Teaching Grammar Creatively

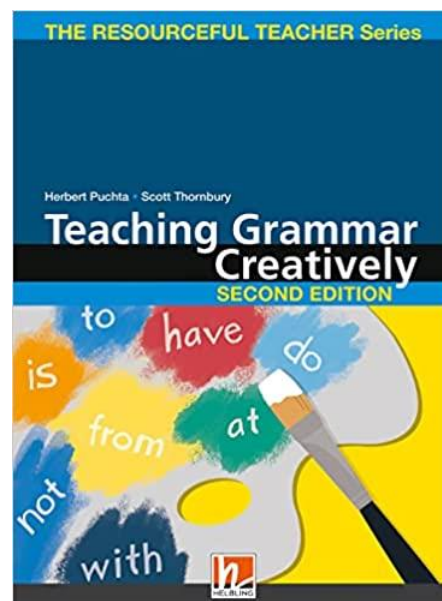(2nd edition)
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The question of an effective approach to teaching grammar remains one of the most frequently voiced concerns among language teachers, and still leads to heated debates among educators. We, the authors of this review, both language teachers at the tertiary educational level, but residing in widely distant geographical locations - Ella from Uzbekistan and Valeria from Ecuador -, have been engaged in teaching grammar and continue to reflect on our experiences of how grammar was taught to us and how we think it should be taught today. Therefore, we welcomed the opportunity to review the book *Teaching Grammar Creatively* (2nd ed.) as our beliefs about grammar instruction are in line with the principles presented in the book, namely, that the creative use of language makes the learning experience not only more engaging and enjoyable, but also activates parts of linguistic proficiency that traditional approaches do not reach.

Ella's experience

As a beginning language learner, I had to juggle two separate worlds of English. One was populated by a series of grammar exercises and rules that my teacher produced from a thick grammar textbook, just like a magician pulls out cards from his sleeve. The other was a tapestry of Disney stories, songs, and films that spoke "different" English, clearly not the one I practiced in my English lessons. These two universes ran parallel for quite a while and, at some point, made me question the very value of learning grammar because, regardless of how good I was at gap fills and sentence-level exercises, my knowledge of grammar rules didn't help me to make grammatically correct choices when it came to their meaningful application. Many years passed till I discovered that grammar can be taught through a different approach, one that equips learners with skills that not only enable them to reproduce certain patterns accurately, but also makes it possible for them to use language forms creatively and meaningfully. This is exactly the way grammar was taught in the 1st edition of the book by Gerngross, Puchta, and Thornbury *Teaching Grammar Creatively* (2006), which I had the good fortune to discover when teaching a grammar course to my teacher-trainees a few years ago.

Valeria's experience

Writing out endless pages of grammar rules and using translation were common assignments during my high school life. In fact, grammatical structures would be presented as the first stage of the lesson followed by more repetition and translation, which sparked no interest in learners at all. In my pre-service years as a teacher, *grammar* was intended to be taught in context, however, the only resources used at that time were books which mostly included non-contextualized grammar patterns. This resulted in a mismatch: while I did learn the grammar rules, I was unable to use the language in conversations. It was not until I found out that language can be taught through the use of authentic materials and in creative ways that I myself became more successful in producing the language.

Approaches to grammar teaching and learning

Over the long history of language teaching, grammar instruction has undergone several cycles of metamorphosis from being the core of language learning *per se* to being rejected as a focus of explicit attention in the classroom. Approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) suggest that teaching needs to be focused on meaning rather than on form and that grammar needs to be implicitly presented in L2 input. Conversely, some authors argue that "language learning can't be imagined without grammar, and it has an equal role to other skills…" in the learning process (Matkasimova & Makhmudov, 2020, p. 95). Recognized as being complementary rather than mutually exclusive, different approaches to teaching grammar have found some reconciliation in their practical implementation in the classroom. Eventually, it is language teachers' views of grammar that will play a decisive role in how to integrate form-focused instruction to foster their learners' ability to communicate meaningfully and in a contextually appropriate manner (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011).

Herbert Puchta and Scott Thornbury introduce this new edition of the book by reviewing the most significant current approaches that have inspired them to create their carefully designed collection of lessons. They highlight the importance of "internalization and retrieval of [language]" using "playful, imaginative and creative functions" (p. 8) in order to activate language production, making this process more meaningful for L2 learners.

The aim of this volume is clearly stated: to provide English language learners with creative and fun lessons through the use of their imagination allowing students to rediscover the language by themselves. According to Alcaraz (2018), this discovery process is activated when students' motivation is ignited. Thus, learners' anxiety is reduced, which enables them to communicate their thoughts in L2. Each chapter presents lessons based on the *discovery learning* approach and creates a space in which students analyze grammar rules by themselves, simultaneously enhancing the use of higher-order thinking skills, such as reflecting, experimenting, and exploring.

Book structure

Chapter 1 is organized around acquiring grammar through prefabricated pieces of language, such as chunks, phrases, and functional patterns which contribute to the realization of communicative competence and prime learners to communicate with greater ease in real-life situations. Out of a variety of speech acts and functions, the authors focus on 18 of the most frequent ones that can be easily combined and sequenced with other phrases to build more complex patterns. The holistic approach to modeling grammar, as noted by the authors of the book, does not exclude the knowledge of the rules behind the patterns, but aims to boost "the internalization and retrieval of a repertoire of fragments and patterns" (p. 6) in genuine communicative situations.

Chapter 2 includes units focusing on the basic use of tenses followed by modal verbs, perfect forms, and the passive voice. In the initial, exploratory stage of each lesson, students are asked to work in a safe space where they are able to analyze and internalize the language for later production. Equally importantly, each lesson enhances students' imagination and creativity by introducing the structure in question by using stories, puzzles, riddles, and text skeletons. For example, Lesson 2.9, whose aim is to present the past passive, introduces the structure by using attention-grabbing headlines from imaginary newspapers such as "Frog kissed by princess" or "Grandmother eaten by a wolf" and then asks learners to recognize which tales or stories they refer to. This connects students' previous knowledge and memory to L2 input.

While units in Chapter 3 (like all lessons in the book) can be covered in any order, the distinctive element of this chapter is that the units are arranged following the progression from simple to more complex structures. Throughout the chapter, the authors utilize different learning strategies (cognitive, affective, and metacognitive) to enhance learning and foster *internalization* of the grammar items. There are activities that engage students in the critical evaluation of ideas, building associations, and making topic-related predictions. To reduce the cognitive workload, students' learning is scaffolded by various question grids and frames which help them to succeed and experience a sense of accomplishment. The grids can be easily modified and integrated into

other content and structures. Many activities are designed for pair and group work to encourage linguistic risk-taking when students practice new grammar items (Griffiths & Slavkov, 2021).

Chapter 4 foregrounds more complex structures which are directed at intermediate learners (A2 to B2 in CEFR). This unit presents longer model texts that provide students with broader contexts of language use. Also, an emotional connection, as an essential characteristic, is added to the lead-in stages of the lessons. This means the utilization of the tenets of Affective Pedagogy, namely, the application of teaching techniques that connect L2 input to learners' emotional states (Ainsworth & Bell, 2020). Owing to the emotional involvement created, language can be more easily memorized or related to students' previous knowledge. The purpose is to emphasize meaning-focused input activities in which students are exposed to vocabulary that can later be used in conversations.

Ella's favorite activity

Out of the dozens of ingenious activities suggested by the book, I would like to highlight my teaching experience with Unit 2.11 presenting the "*used to*" structure. I taught this lesson to a group of teacher-trainees, who reflected upon the activities from both perspectives, namely, as language teachers and language learners. Their feedback confirmed that the unit is a perfect match of a grammar item and a specific content. The topic "childhood memories" was found highly favorable to *noticing* the form-meaning relationship that is afforded further on by a model text. The *True-False statements* activity, as reported by my students, allowed them enough thinking time that, in its turn, helped them relate to the form on a personal level and furthered their production of samples with the target structure without much effort.

However, the *Students' Choice Award* was given to a poem writing activity which, due to the template provided in the lesson, had never been so easy, engaging, and rewarding before. The provision of a template, also referred to by the authors as a *"skeleton",* proved to be a highly versatile scaffolding tool across the book, and served as a trampoline for students' creative language use in this unit in particular, allowing them to focus on self-expression. Finally, the reciting of their poems in small groups enhanced a better memorization of the structure in context.

Valeria's favorite activity

Teaching complex patterns of grammar and keeping students connected have often represented a challenge for me. Lesson 4.5 (Session B) has a special appeal to me, and the first thing that captivated my attention was the unique aim of this lesson: "To make students *aware of sensory areas* and their own use of *preferences* for certain ones" (p. 225). This learner-centered lesson introduces the use of *gerund -ing* forms and proposes a unique opportunity to connect previous knowledge to learners' sensory experiences allowing them to connect language to either visual, auditory, kinesthetic, gustatory, or olfactory skills. Students are provided with a template in order to recognize the sensory feeling when hearing a vocabulary word from the teacher's list, such as a mother, a bunch of flowers, pop music, a chocolate bar, etc. Then, learners are guided to connect their ideas to the grammar objective by using language prompts, "Listening to … makes me think of…" "Hearing, touching, etc.". Finally, students are provided with text skeletons to reinforce the language presented using their own information.

In conclusion

Unlike the 1st edition, the second edition of the book, which includes a lot of teacher support materials, is available in a digital format and is fully accessible through Helbling's online platform any time. As highlighted by the authors themselves, the current volume pays special attention to the activities in Section B, which seek to enhance creativity in the language production stage, and thus involve a greater range of topics, modalities, and skills to be used. Altogether, *Teaching Grammar Creatively* is an exceptional teaching resource that focuses on a holistic approach to teaching grammar and equips teachers with effective hands-on solutions to help them fuel students' interest, and to attend to grammatical forms as a means of self-expression. The book is also highly recommended as a compendium of reflective and collaborative activities that nurture learners'

sense of ownership over the learning process and help them monitor and better plan their further learning progress.

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