

# Grammar Shortcuts for Kids

by Lesley Ito

It is one of the most common and most frustrating situations for English teachers. You finally get your students to the point where they understand a grammar concept. Then, the next week when you try to pick up where you left off, they give you blank stares and say, “Huh?”

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if there were some magic way you could get them to quickly remember that grammar concept you taught just last week? Well, there is and this “magic trick” I call a Grammar Trigger.

First, let’s look at how memory works. It is impossible to remember everything you learn or experience. However, a picture, a smell, or a song can trigger some long forgotten memory. Advertisers know this and spend lots of money developing catchy jingles and eye-catching logos to help you notice and remember their products. Perhaps we should borrow a trick or two from the advertisers to help our students notice and remember grammar—this is where the aforementioned Grammar Triggers come in.

Grammar Triggers are charts or pictures that plainly, simply, and clearly convey a grammar concept. They are best hand drawn because the students pay attention to what you are drawing (Usually in my class, they are laughing at what I am drawing!). For this reason, they must be very simple and easy to reproduce. They must be quickly drawn and are actually better if they are drawn badly, for reasons that will become clear later (Also, remember, you are an English teacher, not Rembrandt!). It is very important for them to be exactly the same every time you draw them. Save variety for games and activities.

Before I introduce my first Grammar Trigger, I would like to say that when I teach grammar to children, I never use Japanese. Many of the basic grammar concepts we teach to children either don’t exist in the Japanese language or are very confusing if you do try to explain them in Japanese. For example, there is no Japanese equivalent to the distinction between “it is” and “they are.” Possessives are not usually used in Japanese and trying to explain them using “*kare no*” or “*kanojo no*” can lead to confusion (especially since the word “*kare*” can also mean “boyfriend”). I have had some students who have been going to my school for years enter junior high and come in complaining that they don’t understand the “‘be’ *doshi*” (the verb “to be”). When I tell them they learned it when they were in elementary school and start drawing the Grammar Trigger on the board to show them, they exclaim, “That’s the “‘be’ *doshi*”??? That’s easy! When my teacher explained it in class, she made it sound so complicated!” If junior high students who have been studying English for years think this grammar explanation in Japanese is confusing, imagine how elementary students must feel.

## The Singular/Plural Grammar Trigger

The first week, draw a cat, a banana, and a shark on the



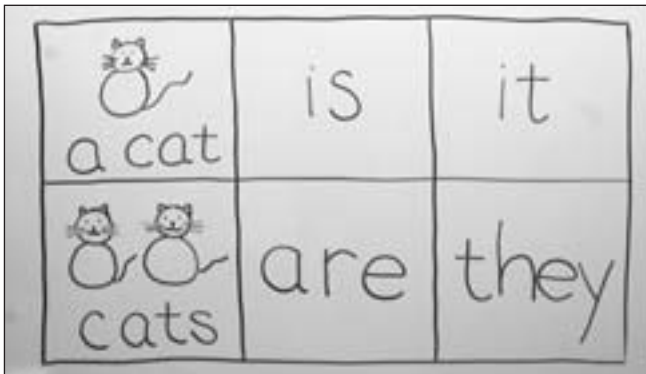
board. Get the students to tell you what these objects are as you write the words underneath. Then, draw an arrow to the other side of the board. Draw three cats, four bananas, and two sharks on the board. Then, point to the cat and have them say, “cat” once again. Point to the cats and before they can confuse themselves and blurt out “Three cat!” say, “catsssssss.” Overemphasize the “s” sound. Use the same pattern to explain the bananas and the sharks.

At this point, you may be wondering, “Huh? What’s so special about what you just did?” Well, for one thing, you have given the students a grammar explanation in a concrete form—a picture. This picture will enable them to make a mental imprint of this grammar concept. They are also paying attention because they are laughing at your cats that look like snowmen or are excited by the scary shark (And the bananas? Well, they ARE more interesting than boring, old apples.). They are also paying attention because they have just participated in getting the grammar concept on the board and were interested in seeing what the teacher was going to draw next.

The next week, draw the exact same thing in the exact same way as the first step of your grammar lesson. Try to talk as little as possible and get the students to tell you what the objects are and see if they remember how to say them in the plural form. The first week, they won’t be so good at it, but encourage them as much as you can. Usually by the fourth week, they will chant out all of the answers before you can draw the complete picture! During the lesson, while you play games or do activities to practice the grammar concept, refer to the Grammar Trigger occasionally. When a student makes a mistake, point to the Grammar Trigger and see if they can correct their own mistake. That is one of those wonderful teaching moments when learning is truly happening!

## The “It is/They are” Grammar Trigger

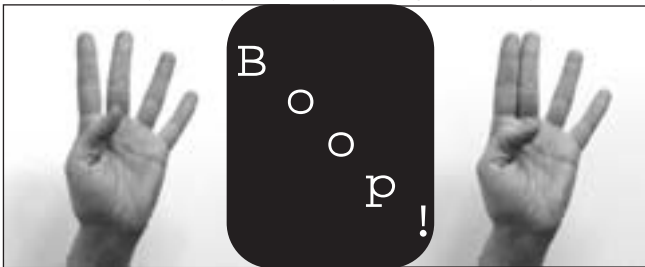
Since singular/plural forms are an important part of this grammar concept, I use the same cats that I drew for the singular and plural Grammar Trigger. Actually, it might be best to review that Grammar Trigger before teaching the “It is/They are” Grammar Trigger. First, draw one cat in the top row and two cats in the bottom row. Get the students to tell you “Cat” and “Cats.” Then in the first row, write “is” and



“it.” While pointing to the words, say, “What is it?” and elicit the answer “It is a cat.” (The word “what” is not written in the chart. This word is symbolized by using a shrugging, “I don’t know” gesture.) Notice you will be making a forward and then a backward motion with your hand. I think this is an important point because it mimics the natural flow of talk between two people—back and forth, question and answer.

Next, go to the second row. Shrug and say, “What. . .” and then point to the empty boxes. If the students say, “is it?” reply, “Really? Cat and Catssssss are different.” Let them be confused for about 3 seconds or so, then write in “are” and “they.” While pointing to the words, say, “What are they? They are cats.” Once again, you will be making the same forward/backward motion with your hand.

Now, what about contractions when using this form? Contractions can easily fit into this method. To make the contraction “it’s”, hold up four fingers and make the students do the same. Point to your fingers as you say, “It is a cat.” Then, put your “it” finger and your “is” finger together and say, “BOOP!” very loudly. Point to your fingers and say, “It’s a



cat.” (During my presentation at the Chubu Expo, one member of the audience asked if it was necessary to say, “BOOP!” very loudly. Yes, it is. You may feel a little silly, but your students will be giggling, participating, and learning contractions! Believe me, they will never forget contractions!) Now, when you refer to the Grammar Trigger, make a swift flick of your wrist when you say, “It’s a cat.”

When practicing this target, mix up singular and plural flashcards. Have the students ask each other, “What is it?” or “What are they?” If they get them confused, take the flashcard and place it over the cat or cats on the Grammar Trigger, then let the students correct their own mistakes.

### Possessives Grammar Trigger

The best way to teach possessives is to have each student have one object of their own to first demonstrate the use of “my” and “your.” At first, I thought it would be fine if every-



one took out their own pencil. However, it always seemed there was one student who had forgotten his or her pencil. So, in frustration, I decided to use the students’ hands. I am pleased to report that none of my students have ever come to class without their hands!

First, at the top of the board, I write the words “my” and “your.” Then we practice saying, “my hand” by pointing to our own hands and then “your hand” by pointing to someone else’s hand.

Now, it is time to move onto the third person possessives. By the boy with the extremely large hand, write “his.” By the girl with the bouffant hairdo and the extremely large hand, write “her.” By the boy with the extremely large hand in the T-shirt with “Yusuke” written on it, write “Yusuke’s.” By the girl with the bouffant hairdo and the extremely large hand in the T-shirt with “Yoko” written on it, write “Yoko’s.” Finally, by the boy and girl with the extremely large hands, write “their.” Now, it is time to practice the Possessives Chant while pointing to the correct hand.

The Possessives Chant goes like this:

*My hand, your hand, his hand, her hand,  
Yusuke’s hand, Yoko’s hand, their hands.*

Just as with the other Grammar Triggers, after one or two times, the students will be able to do the chant by themselves while you point to the correct picture.

A great way to practice possessives is to divide the board into three sections. In the first section, draw a girl, in the second section, draw a boy, in the last section, draw a boy and a girl. Then give all of the children a small piece of paper and ask them to draw any object they want. Of course, by now they have seen the teacher draw many pictures badly, so hopefully they won’t be shy about drawing the perfect picture. Impose a strict time limit of thirty seconds. Then have them form a line by the board and as they walk by the board, give them a small piece of tape and have them stick their picture in one of the sections. After everyone is finished, make new sentences from what your students have taped to the board. (For example: This is her pizza; This is his alien; These are their french fries. The sillier the better!)

Grammar Triggers are like the warm-up before a sporting event. Use them first thing to make sure that everyone is ready to play the game.

*Lesley Ito is the co-owner of Sunrise English School in Nagoya and a frequent contributor on the ETJ Yahoo! groups. She is secretary of ETJ-Aichi and has made presentations for ETJ-Aichi and at the Chubu ELT Expo.*