

From Trash to Treasure: Grammar Practice for the Malaysian ESL Learners

DE LA CORBELLE JUSQU'AU TRESOR: PRATIQUE DE GRAMMAIRE POUR LES APPRENANT D'ANGLAIS DE LA SECONDE DU MALAISIE

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Abstract

Learning of the English grammar has always been a challenging task particularly for students at the national-type schools in Malaysia. Often, these learners are not competent as they do not communicate in English language except during their English lessons merely because English is not their first language. Hence, it is the responsibility of the teachers to prepare appropriate grammar resources to gauge the varying needs of students with different learning styles. This paper therefore seeks to share with classroom practitioners several tested workable grammar activities using "throw-away" materials to help learners overcome their inhibitions in learning grammar. The results indicated that such teaching approach was indeed an effective strategy which brought about a "stress-free" environment and help build learners' self-confidence in learning English grammar. This paper would be handy to ESL teachers who crave for creativity and innovation in their pedagogical approach.

Key words: Grammar; Throw-away materials; Communicative language teaching

Résumé

Apprentissage de la grammaire anglaise a toujours été une tâche difficile surtout pour les élèves dans les écoles de type national en Malaisie. Souvent, ces apprenants

ne sont pas compétents car ils ne communiquent pas en anglais, sauf pendant leurs cours d'anglais simplement parce que l'anglais n'est pas leur première langue. Ainsi, il est de la responsabilité des enseignants pour préparer les ressources de grammaire appropriée pour évaluer les besoins différents des élèves ayant des styles d'apprentissage différents. Ce document cherche donc à partager avec plusieurs praticiens de la classe testée activités réalisables en utilisant la grammaire "jetable" du matériel pour aider les apprenants à surmonter leurs inhibitions en apprentissage de la grammaire. Les résultats ont indiqué que l'approche de cet enseignement était en effet une stratégie efficace qui a entraîné un "sans stress" environnement et aider à construire des apprenants confiance en soi en apprentissage de la grammaire anglaise. Ce document serait utile pour les enseignants d'anglais langue seconde qui ont soif de créativité et d'innovation dans leur approche pédagogique.

Mots clés: Grammaire; Matériaux jetables; Enseignement du langage communicatif

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INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian National Type schools basically, the Tamil and Chinese schools have different curriculum designs and syllabuses as compared to the national schools outlined by the Ministry of Education. In these two conforming schools, the medium of instruction are Tamil and Chinese except for the Malay and the English language. Malay is the national language and therefore more emphasis is given in these schools compared to English which is

the second official language in Malaysia. The English Language is only given three periods per week so the number of teaching hours in Tamil schools is merely limited to the classroom. With less allocation of hours for English means the students will have less practice in the English language. This is even more prevalent in the aspect of grammar. Teaching of English especially in the national-type schools, in this case Tamil schools, would definitely be a challenge to the teachers teaching the Tamil students since the mother tongue is more encouraged and extensively used in these schools.

We often hear of teachers in the national-type schools commenting about students' lack of interests and not being motivated to learn the English language. This is even more apparent when students find difficulty in relating learning to the real world; the result will be that the students become disinterested in understanding the content of the lesson (Rajendran, 2007). Hence, teachers have to constantly seek out for effective techniques that can provide variety in the classroom and at the same time, sustain the interest of the learners, especially for the teaching of grammar which is a very important aspect of language learning. Ellis, R. (2002) asserts that the teacher should provide learners with authentic discourse samples to demonstrate all the contextually dependent grammatical rules.

When grammar is taught and practiced as a means of communication, rather than as a means for correcting the mechanics and surface accuracy of sentences, it becomes more meaningful and therefore a more inspiring focus for classroom learning. Pennington (2002) proposed "action grammar" in which grammars of language should meet real use: "it must be interactive in nature and relative to specific discourse communication and their communicative practices". Musthafa (2001) suggested that teachers should not only make explicit the objectives that they want their students to achieve from learning activities, but also consider relevant materials that will help students to focus their attention to learning. Thus, the grammar activities designed in this study are believed to have the ability to enhance students' awareness through realistic contexts and resourceful activities which allow them to express themselves more precisely as they intend in more diverse types of discourse. The activities also present language teachers a wealth of ideas to inspire learners' interest and sustain their attention in the long-term process of acquiring grammatical knowledge and skills in English hence, helping to make grammar instruction more valuable and enjoyable.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has served as a major source of influence on language teaching

practice around the world since its inception in the 1970s (Richards, 2001). Through this approach, learners are taught not only to manipulate the structures of the language but also to develop strategies for relating these structures to their communicative functions in real life situations. In communicative approach, language is used to carry out meaningful tasks or activities that involve real communication. Consequently, learning activities are chosen according to how well they engage the learner in authentic language use. According to Littlewood, (1984) communicative activities provide learners with 'whole-task practice' in the classroom through various kinds of activities, structured in order to suit the learners' level of ability.

Hence, with the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), many textbooks have been written to integrate communicative activities, authentic materials and personalized contexts. Nonetheless, where the teaching and learning of grammar is concerned, most textbooks do not emulate the aim of the communicative curriculum. An analysis of the KBSM English Form Four (Noor Azlina Yunus & Spykerman, A., 1996) demonstrates that large portion of the grammar activities still characterise the conventional pattern rather than conforming to the standards of the communicative syllabus.

The advent of communicative language teaching has a tremendous impact on the way language should be taught and learned. It is therefore very important for linguists and language educators to critically evaluate the status of grammar in language teaching. Language teachers should shift towards a more communicative approach of teaching grammar because the goal of teaching is to develop the ability for communication (Celce-Murcia, 1991). Yalden (1987:61) summarized the essence of CLT thus:

"It is based on the notion of the learners as communicators, naturally endowed with the ability to learn languages. It seeks to provide learners with the target language system. It is assumed that learners will have to prepare to use the target language (orally and in written form) in many predictable and unpredictable acts of communication which arise both in classroom interaction and in real-world situations, whether concurrent with language training or subsequent to it".

1.2 Why Authentic Materials?

One definition from Morrow (1977) that was cited in Gilmore (2007) is as follows: "An authentic text is a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of sort (p. 98)." Nevertheless, teachers often ignore and underuse the wealth of authentic materials which are available, interesting and can capture and hold students' attention and interest in learning. According to Baird & Redmond (2004), authentic materials must be used in accordance with students' ability. "The text should be used to serve its original purpose as if it is used outside the classroom. For example, if students

are working with health brochures, they must look for information they need, rather than a list of new words chosen by the teacher” (Jacobson, Degener, & Purcell-Gates, 2003). Gebhard (1996) sees authentic materials as a way to “contextualize” language learning. When lessons are aimed on comprehending a menu or a TV weather report, students are inclined to emphasize more on content and meaning rather than the language itself. This offers students a valuable source of language input, so that they are not being exposed only to the language presented by the text and the teacher. In this respect, Taylor (1994) states that “authenticity is not a characteristic of a text in itself: it is a feature of a text in a particular context. Therefore, a text can only be truly authentic in the context for which it was originally written”.

Authentic materials such as ‘throw-away’ materials are defined as any type of printed materials which are easily obtainable as free handouts, literature or pamphlets in various kinds of places; such as fast-food centres, shopping complexes and travel agencies. These materials are cheaply produced to have a limited usable life and rapid appeal to readers. In addition, these ‘throw-away’ materials are often regarded as more interesting than textbook materials because they can be more up-to-date, and relate to everyday issues and activities (Lee, 1995). When learners read an authentic text, their prior knowledge, interest and curiosity make it easier for them to become engaged with it.

To summarize, we can conclude that learner-authentic materials are generally learner-centered, and that they can serve effectively to enhance learner’s interest in language learning. “In cognitive terms, they can provide learners not only with a chance to develop their linguistic and communicative competence, but also with an awareness of conventions of communication, which will enable them to use appropriate styles in different communicative contexts” (Bacon & Finnenman, 1990).

2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The focal point of this study is to help stimulate and enrich ideas and imaginations of the language learners through the use of ‘throw-away’ materials. Merely introducing new techniques in the teaching of second language is not enough. Research has to be carried out on the use of these methods, and therefore, using ‘throw-away’ materials to teach grammar and to experiment with them will help to gauge their effectiveness and prove their viability in the context of real teaching. This study will focus on students’ perceptions and responses with regard to the use of ‘throw-away’ materials during grammar lessons. It is hoped that this study will provide adequate information for ESL teachers in the use of ‘throw-away’ materials in the classrooms. This study may provide useful information for ESL curriculum planners, syllabus designers and textbook writers in preparing grammar

learning units and self-access programmes using ‘throw-away’ materials.

3. CRITERIA FOR SELECTING ‘THROW-AWAY’ MATERIALS

The researcher used a few criteria in selecting the different kinds of ‘throw-away’ materials. The criteria are:

(i) Easy to obtain- ‘throw-away’ materials should be easily obtainable, regardless of place (urban, sub-urban or rural)

(ii) Colourful - ‘throw-away’ materials have to be colourful, interesting and of textual value.

This is to ensure that students are motivated by the activities they are involved in.

(iii) Free of charge - ‘throw-away’ materials are usually free with no cost involved, which means the teacher does not have to pay for the materials.

(iv) Language suitable - the language of the written texts on the ‘throw-away’ materials for students has to be suitable for different levels of learners with different levels of proficiency.

(v) Real-life - select materials which the students might encounter now or situation later in real-life. These may interest and motivate them further to participate actively in the associated tasks and activities.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Subjects

The researcher has designed the materials for Year 4 and 5 students (ages 10-11) at the primary level in the Tamil national-type school with low proficiency in the English language. A total of forty students with twenty students from each Year were selected for the purpose of this study. Tamil is the language of instruction for all subjects, with the exception of Science, Mathematics, and language subjects. The students are from middle to lower income families with their parents typically working as teachers, officers, clerks, nurses, and lorry drivers. These students were able to understand English; however, when spoken to in English, they attempted to respond in English but more often than not, answered in Tamil or Malay.

4.2 Instrumentation

Three instruments, mainly, a series of observations, a structured interview and questionnaire were used in the study to witness students’ responses towards the use of ‘throw-away’ materials in the teaching of grammar.

4.2.1 Observations

Classroom observation was conducted as one of the main research instrument to view the students’ responses towards the use of grammar activities using ‘throw-away’ materials. The observation is done based on the following research questions:

a) Did the activities manage to interest students in learning grammar?

b) Were the students able to understand and carry out the activities independently through using 'throw-away' materials?

4.2.2 Interview

A standardized open-ended interview was utilized to supplement and verify the respondents' feedback and perceptions towards the use of the activities. It focused on items that were found to be significant to the study. Ten subjects (five male and five female) were randomly chosen for the interview (see Table #1).

4.2.3 Questionnaires

A set of questionnaires was distributed to the students to gather information on the subjects' background as well as their perceptions towards the use of 'throw-away' materials in learning grammar. The questionnaire is chosen as the essential instrument for this study since it is seen as one of the easiest and quickest way of eliciting information from the subjects. The items in the questionnaire were designed in a selected-response format where respondents had to circle one response from a four point Likert scale:

4 – Strongly Agree

3 - Agree

2 – Disagree

1 – Strongly Disagree

The questionnaire is divided into two parts:

Part A -to gather information about the students' background.

Part B - focuses on students' opinions towards the use of 'throw-away' materials in grammar activities.

4.3 The Research Procedure

The first step involved in this study was to choose the school where the activities can be carried out. An urban Tamil school in the Klang Valley, the royal city of the Malaysian state of Selangor was chosen. The second stage includes the selection of the classroom recommended by the school coordinator of the English Department as well as seeking verbal consent of the respective class teacher. Lastly, the arrangement for the appropriate day to carry out the activities was done.

4.4 Method of Data Analysis

The data from the observations was analysed based on the research questions presented in section 5.2.1. Meanwhile the findings of the interviews will be used to gain the perceptions of the subjects towards the use of 'throw-away' materials in the learning of grammar. Finally, in order to obtain the results from the questionnaires, the data collected will be presented in summary tables as this will provide a thick description to the interpretation of data. These three instruments were chosen as the researcher felt to be the best way of eliciting information to observe the effectiveness of using 'throw-away' materials in teaching

grammar in ESL classroom.

4.5 Principles and Theoretical Basis of the Study

The creative activities using 'throw-away' materials designed are based on Nunan's (2004) framework for analysing task-based language teaching. Nunan's task components comprise of seven important principles namely goals, input, procedures, task types, teacher and learner roles and settings. The rationale for choosing Nunan's framework is that it provides the researcher with a structure in selecting, adapting and creating own grammar activities for students with low proficiency in the English Language (see Table # 2).

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study signified that majority of the students in the selected Tamil school favour the idea of learning grammar using 'throw-away' materials. The reason being that these materials promote communication and encourage contribution of ideas among the students without any inhibition (see Table #2). In addition, these 'throw-away' materials are more valuable than textbooks because 'throw-away' materials are full of cultural features and demonstrate the students the authentic samples of language as used by native speakers. According to Hwang, (2005) "authentic materials are interactive, whereas, textbooks are instrumental. If a learner wishes to get to near-native proficiency, relying on carefully written materials for English teaching is not enough". Hence to fill in this gap, the present study provides opportunities to the subjects under study to practice and use grammar realistically and meaningfully so as to activate learners' knowledge and increase the automaticity of their performance which textbooks fail to offer.

The overall result of the study revealed that none of the students felt that the use of 'throw-away' materials in their grammar lessons were uninteresting and tiresome. This is proven in the findings of the study whereby majority of the students have shown positive results towards the grammar activities conducted in their classroom. The analysed data in Table 2 indicates that 49.5% of the students agreed and 50.5% strongly agreed that the grammar activities using 'throw-away' materials are interesting. This is because; 'throw-away' materials are very colourful and attractive. These materials consist of real pictures and photographs which are more appealing and can better motivate learners. The results in Table 2 clearly demonstrates that 51.7% and 55.3% of the students strongly agreed that the activities are motivating and felt that they could learn grammar in an enjoyable way without any inhibition. Furthermore, the activities enabled the students to be independent learners whereby the activities provoked responses and inspired students to speak up and practice using the target language. Hence, it

can be concluded that the grammar activities using 'throw-away' materials encourage the students to be actively involved in the lesson and help develop their confidence in learning grammar in a fun way.

Table 3 (see Table #3) shows the students' perceptions of towards the use of 'throw-away' materials in the grammar activities. 50.5% of the students agreed and 49.5% strongly agreed that using 'throw-away' materials in the activities is effective in learning grammar. A large number of students (61.1%) strongly agreed that employing 'throw-away' materials gives them the opportunity to share opinions and to participate actively in class. The findings of the study also found that 49% of the students agreed that they were able to understand grammar in a more meaningful way as they could relate the activities to their daily life. Meanwhile, 51% of the students strongly agreed that learning grammar through the use of 'throw-away' materials helped them to comprehend the grammar lessons more effectively especially when the activities are related to their surroundings and environment.

On the whole, it was noted that the students displayed a lot of enthusiasm and interest while carrying out the grammar activities. The use of such activities helps students not only to gain knowledge but also helps them to apply and use the language in context. The results from testing out the effectiveness of teaching grammar using 'throw-away' materials has made the objectives of this study a success. The activities have increased the creativity and variety of the repertoires and skills of language learners, helping to make grammar instruction valuable and enjoyable for both learners and language teachers.

Several implications could be derived from the results. The researcher found the use of Nunan's (2004) framework for analyzing communicative tasks, as the underlying theory in designing grammar activities effective and useful. Based on the classroom observations and interview sessions with the students, the approaches helped make the activities effective in enhancing and improving the grammatical awareness among these students, which later enable them to be engaged with language usage in a wider context. Apart from benefitting the language learners, the activities using 'throw-away' materials also help the language teachers in their teaching of English grammar by presenting readymade exercises that are simple and applicable which can be used for classroom practice.

CONCLUSION

The activities using 'throw-away' materials can indeed promote language learning in ESL classroom as these materials are enjoyable and interesting where students can relate them to their daily life. The activities are also practical for teachers teaching the English Language

for they provide them new ideas on how to vary their teaching materials and in designing similar activities using the framework of communicative task design. This study also acts as a stepping stone for course designers to create more interesting and communicative grammar activities especially for the Malaysian ESL learners. There are even fewer supplementary activities produced or adapted by Malaysians with local flavour and setting. As such, there is a great need for supplementary activities for utilization in the Malaysian classrooms. Hence, given the lack of supplementary materials on grammar activities written in local context, this creative study is designed to fill the gap, which exists in the Malaysian ELT market. All in all, it is hoped that this study will be a valuable contribution to the development of locally and inexpensive produced materials for the teaching of English grammar.

AUTHENTIC TASK ACTIVITY EXAMPLES

It will be useful to look at three examples of grammar activities (see appendix) using 'throw-away' materials. The first activity 'My Ideal Home' was designed to teach prepositions and WH-questions using house plans from the newspaper. The second lesson plan concerns activities developed using travel brochures, 'Holiday Destination' emphasizing on nouns and adjectives and the third lesson plan, "My Favourite Food" was created to teach Conjunctions and Adjectives.

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Table 1
Interview Subjects

SUBJECT	SEX
A	Male
B	Male
C	Female
D	Male
E	Female
F	Female
G	Male
H	Female
I	Male
J	Female

Table 2
Students' Perceptions of the Grammar Activities Using 'Throw-Away' Materials

		1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree				3 = Agree 4 = Strongly Agree			
No.	Specification	Percentage							
	The grammar activities using ‘throw-away’ materials	1	2	3	4				
1.	Interesting			49.5	50.5				
2.	Motivating			48.3	51.7				
3.	Enjoyable			44.7	55.3				

Table 3
Using 'Throw-Away' Materials in Grammar Activities

		1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree		3 = Agree 4 = Strongly Agree	
No.	Specification	Percentage			
		1	2	3	4
1.	Using ‘throw-away’ materials is an effective way to practice grammar.			50.5	49.5
2.	Using ‘throw-away’ materials gives me the opportunity to share opinions and be active in class.			38.9	61.1
3.	Using ‘throw-away’ materials help me to understand grammar in a meaningful way.			49	51

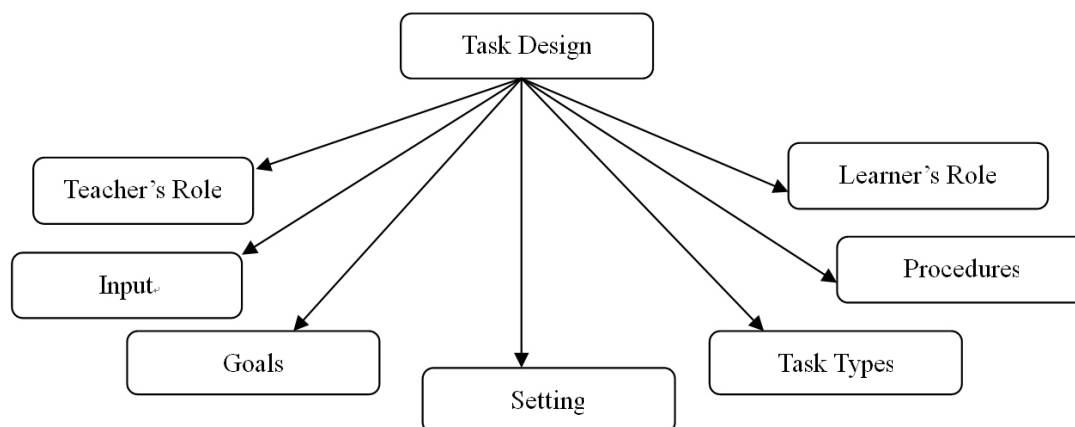


Diagram 1
Framework for Analyzing Communicative Tasks (Nunan, 2004)

Appendix

LESSON PLAN 1

ACTIVITY	:	MY IDEAL HOME
LEVEL	:	Low to Intermediate
DURATION	:	(20 minutes)
GRAMMAR SKILLS	:	Prepositions and WH questions
TEACHING AID	:	Blank House Plan, White Board, A3 Paper
PRE-ACTIVITY	:	Students talk about their own home. E.g. describing their home/room.
ACTIVITY	:	1.) Students are divided into groups of two/four. 2.) Each group is given a blank house plan. 3.) Teacher explains to the class the procedure of the activity. 4.) Then, teacher distributes samples of blank house plan to each group. 5.) Students study the blank house plan by identifying locations of rooms and items in the house plan. 6.) Teacher tells each group to design and draw items in the empty house plan. 7.) Students fill up and decorate the house plan with furniture and household items according to their own preferences. 8.) While discussing the arrangements of the household items, the students are told to ask each other questions using WH-questions. Eg. (a) “Where would you like your cupboard to be?” (b) “What do you want to put on the table?” 9.) The rest of the group members respond to the questions about their ideal home by applying prepositions in their sentences. E.g. (a) “The cupboard will be placed next to my study table”. (b) “I’m going to place the table lamp on the table beside my bed”. 10.) Students tell the class teacher all the prepositions used in the activity. 11.) Students write down all the prepositions identified on A3 paper given by the class teacher. 12.) Once each group has completed writing all the prepositions, the teacher asks them to present their work to the class. 13.) The teacher facilitates and corrects students’ sentences.
POST ACTIVITY	:	Your family is moving into a bungalow during the upcoming school holidays. Write a letter or an e-mail to your pen-friend describing your ideal room.

LESSON PLAN 2

ACTIVITY	:	HOLIDAY DESTINATION
LEVEL	:	Low to Intermediate
DURATION	:	(20 minutes)
GRAMMAR SKILLS	:	Nouns and Adjectives
TEACHING AID	:	Travel Brochures, White Board, A3 Paper
PRE-ACTIVITY	:	The teacher asks the students about their plans for the weekend or about places that they intend to visit.
ACTIVITY	:	1.) Students are divided into groups of four. 2.) Each group is given a travel brochure. 3.) Teacher explains to the class the procedure of the activity. 4.) Students study the travel brochure and talk about the interesting places and things in the brochure. 5.) Students identify all the adjectives used in the travel brochure.

- 6.) The teacher asks the students to identify all the nouns and the placement of the adjectives used in the sentences.

E.g. (a) “The **beach** is **beautiful**”.

(N) (Adj)

(b) “The **amazing monument** in Pangkor Island...”

(Adj)	(N)
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- 7.) The students list the examples that they have identified on the A3 paper given by the teacher.

- 8.) Once all the groups have completed the task, the teacher asks them to present their work to the class.

- 9.) The teacher facilitates and corrects students' work.

POST ACTIVITY

:

The teacher gives a writing assignment (essay) where students describe place(s) that they have visited using adjectives and nouns.

OR

The students talk to their friends, describing places that they have been to using adjectives and nouns.

LESSON PLAN 3

ACTIVITY

$$\vdots$$

MY FAVOURITE FOOD

LEVEL

:

Low to Intermediate

DURATION

:

(20 minutes)

GRAMMAR SKILLS

:

Conjunctions and Adjectives

TEACHING AID

:

Menu, White Board, A3 Paper

PRE-ACTIVITY

:

The teacher asks the students about their favourite food.

ACTIVITY

:

- 1.) Students are divided into groups of four.
- 2.) Each group is given sample menu collected from various food outlets.
- 3.) Teacher explains to the class the procedure of the activity.
- 4.) Students study the menu and they use the information in the menu to talk about the food that they are ordering.
- 5.) Students practise using conjunctions and adjectives in conversation among the group members.

E.g. (a) I would like to order a plate of noodles **and** a bowl of onion soup. (conj)

(b) I'm getting a glass of carrot juice **because** I feel **thirsty**.

(conj) (adj)

(c) This cake is so **delicious**.

(adj)

- 6.) Students identify and write the conjunctions and adjectives that they hear from their group members on the A3 paper given by the class teacher.

- 7.) Once all the groups have completed the task, the teacher asks them to present their work to the class.

- 8.) The teacher facilitates and corrects students' work.

POST ACTIVITY

:

The students are asked to design their own menu. Teacher tells the students to take the role of waiter and customer(s) and practice using conjunctions and adjectives in their conversation.