

[A] Chapter 3 The language teacher's repertoire

What effective language teachers should know and be able to do

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[B] Chapter outcomes

By the end of this chapter you will

- know what grammar is and why it matters
- be able to work with the 'meaning potential' of language and teach grammar in relation to meaning
- be able to use your own languages and the languages of your students as resources for teaching a language
- be able to make decisions about what students need to know
- be able to select from a range of methods for teaching language.

[B] Introduction

Did you know that all children know more about the grammar of the languages they speak by the time they are five years old than any linguist is able to describe? Children learn the sounds, the vocabulary and the grammar of their home languages naturally. They know how to use the rules of the language but they cannot say what the rules are. They may not even know that they exist. This is called **implicit** knowledge. The job of linguists is to make knowledge of how a language works **explicit**. They study the way people use language in order to describe it. Modern approaches to the study of language are descriptive. They are not prescriptive. They describe how language is used not how it ought to be used. Linguists look for patterns. Understanding what fits a pattern and what is an exception to a pattern makes language learning easier.

You can see children working with pattern in language when they over use a pattern. When a child says 'I **bringed** my book', the child is over generalising the *-ed* past tense pattern. They are unlikely to have heard anyone say this. Linguists take this as evidence that children internalise the patterns and form the rules of language themselves. Before they acquire the exceptions to the patterns, they apply the patterns to everything. Errors tell us about a learner's stage of development and they help us to work out what to teach them.

Linguists describe language in great detail. Teachers do not need to know everything that linguists know and learners do not need to know everything teachers know. Our job as teachers is to work out what knowledge about language our students need. We can then choose what to teach them so that they are able to use the language more effectively when they speak and write. Knowledge about language will also

help them to make meaning from the texts they hear and read. As teachers we should be able to use a range of language teaching methods that will keep the learners interested.

[A] The language teacher's repertoire

A repertoire is the range of techniques, skills and abilities that someone has. We can think of it as our bag of tools. We can also think of ourselves as performers who have a range of songs that we know and can sing. So what subject knowledge and what subject teaching knowledge do we need to make our language classes hum?

- We need to know what grammar is and what it is for.
- We need to assess what our learners know about language and what they need to know.
- We need explicit knowledge about the grammar of the language/s we are teaching as well as the ability to find the information that we need.
- We need to be able to use different language teaching methods.

[B] What grammar is and what it is for

Michael Halliday (1985) describes language as 'meaning potential'. He sees it as a system of options. You have to choose between present, past or future tense and between simple, continuous and perfect tenses. You have to choose between **tense** and **modality** and between active and passive **voice**. These are some of the choices in the verb system. What you select, from a wide range of options, determines how language's potential is realised. Look how different meanings are created by using different tense options.

- | | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| (1a) Teachers use computers. | (1b) U.S. soldiers torture prisoners. |
| (2a) Teachers used computers. | (2b) U.S. soldiers tortured prisoners. |
| (3a) Teachers are using computers. | (3b) U.S. soldiers are torturing prisoners. |

(1a) expresses a general truth about teachers and also suggests regular, habitual use. (2a) states that teachers used computers in the past but they no longer do. (3a) means that teachers are using computers now. Which tense we choose, results in a different meaning. We can see how crucial this might be if U.S. soldiers were on trial for their treatment of prisoners based on the choice between (1b), (2b) and (3b).

Instead of choosing tense, we can choose modality. Compare

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| (1a) Teachers use computers. | (1b) U.S. soldiers torture prisoners. |
| (4a) Teachers may use computers. | (4b) U.S. soldiers may torture prisoners. |

(1a and b) are statements of fact they are categorical, either true or false. (4a and b) are statements of possibility. Modality shows degrees of certainty and uncertainty as well as degrees of authority and possibility.

(5) Teachers **might** use computers is less certain than teachers **will** use computers.

(6) Teachers **should** use computers shows less authority than teachers **must** use computers.

We also have to choose between active and passive voice.

(1a) Teachers use computers.

(1b) U.S. soldiers torture prisoners.

(8a) Computers are used by teachers.

(8b) Prisoners are tortured by U.S. soldiers.

(9a) Computers are used.

(9b) Prisoners are tortured.

In (1a), active voice, the *teacher* is at the front of the sentence and in (1b), also active, the U.S soldiers are at the front. In (8a) and in (8b), both passive voice, computers and prisoners move to the front. The passive allows us to change what is in the foreground of the sentence. In (9a) the passive allows us to hide who is using the computers. Look how significant it becomes when you hide who is responsible for torturing prisoners.

All of this helps us to teach language in relation to meaning. Here are the beginnings of three horoscopes published in *The Times*, 1 April 2009.

Table 1: Horoscopes and sentence types

Gemini (May 22–June 22)	Cancer (June 23–July 23)	Scorpio (October 24–November 22)
<p>“Keep your eye on the ball!” “Don’t let opportunity pass you by!” ... “Grab your chance!” That’s the kind of thing people say to each other a lot these days. In some circles it passes for wisdom. Where is the “relax and take it easy” in any of that? ... You don’t need to be so diligent. You can’t lose out on anything you’re supposed to keep. Nor can you miss out on anything that is meant to be for you.</p>	<p>How do you tell when you are winning and when you are losing? What subtle signs give the game away? Is it possible to misread these? Are there times when you think that all is lost only to realise that success is within your grasp? Of course there are! None of us can ever be completely sure in which direction the wind is blowing. Some of us, though, turn ourselves around so as to be ready when the wind comes.</p>	<p>Our needs drive us. So do our desires. We are driven sometimes by fear, sometimes by ambition. A sense of responsibility can drive us too. No wonder we so often end up feeling like passengers. What urge or impulse has taken over your steering wheel recently? Are you happy with the direction you are taking? It’s time to look again at what you are allowing yourself to be driven by.</p>

Here are some ideas for the kinds of questions can you ask about the different grammatical choices that the writer has made for each of these horoscopes.

- How does the choice of statements, questions or commands in the different horoscopes give the writer more or less authority? What difference does it make where these sentence types are used in the passage? Sequencing is also a matter of choice that affects meaning.
- Where is the writer certain and where is he uncertain? How does he show this? Is the degree of certainty or uncertainty appropriate for a horoscope? Why? How much authority does the writer have?
- What tenses has the writer chosen? Why?
- Why does the writer use direct speech? Who do you think the writer is actually quoting?
- Where is the passive voice used? What effect/s does it have?

All these questions expect learners to be able find examples of the chosen grammatical option and to use what they know about these options to make sense of the text. Here grammar is used as a resource for comprehending texts.

As you can see, we need a language to talk about language – a **meta-language**. Words such as **modality, voice, direct and indirect speech, tense** are all part of this specialist meta-language. You cannot tell a learners that their sentences need verbs, if they do not know what a verb is. It is important to introduce these words when learners need them. You, for example, probably know most of the words I have used, except perhaps for modality, which I have explained.

[B] Assessing what your learners know and what they need to know

Most people in the world, including in South Africa are multi-lingual and therefore have implicit knowledge of more than one language. Multilingual teachers know a lot about language. In assessing what your learners know, you need to find out what languages they speak. It also helps to know which of these languages they can read and write. Language Awareness is an approach to language teaching that makes use of this knowledge. For example, all languages use singular and plural. You can ask learners to tell you how to turn singular nouns (e.g. dog, book, girl, boy, teacher) into plural nouns in all the different languages that they know. If these are written on the board, then the class can look for the patterns used to form plurals in each of the languages. Speakers of these different languages can also give examples of words that do not fit the pattern (e.g. sheep, mouse, wife). Patterns are what most teachers call rules. What they are, in fact, is words that can be organised into groups, because they work in the same way. Because not everything can be made to belong to a group or a pattern, we have exceptions. You can think of the the exceptions as the left-overs. In the Language Awareness approach, which is based on contrastive linguistics, we are able to

- teach meta-language (e.g. singular and plural)

- use learners' implicit knowledge of their specific languages and make this knowledge explicit
- show learners that different languages have different resources for expressing the **same** meaning
- show the differences between learners' own languages and the language they are learning
- use what learners know as a bridge to learning a new language.

This contrastive approach can be used for teaching other aspects of grammar. For example, it can be used to teach

- the possessive (English uses an apostrophe. What do other languages use?)
- the article (Not all languages have an article system. What do they use instead?)
- pronouns (English has a problem with sexist pronouns. Languages that do not have masculine and feminine pronouns, like *he* and *she*, do not)
- tone (African languages are tonal languages. English speakers find it difficult to hear these tonal differences because English is not a tonal language).

It does not matter if you do not know all the languages that your learners know. It is good for learners to feel that they are the experts. There is in any case usually more than one learner who knows the same language and you can get them to work out the examples and the patterns together. If there are disagreements you can ask them to do some research at home. This approach values everyone's language/s as a resource and in the process educates us, as teachers, about our learners' different languages. The more we know about each learner's language, the more we can understand the reasons for their errors and we can then plan our teaching to meet their needs.

Error is an important part of any learning. If you tell learners this, then they do not have to be afraid of getting an answer wrong. They will not learn if they are too scared to try. We tolerate more errors in other people's speech than we do in their writing. It is important not to interrupt the fluency of learners' speech to correct their errors. Sometimes the focus in a lesson should be on fluency at other times on accuracy. You can, of course, make notes of the kinds of errors that the learners make when they speak and deal with these in a different lesson.

Learners' errors provide you with important information. They tell you what your learners can and cannot do. You can analyse the errors that they make in order to work out what to teach. In a remedial approach to language teaching, teachers focus on those aspects of language that have to be fixed up or remedied. Here is a simple example. You can make a note of the words that different students spell incorrectly. You can give them quick spelling 'tests' using ten of these words every day from Monday to Thursday.

Table 2: Tricky spellings

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
knowledge	literature	receive	tragic
privilege	sentence	believe	accommodation
principle	language	arrival	opportunity
practise (verb)	business	seize	necessary
practice (noun)	completely	siege	argument
definitely	peculiar	immediately	bottom
separately	disappoint	repetition	criticism
grammar	development	quarrelled	dissatisfied
occasionally	occurrence	embarrassed	continuous
lightning	chooses	particularly	loneliness

After the test, you can go through the words, pointing out the difficult bits which I have marked in bold, and which you would know from analysing their errors. Students can mark their own work and learn the spellings of ONLY the words that they got wrong. On Friday, you can give them a ten-word test based on this list of 40 words. The Friday test should count towards the term mark. What you are doing here is

- using students' errors to decide on the words to test
- making students learn only what they cannot already do
- challenging students to get ten out of ten and helping them to do so on Friday by giving them a chance to practise beforehand
- making the difficult bits stand out to help them remember why the word is tricky.

There are other ways of using the remedial approach. Having decided that learners need to do some remedial work on prepositions, you can examine their errors to see which prepositions are the most problematic and you can teach those by giving examples of the prepositions in sentences and asking students to explain the slight variations in meaning. For example, 1 Sarah was in the room above me. 2 The temperature was above zero. 3 She married above herself. 4 Martyn was merely an erudite eccentric [knowledgeable and odd] and entirely above suspicion. (Sinclair, 1991, 2-3).

[B] Assessing what the NCS expects your learners to know and be able to do

Finally, in assessing what your learners need to know, you need to look at the relevant NCS and Subject Assessment Standards. I say ‘finally’ because if you have examined your learners’ use of language in their speech and their writing you will know where they are in relation to the curriculum and what they still need to learn.

The most important challenge that the NCS sets for language teachers is that language needs to be taught in context. Teachers often interpret this to mean that they should not give the gap-filling isolated language exercises of the past but should use words and sentences in passages, much as in the example of the Horoscopes. Notice how in the horoscopes, three different texts were chosen to illustrate the different **mood** choices (the choice of sentence type: statement, question, exclamation). They were offered as illustrations of grammatical choice and meaning.

A much bigger challenge is to integrate language teaching into the ways in which we teach writing and reading, including the reading of literature. It is no good if your learners cannot apply what they know about language when they use it.

The discussion so far has included reference to the following assessment standards in the first additional language curriculum:

- apply knowledge of spelling patterns
- use verb forms and auxiliaries to express tense and mood
- use and understand the effects of direct and indirect speech
- apply knowledge of plurals
- recognise different sentence types (i.e. mood)
- use active and passive voice
- understand how word order (i.e. sequencing) can effect meaning.
- use punctuation correctly (suggestions were made for teaching the apostrophe)

In a short chapter it is impossible to work with all the assessment standards but it is important that you are so familiar with them that they become part of the way in which you talk about texts and meaning, this includes the learners’ written texts.

As FET teachers you need to use old matriculation examination papers in class, so that your learners know what to expect. You can use exam papers in much the same way as the spelling tests. If you let students do the exams, you will quickly see what they do and do not know and you can teach them what they need to know. It is also important to gain experience as a marker as this helps you to understand what examiners expect markers to look for when they mark. It also gives you experience of working with marking memoranda and it is an opportunity to meet other teachers and to talk to them about how they teach the aspects of language that you are examining.

[B] Gaining explicit knowledge about the grammar of the language/s you are teaching

Professional teachers are life long-learners. It is always necessary to do research as part of lesson preparations. None of us knows everything we need to know about language. Research is easier if one has some of one's own teaching resources. Language teachers need their own 1) an up-to-date reference grammar 2) a good dictionary and 3) an internet connection. Different grammar books are organised differently and you have to find one that you are comfortable with. You might also like books that include interesting activities for learners. Books provide us with expert knowledge and creative ideas.

Cheaper than books is the internet. If you google 'English language teaching materials' you will get over 41 million hits. On 03 April, 2009, these included the following sites on the first page.

- 4071 Free Lessons, Tests, Ideas, Worksheets and Plans for Teachers – a website where the community shares and collaborates on free and open source materials.
- Free English language teaching materials for ESL
- English as a second language lesson plans and ideas for teachers Current Favorite *English as a Second Language Teaching Lesson Links*. Present continuous Olympic Games Lesson letter writing telephoning Public health ...
- English Lesson Plans for ESL EFL Classes. English lesson plans for beginner, intermediate and advanced levels including reading, writing, listening, grammar, speaking ... with links to: Beginner Lesson Plans (22) Grammar Chants (15) Intermediate Lesson Plans (78) Writing Lesson Plans (34) Printable Quizzes for Class (163) Reading Lesson Plans (18) Advanced Lesson Plans (69) Vocabulary Lesson Plans (30) Grammar Lessons (77) Conversation Lesson Plans (69) Listening Lesson Plans (13) Children's Lesson Plans (31) Pronunciation Lesson Plans (14)

Google is a teacher's best friend but there are other interesting sites to explore. The British National Corpus website (<http://sara.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/lookup.html>) is useful for generating examples of language in use. When you type in a word it gives you the number of occurrences of the word in the corpus and 50 random examples of the word in sentences. You could, for example, generate 50 of your own authentic sentences in which the word 'above' is used for learners to examine. The first results on the word *above* appear in Table 3, together with their coded numbers in the data base.

Table 3: The first few results from a search in the British National Corpus for the word *above*

Your query was *above*. Here is a random selection of 50 solutions from the 25 179 found...

A61 1922 Day and night they are hanging in swarms above the trench making it extremely difficult to rest. ♦ **HHA 847** On the other hand, she decided, he wasn't above using guile. ♦ **HHW 7394.** ♦ **HPL 835**
The disciplinary rules applicable to you and agreed by the Council will be found in the documents referred

to in paragraph 3 above. ♦ **HWH 182** The above implicitly has individuals gaining utility from their own incomes.. ♦ **ALJ 2509** The mummy tripped over his legs, and only saved himself from falling by grabbing one of the row of dangling blackjacks above the seats. ♦ **ASE 65** Above him, the topmost twigs of the trees whispered interminably. ♦ **EB7 687** But, above all, more intensive studies need to be carried out on the pottery of the second half of the fourth century to ensure a greater refinement in dating. ♦

[B] Different language teaching methods.

Once you know what need to teach and you feel confident about subject matter, what remains is your decision on how to teach. It is important to have a range of methods for teaching language as this will enable you to

- vary your lessons
- match your method to your desired outcomes
- adjust your teaching to suit the learning styles of different learners
- use different methods in relation to different theories about how people learn language.

You should feel free to experiment with different approaches to teaching language until you find the ones that suit your teaching style. What follows is a summary of a dozen different approaches to language teaching.

[C]1. Remedial approach

As already discussed, in this approach you analyse the learners' errors and teach only the grammar that they need. You can develop a set of worksheets and activities over time in relation to different kinds of errors that you can use from year to year. It even becomes possible to give these activities to individual learners who need them.

[C] 2. Drill

In order to establish linguistic habits, learners need to practise linguistic forms. Drills employ repetition of the feature of grammar that has to be internalised. They also help with pronunciation and are most effective in teaching an additional language. Cumulative drills, in which each person has to repeat what was added by each of the previous learners, require both concentration and memory and can be fun. With FET learners you can use drills to practise prepositions, article use, complicated sentence structures, or other aspects of language that are difficult to master.

[C] 3. Language as system

This is the graded step by step approach that is often used in grammar text books. Because textbooks are written without much knowledge of the learners or the classrooms in which they will be used, they often

use a systematic approach to working through the grammar. This approach tends to work from simple to more complex parts of the grammar. Learners are taught to understand how the different parts fit together.

[C] 4. Grammar/translation

This focuses more on written than spoken language and requires students to translate written texts from the target language into the home language and vice versa. The translations are written. This method makes students aware of the differences between the different languages. Translation is included in the NCS.

[C] 5. Language as rules or patterns

Using a **deductive** approach you teach learners rules and they have to use them or find examples of them in use. Using an **inductive** approach, you give learners lots of examples of a particular aspect in use and ask them to find the patterns and to formulate rules based on these patterns. You could for example cut out headlines from newspapers that use the **article** or ones that use the **apostrophe**, paste them on to a sheet and ask learners to study them in order to work out the rules for using either the article or the apostrophe. With either of these top down or bottom up methods, learners have to recognise and learn the exceptions.

[C] 6. Language as editor

If you know a 'rule' you can use it to monitor or check your own writing. If learners know, for example, that in English the third person verb takes an *s*, (e.g. the dog *runs*, she *thinks*, he *asks*, it *works*) then they can use this knowledge to systematically check every verb to see if it needs an *s* when they edit their work.

Checklists are a good way of implementing this approach and they help learners to transfer what they learn about grammar into their writing. The idea is to establish an ongoing checklist for the whole class. Every time you teach a new aspect of grammar (e.g. third person *s* or the apostrophe or the preposition *above*) learners add this item to their check list. When they have written an essay they check their work using their check list. For this to work most effectively, the essay has to be checked for each item separately. Only when they have begun to internalise these aspects of the grammar can they check for more than one kind of error simultaneously. When you mark their work you can write an explanation of an error for a student who can add this to his or her class check list, so that it becomes gradually more individualised.

[C] 7. Communicative approach

Using the language fluently is as important as using the language accurately. The ability to learn the language in order to communicate is the focus of this method. Role play and drama are used to give learners practice in using language in context to accomplish specific social purposes. Learners can, for example, practise how to complain, to give and receive compliments, to ask for or give directions, to make a polite request etc. (See Chapter 7).

[C] 8. Task based approach

Learners use language to complete interesting tasks. The focus here is on the meaning and getting the task done. Language is simply the medium of communication and language learning is a bi-product. This is

what is supposed to happen in classes across the curriculum, where English is the language of learning and teaching.

[C] 9. Acquisition approaches

These approaches are based on acquisition theory which argues that we learn languages by using them. We learn to listen by listening, to speak by speaking, to read by reading and to write by writing. All that is needed is comprehensible input. Listening provides the input for learning to speak and reading provides the input we need for learning to write. The theory is that if students read a lot, their writing will improve, provided they write often. Encouraging learners to keep journals in which they write frequently about topics and ideas that matter to them is an example of this approach. Learners should also have access to a wide selection of interesting age and competence appropriate books in the target language.

[C]10. Language awareness

As already discussed in this chapter, Language awareness uses a contrastive linguistics approach to raise learners' grammatical consciousness. It values all the languages that learners know and uses them as a resource for language learning.

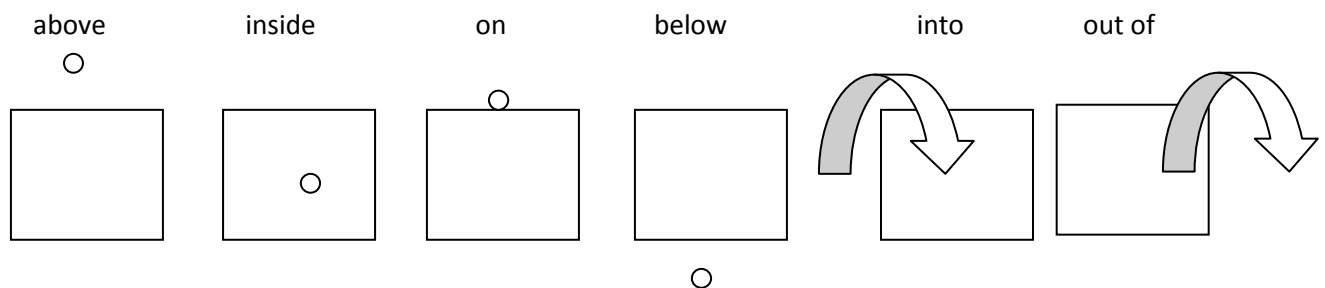
[C]11. Critical language awareness

In this approach learners are taught to read critically so that they can understand how texts work to position us. This approach focuses on the relationship between language and power and looks at how texts may serve the interests of some at the expense of others. Also, the more learners know about language, the more control they have over positioning the texts that they write. (See Chapter 15).

[C]12. Multimodal approaches

Here teachers use non-language approaches to teach language such as drama (role plays), drawings, photographs, diagrams, movement, music. Figure 1 is an example of a visual approach to teaching pronouns.

Figure 1



[B] Conclusion

What remains is for you to put the different ingredients – knowledge about the learners, knowledge about the language you are teaching, knowledge about teaching languages, knowledge about the curriculum and assessment standards – into the lesson preparation pot. The better you are at analysing your learners' levels of achievement, the easier it will be for you to work out what to teach. As with language learning,

we also learn to teach by teaching. It does not matter if one of our lessons was not perfect as long as we take the time to reflect on what went wrong so that we can learn from your mistakes and so get better at what we do.

However, no matter how good we are as teachers, if we do not read , if we never write, if we do not use the internet, if we do not prepare for lessons, if we do no research, if we do not love books, if we do not go to the library, if we do not own books, if we never read poetry aloud, if we never read to your students, if we never read in front of our students, if we don't enjoy language, our learners will not learn to value language and literacy. Learners learn from what we and other adults around them do, not from what we say. Good teachers are also good role models.

References

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