EFFECTIVE ENGLISH LEARNING

Unit 3: Grammar

For many students, ‘grammar’ is not the most exciting word in the English language. Old-fashioned grammar lessons were often boring and repetitive, and the way you have studied English grammar in your home country will probably have given you some strong views and opinions. In this unit we will be highlighting the role of grammar as an essential resource for self-expression and for making your use of English more effective.

This first task gets you thinking about your own attitudes to English grammar.

Task 3.1
Do you believe the following statements to be true or false?

1. The most efficient way to improve my English is to learn more grammar.

2. English teachers are more critical of students’ grammar than subject lecturers.

3. I make a lot of grammatical mistakes when I speak, so people will have trouble understanding me.

4. It is more important to learn vocabulary than grammar.

5. Grammar is important in writing but not in speaking.

6. You can understand what someone means, even when their grammar is poor.

You can compare your answers with what we say in the next section, on putting grammar in perspective.
Grammar and communication: Putting grammar in perspective

Grammar is one of the three main systems of language, the others being vocabulary and pronunciation. Many students have been taught to think of learning English as expanding their knowledge of these systems, with particular emphasis on learning grammar. However, knowing the language systems is only part of what you need to communicate successfully – what has been called communicative competence (Campbell and Wales, 1970). Researchers have shown that a student’s performance on grammar tests does not necessarily correlate with their skill in communication:

It seems that an appropriate conclusion to draw from these studies is that focus on grammatical form … is not a sufficient condition for the development of communicative competence.

(Canale and Swain 1990: 13)

As well as learning the grammatical forms of English, you need to practise using the language in appropriate ways to listen, speak, read and write. The ability to perform these skills successfully does not depend only the quantity of grammar or vocabulary you know. You also need to be able to use the grammar appropriately, and to apply effective strategies for coping when communication is difficult. (The four EEL units on the four skills contain advice on appropriate strategies in each area).

It is sometimes claimed that native speakers “don’t use grammar” in speech. However, it is true that the spoken language does not need to be as ‘rounded’, as complete and perfectly formed, as a written text does. In conversation we tend to produce incomplete sentences, or to change direction in the middle of a sentence. Speech is also
usually less formal in style than writing – you hear more colloquial vocabulary and more idioms.

Many students are afraid to speak English, in case they make mistakes. But it is essential to bear in mind that native listeners and readers will normally be able to understand what you mean, despite any mistakes.

Whether grammar mistakes are actually a problem for your listener/reader depends on things such as the situation, the predictability of the message, the other resources you use to help make your meaning clear, and the type of mistake.

In the university context, non-native students are not expected to produce perfect English in their academic writing. These days most lecturers are used to reading and understanding non-native writing, especially if they teach on programmes with a large number of international students. Another key thing to remember is that when an academic reader reads your text, they are interested mainly in the content of what you have written – while English language tutors tend to be professionally more concerned with the language of students’ texts written or an academic English course (Weir, 1989).

Nevertheless, your academic writing needs to be expressed clearly and appropriately, in order to be acceptable. Careful organization and signposting (such as headings and subheadings, appropriate tables or diagrams, and explicit linking of ideas) will significantly enhance the clarity of what you write. We discuss this further in the EEL unit on Writing.
**Task 3.2**

Below is part of the conclusion to an Animal Production project written by an international student. First, read it through and try to understand what the student means in each sentence.

1. In conclusion in the present paper were considered some aspects on sheep and goats production especially related to productivity and prolificity. Specificities of the species were considered with more stress on that concerned with adaptability of the species in the wide range of climate and environment. The species play important role in the smallholders life and were shown the more important ones. It is suggested that, due to more advantage that these species have especially among the smallholders, perhaps futurely can be the species to concentrate all efforts on them.

You will have noticed quite a number of grammar mistakes. Below, we have identified twelve mistakes, together with our explanations and corrections.

Decide which three mistakes you think are the most serious; then answer the Discussion questions that follow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Error</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Correction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Line 1: were considered some aspects</td>
<td>Subject/verb order reversed:</td>
<td>some aspects ... were considered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Line 1: aspects on</td>
<td>Wrong preposition:</td>
<td>aspects of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Line 2: goats production</td>
<td>No s in compound nouns:</td>
<td>goat production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Line 4: that concerned with specificities</td>
<td>Number agreement (refers to specificities):</td>
<td>those concerned with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Line 5: the wide range of</td>
<td>Wrong article:</td>
<td>a wide range of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Line 5: climate and environment</td>
<td>Number (both countable nouns):</td>
<td>climates and environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Line 6: role</td>
<td>Number (ones in line 7 shows this should be plural):</td>
<td>roles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8 Line 6: were shown the more important ones
Subject/verb order: the more important ones were shown

9 Line 7: due to more advantage
More is redundant (no comparison is made): delete.

10 Line 7: advantage that these species have
Definite article needed (specific advantage): the advantage

11 Line 9: can be the species
Omission of subject: these can be the species

12 Line 9: to concentrate all efforts on them
Them is not required in this construction: delete.

Discussion questions

1. Which three errors did you decide were the most serious?

2. Why did you choose those particular errors?

3. Are there any other aspects of this text which you would like to change?

4. If you were this student's English language tutor, what specific advice would you give him?

To check your answers to Discussion Questions 1-4, click here
Grammar mistakes and language improvement

We make progress in learning anything by a process of trial and error. In the case of language learning, it is important to make a distinction between two types of mistake: *slips* and *errors*.

**Slips**

*We are all aware that in normal adult speech in our native language we are continually committing slips of one sort or another. These ... are due to memory lapses, physical states such as tiredness, and psychological states such as strong emotion. These ... do not reflect a defect in our knowledge of our own language. We are normally immediately aware of them when they occur and can correct them with more or less complete assurance. It would be quite unreasonable to expect the learner of a second language not to exhibit such slips of the tongue (or pen), since he is subject to similar external and internal conditions when performing in his first or second language.*

(Corder 1981: 10)

Obviously, when you are writing in English, you should carefully proofread for slips, as a native speaker would, but slips do not affect the process of learning a language.

**Errors**

*Errors* are mistakes that are *systematic* – that is, which reflecting the learner’s current knowledge of the language system. Young children make errors in their mother tongue. In English one common child error is “we goed to the shops” instead of “went”.

Instead of thinking of second language errors as obstacles to progress, it is more appropriate to take the attitude that they

... are indispensable to the learner ..., because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn. It is a way the learner has of testing his hypotheses about the nature of the language he is learning.
Among the sources of knowledge for these hypotheses are:

1. **Our first language.** If a learner doesn’t know how to say something in the second language, it is reasonable to try using the grammar structure of their first language. Sometimes it works.

2. **Knowledge of another language,** especially if that language is closer to the one they are learning. In Finland, most people speak Finnish and learn Swedish as a second language at school. When they then study English, a Finnish learner’s guesses are more often based on Swedish grammar rules, which are closely related to English, than on Finnish, which belongs to a completely different family of languages.

3. There is evidence that humans are born with ‘knowledge’ of fundamental principles of grammar which apply universally in all languages – for example, that word order is important. We may not be consciously aware of these principles, but they may limit the kind of hypotheses we form.

4. Finally, our hypotheses may be based on our observation of how people use the second language in speech or writing.

Sometimes a learner’s hypotheses will be wrong. In order to test a hypothesis we need adequate evidence. One source of evidence is the language around you.

If you notice a sentence that does not fit what you believe the ‘rule’ requires, then you may need to modify your hypothesis. Successful learners tend to be good at noticing the grammar in the language used around them, and changing their hypotheses when they have enough evidence to do so.
Task 3.3
What do you notice about the word order in the extract below? (The language is correct, by the way)

*Never has there been such public reaction to a new Prime Minister as we saw yesterday when Tony Blair and his family entered 10 Downing Street. And little could he have imagined that the margin of victory would be so wide.*

How do you explain the word order – in other words, what is your hypothesis?

Click [here](#) for our answer

The role of negative feedback

Another type of evidence you can gather from your use of English is *negative feedback* – in other words, indications from someone that you have got something *wrong*. This can take various forms, but perhaps the most familiar is when your English teacher corrects your errors. However, outside the language classroom, people rarely correct someone else’s errors, partly for reasons of politeness, but mainly because they focus on what you are saying, not how you are saying it.

A second type of feedback arises when you say or write something which is *not understood* or is *misunderstood*. This type of feedback is valuable because it highlights the errors that actually cause *communication problems* (as we saw in Task 3.2). This information can help you to identify which areas of grammar you should concentrate on.

Unfortunately, the true source of the problem is not always obvious, so it is important to try to find out what exactly has caused the difficulty – which may not be what you think it is. One way to do this is simply to ask the listener to tell you why what you said was not understood. We explore this point further in the unit on Speaking.
The view of learning as a process of hypothesis-testing lies behind our next language-learning principle:

**Principle 4: Make your errors work**

**Difficulties in learning grammar**

Everyone who sets out to learn the grammar of another language can expect to encounter difficulties of various kinds. Harmer (1987) points out three main reasons for these difficulties:

- a mismatch between form and function
- differences between first and second language grammars
- ‘exceptions’ or complexities in the second language grammar

**Problem 1: Mismatch between form and function.**

Many grammatical forms, such as the Past Simple Tense, are used to perform several of quite different functions.

Task 3.4

Look at the following sentences and say why the past tense is used in each case:

1. *I phoned* home last night.
2. *If you had* the opportunity, would you come back to Edinburgh?
3. *Could I borrow* your pencil for a moment?
4. *I just wanted* a quick word with you, if you’re not too busy.

To check your answers with those in the Feedback, click [here](#).

Conversely, you may find that several different forms are available in English to perform what seems to be a single function. One example is the variety of verb forms which can be used to refer to future time:
I will travel, I’m going to travel, I travel, I will be travelling, I am to travel – with slightly different meanings.

Problem 2: Differences between first and second languages
Difficulties are very likely to occur when the second language grammar system works in a different way from the learner's native language.

Task 3.5
Below are some French nouns with the definite article, with their English equivalents.

1. Based on this data, do you think it would be more difficult for a native speaker of French to learn the English article system, or for a native speaker of English to learn the French system?

   For Feedback, click here

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FRENCH</th>
<th>ENGLISH</th>
<th>FRENCH</th>
<th>ENGLISH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>la femme</td>
<td>the woman</td>
<td>l'homme</td>
<td>the man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la fille</td>
<td>the girl</td>
<td>l'acteur</td>
<td>the actor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la chanteuse</td>
<td>the (female) singer</td>
<td>l'actrice</td>
<td>the actress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la table</td>
<td>the table</td>
<td>l'orange</td>
<td>the orange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la situation</td>
<td>the situation</td>
<td>les femmes</td>
<td>the women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>le garçon</td>
<td>the boy</td>
<td>le chanteur</td>
<td>the (male) singer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>le livre</td>
<td>the book</td>
<td>les livres</td>
<td>the books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>le pouvoir</td>
<td>the power</td>
<td>les oranges</td>
<td>the oranges</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Can you think of a grammar area in which English is more complex than your language?

3. Is there any part of the grammar of your language which is difficult for native English speakers to learn, because of differences between the two systems?

Problem 3: ‘Exceptions’ or complexities?
One difficulty in learning the grammar of another language is the existence of ‘exceptions’ to the normal rule. Most languages have exceptional forms of this sort. For example, in English there are those irregular verbs that do not form their
Past Simple tense or Past Participle by adding -ed to their base form: see/saw/seen, sing/sang/sung, etc.

Even educated native speakers may be unsure whether verbs like dive or swell are irregular.

Task 3.6
See whether the rule below expresses what you know about the difference between some and any:

Countable nouns are used with some + a plural noun in positive sentences, and with any + a plural noun in questions and negative sentences.

I've got some books
Are there any eggs?
We don't need any potatoes.

Uncountable nouns are used with some in positive sentences, and any in questions and negative sentences.

There is some milk
Is there any butter?
We haven't got any wine.


How many of the following sentences do you think are correct? (Check your answers on the next page.)

1. Some of my luggage hasn't arrived.
2. Would you like some coffee?
3. You can choose any cake you like.
4. Any candidate caught cheating will be disqualified.
5. I haven't seen some of these books before.
In fact, all five sentences are correct. Now look at the explanations below.

**SOME**  You use *some* with uncount nouns and plural nouns to talk about a quantity of something or a number of people or things without being precise.

*I have left some food for you in the fridge.*
*Some trains are running late.*

You normally use *some* in affirmative sentences.

*There’s some chocolate cake over there.*
*I had some good ideas.*

You use *some* in questions when you expect the answer to be ‘yes’, for example in offers or requests.

*Would you like some coffee?*
*Could you give me some examples?*

You can use *some* with a singular noun when you do not know which person or thing is involved, or you think it does not matter.

*Some man phoned, but didn’t leave his number.*

Is there *some* problem?

---

**ANY**  You use *any* in front of a plural and uncount nouns to talk about a quantity of something that may or may not exist. You normally use *any* in questions and negative sentences.

*Are there any jobs men can do but women can’t?*  
*It hasn’t made any difference.*

You use *any* with a singular noun to emphasize that it does not matter which person or thing is involved.

*Any container will do.*

You can use *no* with an affirmative verb instead of *not any*.

*There weren’t any tomatoes left.*  
*There were no tomatoes left.*

You can also use *not… any*, or *no*, with a comparative.

*Her house wasn’t any better than ours.*  
*Her house was no better than ours.*

(Collins COBUILD Student’s Grammar, 1991: page 36)
So what can at first appear to be ‘exceptions’, may actually belong to a more complex system than the learner is yet familiar with.

In attempting to prevent confusion, grammar books (and teachers) tend to simplify grammar rules for learners, especially at the early stages. The simplified rules about *some* and *any* that you read on page 11 came from a textbook for pre-intermediate learners of English. Those shown on page 12 provide a more comprehensive picture, for learners at a more advanced stage.

**Grammar as a resource**

In the previous section we looked at the difficulties of learning to use second language grammar. Many international students think of English grammar as an obstacle in their path, which hinders their ability to communicate.

We prefer to think of grammar as a resource for communication, rather than a set of rules. The linguist Michael Halliday defined language as ‘a resource for expressing meaning in context’ (Halliday, 1985). Grammar allows us communicate ideas in the most effective and appropriate way. It offers a system of choices of form – for example, English *past* or *present* verbs - to make your precise meaning clear.

**Task 3.7**
The writer of a medical research report might write either of these two sentences in describing the findings, but the effect would be different. Can you explain the difference?

- a) Women with breast cancer *benefited* from exercise classes.
- b) Women with breast cancer *benefit* from exercise classes.

**Feedback** [here](#)
Another choice to be made between active and passive voice. In written reports, academic researchers often use the passive voice to describe their research methods. Here are two examples, from published research papers on language teaching and biology. The passive forms are shown in bold:

In order to carry out the experiment, data from four sessions in each group were collected and coded. Four one-hour sessions were video-recorded in each group. The first session was recorded before the experiment.


To evaluate further the significance of this observation, genes carrying non-synonymous somatic mutations in each cancer type were examined in additional series of each cancer. An additional 454 cancers were examined in this follow-up screen and 91 additional somatic mutations were identified.


Task 3.8
Can you explain why the passive, rather than the active, is often used in contexts such as these?

Is your answer the same as ours? Check here

Choosing the most effective form for your purpose

Now compare these alternative versions of two texts (extracts from research reports):

Text 1 Version A

We analysed the data in several ways on an intention to treat basis. As randomisation led to no discernible systematic biases, we compared the follow-up scores of the intervention and control groups and subtracted follow-up scores from baseline scores to derive change scores. We routinely added sex, ethnic origin, and age group to the adjusted model. We used SAS software (version 9.1, SAS Institute) and the Glimmix procedure for binary or normal data or STATA (version 8.2, StataCorp) and a zero inflated negative binomial model for count data.

Text 1 Version B

The data was analysed in several ways on an intention to treat basis. As randomisation led to no discernible systematic biases, the follow-up scores of the intervention and control groups were compared and follow-up scores from baseline scores to derive change scores were subtracted. Sex, ethnic origin, and age group were routinely added to the adjusted model. SAS software (version 9.1, SAS

Text 2 Version A

*We examined* the coding sequence of 518 protein kinases, ~1.3 Mb of DNA per sample, in 25 breast cancers. *In many tumours, we detected* no somatic mutations.

Text 2 Version B

*The coding sequence of 518 protein kinases, ~1.3 Mb of DNA per sample,* was *examined* in 25 breast cancers. *In many tumours, no somatic mutations were detected.*


Task 3.9
Which version, in each case, do you think seems more ‘academic’?
Which is easier to read?
Which do you think was the original published version?

Click here to check your answers with the Feedback.

RESOURCES

Grammar books

Some grammar books are purely for reference and contain explanations of rules. They are designed to increase your knowledge of the grammatical system.

Others provide exercises to give you controlled practice in manipulating particular structures. Many grammar books perform both functions, and combine explanations with exercises.

Grammar books vary in their design and in the type of learner they are intended for. Some are intended for speakers of a particular first language and may provide explanations or translations of sentences in that language.
Another variable is level. As we saw in Task 3.6, explanations for elementary learners can be inadequate for students needing to express more complex ideas. It is important to choose grammar books which you can understand, and which are intended for learners of your level.

Below is a selection of useful grammar books, with our comments.

(E/K = contains Exercises and a Key with answers).

**English Grammar in Use** (R. Murphy; Cambridge University Press) E/K

The best-selling book on British grammar. It presents grammatical rules (and exceptions) simply and clearly, and provides plenty of sentence-level exercises. **However, it provides rather limited help for students needing to write academic assignments.**

**Advanced Grammar in Use** (M. Hewings; Cambridge University Press). E/K

In the same series as Murphy’s book. More relevant to university-level writing.

**Grammar Troublespots** (A. Raimes; Cambridge University Press) E/K

Very practical guidance on points to look out for when editing your own academic writing.

**How English Works** (M. Swan and C. Walter; Oxford University Press) E/K

Intended ‘to make grammar practice interesting’. As well as covering the usual areas, it comments on differences between spoken and written grammar where necessary. Also includes a useful test to show you which grammatical areas you need to concentrate on.

**Exploring Grammar in Context** (R. Carter, R. Hughes and M. McCarthy; Cambridge University Press) E/K

This book looks at the grammar patterns typically found in particular contexts. It focuses on problem areas such as tenses, modals and articles. The authors are leading researchers in English language, and the book uses a lot of real-life examples of spoken and written English from their research data.

**Oxford Guide to English Grammar** (J. Eastwood; Oxford University Press)

A very thorough grammar reference book with clear explanations - with a good section on articles and related points, for example - but no exercises. A companion volume, *Oxford Practice Grammar*, by the same author, has exercises but less complete explanations.
Grammar websites

You can find links to some very useful grammar webpages from Andy Gillett’s comprehensive website *Using English for Academic Purposes*:

http://www.uefap.com/links/linkfram.htm

Before visiting a grammar webpage, it is worth thinking of one or two areas of English grammar that you *know you are unsure* about. Make a note of the points you think you need guidance or advice on; then check out the website to see how much it helps.

- **Academic Grammar for students of the Arts and Social Sciences** (to help students with their academic assignments)
- **Cybergrammar** (to support and develop knowledge of grammar)
- **Grammar Safari** (hunt for and collect examples of language use)
- **Guide to Grammar and Writing** (from Capital Community College, Hartford, Connecticut)
- **Internet Grammar of English** (a complete online English grammar for undergraduates - University College, London)
- **On-Line English grammar** (general grammar practice)
- **BBC grammar support** (updates on current and new expressions)

**Google it**

You can also try simply googling your question - for example, “What’s the difference between Past Simple and Present Perfect”. Try it - what do you think of the answer you find?
Using corpus concordancers to answer grammar queries

The Resources section of the EEL Vocabulary unit refers to on-line *concordance* programmes which you can use to search a *corpus* (a large language database) to see how words are typically used. These programmes are also very useful for checking the grammatical patterns that particular words are normally used in.

Tasks 3.10 and 3.11 involve using concordancers to resolve common doubts about the grammatical patterns used with two English words.

**Task 3.10 How should I use ‘suggest’?**

Which (if any) of these are correct?

- a) She suggested that I ask you
- b) She suggested I ask you
- c) She suggested me to ask you

To check your answer, follow the instructions below for visiting the British National Corpus.

Go to [http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/](http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/)

**Instructions for using the BNC:**

In the ‘Please enter your query’ box, type

`suggested that I`

Then click ‘Go’

Are there any examples of ‘suggested that I ...’ in the database?

Do the same for

`suggested I`

and then

`suggested me to`.

Were you right?
**Task 3.11 How should I use ‘worth’**

Which is correct?

a) it is worth to do  
b) it is worth doing

Go back to the British National Corpus site and type in *worth*. Follow the same procedure as on page 18.

Were you right?

You can also carry out more sophisticated searches with the National Corpus; instructions are shown on the opening web-pages.

A further rich source of information about grammar is the English you encounter in daily life, especially in texts:

- Focus on a sentence in a text you are reading and ask yourself whether you would naturally have expressed the idea in the same way. If you would have chosen a different form of expression, would your sentence be correct? Would it have a different effect?
- Reading the first few words of a sentence and trying to predict the end may help you to develop a ‘feel’ for natural sentence patterns.

**Task 3.12**

Choose a short paragraph from one of your textbooks, or from a newspaper or magazine. Make sure you understand it clearly.

Put the text aside. Rewrite the paragraph from memory.

Compare your version with the original text. Notice the differences. Have you produced grammatical errors or acceptable alternatives?

If you think your alternative is grammatical, why did the original author make a different choice?
ADVICE FROM OTHER INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Here are a range of views on ways of improving your grammar:

1. It is very difficult to learn grammar without some need associated with that. What I have been doing is to choose one structure per day, and try to use this in real situations as much as I can.

2. When I read or listen to something, I try to understand the grammar disposition of the words: How does it fit? and Why? When I don’t know the answer, I consult a book of grammar or ask a native English speaker.

3. The best way to improve grammar is make sentences after learning a grammar point.

4. Interest and motivation are very important in learning a foreign language. When you are eager to know what natives say in the foreign language and eager to communicate, you explore by yourself how the grammar functions here and you remember fast.

5. My experience of learning grammar is reading with a pen, whenever I found a grammar structure in the newspaper, novels, articles, etc. I would highlight them with the pen and collect them in my notebook.

6. Practice is the way I learn grammar, which is quite effective. And I like to look for examples to test the usage of the rules I’ve learned. Those sample sentences can deepen and reinforce the learning effect visually and mentally.

7. I would like to suggest some reading material which is easy to get such as newspaper, journals to help students find the English feeling.

8. If we take "learning style" theory, my learning style would be learning from doing. So, the best way for me to improve my English is to communicate with native speaker. Writing a reflection journal is also helpful, watching BBC news, living with a native speaker - all the factors are quite helpful indeed. My friend proofreads for me all the time. I feel if you do proof reading face to face it is really helpful. However, it takes up so much time for both of us.

Task 3.13

There are some common themes in those comments. Which students stress the importance of the following? Write the relevant comment numbers against each of these ideas:

- practice
- need to communicate
- working out the rules for oneself
- noticing grammar structures (for example, in reading)

Click [here](#) to compare your solution with the Feedback
Task 3.14
What do you think the writer of comment 8 meant when she wrote about ‘proofreading face to face’? Why would that be particularly helpful?

Feedback here

Grammar learning ‘styles’

Comment 8, from an Education student, refers to learning styles. Different approaches to learning suit different people. There are two basic approaches to learning any rule-based system, such as grammar. Which one works better for you depends on factors like personality and the educational methods you are familiar with:

- **Rule-learners** prefer to start with general principles (rules), which are first explained and then applied to specific instances of use. This approach is known as **deductive learning** - going from the general to the specific.

- **Data-gatherers** prefer to ‘pick up’ the rules by noticing for themselves how the language is used. As we have seen, they form hypotheses based on the samples of language use (data) they have observed.

They then **test** their hypotheses by further observation, in two ways: by paying attention to how other people use the **grammar item** in question, to see if it fits with their hypothesis; and by **trying it out themselves** and noticing the effect it has – for instance, whether or not they are understood). They may then need to adjust their hypotheses. This approach is called **inductive learning** - generalizing from specific examples.

Task 3.15
Look again at the strategies reported by learners on the previous page, and decide whether you think the person is basically a **rule-learner** or a **data-gatherer**. Why?

Our solution is here
We will close this unit with some comments on deductive and inductive grammar learning from students interviewed at an English university. You may find that some of them reflect the way you yourself feel about learning grammar.

- I feel more secure with a rule, because my intuition does not tell me a lot.

- You can’t be 100 per cent sure that you’ve found the rule. You must have the possibility to get the right rule from the teacher.

- [inductive learning] makes me work harder and use my common sense. I find it rewarding to find out the rules myself.

- It’s a good idea to look at grammar the other way round. You learn about English without having to learn boring rules.

- When you find the rule yourself, you’ll be able to remember it more easily.

(Fortune 1992: 167-8)

Task 3.16: Open question

Are you basically a rule-learner or a data-gatherer? Can you suggest why you prefer this learning style? Do you use the same style when you are learning things other than language?

Whether or not you consider yourself to be a data-gatherer, an analytical attitude to grammar is useful. Noticing instances of language use which seem to break what you believe to be the rules (i.e. to disconfirm your hypotheses) can help you identify aspects of grammar which need further clarification.
**Grammar Feedback: study notes and answers**

**Task 3.1** is an open question; our comments on some of these issues are on pages 1 and 2.

**Task 3.2**
Discussion **Questions 1 and 2** are open questions. Mistakes that interfere with the clarity of the message are the most serious from the point of view of communication.

Our choice: 8, 11 (the Subject-Verb-Object order in English affirmative sentences is not very flexible – absent or misplaced subjects can disorient the reader), 7 – **number** (singular / plural) mistakes can convey the wrong information; it is hard to interpret the more important ones unless you realise that **ones** referred to **roles**. Moreover, mistakes in subject/verb order and number agreement each occur more than once in this short text, perhaps indicating lack of grammatical knowledge in these areas, rather than just carelessness. If so, they are also ‘serious’ in that they represent important areas of grammar which the learner needs to focus on (see the comments on slips and errors, on the following page).

**DQ 3**  *Futurely* (line 9) is not an English word, although the intended meaning is obvious. *In the future* is the normal phrase. This is a vocabulary mistake.

A veterinary specialist commented that it seemed strange (unnecessarily “technical”) to keep referring to sheep and goats as the species; he would prefer simply the (or these) animals. This is another vocabulary problem, this time concerning the appropriate style (register).

The specialist also pointed out that, since **adaptability** (line 4) was a separate feature of animals from **productivity** and **prolificity** (lines 2 and 3), it would seem logical to add it to these in the first sentence: ... related to **productivity**, **prolificity** and **adaptability** – a matter the structure of ideas.

A native speaker would not say **more advantage** in this context. There does not
appear to be a grammatical reason for this - it is perhaps a question of collocation: more does not "go" with advantage: the greater advantage would be possible if a comparative were necessary.

There is also a punctuation mistake in line 6: smallholders'.

DQ 4: Open question. Advising the student to read a number of conclusions to articles in his field, and to pay attention to the language typically used, should help familiarize him with appropriate phrases and sentence types.

It would perhaps also be a good idea to point to the word order restrictions in English, which is less flexible than many other languages, in this respect. Then get the student to look for examples of similar sentences (they are quite typical in conclusions to papers).

The number problem (singular and plural) may also be helped by pointing out the danger of confusion. He probably needs to think more carefully about the relationship between some of the topics identified in the first two sentences.

Task 3.3
Subject and verb are inverted. The rule is that inversion is required when the clause begins with one of a group of negative or limiting adverbs or adverbial phrases: never, seldom, rarely, hardly, not once, etc.

Task 3.4
1. To indicate that the event happened in past time (‘last night’).
2. To show that the situation is hypothetical (the Second Conditional structure).
3. For politeness – could (past) is more polite than can (present) in requests.
4. Also for politeness – want would seem rude or aggressive.
It may be helpful to think of the past tense as indicating ‘distance’: time distance in 1, reality distance in 2, social distance in 3 and 4.
Task 3.5
Logically, it should be easier for French speakers to learn the formal aspect of the English system than *vice versa*, because this part of French grammar is more complex than English. English has only one definite article form, *the*, whereas French has **four**. Selection of the appropriate French form depends on several factors: the noun’s *number* (singular / plural), its grammatical *gender* (all French nouns are masculine or feminine – including things and abstract ideas), and whether the following word begins with a consonant or vowel *sound* (*h* is not pronounced in French).

*To return to the page you were on, click here*

Task 3.6 is an open question – correct answers and explanations on the following page.

*To return to the page you were on, click here*

Task 3.7
The Past Simple tense in version (a) indicates that the truth of the statement is limited to the women in the study. The Present Simple tense in version (b) would indicate that the author was extending the conclusion to women with breast cancer *in general* – which would be a much stronger claim. This is a key difference in academic language.

*To return to the page you were on, click here*

Task 3.8
The passive voice is used to create a more *impersonal* style, avoiding the need to mention *who* carried out the collecting, coding, examining, etc. This puts the focus on the research *procedures*, rather than the researchers. It also gives a more *formal* tone to the writing, and avoids repeating the same subject (*we*, for example) many times.

*To return to the page you were on, click here*

Task 3.9
The passive versions (B) probably seem more ‘academic’, but most people would find the active versions (A) more natural and ‘readable’. In fact, version A – containing the *active* forms ‘we examined….’ – was the original in each case. Although the passive has traditionally been preferred in research writing,
for the reasons given above (Task 3.8), the editorial guidelines for contributors to some widely-read research journals now emphasise clarity rather than formality:

Contributions should be clear and simple so that they are accessible to readers in other disciplines and to readers for whom English is not their first language.

(Nature guide to authors)

Write in the active and use the first person where necessary. Try to avoid long sentences that have several embedded clauses.

(BMJ Guidance on house styles)

This recent tendency has not been adopted universally. If you will need to write research reports, check with your supervisor which style is preferred. In writing, it is important to consider your audience and to choose grammatical forms appropriately; the overriding principle should always be clarity.

Task 3.10
You should find examples of (a) and (b), but none of (c), indicating that c is (probably) wrong.

To return to the page you were on, click here.

Task 3.11
(b) is correct.

To return to the page you were on, click here.

Task 3.12 is an open question

To return to the page you were on, click here.

Task 3.13
practice: 1, 3, 6
need to communicate: 1, 4, 8
working out the rules for oneself: 2, 4, 5?
noticing grammar structures: 2, 5, 6, 7?

To return to the page you were on, click here.

Task 3.14
We think the student meant that her (British) friend goes through her writing with her, pointing out mistakes. Presumably, this is more useful than simply making written corrections, because the student can discuss the problems with her friend, and clarify what she means. However, as the student herself points
out, this is expecting a lot of her friend because proofreading is a very time-consuming process. To have your text proofread you would normally have to pay for a professional service, but a limited ‘peer proofreading’ service is now offered by the Edinburgh University Students Association (EUSA). For details, visit http://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/advice/academic-advice/proofreading/faq/

To return to the page you were on, click here

Task 3.15
The student writers of comments 1, 3 and 6 refer to first learning rules; 1 and 3 describe finding ways to practice producing the structures, while 6 focuses on recognising the forms; those students seem to be rule-learners – though the strategy described in 6 also involves gathering data to reinforce the learning.

Comments 2, 4, 5, 7 and 8 describe various data-gathering strategies – these students prefer to learn by paying attention to the language they encounter in reading or listening.

To return to the page you were on, click here

Task 3.16 is an open question.

References in this Unit


