

NOTES FOR TEFL TEACHERS

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TEACHING GRAMMAR PART 2

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

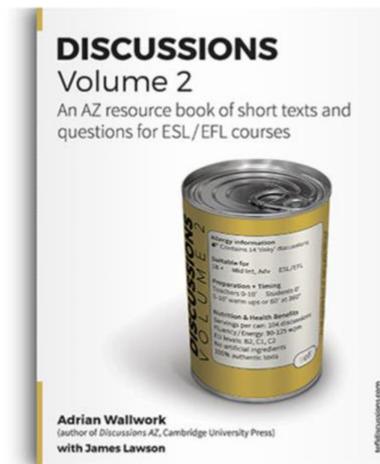
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17 Is there a danger of overloading students with grammar?

The result of teaching students lots of rules does not necessarily lead to an increased ability for your students to understand English. In a series of repeated experiments I gave my students a handout explaining the position of adverbs within a phrase. The handout contained only 99 words (so was quick to read), five rules, and eight examples. I then gave them 2-3 minutes to absorb the rules.

How many of the five rules do you think the students remembered five seconds after they had finished reading the handout?

In this test students, predominantly PhD students and researchers, can generally only remember one rule - which is probably a rule they already knew in any case.

What can you learn from this?

1. students cannot absorb a lot of rules at the same time
2. they need plenty of practising before standing any chance of being able to apply the rules correctly, and even then they may continue making the same mistake for their entire life
3. it may make sense just to choose the one or two rules that will help them the most, i.e. the rule(s) that cover the most typical and frequent situations where the rule needs to be applied

18 What if a useful grammar point comes up during a lesson, but it's not covered in the coursebook until a later unit?

How quickly and the order in which you teach tenses does not have to be dictated by your coursebook. For instance, learning how the past is formed is not difficult if students have already understood the pattern of simple present. The more tenses they know, the more students will be able to express themselves, and the quicker they will progress. Unfortunately the structure of most course books does not allow for this as they function on a tense-based structure (one tense per unit in low levels). However, you cannot reasonably tell students who want to know the simple past now, they have to wait another five units.

19 When is there no sense in teaching the grammar behind a particular expression?

Often it makes sense to teach phrases containing a grammar point without actually teaching the grammar itself. In fact, many teachers may do this unintentionally. No teacher would ever explain the grammatical meaning of *yours* in *yours sincerely*. Nor would many teachers embark on the dangerous ground of teaching why we say *I look forward to seeing you* rather than *I look forward to see you*. We teach it as an idiomatic phrase typically used in emails and sms, in the same way as we might reach *best regards*, *see you soon*, just reminding students to use the *-ing* form. Students aren't helped by the rather complicated explanation for why we say *I want to go* but *I look forward to going*.

In reality, in *yours sincerely* the *yours* is a pronoun standing for *your [obedient] servant*). The *to* in *look forward to going* is part of the phrasal verb *to look forward to*. *to* in this case requires the *-ing* form, in much the same way as we would say *after going*, *before seeing* etc. The *to* in *I want to go* belongs to

go and not to *want*, so in this case the verb *to go* takes the infinitive - students. And even this explanation only touches the surface!

20 What should I do when a student focuses on the exceptions to a grammar rule?

Language has patterns; more patterns than apparently random constructions. You can tell this true from listening to the way children learn their native language. English children tend to say things like *goed* (went) because they are intuitively following a pattern. In reality they don't make many mistakes. This would not be the case if English were full of arbitrary 'rules' or exceptions to rules.

Patterns differ from language to language and your students need to avoid imposing their patterns on to English.

Patterns indicate that language is quite predictable. We don't go around inventing completely original sentences, in fact in most cases we could easily finish a sentence that someone we are talking to has just begun - this fact should be quite reassuring for students. So we tend to map new thoughts on to old sentences.

When there is an exception, students tend to place too much importance on it. Unfortunately so do many grammar exercise books and coursebooks, where too much space is given to exceptions relative to the main rules, thus giving students (and teachers) the false idea that these exceptions are important as the main rules.

The secret is:

- Acknowledge that yes there are exceptions to the rules, but that learning the exceptions at this point in their English course may not really be beneficial.
- If the student insists, ask them to stay behind and you can talk about it then.
- Don't waste time on explanations that are of no benefit to the class as a whole.

21 How do I handle a student who says in an accusatory way: Well my teacher at school says / said that ...?

Let's imagine a teacher, Rosie, is teaching a group of Russians. Rosie writes the following on the board, which elicits reactions from two of the students.

Rosie writes on board: I *emailed* him just before the lesson so I *haven't heard* back from him yet.

Sergey: Our teacher told us that the simple past could not be used for a recent event.

Ekaterina: Our teacher says you cannot have two different tenses in the same sentence.

Rosie: I think your teachers were probably talking about different contexts. In any case you can use the simple past even for an event that happened one second ago. It is also OK to use two different tenses ...

The key is not to make either the student or their teacher (previous, at school) lose face. So simply acknowledge that in another situation their teacher might have been right, but not in the case in question.

However the student (or their teacher) might be right and this may undermine your credibility. You need to handle this carefully so that neither you nor they lose face. Be careful that you don't brush them off by simply agreeing with what they say, or they will even start questioning you on that (believe me, I have had a few of these students in my time!). Here's another scenario illustrating the situation.

Rosie: Given that *some* students *haven't* come today, I've decided to ...

Valeriya: Excuse me, I thought *some* was used for affirmative sentences and *any* for negative and questions. That's what my teacher at school said.

Rosie: Your teacher's rule is right in most cases. But *some* can occasionally be used in negative sentences when ...

State schoolteachers tend to simplify the rules of English. There are probably three main reasons for this:

1. it makes life easier for the students
2. it makes life easier for themselves because it avoids them having to go into lengthy explanations
3. they may not even know the rule themselves

Making life simple for students is not such a bad idea. Murphy's grammar books has sold millions and millions of copies primarily due to the fact that it is difficult for a reasonably intelligent student to make more than a couple of mistakes with the exercises. This means that student's confidence will be boosted.

Rosie chooses her words carefully, she says *Your teacher's rule is right* rather than *Your teacher is right*, thus saving the teacher's face. Basically you don't want to cause problems for other teachers!

22 I have a student who is so fixated with grammatical correctness that it totally blocks her when she tries to speak. What can I do?

In every class it is typical to have one or more students who are perfectionists. They want to have total control over what they are saying. They get too caught up with learning the grammar - perhaps because they

- feel they are not moving ahead in other areas and so focus on an area where they think they can make progress
- have an unwarranted low perception of their language skills
- are setting their standards too high

Whatever the reason, they don't want the embarrassment / shame of making a mistake in front of the class.

Your job is to readjust their perspective.

At the moment they are focusing on themselves. Instead they really need to be focusing on their interlocutor. In the real world when we are talking most of our interlocutors will be focusing on the content of what we are saying and the fluency with which we are saying it. They will not be counting the mistakes we make.

Most people would rather listen to someone who speaks fast and makes a few mistakes, than someone who is painfully slow and makes no mistakes (or worse, corrects themselves whenever they realise they have made a mistake).

The solution with students who are obsessed with grammatical correctness is to give them lots of praise for their written work and their performance in grammar exercises. Then explain that one can communicate orally perfectly well even when making mistakes. They need to be willing to take risks and understand they will not appear foolish in front of their peers.

A perfect example that you can show such students is Philippe Starck's (French product designer) presentation on TED entitled *Design and Destiny*

http://www.ted.com/talks/philippe_starck_thinks_deep_on_design?language=en

Starck's English, by his own admission, is abysmal: "You will understand nothing with my type of English." His pronunciation is terrible. At least 20% of his first 100 words contain pronunciation mistakes. More relevantly for a grammar-fixated student is that he makes a series of grammar mistakes: forgetting the plural s, using the wrong part of the verb etc. But because the audience are interested in what he is saying rather than how he is saying it, his poor English skills are not a problem. In fact if you read the comments on his presentation, not one reference is made to his poor English. Instead many viewers simply write: *Superb! Fantastic! Really the most brilliant talk I've heard on TED.*

23 What can drills be used for? How well do they work?

A drill is an exercise where students (typically low levels) repeat something according to a simple model. The drill can be done with the whole class in unison, and/or the teacher can pick out individuals.

Let's imagine you have a group of beginners and you want to practise the present simple. You could write on the board a series of verbs that students are already familiar with (e.g. *go, work, live, study, read, write*), the personal pronouns, and then the symbols +, -, and ? standing for affirmative, negative and interrogative forms, respectively. So your board looks something like this:

go	I
+	
work	you
study	she
-	
read	we
write	they
?	

The drill works as follows:

- Point to three elements in quick succession e.g. *work she ?* and say *does she work?*
- Indicate that the whole class should say *does she work?*
- Then point to one element e.g. *study*, the class says *does she study?*
- Point to the minus sign, the class says *she doesn't study*
- Point to *read*, they + then point to just one student, he/she says *they read*
- etc

You can devise similar drills for all the tenses, for highlighting the difference between *some* and *any*, even for pronunciation: *where, wore, why, were, woo* etc.

Clearly, instead of pointing to the board you could give oral prompts such as 'interrogative', 'study', 'she', 'negative'; but this tends to confuse some students

Drills work well because give all students an equal chance to participate. They help students become more fluent because the students don't have to dream up any content, they simply repeat a phrase just changing one element in it. If the whole class does the drill in unison, then shyer students are more willing to participate.

Drills may also remind students of how they learned languages or other subjects at school - and this may be reassuring for them. Many cultures also learn by constant repetition. For example, I have met students from Pakistan who can recite the entire Koran starting at any point, and Indians who learned their times tables not just with whole numbers but also with fractions (e.g. one and a quarter times two

and a half). Thus repetition may be an integral part of your students' learning strategies and thus one they may feel comfortable with.

It is important that your drill contains vocabulary that is familiar to your students. If you were practising, for example, *should + bare infinitive*, then the following items would probably not be good for students of an upper intermediate level or below:

You should *wear a suit / polish your shoes / comb your hair / shave*.

The words are very everyday words for us, but in fact they are words that rarely come up spontaneously in students' conversations in English, and in this case seem rather male biased as well. Often students can have quite philosophical conversations and know lots of abstract terms, but the everyday stuff they don't know. This is also due to textbooks where the reading texts tend not to have such words. So don't choose uncommon words otherwise the students will focus on remembering what the words mean or not being sure how to pronounce them.

There are also arguments against doing drills.

- Some students simply don't like doing drills - they feel like children. So judge their reaction, if they don't like drills, then don't do them.
- Most theorists would argue that we learn better by using language in a context or when it seems to come up naturally.
- You may not feel comfortable with drills or convinced of their utility. As with any activity you do with your students, you need to be convinced that the activity is useful.

Whether drills work or not, they need only take a few minutes so they are useful to give a bit of variety to your lesson, to change the pace, or even as a warm up.

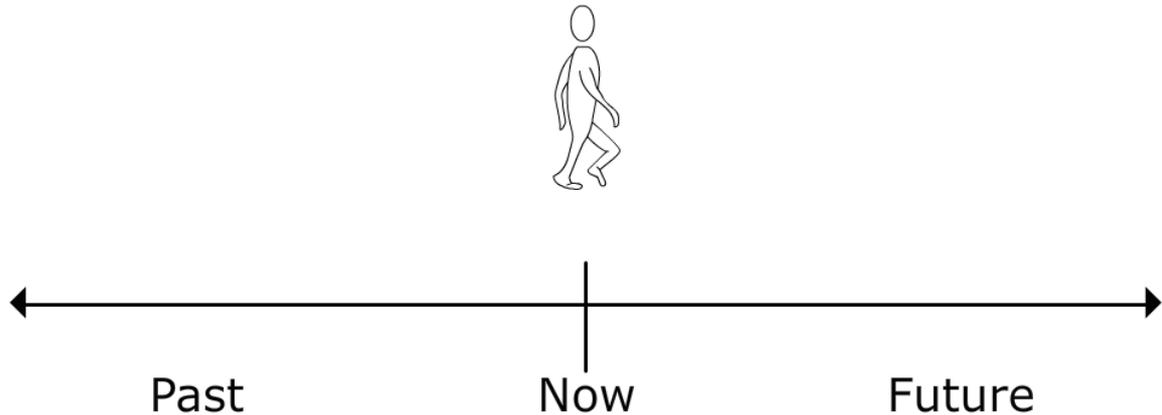
24 What are timelines? Should I use them? Are there alternatives? Calendars?

Below is an example of a timeline.

For example...

"He is walking."

... means right now, he is walking, as we speak.



Timelines seem like really neat ways to explain the concept of time. The example above just focuses on one element and is easy to understand (see: www.elihinkel.org/tips/tenses.htm). It could easily then be expanded to explain the present perfect continuous.

However, the more information given in a timeline, the more effort the student (or teacher!) has to make in order to understand them. The timeline below would be fine for an advanced group that has already learned the respective tenses and is now being shown how they relate to each other.

Perfect Tenses:		
Perfect tenses are used whenever we are talking about a <i>point in time before another point in time</i> .		
<p>Past Perfect Use for an action that happened in the past before another action.</p> <p>e.g. - I had already eaten breakfast when my brother arrived.</p>	<p>Present Perfect Use for an action that happened in the past before the present moment.</p> <p>e.g. - I have already eaten breakfast.</p>	<p>Future Perfect Use for an action that will happen in the future before another action.</p> <p>e.g. - I will have already eaten breakfast by the time my brothers arrives.</p>

<http://www.eslcharts.com/verb-tenses-chart.html>

In any case, a timeline in itself is likely to be a new concept for a student. Some books get students to match the timeline with the tense. For many students (and teachers) this is quite a difficult task, because it is not like anything anyone is likely to have done before.

I suspect that some teachers often put up timelines on the board having done so many times in the past and just assume that students understand what they are talking about.

Possibly a better alternative, and something that you can show on your laptop or smartphone, is a calendar. A calendar is very authentic and something students can relate to. You can make exactly the same points by looking at a month's entries (past and future).

Students can make their own entries on the phones or laptops and then formulate sentences by putting these things in relation. e.g. the entry for last Monday at 6.00 could be 'tennis with Paula', students could invent: *last week at 6.15 I was playing tennis with Paula* or *last Monday I played tennis with Paula, I had already played her the week before. I have won six out of seven matches so far this month.*

I am not advocating not using timelines - they are quick to put on the board, and if done well most students will catch the concept. But not all students will automatically understand the logic of them, so by combining them with something far more personal and realistic (calendar entries) you provide a more authentic alternative and a second chance for the students to grasp the concept.

25 Does grammar vary much from language to language?

Yes, it does. Other languages have features that are quite hard to get your head round - languages with no articles, with no verb *to have* (e.g. Welsh), with no prepositions, with no infinitive or gerund forms, and even with no tenses.

To get an understanding of how different the grammar of other languages can be, take a look at this example from Japanese, what do you think it might mean?

Japan safety is.

Even if you don't understand the meaning, you can see that it has three elements: two nouns and a verb, and that the verb is in the end position. If we put the verb in second position - *Japan is safety* - then the sentence begins to make more sense. We can conclude that the student either got the verb wrong (it might be possible to say Japan means safety), or more likely, that he/she didn't know the adjectival form of *safety* and wanted to say: *Japan is safe*. In reality, in Japanese one would use the noun *safety* rather than an adjective, so the student's mistake was not that he/she didn't know how to form the adjective, but in not knowing that an adjective rather than a noun was needed.

But don't be unduly worried. Although some grammar mistakes are unique to a specific language speaker, the vast majority are common to all languages. Here are a couple of examples:

- Most languages don't use auxiliary verbs when asking questions, so they would say *You study English?* rather than the equivalent of *Do you study English?*
- A German (and all Germanic languages), an Italian (and all Latinate languages) and an Arab will say *I want that you go* rather than *I want you to go*. In other languages such as Polish, Russian and Estonian the literal translation will often be *I want you go*.

However, you can be misled by certain types of mistakes. For example both an Arab and an Italian would say *She is student* (rather than *She is a student*). However, in Italian this is simply an example of where the indefinite article is not used (they would say, however, *She saw a student*), whereas in the case of Arabic the indefinite article simply does not exist.

26 Should I make comparisons between English and the students' own language? Will my students suffer if I don't?

Yes, if you can. Why not?

With a monolingual class, in some cases it makes sense to work backwards from the student's own language. For instance, traditionally the presentation of the articles focuses on the way WE use of them in English without taking into account how the student's own language uses them.

However, if you are simply unable to make comparisons (you don't know their language), then your students certainly won't suffer.

If you have decided that making comparisons between languages does not make didactic sense, then I recommend reading *Can a Knowledge of Japanese Help our EFL Teaching?* by John R. Yamamoto-Wilson, Associate Professor at Sophia University, Tokyo, from whom some of the Japanese examples in this chapter have been taken. John concludes his paper saying:

... despite the much-vaunted superiority of communicative methods over other language-teaching strategies, the contrast between the virtually universal success of children in acquiring their mother tongue and the high failure rate of L2 learners remains as stark as ever. There may be many reasons for this -- social, cultural and psychological -- but one possible contributory cause may lie in the failure of teachers to make meaningful connections between the target language and the mother tongue. There are many types of students, and many types of teachers. A fully comprehensive EFL pedagogy would include strategies that gave all types the maximum opportunity to realise their potential. All the present paper proposes is that an approach which draws on a knowledge of students' own language(s), and uses that knowledge to build some kind of bridge between the students' existing expectations about language and the realities of English sentence structure, ought not to be rejected out of hand, but should be acknowledged as a potentially useful pedagogical tool.

27 Why do so many students say sentences like 'I am here since yesterday'?

Many students do literal translations in their head. A French student would say: *Je suis ici depuis hier*. So their English version corresponds literally to what they would have said in their own language.

Other typical mistakes like this are:

I know her since 10 years.

How long do you work for...?

How long are you married? I am married since ...

Not all students make such mistakes. A Danish student, for example, would have no problem in coming up with the correct phrase *I have been here since yesterday*. Why? Because they use a very similar construction in Danish: *Jeg har været her siden i går*, where *har været* is in the present perfect. Likewise in Swedish (*Jag har varit här sedan i går*), Icelandic (*Ég hef verið hér síðan í gær*) and Norwegian (*Jeg har vært her siden i går*) - note how similar the four languages are. Why do we use a similar expression to these Scandinavians? Because much of the grammar of the English language is derived from the same language group that the Scandinavian languages belong to.

Interestingly, however, a German (some of whose ancestors also landed in England, specifically the Angles and the Saxons) would use the simple present (*Ich bin seit gestern hier*), with the justification I am here now and my being here now is what I want to emphasize.

So what types of students do make this mistake and say *I am here since yesterday*? Typically those whose languages, like German, would render the same idea as I have been here since with the present tense, for example *Estoy aquí desde la semana pasada* (Spanish - *estoy = I am*). Other languages include Croatian, Czech, Italian, French, Hungarian, Portuguese. In these languages the focus is on the end point now, rather than on both the beginning and end points (as it is in English). Note that in this case the various languages do not all belong to the same language group, some are Latinate others are not - so don't assume that just because you have students from totally different language groups that they are not likely to make the same mistakes.

Even students who don't have a present perfect in their language, may still make the same mistake. They would put emphasis on the present "I am here" now, which would override, in their thinking, the concept of past (I arrived yesterday) to present (I am still here now).

Not all languages have a present perfect, in fact some languages have no tenses at all. Yet speakers of these languages may or may not make the same mistake as other non-native speakers when attempting to produce a sentence in English such as *I have been here for one year*, depending on which element of the phrase they want to put the emphasis on (i.e. *here = now*, *one year = past to present*)

If you are learning Chinese you have to make a series of decisions if you want to translate a sentence. You have a toolbox that contains verbs (but there are no tenses or modal verbs), adverbs (in our case you would need adverbs of time) and particles. These particles typically are put after the verb and indicate whether the action:

- is happening now
- action has taken place and constitutes an experience
- has concluded
- indicates a change (e.g. five seconds ago it was sunny and now it is raining)
- is counterintuitive

This means that in our case you might have three choices:

1. Focus on present: I have been here for one year and I am still here now.
我来意大利已经一年了。
2. Focus on the time period that I have been here: It has been one year since I came here.
我来意大利已经有一年了。

3. Focus on one year ago that I came here: I came to Italy one year ago. 我一年前来的意大利。
Although the present perfect has been used in the first case, another Chinese student might have put the verb into the present in order to focus on the present.

Clearly, a Chinese person does this instinctively when they speak in Chinese. But you, as a learner of Chinese, have to go through quite a complex thought process. Thus it may help your students, of whatever nationality, to explain the decision process underlying the choice of the present perfect in general and specifically with *yesterday* (an adverb of time that normally refers to a past completed action - *I arrived yesterday*). In other languages, such as Wolof the language spoken in Senegal, the Gambia and Mauritania, the speaker has to take into similar aspects to Chinese, but also whether the action is going to take place for user and whether the role of the subject, predicate or object of the sentence is the main focus.

So again, it makes sense to show students the mechanics of their own language and compare it with the decision-making process in English. This also means instilling the idea in your students that good language learners try to transpose their ideas and thoughts into the target language rather than trying to do word-for-word translations.

28 Why do students muddle *since* and *for* when using the present perfect? Why do Germans use *already* so much? Is there a difference between US and GB English with regard to *already*?

Many languages don't distinguish between *since* and *for*, but just have one word (e.g. *od* in Hungarian) that does the job for both meanings.

Very often Germans add the word *schon* (already) to emphasise the present perfect (Wie lange kennst Du sie schon? = How long have you known her?), which is why they tend to overuse the word *already* when they speak English.

A North American might say *I did that already*, whereas a Brit might say *I have done that already*. If students bring this up, just tell them that it is one of many small differences between the two languages, but there is no real difference in meaning.

Ack. Mike Seymour

29 Is it a good idea to use unforeseen episodes in class to teach a grammar item?

Imagine this situation. Matt (the teacher) is near the end of a course with group of teenagers who are studying to do the Cambridge First Certificate exam. His mobile phone goes off and he knocks a bottle of water all over the floor.

Matt: Oh shite! Sorry about that.

Matt goes to the board and writes: "If my mobile phone had not rung I would not have knocked the water off the table".

Matt: OK, so I want you to invent similar sentences about something recent that happened to you using the third conditional.

Students write examples.

Matt: Giorgia, what have you written?

Giorgia: If Mister Matt had followed his rules about turning cell phones off, he would not have knocked the water off the table.

Matt elicits further examples.

Matt: OK five minutes to go, usual thing. Write down five words, expressions or grammar things you learned today. Then give today's lesson a title.

Matt: Pietro, what are your words?

Pietro: knock off, hypocrite and ... shite!

M: Very funny! And Silvia, your title for the lesson?

Silvia: "Mister Matt's telephone incident".

Matt handles his little 'incident' very well by abandoning his lesson plan and by exploiting the episode to revise the third conditional. Students tend to learn everything (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation) better, if they learn it in a context and particularly if that context comes up naturally during the lesson. The third conditional is now likely to stand a better chance to be imprinted in his students memory than if they had just learnt it from their coursebook.

Matt has also developed a very clever technique for getting students to memorize what they learned during the lesson.

First he asks them to write down what they personally remember from the lesson in terms of language items. This encourages them to record only what they think is useful or significant for them.

'Significant' could also mean things that they found interesting, quirky, funny or simply memorable in some way.

Second he gets them to associate the five items with the lesson itself. The association could be, as in this case, an episode during the lesson. Or it could be the topic of a discussion that took place, a student recounting something that happened to them, some external interruption to the lesson etc.

When students then read over their notes in a month or so's time, by seeing the association with what happened during the lesson, they will recall the lesson and then, hopefully, recall what was learned too.

Here is an example of what Silvia might have written.

13 May, Lesson: Matt's telephone incident (mobile ringing and knocking over - far cadere - his water)

third conditional: [if + had + past participle ... + would have + past participle] If I had not come to today's lesson I would not have had an opportunity to laugh. If I had done my homework [instead I forgot it], Matt would have been happy.

pron: wouldn't've /wudntuv/

words: mobile = cell (phone), laugh my head off (ridere a crepa pelle), sugar (polite form for shit, cf cavolo/cazzo)

30 How can I use a student's oral mistake to initiate a grammar explanation?

When you have mastered the complexities of English grammar, you may feel ready to give on the spot corrections followed by a comprehensive explanation. In the dialogue below the teacher, Kate, takes an opportunity to use a mistake made by a student, Ahmed, to teach the future continuous.

Ahmed: I won't come to lessons next month.

Kate: Sorry to hear that. Is that because you don't want to come or because you can't come?

Ahmed: I have to prepare for an exam at university, so unfortunately I can't come.

Kate: OK. Listen everyone. Let's imagine there's something you want to do in the future. But for some reason you can't do it. For example, you can't go to a friend's party. And the reason you cannot go, does not depend on you. It is something inevitable that you cannot control. Perhaps you are doing something with your parents or your boss needs you to work late. Well, in these cases you can say, *I am sorry but I won't be coming to your party*. Or, in Luca's case, *I won't be coming to your lesson*.

Kate writes on board "I won't be coming ..."

Kate: Ahmed wants to come to the lesson, but unfortunately he can't. If he says *I won't come* it seems like he absolutely does not want to come to my lessons. So I might be offended. So the future continuous is very useful when you need to make an excuse for not doing something. Next lesson I will give you some more examples and we will do a little exercise.

Next lesson

Kate: You remember last lesson Ahmed said: "I won't come to lessons next month"? OK, what should he have said?

Maria: I will not be coming.

Kate: And why?

Maria: Because

Kate: That's right, because ... OK, well here is a little exercise on the future continuous that I would like you to do.

You can find an exercise on the future continuous, which uses concept questions, here 00.

Students tend to learn grammar best when it comes up spontaneously during a lesson. This means that they associate the grammar item with a situation that they experienced personally. In the case above, the student has used the future simple (*won't come*) rather than the future continuous (*won't be coming*). Note how Kate in the first lesson:

- uses short simple sentences in her explanation - this helps students to assimilate the information they are being given
- doesn't immediately explain how the future continuous is constructed, but instead gives examples - students more easily relate to practical examples first with the theory coming later
- writes the example on the board - most students like to 'see' what the teacher is telling them
- promises to deal with this construction in more detail in the next lesson

How might Kate proceed afterwards? Some grammar items, such as the future continuous, are quite complex and are best dealt with in small doses. The future continuous is a very common tense in English because it is incredibly useful. It attributes the responsibility for doing or not doing something to external circumstances that are seemingly beyond the control of the speaker. It is one of those grammar items that is best explained using examples in the negative first (rather than the affirmative which might be a teacher's first natural instinct). It is much easier for students to understand the difference between *I won't go* and *I won't be going*, than it is between *I will go* and *I will be going*, or between *will you go?* and *will you be going?*. Similarly the difference between *can* and *may* is much clearer in the negative than in the affirmative.

So for the moment Kate just continues with more negative examples. She might then decide to leave it there until an example with the affirmative or interrogative happens to come up during the lesson. Or she could do as she has done in the second lesson, by introducing the affirmative form without giving an explanation but within an exercise that begins with negative form. In this way she sees if the students can intuitively transfer the rule from the negative to the affirmative.

Alternatively, she might wait before giving a detailed explanation until the future continuous is dealt with in the coursebook. However, coursebooks often tend to ignore the future continuous completely, despite the fact that it is used far more frequently than, for example, the past perfect (which instead is always covered). This is probably because it is felt that it is a complex grammar item that only experienced teachers and more advanced students will be able to cope with. To a certain extent this

is true, and if you plan to teach this tense you need to be absolutely clear in your mind how it is used otherwise you will end up confusing both yourself and your students.

But if you teach the future continuous in easy manageable doses, beginning with what it is easiest for you to explain and for the students to understand, then you should not have too many problems. This is of course true for all grammar. And don't feel you need to be exhaustive in your explanations or coverage. There is no need to deal with every single case or usage.

31 What elements of English are unwise to teach?

When you teach something you need to decide what elements of the topic are actually worth teaching. For example when teaching the definite article, focus on what is really important (general vs specific - *all you need is love* vs *the love I feel for my children*), rather than all the tiny details (*I went to church* vs *to the church*), and if you do enter into tiny details only choose the most useful ones.

You also need to decide whether some grammatical issues are actually worth teaching at all, and might in fact be a minefield!

Imagine this typical classroom situation. Jo is a relatively experienced teacher doing a First Certificate class.

Student 1: I don't understand why in this text it says *try and do*, why not *try to do*?

Jo: Er, well I think er that *try and do* is just colloquial and that the correct form is *try to do*.

Student 1 is not convinced. The students see the look of confusion on the teacher's face.

Student 2: What about *try doing*? I have heard that construction many times.

Jo wipes sweat from forehead.

Jo: To be honest I am not really sure about this. Let me check and I will tell you next lesson.

It is completely normal to be put on the spot by your students. Jo's initial reaction is to hazard a guess and pray she can get away with it. But things only get worse for Jo. This is typical with high level classes, who tend to ask high level questions that sometimes simply don't have any straightforward answer.

In the end Jo wisely gives up and defers any definitive answer till next lesson.

If you yourself struggle to understand the reason for a rule, or the mechanics of the rule itself, then there is probably no need to teach it. Moreover, you would probably only confuse your students if you did teach it. Other examples include:

- the difference between *who* and *whom* (most native speakers have no idea, and in any case *whom* is destined for extinction)
- the difference between *each* and *every* (the rule that *each* is for something seen as an individual item simply doesn't hold in many cases), *all* and *the whole*

- grammatical explanations of exactly how phrasal verbs are used (this is different from teaching the meaning of phrasal verbs, which is of course useful). I had an email from one my teachers saying: *What are adverbial particles vis-a-vis phrasal verbs? I have found one place on the internet that seems to suggest that the particle of any intransitive phrasal verb is adverbial. Oh, I don't know! Can you help?* This cry for help is typical, and my answer would be that if you find it confusing there's a good chance that you don't need to teach it, and in any case the chances are your students will get confused too
- inversions used after *only, hardly, rarely* and negations at the beginning of phrases (e.g. *only when I'm feeling tired do I make a lot of mistakes, rarely have I seen such a bad film, never would I do such thing*) - this is a strange use of English and is likely to tie you up in knots when giving an explanation. However students at C2 level will probably need this construction in any exams they do

It is also worth considering how frequent the grammar or vocabulary item is - irrespectively of how difficult it is to teach. You cannot give equal emphasis to say, the present perfect continuous (*I have been reading*) and the past perfect continuous (*I had been reading*), as the first is around 10,000 times more commonly used than the second.

You also need to weigh up the cost to you and your students in terms of potential stress and misunderstanding of teaching certain items. For example explaining the difference *between I wish you would come more often and I wish you came more often* is likely to cause everyone a big headache. You need to be really sure of what you are doing when you embark on such explanations, and decide whether in any case it is:

- really going to help your students
- the best way to spend the time in your lesson

If you are teaching very high levels, then some students may justifiably wish to know about some of the things above that I have suggested you avoid. In this case it is wise to consult with other teachers to see what tactics they use.

32 What should I do if a student makes a request such as: *Next lesson can we do prepositions?*

This is quite a common request from students. Students often have little idea of the enormity of some of their requests. Learning any kind of prepositions is not easy, and which ones should you choose, where should you begin? One solution is to hand over the problem to them, by asking them which kinds of prepositions they would be interested in learning: time (e.g. *in, on, during, since, from*), place ...

The easiest solution is to say you prefer not to teach prepositions as such but just to let them come up naturally via the course book, through a reading exercise, or during conversation.

33 Is there any point in teaching question tags? Are there some grammar items commonly used by native speakers that non-natives don't actually need to learn?

Is it worth teaching question tags? Not really, you can easily avoid them; and yes there are many grammar items that your students don't need to learn unless they need them for an examination.

Here are some examples of question tags (in italics):

You live here, *don't you?*

You've not been here before, *have you?*

Native speakers use question tags the whole time. However, they are quite complex to use: you have to remember what you said in the first part of the sentence to know what to put in the second half, and if the first half is affirmative the second has to be negative. In fact, many native speakers have come up with a short cut - *innit?* - which is used pretty much for all cases. If native speakers need such a shortcut, then it is hardly surprising that non-natives find this construction hard. In any case you can live quite happily without using a question tag at all: *They are going tomorrow, right? It's a lovely day, don't you think?*

In reality, the biggest issue with question tags is getting the intonation right. A student will typically say, *Today is Wednesday, isn't it?* with a rising intonation that indicates surprise rather than a falling intonation to indicate that they want confirmation. Thus most of the time even if they get the grammatical construction right, they will sound completely unnatural.

So question tags are something that students simply don't need to learn, although they may be presented in the students' course book. And you will find that in any case, those who understand the mechanism and can use it under controlled practice without any problems, will rarely if ever use it in other situations.

34 Are there types of grammar exercise that I should avoid?

Before setting your students any task, check whether you could do it yourself. Below is an exercise that practises the difference between *this*, *that* and *it*, as frequently used in email or spoken exchanges. The task is to choose the correct form.

EXCHANGE 1

A: I have planned the meeting for 10.0. Is *this* / *that* / *it* OK with you?

B: Yes, *it's* / *this is* / *that's* OK with me

EXCHANGE 2

A: As far as I am concerned *it* / *this* / *that* would be OK to have the meeting at 10.0, would *this* / *that* / *it* suit you?

B: Yes, *this* / *that* / *it* would suit me. I was thinking of doing a mini presentation - *it* / *this* / *that* would take about 10 minutes. Does *it* / *this* / *that* sound OK with you?

EXCHANGE 3

A (who has just read a report written by B): *It / This / That* sounds really interesting - I think we should go ahead with your plans, especially because *it / this / that* is exactly what the company needs at the moment.

B: *It / This / That* is exactly what I was hoping you would say. So does *it / this / that* mean you will also give me all the funds I need?

[Possible key: 1 a) that b) that 2 a) it, that b) that, it, that 3 a) this, this/that b) that, this/that]

The moral of the story is:

- if you have any difficulty doing the exercise, your students are likely to experience an even greater level of difficulty
- if you can't explain why one answer is correct and another is not (or that both are correct), you are setting yourself up for a difficult lesson
- if the difference in meanings between the various forms is very subtle, it probably isn't worth teaching / testing as for the vast majority of students it will have no impact at all on their ability to communicate in English.

Students are in a hurry to learn English - so they don't want to waste time on exercises that are unlikely to be productive.

35 How is grammar dealt with in course books and practise books?

The grammar is typically taught in language classes is generally dictated by coursebooks. The grammar syllabus of these coursebooks has hardly changed in 40 years. Moreover, the syllabus is not based on any scientific research into what grammar points would be most useful for students to learn.

In most courses outside the sphere of language teaching, the amount of time people are trained in something tends to correspond to the utility of what is being taught. If you are training to be a vet for domestic animals, you would expect your course to focus more on cats and dogs than on snakes and ferrets. If you were learning to play football, you would not expect much time to be dedicated to learning to tie your shoelaces, score an own goal, or respond to a referee when being shown a yellow card.

This is not the case in TEFL.

Most grammar in EFL tends to be taught without too much consideration of

- how common or important it is compared to another grammar point
- how frequently it is used by native speakers with respect to non natives
- whether it actually needs to be taught

- how difficult it is (the difficulty is compared within English grammar rather than with the difficulty of other things that students are able to do quite happily - why is the third conditional any more difficult than doing long division in maths?)

So what happens is that items that are frequently and infrequently used tend to be given equal space within coursebooks and grammar exercise books. This means that will which is used hundreds of times more often than the past perfect, will be given equal importance (i.e. number of pages of rules, explanations and exercises), and will also mistakenly assume equal importance in the minds of the students.

This I believe is a fundamental problem in the way grammar is being taught. We are teaching our students too many things, without focusing on the items that are the most frequently used and which in some cases may cause the most problems.

For example, under present simple vs present continuous, you may find the following distinction in your coursebook or grammar book:

I always meet her at the station (regular event, this is our arrangement)

I am always meeting her at the station (coincidence, we bump into each other quite often)

The second use is quite rare and is something that upper intermediate students and below, simply do not need to know. Yet such usage is not flagged as being rare.

In a nutshell:

- focus on those areas of grammar which are the most used in everyday life, by surveying English usage, for example, in emails (formal and informal), in social networks, and on news websites.
- don't put priority on the level of difficulty, but on how commonly used it is.
- give students some idea as to the relative importance of what they are learning. Don't present grammar items as if they all had the same importance.
- in the grammar explanations, explain why a specific grammar item is important - what will it enable students to do that is important in their communication, what will happen (if anything) if they make a mistake with it?
- focus on electronic versions of coursebooks where you can increase the numbers of exercises for those areas that are considered important.