



T U T O R S ' T I P S

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"Grammar, what big teeth you have" - PART 1 -

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► What is grammar and how do we learn it?

The grammar of a language is the way we string words together to make meaning. In the sentence "The girl bit the dog" we know who did the hurting and who got hurt because we know how English works ie. We know the grammar of English. We can even turn the sentence around, write the verb a bit differently and still manage to say the same thing "The dog was bitten by the girl". For native speakers meanings are very easy to negotiate because we have been immersed in the patterns of our language since birth, even if we can't describe the patterns or explain them - and even if words like 'subject', 'object', 'participle' and 'passive voice' mean nothing but a shudder up the spine.

When you consider that babies learn the grammar of their language over time without ever hearing grammatical terms, it is clear that **immersion** is the key. Immersion and **practice**.

For adult ESL learners, the same is true, but it isn't so easy to develop skills in grammar. For one thing, learners already have a language (or two or three) and learning another is more **onerous**. Furthermore, learners are aware that **time** matters and often wish to fast track their learning. Teachers and tutors need to respond by immersing learners in useful, grammar-specific contexts, contriving opportunities for practice and drawing attention to the new grammar patterns. Immersion, practice and **attention**.

Native or bi-lingual speakers of English with entrenched grammar "errors", have perhaps not attended sufficiently to the patterns they encountered; or, have been immersed in "wrong patterns" more often than "right" ones. Habits develop which work for them until a situation requires different grammar. (They seen it written right and could of learnt it and in fact would of they'da known it'd matter at the job interview.) Again, they need to be immersed in appropriate models, note the appropriate patterns and practise them.

‘ (Bad grammar) is something up with which I will not put! ’

- Winston Churchill

The way we use language has changed over the years. We don't need to teach archaic forms - we need to help learners become aware of appropriate, current usage for contexts that interest or concern them. Whether we like it or not, our learners' goals will lead them into contexts in which their grammar will be judged. Let's help them to achieve their goals. I hope you will get some ideas from those presented here.

Ideas

► 1. Vanishing Story.

This technique gives learners a good idea of how we build up sentences from the very basic structure (Subject + verb or Subject + verb + object)) without having to mention grammar terms. (Do not use texts with complex structures.)

The technique works like this: Ask students to take out any single words that they can from the text. They will lose some meaning but must retain good grammar ie. a meaningful sentence. Each time the learner makes a good choice, s/he reads the new sentence aloud (so that s/he is hearing the good grammar.) When all the single words are taken out, groups of two consecutive words are taken out and finally groups of three consecutive words.

The text is now reduced to its most basic grammar (It reads: A helicopter was called. Campers were alarmed. Police searched.)Learners can then re-build the text as you ask them to add details. Eg. What kind of helicopter was it? Yes, a rescue helicopter. (Having read the good sentences so often, they should be able to recall details easily.)

A Queensland Rescue helicopter was called to help in the search for a woman along the Mulgrave River near Gordonvale on Saturday night. Campers in the vicinity were alarmed at hearing a woman's screams at around 7.30pm and called police. Six SES volunteers and six police officers searched the area for five hours without success.



► 2. Work the nitty gritty grammar.

When you identify a specific grammar difficulty, devise tasks that focus on that grammar point. The one below was designed to familiarise ESL learners with the superlative form of the adjective and its use. The details come from the Guinness Book of World records. The task generates lots of useful language practice and thinking practice.

Task: Match the World Records

The tallest man	69
The shortest dwarf	11 kgs
The oldest mother	272 cm
The greatest number of children	55 cm
The largest new-born baby	8 840 m
The oldest person	4 900
The highest mountain	112m
The deepest ocean	171 km/hr
The tallest tree	122
The oldest tree	11kms
The fastest creature	6 600 kms
The highest sea-cliff	72
The longest river	1 005 m

The following task was designed to help consolidate the Past Continuous for ESL learners.

Scenario: Yesterday, between 2pm and 3pm, there was a robbery at TAFE. Computer equipment was stolen from the Storeroom. Police are interviewing all TAFE students. What is your alibi? What are your classmates' alibis? Complete the following table of information:

NAME	Where were you between 2pm and 3pm yesterday?	What were you doing?	Who were you with?
1.			
2.			
3.			

To work the Present Continuous tense try something like this. Dictate the following letter and ask the learner to write a response:

Dear

I am writing to you from I am visiting friends here for a few days.

How are you enjoying life in Cairns? Are you living in a nice house, in a nice suburb? Are you working or studying? Are you making nice friends? Is your English improving? Are you planning any visits to.....?

I would love to visit you this year. I am working hard to save money. I am thinking of coming in July and staying for three weeks? What do you think? Please write soon.

Best wishes,

The next task works the simple present tense - and, in particular, the third person singular. The context can vary to suit learners' needs / interests / circumstances. (Who does what at the hospital? in the family? in the community? at the airport?) In this task, the learner should fill in the columns with words from the list beneath.

Who does what at school?

A cleaner	A tuckshop convenor	A groundsman	A tutor	A lollypop person	A teacher -aide

Orders food

Cleans the classrooms

Works with volunteers

Helps with reading skills

Prepares craft activities

Wears an apron

Works with tools

Needs a qualification

Photocopies worksheets

Works with individual students

Keeps the playground safe

Sells food

Types worksheets

Wears a hat

Has the best job

Does the most physical work

Controls traffic

Supervises pedestrian crossings

Empties waste paper bins

Blows a whistle

Maintains the gardens

Works the longest hours

Works outside

Has the easiest job

Mows the grass

Makes sandwiches

Supervises rubbish disposal

Wears a uniform

Has rostered helpers

Helps with maths skills

Gets most money

Is usually male