

Before Gramatica

I was always going to be a teacher, I suppose, with both parents, two brothers, my wife and two children all with either teaching degrees or significant teaching roles, or both. It was deeply woven in the family DNA. However, in my early adult years, I was not at all sure what form that teaching would take.

I first trained as a primary teacher and, after graduating in 1983, I began teaching in 1984, first at two local primary schools and a country school before realising that, while I enjoyed primary teaching, it was not my main passion.

After marrying in 1987, I then resigned from teaching and joined my father's educational travel business, where I organised and led primary and high school cultural and educational trips to Japan and Indonesia, and also organised similar programs for visiting school groups from Japan, Africa and Indonesia. During this time, I assisted unofficially with teaching English to Japanese school groups.

In late 2002, I decided to try ESL teaching and completed my CELTA, the English as a Second Language qualification. Shortly after, in 2003, I started work at a Perth ESL college, where I discovered that teaching our baffling but beautiful language English to overseas adults was what I enjoyed most professionally.

I should add that I have also taught at high schools as well as over a decade as a lecturer and teacher at a local university, where I prepared the next generation of teachers in their Bachelor of Education and Masters of Education courses.

As well as this, my own educational list is as follows: CELTA, Bachelor of Education, Master of Education and Master of Medieval and Early Modern Studies. I enjoyed them all.

Questions

Very early in my ESL teaching career, I was given an Elementary class together with a coursebook, teachers book and access to reference books and some wonderful colleagues. At that point, I didn't ask questions of the content, methodology, sequence of lessons or anything else really. I just accepted that this was the way the ESL world worked, and that these coursebook writers knew everything there was to know about teaching ESL, particularly grammar. Teachers learned the content from the teachers book and taught from the coursebook. Students did the required coursebook exercises in class and possibly studied in the local library after class. By some magical process, over a period of months or years, students learned how to speak, read, write and understand English.

But then I started to ask questions of the content and methodology. I wondered, for example, why the teaching point was at the end of many coursebooks in small print. If it was the teaching point, why wasn't it at the front of the unit so students could see it and work with it? I also wondered why the stories of the students, which were far more relevant, were not asked for more in coursebooks.

I wondered at the common coursebook methodology of avoiding the grammar point and instead providing many stories and other texts in the hope that students would see the embedded grammar points, understand them and apply them. Wouldn't it be more efficient to teach them how to use the grammar point first? Then students could apply it to their own lives, which would make the grammar point more relevant.

And on one occasion, when I read a coursebook definition of the Past Simple tense as 'finished actions in the past' and realised that it actually applied to all of the Past tenses, I wondered if there might actually be a different way.

Search

I then started a continuing search for a more efficient teaching methodology that would introduce the teaching point to students first. In order to this, though, I realised that I needed to understand the grammar points and how they worked, so I looked first at academic and technical grammar books and texts.

However, I soon saw that grammar was often considered in these texts as complex and difficult, with a myriad of technical terminology and concepts. It appeared to be more a scientific discipline, suited better as a subject to be *studied* by academics and grammarians than a language to be learned and *used* by students.

And so I turned my attention to students and the way they learn English, reading extensively about neuroscience, second language acquisition, and teaching principles, a reading list that covered both the last few decades and the ancient world, with thinkers like Socrates figuring large. As I did, I began to understand three glorious truths and became very excited indeed.

Discovery

Two of my three discoveries were about the content of ESL, and the third about the methodology.

Firstly, I realised that grammar is simply Life's way of organising and expressing itself. Grammar represents Life, and the two are inextricable. When I say Life, I mean the universal principles of Life: the past, the future, cause and effect, the progress of time, human action and how we think about our actions. The big-picture ideas, although these principles apply equally well to daily actions like paying bills, studying, working, having relationships. All of these are represented in our grammar.

As a visual metaphor, imagine grammar as an enormous house, with many walls, roofs, levels, angles, doors and extensions. From the outside, it looks tremendously complex. However, when you look at the architectural plans, you can see that it has a single, strong and trustworthy foundation upon which the whole thing stands. Wherever you go in this house, the foundation (grammar) supports you. You can rely on this foundation just as you and your students can rely on these simple English principles, building blocks and structures.

My second discovery was equally wonderful. If we could show students how this works, we would take the focus off the detailed lists of rules and exceptions that most ESL students are warned to expect when starting an ESL course, and place the focus squarely on Life. Life first and grammar second. More specifically, *their* lives. Students' lives. Since their stories are far more exciting, relevant and precious to students than the (necessarily) artificial stories in the books, we should teach them (and I must admit that I got tremendously excited at this point!) to consider their own stories first and then choose the grammar points they might need to express these stories. I decided then to teach life as the main thing and grammar as just a set of tools to express it. Life first and Grammar second.

Take the third conditional as an example. Rather than stand up in class and say, "Today we are going to study the third conditional," I might say instead, "Imagine your past was different. Here are the tools you need to express that."

My third discovery followed from this. Since students' lives were now the focus, they had how to choose which grammatical tools they needed to express their lives. They actually had to learn how to *think* in English. For this, they needed key words, little mental triggers that linked the life situation with the grammar they needed.

All of this, over a period of years, came together in Gramatica.

Gramatica in the world

Gramatica has been introduced and taught in three countries at school presentations and training sessions for both primary schools and ESL colleges around the world. As well as delivering numerous training sessions for primary schools in Western Australia, I have also presented at several conferences and seminars: Perth (twice), Queensland (once), New Orleans (three times), Melbourne, London and the Philippines.

And now the Gramatica website is available for teachers around the world to enhance their knowledge and practice.

Welcome!