

# Heightening Grammatical Awareness in English

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This article discusses a student project which helps ELT (English Language Teaching) students develop their grammatical awareness, as well as linguistic competence and performance at upper-intermediate or advanced levels. Encouraging students to carry out research on English grammar, collecting data, evaluating structures of language in use, drawing upon the discourses of movies, media and literature, is obviously beneficial to foreign language learners in many respects as they can not be exposed to target language and its culture in natural settings. From this, it is possible to claim that foreign language learners should be directed to the discourse of native speakers in order to have an understanding of “language in use” from a descriptive perspective rather than following the subjective prescriptive grammar rules.

## **Introduction**

Grammar instruction at advanced/upper-intermediate levels is often problematic for foreign language teachers, since it is far from being efficient, effective and informative because instructors have generally followed traditional lesson plans with reference to the limits and fallacies of prescriptive grammar. However, modern learner-based trends in language instruction may help language teachers to be more efficient in their profession and make students more competent in grammar. In this respect, directing students to prepare grammar projects in foreign language classrooms is an efficient and effective method which can lead to long-term success.

As it is almost impossible for many foreign language learners to be exposed to grammar-in-use in real contexts, the students may make use of discourse found in the media, movies, literature and song lyrics, which are the reflections of naturally occurring English discourse in real settings. Therefore, a project that makes students analyze the grammar in these discourses will heighten the grammatical awareness of the students and, in relation to this,

will lead to betterment in not only grammatical competence and performance, but also communicative and linguistic performance.

### **The Suggested Grammar Assignment**

This project, entitled “*The analysis of ungrammatical yet communicatively acceptable usages confronted in literary texts, media texts, song lyrics and movies*”, may be assigned in upper-intermediate and advanced grammar classes in which the students already have a high degree of grammatical competence in English. As they have been acquainted with syntactic and morpho-syntactic features of English for a long period of time, it is pre-supposed that the learners have the necessary grammatical awareness to judge whether a sentence or a phrase is grammatical or syntactically well-formed in a related context.

Throughout the project, students have to scan spoken and written texts in foreign media including newspapers or texts on the internet, movies, song lyrics and any forms of literary work. In these texts, ungrammatical or syntactically ill-formed sentences or phrases are selected, edited and listed. The learners further discuss the underlying reasons for ungrammaticality, keeping the related context in mind. At the end of a two-month period of research, the students’ projects (prepared either individually or in a group) are presented to the instructor in a research paper format.

It may be the case that the students also develop their skills in preparing a well-organized research paper through this assignment. At the end of the project, they should be capable of organizing their ideas, collecting and analyzing data, evaluating the collected data, and reflecting their comments and suggestions comprehensively. The students should be pre-instructed about the format and sections of the paper. The sections in the project are as follows:

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#### ***Introduction part***

In this section, the students are expected to introduce the aims and objectives of this project and how it can help them. This introduction part is also a map for the project as it introduces the steps to be taken throughout the project. All the points mentioned in this part should refer

to sections and sub-sections throughout the rest of the paper. It should be kept in mind that this part should be consistent with other parts of the paper and should clarify the objectives and procedures of the project. Below is a sample introduction paragraph which clearly specifies the aim of the paper and introduces following sections:

*Grammar is an indispensable part of any particular language, considering that the systematic rules of the language play the most important role for mutual intelligibility and, in relation to this, for building social relationships via verbal communication. Throughout history, grammarians have tended to either describe or prescribe the grammatical rules of languages. Yet, analyzing languages via isolated sentences free from their contexts, seems to be a complete fallacy, keeping in mind that language should be analyzed drawing upon its naturally occurring use in real contexts.*

*As it is not always possible for foreign language learners to experience naturally occurring discourse, alternative contexts may be studied like literary texts (poems, stories etc.), movies, song lyrics, newspapers, visual media etc. in which the target culture and target language are reflected. In relation to this, by making use of the data gathered from these contexts, explanations about the ungrammatical (or what seems to be ungrammatical) language use in authentic discourse may be put forward in a descriptive manner.*

*Drawing upon what has been mentioned so far, the particular purpose of this project is to bring logical explanations (if possible) to the ungrammatical phrases or sentences observed in literary texts and song lyrics in English. The grammatical deviations will be listed in the data part and will be analyzed and evaluated in a different section by suggesting well-formed structures and discussing the underlying reasons for the occurrence of these ungrammatical structures. After giving further explanations from a holistic perspective in the findings part, the study will be concluded in a few words with a heightened awareness of its contributions.*

### ***The data***

As mentioned before, the students will make use of written or spoken texts in pre-determined discourses. In the data section, they are expected to give information on the type of data they have chosen and list the ungrammatical or syntactically ill-formed sentences with reference to their contexts. An approximate number of forty structures seem to be adequate to fulfill the requirements of the project. It should be kept in mind that the quality of the collected data (whether it is appropriate for the students' level and whether the structures are not ambiguous within the relevant contexts) is a determinant factor in evaluating the papers.

The scope of this 'corpus' will obviously shape the rest of the study. The samples in the data should be consistent and in correlation with the aim of the project. In other words, the sample phrases or structures should be relevant with the contexts already mentioned in the introduction part like movies, magazines etc. If the meaning cannot be deduced from the

given sample, the students should put the co-text of the sample within the corpus. The listed and numbered data will be a guide for the data analysis section.

### ***Data analysis***

In this section, the students should analyze the data collected with a three-step process: the grammatical form should be named; the violation of the rule should be explained, and suggestions should be supported by giving the appropriate rule, either through grammatical intuition or by referring to related grammar books; and, finally, the students should question the underlying reasons for the use of the grammatical deviation if possible. A sample analysis of data may be as follows:

*\*Well, I sure hope so (The Cardigans, Do you believe?).*

*The correct grammatical form of the sentence is “I **surely** hope so”. Evans states that verbs are preceded by adverbs (like surely) in order to be modified in terms of manner, place, time, frequency and degree (1998:55). The violation may have resulted from the attempt to strengthen the meaning more emphatically and the sentence is intelligible although it is ungrammatical.*

*(Adopted from a student paper)*

### ***Findings and Conclusion***

In these sections (whether separated or as a whole), the students make attempts to generalize what they have found throughout the analysis and evaluation of the data. They try to build relations in terms of intelligibility and grammar rules. The grammar in discourse is also discussed and is handled considering the rules and impositions of prescriptive grammar. Additionally, common points observed in the data and the analyses are revealed in order to reach legible conclusions about any sort of overuse of a particular violation in terms of structure.

## **The criteria for evaluation**

After explaining the sections, format and the processes to the students, the instructor should keep in mind that a relevant checklist and consistent criteria are required in order to evaluate the students' assignments. It is obvious that the criteria for the evaluation of the papers should be parallel with the aim, objectives and long-term goals of the related grammar course. The criteria below (which I used for evaluating the students that I instructed) seem to be satisfactory in terms of the course objectives and syllabus, through which the students are expected to gain competence in discourse-based grammar. Each criterion is explained briefly and one should be aware of the fact that the percentages assigned for each criterion is up to the instructors' own judgments.

**Table 1. The criteria for evaluating the students' projects**

<b>THE CRITERION</b>	<b>POINTS/100</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE</b>
<b>Validity of the data</b>	18	18%
<b>The analysis of the data</b>	18	18%
<b>Grammar</b>	18	18%
<b>Spelling</b>	16	16%
<b>Quality of the data</b>	14	14%
<b>Findings</b>	12	12%
<b>Paragraph organization</b>	4	4%

### *The interpretation of each criterion*

*Validity of the data: Whether the ungrammatical or syntactically ill-formed sentences are selected appropriately and judged correctly, which is in close relation with grammatical awareness.*

**The analysis of the data:** *Whether the collected sentences are analyzed by the procedures and certain steps that are instructed before:*

- 1. The grammatically correct or syntactically well-formed use is put forward.*
- 2. The problem is pointed and corrected via own judgments and/or with the help of reference books by using appropriate terminology.*
- 3. Whether the underlying reasons for the uses of structures in these discourse types are discussed, if there are any.*

**Quality of the data:** *Whether the focused structures in selected sample texts are far below the level of students or the ungrammaticality is not comprehensible or ambiguous in the given context.*

**Grammar:** *The use of grammar while presenting the outputs in written form.*

**Spelling:** *The avoidance of spelling mistakes in the papers.*

**Findings:** *Whether the explanations and comments are put forward appropriately in the findings section following the data analysis. This section requires students to explain what they have found in general in analyzing the data from a holistic perspective.*

**Paragraph organization:** *Whether the assignment is well-organized with sections and sub-sections and appropriate paragraphing procedures.*

(Adopted from Sert, 2005)

## **Discussion**

The exposure to English-in-use seems to be possible in two ways: first, by living in the target community in which the English language is spoken in naturally occurring contexts, through which the social signs and codes of the related culture may be acquired as well. Secondly, it is possible through exposure to all forms of mass-media as well as literature texts and the arts (including novels, poems, stories, movies, songs, etc.). The idea for this project emerged

from the fact that the first possibility stands to be almost impossible for foreign language learners living in other countries in which English is not the official or second language.

This grammar assignment can have positive outcomes for students as it is a good technique for both evaluating and heightening the “grammatical awareness” of the students. The term “grammatical awareness” is used deliberately instead of competence and performance here. According to Chomsky “Competence is the speaker’s or hearer’s knowledge of his language, while performance is the actual use of language in concrete situations” (cited in Radford: 1997). Drawing upon this, the evaluation of the data performed by the students cannot be considered exclusively as the indication of grammatical competence; since the written output should be regarded as a product of grammatical performance.

A central aim of the project is to enable foreign language learners to realize how native speakers of English communicate even when the prescriptively correct rules of grammar are deviated. This assignment may reveal the degree of grammatical awareness of the learners both in receptive and productive levels, as they will first judge the ungrammaticality/grammaticality of the sentences or phrases in the data, and then edit them and comment on them with possible underlying reasons.

## **Conclusion**

It is possible to suggest that by making use of a project-based grammar assignment that enables learners of English as a foreign language to analyze the English grammar in discourses of mass media, movies, song lyrics and literature, the learners are directed to the reflections of naturally occurring English discourse in various contexts in order to develop their ability to judge whether the structures analyzed are grammatical or ungrammatical, ill-formed or well-formed from a prescriptive point of view and grammatical but acceptable from a descriptive viewpoint.

This technique was first used at Hacettepe University (Ankara, Turkiye), ELT department and was regarded as a fruitful and enjoyable student assignment both by the learners taking the course and by the colleagues in the department. It is obvious that further application of the technique in different universities and countries will determine its reliability and will produce

clear results about the effectiveness and efficiency of its use in advanced and/or upper-intermediate levels.

## References

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