SYSTEMS · GRAMMAR

TEACHING GRAMMAR

What grammar is, what research tells us, and how to teach it

AT A GLANCE

What it involves	helping learners understand and use grammar to make meaning: its form, meaning and use
Teaching grammar means	analysing the language, clarifying it in context, and giving learners plenty of meaningful practice and feedback
Plan it with	the **Presentation – Practice – Production**, **Test – Teach – Test** and **Task-Based Learning** frameworks
Tools	the **Language analysis sheet** and **Grammar map** in the appendices

What is grammar?

Grammar describes how words are combined and changed to make meaning. It is helpful to think of every grammar point in three connected dimensions (Larsen-Freeman 2003).

FORM	MEANING	USE
How it is built: word order, endings, auxiliaries, spelling and pronunciation. **e.g.** *have / has* + past participle: *I've been to Japan.*	What it expresses: time, completion, possibility, obligation and so on. **e.g.** an experience at some point in your life up to now	When and why speakers choose it rather than another form. **e.g.** to introduce an experience, before giving details in the past simple

Grammar is a resource for making meaning, not just a set of rules. Speakers **choose** structures to express what they mean: *I went to Japan* and *I've been to Japan* are both correct, but they say different things.

Grammar and vocabulary

Grammar and vocabulary are not completely separate. Much of what we say is made of **chunks**: fixed or semi-fixed phrases that combine grammar and vocabulary, such as *Have you ever…?*, *I'd rather…* or *If I were you, I'd…*. Learners can often learn and use chunks long before they can analyse the grammar inside them. The **Vocabulary** and **Functional Language** handouts look at this in more detail.

Spoken and written grammar

Spoken grammar has features that written grammar rules often ignore, such as ellipsis (*Seen it?*), heads and tails (*That film, it was brilliant*) and vague language (*and stuff like that*). These are not errors: they are normal in speech, and learners need to understand them, even if they don't always use them (Carter & McCarthy 2006).

What research tells us

The role of grammar teaching has been debated for decades. A useful distinction is between three broad orientations (Long 1991).

	Focus on meaning	Focus on form	Focus on forms
What happens	no attention to grammar; learners acquire it from input and communication	attention to grammar arises during meaning-focused activities, often in response to learners' needs	grammar items are pre-selected and taught one by one
Typical lesson	a communicative task with no language focus	a task followed by a language focus on what learners needed	a planned presentation of an item, then practice
eltMate frameworks	—	Task-Based Learning; Task–Teach–Task; Test–Teach–Test	Presentation – Practice – Production

Can explicit knowledge become ability?

Researchers disagree on whether knowing a rule (**explicit knowledge**) can develop into the ability to use it spontaneously and automatically (**implicit knowledge**).

The **non-interface** position holds that the two are separate: explicit knowledge cannot become implicit knowledge. According to Krashen (1985), acquisition depends on exposure to comprehensible, meaningful input, while consciously learned rules serve mainly to monitor language use.

The **strong interface** position holds that explicit knowledge can become implicit through practice, as learners gradually proceduralise and automatise what they have learned (DeKeyser 2007).

The **weak interface** position takes an intermediate view: explicit knowledge can facilitate the development of implicit knowledge, particularly by helping learners **notice** grammatical features in the input they encounter (Ellis 2015).

Key findings

- **Explicit teaching works.** Large reviews of research show that explicit grammar instruction has substantial and lasting effects (Norris & Ortega 2000; Spada & Tomita 2010), although the effects are usually stronger on controlled tasks than in spontaneous speech.
- **Learners need to notice.** Learners are more likely to acquire grammar they have consciously noticed in input (Schmidt 1990).
- **Learners follow their own route.** Some structures, such as question forms and negatives, are acquired in a fairly fixed order, whatever order they are taught in (Pienemann 1998; Lightbown & Spada 2013).

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR TEACHING

- Teach grammar in context, so learners connect form with meaning.
- Help learners notice grammar, both in planned lessons and when needs arise.
- Give plenty of practice, moving from controlled to communicative.
- Recycle grammar over time: one lesson is rarely enough.
- Expect errors, and see them as a normal part of development.

Analysing a grammar point

Before teaching a grammar point, analyse it carefully. This helps you decide what to teach, anticipate learners' difficulties and answer unexpected questions. A common approach is to analyse **meaning and use**, **form** and **pronunciation**, then predict **problems** and plan **solutions**.

Area	Questions to ask yourself
Meaning and use	What does it mean in this context? When and why do we use it? How will I convey the meaning? Which concept questions will check it?
Form	How is it formed in positive, negative and question forms? Are there irregular forms or spelling changes?
Pronunciation	Are there contractions, weak forms, linking or important stress and intonation?
Problems and solutions	What might learners find difficult, and why (e.g. their first language)? What will I do about it?

Appendix A has a Language analysis sheet you can use, with a worked example for the present perfect.

Approaches to clarification

Deductive approaches start with the **rule**: the teacher (or a grammar box) presents it, and learners apply it to examples. **Inductive** approaches start with **examples**: learners work out the rule from them. Either can be **teacher-led** or **learner-led**.

	Teacher-led	Learner-led
Deductive (rule first)	The teacher explains the rule with examples, then checks understanding.	Learners read a rule in a grammar box and use it to correct or complete examples.
Inductive (examples first)	The teacher writes examples on the board and elicits the rule with concept questions.	Learners analyse examples in a text with a guided discovery task.

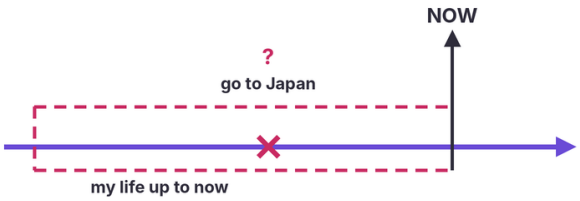
Clarification can also be **planned** (before practice, as in PPP) or **reactive** (in response to what learners needed during an activity, as in Test–Teach–Test and Task-Based Learning). Many lessons combine both.

Clarification in action

An inductive, teacher-led clarification of the **present perfect for experience**, for pre-intermediate learners.

Context and marker sentence

The teacher shows photos from a trip and says: *I love travelling. I've been to Japan, but I've never been to China.* The teacher writes the **marker sentence** on the board: **I've been to Japan.**



A timeline for the present perfect for experience

Concept questions and elicitation

Focus	Teacher asks…	Expected answer
Meaning	*Am I talking about my whole life up to now?*	Yes
	Did I go to Japan?	Yes
	Do you know when I went?	No
	Is the exact time important here?	No
	Am I in Japan now?	No (*been* means I went and came back)
Form	*Which auxiliary verb do we use?*	*have* (*'ve*), *has* with he/she/it
	What form of the main verb?	the past participle: *been, seen, visited*
	How do we ask a question? How do we make it negative?	*Have you ever been…? I haven't been… / I've never been…*
Pronunciation	*Listen: I've been. How many words do you hear?*	the contraction *I've*
Use	*If I want to say when, which tense do I use?*	past simple: *I went there in 2019.*

As learners answer, the teacher builds up the board: the timeline, the form (positive, negative, question, short answers), the contraction and weak forms, and an example of the switch to the past simple. Learners then drill the chunk *Have you ever been to…?* before practice.

A learner-led alternative

The same clarification can be done as a **guided discovery** task: learners read a short dialogue about travel experiences and answer questions such as *Do we know when the speakers went? Which tense do they use when they give details?* See the **Guided Discovery** handout. For writing concept questions and drawing timelines, see **Conveying Meaning and Checking Understanding**.

Rules of thumb

Learners often need simplified rules. Swan (1994) suggests that a good teaching rule should meet several criteria.

Criterion	What it means	Example
Truth	A simplified rule should still be true.	*Use* "some" *in positive sentences and* "any" *in questions* is untrue: *Would you like some tea?* Better: *Use* "some" *when you expect or offer a positive answer.*
Demarcation	It should show where the rule applies and where it doesn't.	*Use the present perfect for the past* is too broad. Better: *...for experiences, when the time isn't stated or important.*
Clarity	It should be easy to understand.	Avoid technical terms learners don't know.
Simplicity	It should cover the main pattern, not every exception at once.	Teach the most common uses first; add exceptions later.
Familiarity	It should use concepts learners already know.	Relate a new rule to one learners already know, or to their first language.
Relevance	It should answer the question learners actually have.	Focus on the specific error learners make, not everything about the structure.

Practice and feedback

Clarification is only the first step: learners need plenty of practice, moving from controlled to communicative, in the same context.

Mechanical	Meaningful	Communicative
Complete sentences with the present perfect of the verbs in brackets.	Write three true sentences and one false sentence about your experiences.	"Find someone who...": ask classmates about their experiences, add follow-up questions in the past simple, and decide who has had the most adventurous life.

Give more immediate correction during controlled practice, and mostly delayed feedback during communicative practice. See the **Practice Activities** and **Error Correction** handouts.

Choosing a lesson shape

If learners...	Consider	Why
know little about the grammar point	**Presentation – Practice – Production**	clarification before practice gives them a clear starting point
have met it but don't use it accurately	**Test – Teach – Test**	you teach only what they need
need to communicate, and grammar needs will emerge	**Task-Based Learning**	grammar is taught in response to the task

Making it work

Know the grammar before you teach it

Analyse the grammar point and check a reliable grammar reference. You'll be better prepared for learners' questions and less likely to give misleading rules.

Meaning before form

Establish and check the meaning and use of a structure before analysing its form. Learners need to know why they would use a structure before they need to know how to build it.

Teach what learners need, not everything

Match the depth of your clarification to the lesson aims and learners' level. Teaching everything about a grammar point at once can overwhelm learners.

Keep a communicative goal

Teaching a structure for its own sake has limited value. Aim for learners to be able to do something with it, such as talk about their travel experiences.

Short clarification, plenty of practice

Keep clarification focused, and spend most of the lesson on practice and feedback.

Teach in response to needs

Coursebooks present grammar in a fixed order, but learning isn't linear. Keep a record of learners' common errors and plan some lessons in response to them.

Common pitfalls

Pitfall	What to do instead
Grammar is presented with no context.	Present grammar in a situation, with a marker sentence.
The teacher lectures on the rules.	Elicit with concept questions or use a guided discovery task.
Form is taught before meaning.	Establish meaning and use first.
Rules are oversimplified to the point of being wrong.	Check rules against Swan's criteria and a grammar reference.
Clarification takes most of the lesson.	Keep it focused, and leave plenty of time for practice.
Practice stops at controlled exercises.	Move on to meaningful and communicative practice.
The teacher expects accuracy after one lesson.	Recycle grammar in later lessons, and expect errors as part of learning.

ONLINE CLASSES

Prepare the context, marker sentence and timeline on slides, and build up the analysis with annotation tools. Use polls or the chat for quick concept-checking questions, and a shared document for guided discovery tasks.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Every grammar point has form, meaning and use; grammar is a resource for making meaning.
- Explicit teaching helps, but learners need to notice, practise and meet grammar again over time.
- Analyse a grammar point before teaching it: meaning and use, form, pronunciation, problems and solutions.
- Clarification can be deductive or inductive, teacher-led or learner-led, planned or reactive.
- Keep clarification short and practice long, with a communicative goal.

WHERE NEXT

Presentation – Practice – Production, Test – Teach – Test (frameworks) planning a grammar lesson
PPP, T-T-T and TBLT (methodology) the approaches behind them
Conveying Meaning and Checking Understanding concept questions and timelines
Guided Discovery learner-led clarification
Practice Activities from controlled to communicative practice
Error Correction feedback on grammar errors

Grammar books for teachers

Carter, R. & McCarthy, M. (2006). *Cambridge Grammar of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Collins COBUILD (2017). *English Grammar* (4th ed.). London: HarperCollins.

Leech, G., Cruickshank, B. & Ivanič, R. (2001). *An A–Z of English Grammar and Usage* (2nd ed.). Harlow: Longman.

Parrott, M. (2010). *Grammar for English Language Teachers* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swan, M. (2016). *Practical English Usage* (4th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Grammar activities and games

Gerngross, G., Puchta, H. & Thornbury, S. (2006). *Teaching Grammar Creatively*. Rum: Helbling Languages.

Hadfield, J. (2003). *Intermediate Grammar Games*. Harlow: Pearson Education.

Hall, N. & Shepheard, J. (1991). *The Anti-Grammar Grammar Book*. Harlow: Longman.

Obee, B. (1999). *The Grammar Activity Book*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rinvolucri, M. (1984). *Grammar Games*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thornbury, S. (2006). *Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ur, P. (2009). *Grammar Practice Activities* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zaorob, M.L. & Chin, E. (2001). *Games for Grammar Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

References and further reading

DeKeyser, R. (Ed.). (2007). *Practice in a Second Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ellis, R. (2015). *Understanding Second Language Acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Krashen, S.D. (1985). *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*. London: Longman.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2003). *Teaching Language: From Grammar to Grammaring*. Boston: Heinle.

Lightbown, P.M. & Spada, N. (2013). *How Languages Are Learned* (4th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Long, M.H. (1991). Focus on form: A design feature in language teaching methodology. In K. de Bot, R. Ginsberg & C. Kramsch (Eds.), *Foreign Language Research in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (pp. 39–52). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Nassaji, H. & Fotos, S. (2011). *Teaching Grammar in Second Language Classrooms*. New York: Routledge.

Norris, J.M. & Ortega, L. (2000). Effectiveness of L2 instruction: A research synthesis and quantitative meta-analysis. *Language Learning*, 50(3), 417–528.

Pienemann, M. (1998). *Language Processing and Second Language Development: Processability Theory*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Schmidt, R.W. (1990). The role of consciousness in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 11(2), 129–158.

Scrivener, J. (2010). *Teaching English Grammar: What to Teach and How to Teach It*. London: Macmillan Education.

Spada, N. & Tomita, Y. (2010). Interactions between type of instruction and type of language feature: A meta-analysis. *Language Learning*, 60(2), 263–308.

Swan, M. (1994). Design criteria for pedagogic language rules. In M. Bygate, A. Tonkyn & E. Williams (Eds.), *Grammar and the Language Teacher* (pp. 45–55). Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.

Thornbury, S. (1999). *How to Teach Grammar*. Harlow: Longman.

Thornbury, S. (2001). *Uncovering Grammar*. Oxford: Macmillan Heinemann.

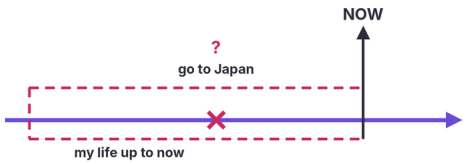
Appendix A · Language analysis sheet

Use this sheet to analyse a grammar point before you teach it. The same sheet, slightly adapted, is used in the other Systems handouts.

Template

Target language	*the structure and the marker sentence you will use*
Context	*the situation in which you will present it*
Meaning and use	*what it means in this context; when and why we use it*
Concept questions	*three to five short questions, with answers, that check the meaning*
Visual support	*a timeline, picture or diagram*
Form	*positive, negative, question, short answers; irregular forms and spelling*
Pronunciation	*contractions, weak forms, linking, stress, intonation (with phonemic script)*
Problems and solutions	*what learners may find difficult, and what you will do*

Worked example · The present perfect for experience

Target language	present perfect for life experiences **I've been to Japan.**
Context	The teacher talks about places they have travelled to.
Meaning and use	an experience at some point in the speaker's life up to now; the time isn't stated or isn't important often used with *ever*, *never* and *before* often introduces a topic; details follow in the past simple (*I went there in 2019. It was amazing.*)
Concept questions	*Am I talking about my life up to now?* (Yes) *Do you know when I went?* (No) *Is the exact time important?* (No) *Am I in Japan now?* (No)
Visual support	
Form	**Positive:** subject + *have / has* + past participle: *I've been. She's visited.* **Negative:** *haven't / hasn't* + past participle, or *never* + past participle: *I haven't been. I've never been.* **Question:** *Have / Has* + subject + (*ever*) + past participle: *Have you ever been…?* **Short answers:** *Yes, I have. / No, I haven't.*
Pronunciation	contractions: *I've* /aɪv/, *she's* /ʃiːz/ weak form of *have* in questions: *Have you ever…?* /həv juː/; strong form in short answers: /hæv/ main stress: *Have you EVer been to jaPAN?*

Problems and solutions	**Finished time:** *I've been to Japan last year.* Learners whose first language uses a similar form for finished past events (e.g. French, Italian, German) may over-use it. → CCQ *Do we know when?* Contrast with the past simple on a timeline. **Been or gone:** *He's gone to Japan* (he's there now) vs *He's been to Japan* (he came back). → CCQ *Is he there now?* with pictures. **Past participles:** *I've ate sushi.* → Board a list of common irregular past participles; practise them. **Missing auxiliary:** *I been to Japan.* → Highlight *have* in the form; drill the contracted chunk *I've been*. **Pronunciation:** no contractions or weak forms, which sounds unnatural. → Drill *I've been* and *Have you ever…?* as chunks.

Appendix B · Grammar map for teachers

A compact overview of key grammar terms and areas. For full descriptions, see the grammar books listed above.

Word classes

Class	Main types	Examples
Nouns	countable, uncountable; common, proper	*book, advice, London*
Verbs	main verbs; auxiliary verbs (*be, have, do*); modal verbs	*work, is, has, can, should*
Adjectives	describe nouns; comparative and superlative forms	*small, smaller, the smallest*
Adverbs	manner, frequency, degree, time and place; linking adverbs	*quickly, often, very, however*
Pronouns	personal, possessive, reflexive, relative, demonstrative	*she, mine, myself, who, this*
Determiners	articles, demonstratives, possessives, quantifiers	*a, the, this, my, some, many*
Prepositions	time, place, movement; dependent prepositions	*at, in, into, depend on*
Conjunctions	coordinating; subordinating	*and, but, or, so; because, although, when, if*

Sentence elements and patterns

Element	What it does	Example
Subject (S)	who or what the sentence is about	**She** works in Tokyo.
Verb (V)	the action or state	She **works** in Tokyo.
Object (O)	who or what is affected by the verb	She bought **a car**.
Complement (C)	describes the subject or object	She is **a teacher**. They made her **happy**.
Adverbial (A)	adds information about time, place, manner, etc.	She works **in Tokyo**.

Common patterns: **SV** *She laughed.* · **SVO** *I ate an apple.* · **SVC** *I am hungry.* · **SVA** *He lives in Rome.* · **SVOO** *She gave me a book.* · **SVOC** *They elected her president.* · **SVOA** *Put it on the table.* English word order is fairly fixed (SVO); many languages, such as Japanese or Turkish, place the verb at the end (SOV).

Tense and aspect

English has two tenses marked on the verb (**present** and **past**) and two aspects (**continuous** and **perfect**), which combine to give eight forms. Future time is expressed in several ways, including *will*, *going to* and the present continuous.

	Simple	Continuous	Perfect	Perfect continuous
Present	*I work*	*I am working*	*I have worked*	*I have been working*
Past	*I worked*	*I was working*	*I had worked*	*I had been working*
Future (*will*)	*I will work*	*I will be working*	*I will have worked*	*I will have been working*

Other key areas

Area	What it covers	Examples
Voice	active and passive	*They built the bridge in 1990. / The bridge was built in 1990.*
Modality	ability, permission, obligation, advice, possibility, certainty	*can, could, must, have to, should, might, may*
Conditionals	real and hypothetical situations	*If it rains, we'll stay in. / If I had time, I'd help. / If I'd known, I'd have come.*
Questions and negatives	auxiliary inversion, *do*-support, question words	*Do you like it? Where does she work? I don't know.*
Reported speech	reporting what people said or asked	*She said she was tired. He asked if I was coming.*
Relative clauses	adding information about a noun	*The woman who lives next door is a doctor.*
Sentence types	simple, compound and complex sentences	*I was tired. / I was tired, so I left. / I left because I was tired.*