# Using Age-appropriate Games and Activities to Facilitate Grammar Learning and Teaching

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## Introduction

As suggested in the English Language Curriculum Guide (Curriculum Development Council [CDC], 2017), the task-based approach should be adopted as it encourages the learning and teaching of grammar in context. With the adoption of a task-based approach, apart from making effective use of meaningful and purposeful tasks in the while-task stage, teachers can design meaningful and learner-centered activities in the pre-task stage to prepare students for accomplishing the tasks and to clarify and reinforce the concepts about the use of the target language items and structures in the post-task stage. In this sharing session cum workshop, some age-appropriate games and activities will be shared with participants and how these games and activities can be conducted to facilitate the learning and teaching of grammar will be explained. Participants will also have a chance to take part in the games and activities and gain hands-on experience in designing their own ones.

## Learning and teaching grammar in Hong Kong

According to the curriculum guidelines (CDC, 2004; CDC, 2017), task-based language teaching (TBLT) is recommended to help students in primary and secondary schools learn and use English for purposeful communication through meaningful and contextualized tasks and activities. However, it has been found that the more traditional Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP) model is still being used in Hong Kong language classrooms (Carless, 2009). Teaching and learning activities structured in a PPP model involve presenting a grammar item in the form of a rule or function explicitly, practising the item in a relatively controlled manner and using the target form in a freer and more communicative context (Richards & Renandya, 2002).

The reasons why teachers are in favour of this teaching methodology are multifold. First of all, it not only allows the teacher to control the content and pace of the lesson (Thornbury, 1999), but also provides teachers with a clear instructional role in the classroom (Skehan, 2003). In addition, a study carried out by Carless (2009) found that PPP was more understandable and manageable in the view of those interviewed teachers. They also perceived direct grammar instructions as a more effective method than task-based language teaching. However, PPP has been criticized by academics for its limitations. One issue associated with this mode of teaching is that it has the main features of a deductive approach. Lessons based

on PPP can be very teacher-centered and such method does not easily fit with more humanistic frameworks (Harmer, 2007). Another concern that has been raised is that decontextualized and meaningless drills are heavily relied upon in this strategy (Wong & Van Patten, 2003). Apart from these, there have been doubts over the effectiveness of direct explanation of grammar rules or structures and repetitive drilling on the acquisition of the language (Ritchie, 2003). As Carless sees it, "a key risk in PPP is that it is superficially attractive, but not leading to long-term acquisition of the target grammatical forms" (Carless, 2009, p.63).

## Myths about grammar learning and teaching

Despite having discussed the disadvantages of PPP, it is not right to say that teachers should not employ activities involving presenting grammar explicitly or providing controlled practice for students. As suggested by Thornbury (1999), it is sometimes appropriate for teachers to present grammar explicitly with a deductive or rule-driven approach. This view indeed echoes the recommendation in the Curriculum Guide:

"Depending on the age of the learners and their cognitive development, teachers may decide to introduce a small number of useful and not overly complex grammar rules and terms to help them develop a conscious understanding of the language forms they are using" (CDC, p.160)

Therefore, direct grammar instruction may not be necessarily undesirable or ineffective in all contexts, but it is definitely a myth that it is a must for teachers to explain grammar rules explicitly with metalanguage or PowerPoint presentations each time when grammar is introduced. The Curriculum Guide (CDC, 2004) points out that it is not always useful for learners to internalize the forms through formal explanation and memorization. Instead, teachers should provide students with an opportunity to work language patterns and rules out for themselves from time to time. The advantages of encouraging learners to uncover rules using an inductive approach include (Thornbury, 1999, p.54):

- Rules learners discover for themselves are more likely to fit their existing mental structures than rules they have been presented with. This in turn will make the rules more meaningful, memorable, and serviceable.
- The mental effort involved ensures a greater degree of cognitive depth which, again, ensures greater memorability.
- Students are more actively involved in the learning process, rather than being simply passive recipients: they are therefore likely to be more attentive and more motivated.
- Working things out for themselves prepares students for greater self-reliance and is

therefore conducive to learner autonomy.

Another myth concerning grammar learning and teaching is that teachers think practising a lot of grammar exercises and repetitions drills can help students master the target grammar structures. Teachers may feel more confident and comfortable about the more traditional drills (Nazari & Allahyar, 2012); however, drills, especially meaningless and decontextualized ones, have been considered to be ineffective, failing to engage students in conveying meaning through language (Larsen-Freeman, 2014).

From the discussion above, it is obvious that learning and teaching grammar in context is important for effective language learning to take place. This is in line with what is recommended in the Curriculum Guide (2017): grammar is best learnt in meaningful contexts and it should be regarded as a means to convey meaning rather than merely a set of items and rules.

## Place of grammar teaching in TBLT

To allow students to learn grammar in meaningful contexts and avoid them from decontextualized drills, task-based learning has been promoted in primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong. The task-based approach encourages learning and teaching grammar in context as it provides language learners with a meaningful and purposeful context to use the language effectively to complete a task. There are three stages in task-based grammar teaching as follows (CDC, 2017):

In the pre-task stage, teachers can help students practise the forms and functions of the target language items and structures through exercises or activities before completing the task. In the while-task stage, students apply their grammatical knowledge through making meaningful use of the target language items and structures to complete a contextualized task. In the post-task stage, extended tasks can be used to clarify and reinforce concepts about the use of the target language items and structures in new contexts.

The above explains that teachers can actually conduct appropriate pre-task, while-task and post-task activities to ensure that learners can learn, practise and consolidate the target language through completing the task. This can dispel the myth that teachers should not teach students grammar when using a task-based approach. In Thornbury's discussion on the task-based approach, he put forward that "a focus on form does not necessarily mean a return to drill-and-repeat type methods of teaching. Nor does it mean the use of an off-the-shelf grammar syllabus" (Thornbury, 1999, p.24). What teachers should not do is to teach grammar through a heavy concentration on decontextualized and meaningless

drills. Instead, students should be given ample opportunities to apply their knowledge of grammar in meaningful communication so that they can gain a better understanding of when, why and how to use particular language items and structures.

## Characteristics of young learners

When teaching grammar to young learners, one aspect of learning and teaching in primary education has always been overlooked by teachers. The characteristics and learning styles of young learners have often not been taken into consideration

Harmer (2007) explains that young learners not only learn from explanation but also from interaction. He also points out that young learners can easily get bored because they have a short attention span. Moreover, Slattery and Willis (2001) describe young learners as curious, imaginative, and playful. Based on these characteristics, it is not difficult to understand why young learners find English lessons with a heavy focus on explanations and drills off-putting.

## Advantages of engaging games and activities

There are numerous reasons why engaging games and activities should be used in the language classroom. First of all, according to the Curriculum Guide (CDC, 2004), young learners have an amazing ability to learn language through play. Therefore, purposeful and interesting games can be used to allow young learners to play with language and explore it in a meaningful and enjoyable context. They can also be used to help students practice target grammar items, structures and the language for interaction, through which students are prepared to carry out a task that they are going to work on. Furthermore, interesting games and activities are motivating and they provide opportunities for young learners to gain a sense of involvement and achievement (Khan, 1996) and a context for meaningful communication (Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 2005). The elements of fun and interactivity are indeed very crucial for effective learning among young learners. Therefore, there is a need to include engaging games and activities when conducting unit or modular planning. As suggested by Tütünis (2012), in order to make L2 grammar teaching effective, teachers need to try hard to make their classes fun and interesting.

## Using age-appropriate games and activities in Chung Sing School

Teachers from Chung Sing School believe that classroom learning plays a significant role in student learning. They are well aware of the problems of teacher-centered lessons in which grammar rules are directly presented and mechanical drills and meaningless repetitions are dominant. They also contend that a variety of teaching approaches and methods should be used to make grammar

learning effective and interesting. Therefore, they aspire to provide a better environment conducive to more effective learning through designing and using student-centered and meaningful games and activities to scaffold students to complete purposeful tasks.

Instead of blindly following the textbooks, teachers in Chung Sing School design activities and tasks with reference to the textbooks as well as other teaching resources. Teachers organize learning units or modules by themes and set clear learning objectives for each unit or module. Backward planning is adopted to ensure that students learn progressively to achieve the learning objectives set out. A unit framework is developed for each unit to organise the teaching sequence and a range of scaffolding tasks such as exercises, games and activities is interspersed with the speaking and writing tasks, which are designed to help students apply what they have learned. Grammar is intended to be taught in context and is dealt with in the pre-task stage, while-task stage and post-task stage. Through teachers' observation, students enjoyed learning through the games and activities they designed and they greatly enhanced students' learning motivation and participation in the classroom. Students were engaged in these activities, which helped them learn and consolidate the target grammar items more effectively.

## Highlights of the sharing session cum workshop

The first part of the sharing session will briefly recap the key concepts of task-based learning and explain how activities and tasks can be developed into a unit or module of work with reference to a textbook unit. An overview of how activities and tasks should be sequenced in the pre-task stage, while-task stage and post-task stage will also be shown. However, instead of focusing too much on how to develop a unit of work, emphasis will be placed on what kind of games and activities can be employed in the pre-task stage and post-task stage to facilitate the learning and teaching of grammar. A range of games and activities will be shared and the rationales behind using them will be explained.

For instance, in a module where P.3 students needed to complete a task of writing a diary entry on a particular day, teachers used meaningful games and activities in the pre-task stage to prepare students for the writing task. To begin with, teachers first provided an opportunity for guided noticing by giving students a diary entry in which the simple past was used. Students were asked to be language detectives to find the examples of verbs in the simple past in the diary entry and were guided to examine and observe the functions of the simple past. This noticing activity not only raises students' awareness of the past tense form, but also how grammar works at a textual level (Richards & Reppen, 2014). After exposing students to the target language item in a meaningful context, teachers drew students' attention to different spelling patterns of verbs in the simple past found in the diary entry. Instead of explicitly explaining the spelling rules, teachers engaged students in a categorization game where they had to group the given past tense verbs into different categories according to their spelling patterns. Students had to deduce the spelling rules of the verbs in the

simple past through observing the characteristics of the given words themselves before the teacher's explanation. After the categorization game, students were provided with another matching activity which aims to help them consolidate the spelling rules that they had learned. Apart from focusing on the spelling patterns of different verbs, teachers also enhanced students' awareness of pronouncing different sounds of verbs in the simple past using the same method. After that, students were engaged in other activities to learn and practise using the simple past and develop the four skills in an integrated and purposeful way before they completed the main task of writing a diary entry. To reinforce the learning of the simple past tense, teachers designed an activity named "Spot the Errors" in the post-task stage by using the common errors made by students in their diary entries. Students had to work in pairs to discuss and decide if the sentences extracted from their classmates' work were correct or not. Students were engaged as the more correct answers they got, the higher scores they would get. The activity was followed by teachers' debriefing, providing another opportunity for teachers to clarify the concepts about the use of the simple past. Through all these games, activities and tasks, the link between the form, meaning and use of the simple past were made known to students.

In this sharing session cum workshop, a range of interesting and meaningful games and activities focusing on various grammar items and structures will be shared and participants will have a chance to take part in some of these games and activities and experience learning grammar in a fun-filled context. They will also gain hands-on experience in designing engaging games and activities that suit their students.

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