lesson tell them the rule and maybe set a little exercise testing it - you can use Raymond Murphy's *Essential Grammar in Use* or find some test on the web.

A final word: The difference in usage between certain tenses is huge. So do not launch into an explanation of all the possible differences between two tenses, instead just focus on that one difference that the student made a mistake with. You can also tell students that there are other differences and these will be dealt with in future lessons.

## 9 What is concept testing? How can I use it to check that students have understood?

Concept testing is a means to check students' understanding of a grammar point that they are supposed to have learned by making them truly think about the grammar involved. It avoids throwaway phrases such as *OK? Do you understand? Got that?*

In the exercise below students have to choose between a) and b). Their choice depends entirely on them having understood the rules.

1. He has phoned three times this morning. a) It's 10.30 a.m. b) It's 4.30 p.m.
2. I've lived in Beijing for 10 years. a) I still live in Beijing. b) I do not live in Beijing now.
3. Manchester United have won six of their matches. a) The football season is continuing. b) The season has ended.
4. The Prime Minister has formed a new government. a) This is a news headline. b) This is from a weekly magazine.

Key 1a) 10.30 is still in the morning, the present perfect indicates a connection with the present; 2a) many students will use the present perfect in their language to refer to a completed action (i.e. as an equivalent to *I lived*); 3a) the present perfect is often used to describe something that began in the past and is still continuing now; 4a) a weekly magazine tends to report old news, rather than news as it happens.

A similar kind of concept test is when students are required to match the beginnings with the correct endings.

1. They've gone to NY for a year ... a) they came back last Spring. b) they'll be back next Spring.
2. She was his project leader for six months and he .. a) learnt a lot from her b) has learnt a lot from her.
3. I am here for six months: a) it will be a great experience. b) I have really enjoyed it.
4. I have been responsible for the Asian market .. a) among other markets b) and then after the African market.

Key 1 b 2 a 3 a 4 a

Depending on the level of your students, you can use more difficult concept tests. The following would not work well with students who have just learned the present perfect, would be challenging even for bright intermediate students, but great for any student of upper intermediate level or above. Students are required to underline all the possible correct endings.

1. *Have you ever seen* a) the sun rise? b) the Beatles play live? c) your father cry?
2. *Where have you* a) been? b) bought that? c) found that?
3. *Why have you* a) broken it? b) never told me before? c) hit me?
4. *Have you known* a) she was married? b) her for a long time? c) she's marrying him?

5. *I've seen her* a) at breakfast b) get on that bus c) play tennis.
6. *She has bought* a) a new car b) this car from a Ford dealer c) several cars from that dealer

Key 1 a, c 2 a 3 b 4 b 5 c 6 a, c

Another possibility, again for more advanced students, is to give students a set of rules relating to what you have just been analysing. They decide if the rules are true or false.

1. The present perfect (PP) is used for things that have happened recently, the simple past (SP) when giving older information.
2. PP is not use for completed actions.
3. *for* is only used with the PP.
4. SP for specific (explicit and implicit) times, PP for unspecific times.

Key 1 F, 2 F, 3 F, 4 T in the case of SP.

Concept testing does not just involve tenses, you can use it with other areas of grammar too. The following exercises test the difference between the definite article and the zero article. The idea is to highlight the difference between general cases (where no article is required), and specific cases (where the article is required).

The first exercise is relatively easy and practises specific cases of where the definite article is and is not used.

a) *I don't like the English.* b) *I don't like English.*

In which case am I talking about the English language?

a) *I'll do it next week.* b) *I'll do it the next week.*

In which case am I talking about the week after this week?

The next exercise is considerably more difficult. It has two parts: first the students choose the correct answer, then they check their answers by responding to a series of concept questions.

Part 1

**(1) the / Ø** researchers have a very privileged position as they are paid to do what they like doing. **(2) the / Ø** researchers in industry tend to be paid more than **(3) the / Ø** researchers at university.

**(4) the / Ø** researchers at Manchester University are studying ways to improve English as a language of international business communication: the project is called Bizglish. **(5) the / Ø** only researchers in the project who are not being sponsored by the British government are those from abroad. **(6) the / Ø** Researchers who started the project have now all left the team.

There are two types of researchers involved in the project. **(7) the / Ø** researchers who are studying the ways mother tongue speakers communicate and **(8) the / Ø** researchers studying the way non-native speakers use English. **(9) the / Ø** researchers who are studying the way non-native speakers use English have provided the most interesting results so far.

(10) *the* /  $\emptyset$  researchers that I met yesterday told me that the project was going very well.

## Part 2

1) Are we talking about *specific* researchers that we've already mentioned, or *all* researchers?

2-3) Are we talking about *specific* researchers that we have already mentioned, or essentially *all* researchers in industry and *all* researchers at university?

4) Are we talking about *specific* researchers at Manchester University that we have already mentioned, or just *some* researchers at Manchester University that we have not already mentioned?

5-6) Have these researchers already been mentioned in some way? Are they defined in some way? Are they *specific* researchers or simply researchers *in general*?

7-8) Have these researchers been *explicitly* mentioned before? Could we say: *some researchers are studying non verbal ways in which we communicate and others are studying the language we use*? Could we say (in a similar way): *There are two types of researchers involved in the project: English researchers and Italian researchers*?

9) Have these researchers already been mentioned? So, are they *specific*?

10) Does this mean *all* researchers, *some* researchers, or very *specific* researchers?

Key to Part 1: 1)  $\emptyset$  2)  $\emptyset$  3)  $\emptyset$  4)  $\emptyset$  5) *the* 6) *the* 7)  $\emptyset$  8)  $\emptyset$  9) *the* 10) *the*

Key to Part 2: 1) *all* 2, 3) *all* 4) *some* 5-6) they have been mentioned and are thus *specific* 7-8) not explicitly mentioned, yes, yes

## 10 Why do students manage to use the target language in the controlled practise part of the lesson and then fail to use it in the productive stage?

There are three possibilities.

Firstly, if, for example, you have been teaching them a new tense that is very frequently used and they fail to use it in the productive phases, it probably means that in the exercise you've set them it is possible to manage without actually using the new tense! So always do a simulation in your head of the kind of conversation students might have with the exercise you have given them.

Secondly, it may be that what you have taught them is not really necessary: students manage to communicate perfectly well without the target language that you would like them to use. This is typical when you have taught them 'useful phrases', for example for agreeing or disagreeing. Maybe you have taught them expressions such as *I see your point but ... I completely agree with you and ....* However, students could easily replace them with *OK but* and *yes, and*. When given the choice students will, consciously or unconsciously, opt for the simplest solution. Another typical case is trying to get students to use question tags (*don't you?*, *isn't it?* etc) during a conversation - students will simply either opt not to use them, or will use them in a very artificial way.

Thirdly, some grammar items are not frequently used in everyday conversations, even by native speakers, e.g. the past perfect continuous and future perfect. Effectively what you are asking your students to do is to use forms in an unnatural context, and in most cases it simply won't work.

### **11 Is it a good idea to teach grammar from context (e.g. a reading or listening exercise) rather than presenting directly out of the blue?**

Many students may internalize grammar better from first seeing / hearing it in a context rather than having it introduced directly by the teacher.

You can indirectly introduce grammar via a reading exercise. You can use, for example, the BBC search engine to find the construction used in some article. Cut and paste the article into a Word file, and then modify / simplify the text, adding extra example sentences where required. In any case keep the reading passage short, as in this case your objective is not reading but grammar.

You can also a listening exercise to introduce grammar.

In the following extract from an exercise, students listen to some dialogues of people talking at work. The students' task is not the traditional task of listening for information. Instead they are instructed to listen to the tenses the speakers use when carrying out a particular function (in this case expressing intentions and decisions).

This kind of exercise is useful as it shows students how different tenses are used in typical situations - literally grammar at work!

Listen to these people carrying out various tasks. In each case circle the tense that the female (F) speaker uses. In some cases she uses both tenses. (W= will, GT = going to, PC = present continuous).

1 taking spontaneous decisions over the phone	W	GT
2 offering to help a colleague do something	W	GT
3 reporting arrangements made at an earlier time	PC	GT

#### DIALOGUE 1

F Hold the line and I'll see if he's available.

M Actually I think I'll just leave a message – could he ring me before 10.0?

F OK. I'll give him your message.

#### DIALOGUE 2

M I can't find the receipts anywhere and I need them to get reimbursed.

F Don't worry I'll help you find them. I'll give you a hand after the meeting.

#### DIALOGUE 3

F We're actually having the meeting with the CEO before the presentation.

M Sounds sensible.

F And then afterwards we're going out for a trip around the medieval part of the town before dinner.

Once students have done the exercises, they can look at the script to check their answers. They then analyse why in each case a particular tense was chosen. As a follow up, they can role play similar situations and thus practise the grammar orally. After this, they can convert their conversations into emails, as if the same conversation had been carried out not face to face but via email.

### **12 Can I practise grammar by exploiting texts that students have written themselves in their own private lives rather than specifically for their English course?**

Many of your students may write in English in their private and working lives. They may send emails and tweets in English, post messages on Facebook and Instagram, participate in forums (e.g. Quora), write reviews on Amazon or TED etc. Ask them to paste a selection of these texts into a file, print it, and bring it to a lesson. Their task is to try and correct their own mistakes. Alternatively, they can swap texts with a partner and correct his/hers.

You can also use examples from their own language native language, for example reviews they've made on Amazon (.cn, .jp, .fr etc), tweets and emails they've sent, answers they've posted on Quora. They can then translate their texts into English and then analyse the mistakes.

### **13 What about getting the students to study the grammar at home before I present it in the next lesson?**

This is a good idea if:

- students all read the same grammar explanation (i.e. from the same book or webpage - this could be in English for a multilingual class, or in the students' own language in a monolingual class)
- you clearly tell them which part of the explanation they need to focus on, and strongly discourage them from doing anything extra (otherwise they'll bombard with you with questions that are off topic)

It might work well with individual weaker students, who might otherwise struggle to follow your explanation.

But it can be a problem if:

- not everyone does the homework
- people read different explanations from different books

As an alternative to reading the grammar explanation, they could listen to an explanation on YouTube - but you need to choose the right teacher!

#### **14 Isn't grammar basically just a set of rules? Do I need to justify to students why I am teaching them a particular grammar item?**

Grammar is a set of rules and that is generally how it is taught and how students expect it to be taught. But you will get much better results if, with each point of grammar you teach, you explain why it is important for students to learn it.

- What will they be able to do now, that they couldn't do before?
- In what typical everyday contexts will they use such grammar?
- What might happen if they don't learn this point of grammar (either at all or incorrectly)? Might it cause ambiguity?

Teach grammar in terms of utility.

The utility approach is great, because students suddenly find out why they are learning something. This is actually an unusual concept. When we learn stuff at school (primary, secondary) we never normally question why we are learning it, we just assume that we have to. Then when we leave school we may realise that what we learned has no practical value in the big wide world. If we then go to a language school although we know that learning the English has a practical value, we don't look for a reason why we are being taught a particular grammar point - we just assume that it is necessary.

So if you tell your students why the need to learn a particular grammar point, and you prove to them that it is useful, they will be more motivated to learn it.

By thinking in terms of utility you will then start questioning yourself whether particular grammar items are actually worth teaching.

#### **15 What are the most difficult grammar items to teach?**

Here is my personal list of grammar items that are traditionally covered in coursebooks and which can cause you (and your students) problems due to subtle differences in meaning / usage:

- present perfect vs past simple
- present perfect vs present perfect continuous
- *will* vs future continuous
- *can* vs *may* / *might*
- *the* vs zero article

All the above are certainly worth teaching given that they are all commonly used in everyday life (though the future continuous is given little coverage in coursebooks).

Another construction that is traditionally considered to be difficult is the third conditional (*I would have studied more if I had had time*). However, this is not due to any conceptual differences but simply to the rather complex form/structure. In fact, if you think back to how you learned, for example, French or German at school, often it was not a problem of concept but in remembering the form and the various irregularities. In English, the problem tends to be the reverse - the form is easy, but the concept is difficult to grasp - the third conditional is one of the few cases where the form is not easy.

There are also a whole load of grammar items that are difficult to teach, but are probably not worth teaching either because they are rarely used or because even if the student makes a mistake this does not impact on their interlocutor (i.e. the listener / reader will have no problem understanding them) - for more on this see 00.

### 16 What are the most important grammar items to teach? What about word order?

In addition to the five items mentioned at the beginning of the previous subsection, students also need to have a clear idea of:

- present simple vs present continuous
- *a* vs *one* vs *the* vs zero article
- the difference between *to do this* and *doing this*, i.e. the key difference between the *-ing* form and the infinitive. But there is no need to worry unduly about which verbs are followed by the gerund and which by the infinitive

But students also need to learn about word order, which is rarely touched on in coursebooks. Let's take a simple example: *I like you*.

You might think that other languages would follow our simple order: subject + verb + object. Not so. Here are the equivalents in a few different languages.

LANGUAGE	WHAT THEY SAY	LITERAL TRANSLATION
Chinese	我喜欢你	I happy / like you
Croatian	Sviđaš mi se	Like to me you
Estonian	Sa meeldid mulle	You like to me
Irish	is maith liom thú taitníonn tú liom	Is good with me you (You are pleasing to me)
Korean	나(I)는 너를 좋아해	I you like
Spanish	Me gustas	To me you like
Wolof	Yow ma la sopp.	You me I like

Actually, it seems that there are as many languages that don't follow the English word order for *I like you*, Chinese, German and Thai are three examples that behave similarly to English.

Only a couple of centuries ago, English speakers would say phrase such as: *It liked me not* or *It liked me ill*. Language is constantly evolving towards greater simplification.

In any case, with some nationalities you will find that some sentences that they write or say sound totally un-English. Here is an example of what we would consider strange order (in this case a literal translation from Japanese):

this Jack-built-house live-in-rat is (This is the rat that lives in the house that Jack built.)

This sentence clearly highlights the difficulties that a low level Japanese student might have in constructing a sentence in English.