# Creative Grammar for Language Learners

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**Introduction.** The status of grammar in first and foreign language teaching has long been characterised by uncertainty, difference and debate.  In first language teaching, whilst many countries have continued to routinely teach grammar as part of the curriculum, Anglophone countries in particular largely abandoned it in the 1960s and 70s, because of the belief that it had no effect on the language proficiency of learners. In foreign language teaching, the strong move away from grammar-led language teaching towards communicative language teaching paralleled the Anglophone abandonment of grammar teaching.  Different jurisdictions and different curricula continue to place different emphases on grammar, and what is clear is that we still have no educational consensus about the role of grammar in the language curriculum, neither for first language or foreign language learning. At the heart of this ambivalence around grammar is the problem that there is a lack of clarity about the relationship between grammar and language learning, and thus an absence of a clear rationale for its place in the classroom.

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This article draws on a sustained body of research from the *Centre for Research in Writing* at the University of Exeter, UK, which has considered the ways in which grammar can support language learning. Over time, we have developed an informed rationale for grammar in the curriculum, and from that developed a pedagogy which brings grammar and language learning together in a creative and educationally purposeful way.  The article will use this research and classroom practice first to outline how grammar and communicative language teaching can be integrated, and will then illustrate the pedagogical approach with examples, and highlight the importance of talking about language choices.

**Communicative Language Teaching and Grammar.** The move towards communicative language teaching in L2 teaching was a direct response to dissatisfaction with the traditional way of teaching languages through a heavy emphasis on grammar.  The grammar-led approach relied heavily on teaching how to read or write another language through using grammar to support translation, and focused on grammatical forms and grammatical accuracy. But this did not necessarily mean that learners could communicate effectively in the target language.  So communicative language teaching turned attention to communicative competence (Hymes, 1972), focusing much more on being able to interact with others appropriately in speech and writing, with awareness of the context of the communication. Canale and Swain (1980) developed the idea of three strands to communicative competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence.  Communicative language teaching is characterised by interactive language tasks which mirror

communication in authentic social situations, and grammar plays little part in it. Indeed, in many communicative classrooms grammar is not taught at all: instead, the idea is that grammar is learned implicitly through exposure and usage. Just as in L1 teaching, pedagogical trends have tended to give primacy to grammar teaching at the expense of important aspects of communication or to reject it altogether.

Our approach to grammar teaching reconciles this long-lasting split between grammar-focused teaching and communication-focused teaching. It is a functional approach which brings together explicit grammar teaching with a clear focus on effective communication. We draw on the thinking of Halliday (2004) who argues that grammar is not simply a way of labelling and dissecting a language into its various parts, but is a dynamic, meaning-making process, where the grammatical choices we make subtly shape how we communicate with our readers or listeners. Our pedagogical goal is to help learners become more aware of the grammatical choices available to them, and how those choices affect the communicative power of their writing. Take, for example, the two sentences below. The first is taken from a children's book by Michael Morpurgo, the other is a re-arrangement of the sentence using the same words:

*- And out of the mist came a figure in flowing green, walking across the water.*
*- And a figure in flowing green, walking across the water, came out of the mist.*

Grammatically, the first sentence begins with an adverbial, followed by a subject verb inversion, whereas the second begins with the subject. The point is not that one sentence is better than the other, but that the choice of different syntactical structures creates different effects. In the first, the reader sees the mist first, and the figure in flowing green emerges from it; whereas in the second, the figure is foregrounded with the mist relegated to the background. This example illustrates that writing is not merely a matter of complying with conventions of grammatical usage, but much more importantly, it is about understanding the power of grammatical choices.

**The Pedagogy – Grammar as Choice**. To support the teaching of grammar as choice, we have developed a set of pedagogical principles to inform the design of teaching materials. There are four of these, organised round the acronym, LEAD, as set out below:

> **LINK**: make a **link** between the grammar being introduced and how it works in the writing being taught;
>
> **EXAMPLES**: explain the grammar through **examples**, not lengthy explanations;
>
> **AUTHENTIC TEXTS**: use examples from **authentic texts** to link writers to the broader community of writers;
>
> **DISCUSSION**: build in **high-quality discussion** about grammar and its effects.

Each of these principles has an important purpose in supporting creative teaching of grammar in a way that is meaningful and relevant to learners.

**Making Links:** This is core to the idea of grammar as choice as it avoids form-focused teaching about grammatical structures and instead attends to functionally-focused consideration of how grammar is working in a particular context. So, for example, a lesson could explore the mixed use of past and present tense in many newspaper reports, and discuss how the two tenses are used to cover reporting of events and reactions in the past tense, whilst comment is in the present tense. For more advanced learners, this activity could also explore aspect, and how the 'universal present' is used to describe something which is still true or in existence. The brief extract below from the BBC news website exemplifies all of these points.

> The Myanmar army has released the results of an internal investigation in which it exonerates itself of blame regarding the Rohingya crisis. It denies killing any Rohingya people, burning their villages, raping women and girls, and stealing possessions. The assertions contradict evidence seen by BBC correspondents of a crisis the United Nations has called «a text book example of ethnic cleansing». Amnesty International said the army's report was an attempted «whitewash». The human rights organisation called for UN fact finders to be allowed in to the region.
> From http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-41975331

**Using Examples:** This principle avoids a lesson focusing on language use deviating into a grammar lesson, which deflects learners' attention from grammar as choice to identifying and labelling terminology. Instead, by presenting examples of the target structure in use, and using the appropriate grammatical terms, learners are introduced to the grammar in context. For example, in a lesson focusing on the use of «and» as a co-ordinator, learners might discuss the different choices that children's authors, Eric Carle and John Burningham, make about using «and» or an asyndetic comma in a list of co-ordinated noun phrases:

> On Saturday, he ate through one piece of chocolate cake, one ice-cream cone, one pickle, one slice of Swiss cheese, one slice of salami, one lollipop, one piece of cherry pie, one sausage, one cupcake, and one slice of watermelon.
>
> The Very Hungry Caterpillar – Eric Carle
>
> Then Mr Gumpy and the goat and the calf and the chickens and the sheep and the pig and the dog and the cat and the rabbit and the children all swam to the bank and climbed out to dry in the sun.
>
> Mr Gumpy's Outing – John Burningham

**Using Authentic Texts:** Grammar teaching has often been characterised by the use of rather dry textbooks full of perfect examples of grammar structures, many of which though grammatically correct do not represent natural usage in English. Using authentic texts ensures that the target structures represent the genuine structures that are used in practice. Moreover, the use of authentic texts connects learners to the grammatical choices that other published writers have made, thus reinforcing the notion of authorial choice when writing and signalling their own power to choose as writers. All the examples in this article are from authentic texts.

**High-Quality Discussion:** The significance of talk as a tool for learning in all curriculum contexts is now a familiar understanding in many classrooms, and well-supported by research (Alexander, 2017). But it has a particular role within a pedagogy of grammar as choice. Talking about language use and language choice makes visible for learners the relationship between a grammatical choice and how it is functioning to make meaning in a particular context. Whilst a teacher can tell a learner about a particular grammar-meaning relationship, this learning can simply be hollow if learners don't fully understand it themselves. So high-quality discussion requires teachers to be confident in managing high-level talk and in creating opportunities for learners to engage in high-level peer to peer talk. For example, in a unit of work focusing on fictional narrative, one lesson is considering how noun phrases are useful to build descriptions of character. One part of the lesson looks at the use of post-modification in a noun phrase, and the learners are shown examples of post-modified noun phrases describing characters, taken from the book they are sharing (*Arthur, High King of Britain* by Michael Morpurgo). The teacher then asks them to look at their own descriptions of a character that they have been working on and to reflect on this. Crucially, the teachers' questioning moves from inviting them to identify if they have used noun phrases in this way, to asking learners to evaluate the effectiveness of these choices in creating vivid descriptions of their character for their reader. This opens up the possibilities for high-quality discussion about the efficacy of their own writerly choices.

> You can also build noun phrases by adding more description <u>after</u> the noun.
>
> You could add adjectives:
> • her **fingers**, long, white and dancing
> • her **eyes**, wide and intense
> • a **lady**, dark-haired and beautiful
>
> You could add a prepositional phrase:
> • the **colour** of honey
> • the **hood** of his dark cloak
>
> You could add a non-finite clause beginning with an -ing or -ed verb:
> • **gold** washed in milk
> • a **lady**, dark-haired and beautiful wearing a gown of wine-red
> • the **words** flowing from her lips
>
> Have you used any noun phrases like this?
> How do these choices help your readers see this character in their minds' eye?

These four LEAD pedagogical principles operate in harmony to create classrooms where learners are actively engaged in investigating and evaluating how grammatical choices generate meaning in authentic language use. A goal of this is to build learners' awareness that every time they write they have open to them to a repertoire of infinite possibilities of choice, where subtle decisions about things as apparently simple as the use of an article, or the choice of tense can alter how a text is read. This teaching generates explicit knowledge about language, or specifically «metalinguistic understanding»: it is this «meta»-knowledge about language which we believe is the powerful tool in this approach as it gives learners access to metalinguistic understanding which is accessible and verbalisable.

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**The Pedagogy in Practice.** In this section, we will outline in a little more detail a small selection of examples of this pedagogical approach, illustrating how the LEAD principles are used in practice.

**Traditional Fairy Tales** – exploring simple noun phrases. Traditional fairy tales, such as those written down by Hans Christian Andersen or by the Brothers
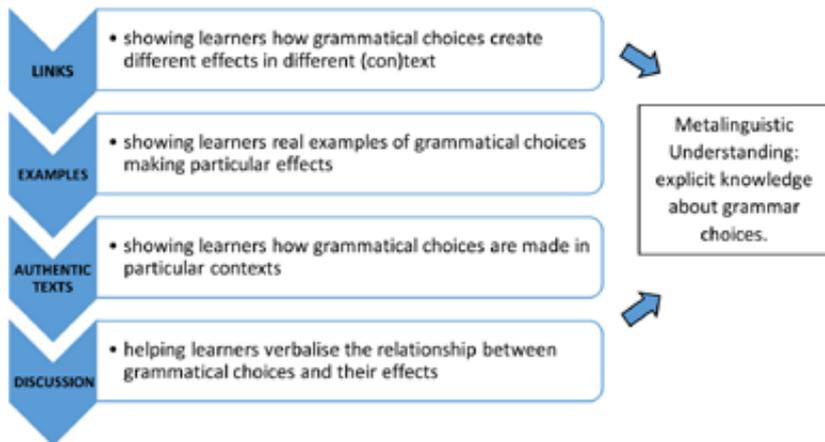


Figure 1: The Pedagogical Model

Grimm, draw on an oral narrative tradition and are thus characterised by linguistic structures, which support listeners, rather than readers. For example, noun phrases are often simple, with limited premodification and drawing on a set of stock characters and descriptions. With your class, collate together a list of characters that might be found in fairy tales, such as *princess, prince, stepmother, king, frog*. Then discuss whether any of these fairy tale characters tend to have particular adjectives attributed to them – you might come up with *beautiful, wicked, handsome*. On a whiteboard, invite students to create simple noun phrases, which are therefore typical of fairy tales, such as:

*a beautiful princess,*
*a wicked stepmother*
*a handsome prince*

Discuss the noun and adjective choices here and how they are simple, archetypal and repeated in many fairy tales. This

activity could be extended to consider settings in fairy tales such as *an enchanted forest* or *a gingerbread house*. Or class discussion could consider Proper Nouns and naming in fairy tales. Many characters in fairy tales are never named but simply described as «the king» or «the handsome prince», but where characters are named they are rarely names used in the real world, but invented names signalling their fairy tale origin. Think, for example, of *Rumpelstiltskin, Snow White, Goldilocks* and *Red Riding Hood*. This focus on simple noun phrases in fairy tales also creates an ideal opportunity for appropriate vocabulary development for this genre, and an authentic context to discuss collocations:

**LINK:** use of simple noun phrases for characterisation in fairy tales
**EXAMPLES:** simple noun phrases collated on whiteboard
**AUTHENTIC TEXT:** fairy tales
**DISCUSSION:** the noun and adjective choices typically used for fairy tale characters

**Information Texts – creating cohesion.** An information text which is introducing and explaining new content often demands careful management of local cohesion within and across sentences to avoid clumsy repetition of key nouns at the same time as ensuring the reader can follow the flow of information. The extract below, from a book written for primary aged children, offers a useful model of how determiners and pronouns can be used to refer back to ideas and create cohesion.

> Dandelions bloom like little suns. But the flowers don't last long – they fold up like furled umbrellas pointing at the sky. Then each rolled umbrella opens into a puff of down: a hundred fluffy parachutes, each carrying a small brown seed. Just one blow and you can set them flying.
> From *Outside Your Window: A first book of nature* by Nicola Davies

Having read this section of the book together and engaged with its ideas, perhaps by sharing experience of dandelion «clocks» (seed heads), display his extract of text on an interactive whiteboard or visualiser and lead a discussion to trace and underline the chain of reference from «the flowers» to the end, drawing out how the pronouns (*they; them*) and the determiners (*each; a; hundred;*) are pointing back referentially to preceding nouns. You could also highlight the cohesion created by the hypernym/hyponym pattern of «*dandelions*» and «*the flowers*».

**LINK:** using pronouns and determiners for local cohesion and an information text

**EXAMPLES:** underlining the chain of reference on the interactive whiteboard
**AUTHENTIC TEXT:** *Outside your Window* by Nicola Davies
**DISCUSSION:** student talk about reference chains and how they link back to previous ideas

**Persuasive Writing – sentence sequencing for rhetorical effect.** This activity focuses learners' attentions on the significance of choices around types of sentence and the sequence of sentences in the closing of a persuasive text. It draws on the final six sentences of an appeal by bereaved parent, Tariq Jehan, after violent riots which occurred in Birmingham, UK, in 2011. He stood on the streets where his son, Haroon, was killed and appealed to his community to end the violence.

> I lost my son. Blacks, Asians, Whites – we all live in the same community. Why do we have to kill one another? Why are we doing this? Step forward if you want to lose your sons. Otherwise, calm down and go home – please.
>
> The final six sentences from Tariq Jahan's speech following his son's death
> The Telegraph 13 August 2011

The six sentences include two statement sentences; two rhetorical questions; and two imperative sentences. Give groups of students the six sentences reproduced as individual sentences on strips of card as shown:

> I lost my son.

> Blacks, Asians, Whites – we all live in the same community.

> Why do we have to kill one another?

> Why are we doing this?

> Step forward if you want to lose your sons.

> Otherwise, calm down and go home – please.

Ask students to use the six sentences to create at least three endings to the speech in which the sentences are differently sequenced – there are many variations possible as only two sentences must be placed together (*Step forward…* and *Otherwise, calm down…*). Then invite students in their groups to discuss the different effect the different choices might have on readers or listeners. Bring the class together and share responses, managing the discussion to draw out especially the variety in effect caused by ending with a statement, as opposed to a question or imperative. Remind the class of the context the speech was delivered and what effect, for example, might have been created by ending with «I lost my son» rather than the appeal for calm.

**LINK:** sentence type and sequencing and rhetorical effects
**EXAMPLES:** six sentences of different types printed on cards

**AUTHENTIC TEXT:** Tariq Jehan's speech from *The Telegraph* 13 August 2011
**DISCUSSION:** group and whole class discussion about how the varied sequencing alters rhetorical effect

**Conclusion:** By making a connection between a grammatical choice and how it functions in a particular text and context, we are heightening students' awareness of language in use, but in an explicit and purposeful way. It draws attention to language choices which might not be noticed in natural usage, or which as a language learner, they have not yet learned to use. It is not focussing on form and grammatical accuracy but on the making of meaning.

The four LEAD principles support language learning by uniting grammatical choice with its effect, always in the context of an authentic text which engages learners with real world use of the language. In addition, the LEAD emphasis on high-quality discussion is crucial in converting the teacher's knowledge about language use to metalinguistic understanding which is owned by the learner, thus empowering them to make their own choices.

For more information and access to resources, look at our website:
http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/education/research/centres/centreforresearchinwriting/grammar-teacher-resources/

**References**

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