

Supplementary Grammar-focused Activities for a Company English Course

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Teaching materials play an important role in language teaching and learning. Commercial course textbooks, one of the various kinds of materials available, are most prevalent. Richards (2001) discusses the positive and negative effects by commercial textbooks. He identifies several principal positive effects, such as standardized instruction and overall quality of the materials. However, he also points out possible negative effects, which include inauthentic content that does not reflect students' needs. This paper, through an examination of the author's own taught course, discusses a downside to using a commercial textbook, then shows a possible adaptation which introduces supplementary activities to mitigate the weaknesses of using a commercial textbook only.

Limiting factors

One of the company courses I teach is a beginning grammar course for 12 people in business. The textbook is assigned by an agent. I see the book, which was originally written for junior high school students, as a limiting factor that needs modification and supplementation. This is because the text fails to reflect students' and the personnel department's needs in some aspects. In the following sections, I evaluate the textbook based on both their needs.

Students' prior knowledge, abilities, interests and short- and long-term goals

Firstly, I doubt if the textbook matches the students' nonlanguage knowledge and abilities. For example, this book explains the major difference between 'will' and 'be going to' as the different number of words contained in 'will' (one word) and 'be going to' (three). It mentions there are differences in meanings between the two structures; however, it says students do not have to learn these differences at the junior high level. My adult students, though, have enough cognitive ability and English learning behind them to begin to understand that although the two structures overlap, there are some differences in use in certain situations.

Next, regarding students' interests, I am skeptical about the textbook's appropriateness. Since my students range in age from 38 to 54, it is unlikely that they would ever need sentences such as, "We are going to play baseball after school" or "I am taller than my mother".

Through a group interview, I discovered that most of the students expect to use

English in the future at work. Some will have to read and write in English. Many will need to communicate with American management and colleagues. Therefore, it is essential for them to have grammatical competence, a term which refers to one's ability to "use a grammar rule in the interpretation, expression, or negotiation of meaning" (Savignon, 2001, p.6). However, the assigned textbook does not have sufficient tasks and exercises in order to foster this important goal of improved grammatical competence.

Personnel department's expectations towards the students in the short- and long terms

Following the first course in which I used this textbook, I received positive feedback from the personnel department. At the end of the course, the students took the same written test as they did during placement. The personnel department informed me that students who took the grammar course in addition to the conversation course improved their test scores much more than the students who took a conversation course only. This comparison suggests that the personnel department's short-term goal is to see improvement in the students' scores, and they see grammar review and revision as key to meet this goal. In this narrow sense, the assigned textbook seems appropriate. However, it is difficult to determine just which aspects of the grammar lessons contributed specifically to the favorable results since I used supplementary materials, activities, and communicative lessons in combination with the assigned elements of the grammar course.

The personnel department has told the employees that they should be able to work efficiently using English. This directive sug-

homework	
I use	I go
I use	I go
I use	I go
I use	I

Figure 1: Graphic of the assignment sheet

We use a computer. . . .
to **send e-mail messages.**

to

to

Also, we can use it
to **have an on-line meeting.**

to

to

Figure 2: Graphic of the worksheet for brainstorming step

gests that the students are expected to obtain not only grammatical competence but also other components of ‘communicative competence’: discourse, sociocultural and strategic ones (Canale, 1983, cited in Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, & Thurrell, 1995; Savignon, 2001). However, the textbook does not seem to include exercises that might help to improve learners’ grammatical competence. There are no dialogues, making it nearly impossible to cultivate discourse. Given the fact that there are no dialogues, it is challenging for the teacher to teach sociolinguistic aspects of the language. Since there is little context and no content given, it seems extremely hard to practice commonly used strategies such as the negotiation of meaning.

The need for supplemental materials

As discussed above, the assigned textbook shows its limitations in several crucial ways. Supplemental materials, which can

be used to compensate for some of the limitations of the text, may enable the students to achieve higher test scores and acquire communicative competence. This would, in turn, fulfill both the students’ and the personnel department’s goals and needs.

Sample Developed Materials

In this section, examples of material is introduced in five steps. The use of ‘to-infinitives’ to express purpose is the target grammar point.

Home assignment description: As homework, the students are asked to finish the sentence in each box on the worksheet (see Figure 1). They are encouraged to write about things related to their job.

The aim: Since this sheet will be used to make ‘to-infinitive’ sentences later, this assignment can help students make connections between what they already know and what they are going to learn. In addition, by

Use one of these dialogues below. Talk with your partner.

A: What do you _____ for? / Why do you _____ ?

B: I use it / them to (purpose) _____
for (purpose) _____.

Example

A: What do you use a computer for? / Why do you use a computer?

B: I use it to send e-mail.
for sending e-mail.

A: Do you _____ to (purpose) _____ ?

B: Yes. I use it to (purpose) _____
for (purpose) _____
or

No. I _____ to (purpose) _____
for (purpose) _____.

Example

A: Do you use a cell phone to call the clients?

Figure 3: Graphic of the example sheet for the expansion step

thinking about things and places related to their work, the students generally will be prepared for the week's content, such as things and places on the job.

Brainstorming step description: The second material (see Figure 2) is used in a class task to complete the sentences by brainstorming the purposes and functions of a computer. The teacher explains the usage of 'to-infinitives' during the activity.

The aim: With support from the teacher, the students can practice making 'to-infinitive' sentences and begin understanding with greater depth and breadth the usage of the target grammar point.

The cellular/mobile phone activity description: A worksheet similar to the one used in the brainstorming activity is used in this step (see Figure 3). However, in this activity the students are expected to collaborate and help each other rather than seek the teacher's help. In section 1, the students work in groups to think of various uses of cellular phones. Then, in section 2, they look at a mobile phone catalog written in English and complete the worksheet.

The aim: There are three aims of this activity. The first is to expose the students to authentic written text and to provide them with an opportunity for reading to extract key information. The second aim is to help the students gain discourse competence. Example dialogues are shown on the worksheet. By using the target grammar point in the dialogues, the student may

become more aware of the relatedness of grammar use in a series of utterances. Finally, they may learn communication strategies for L2 interactions through this activity. Suggestions in Japanese are included in the handout with the English dialogues so that the students can more easily understand some useful strategies while fulfilling the tasks using their English.

Expansion activity's description: The students use the same assignment sheet, but expand on its contents. One student in a pair looks at his partner's assignment sheet (see Figure 1) and asks the partner about the purposes of what he does or where he goes on business. Example dialogues are given (see Figure 3), but the students are encouraged to ask additional and freer questions to expand on the dialogues.

The aim: The main purpose of this activity is to personalize the target grammar point. It is also worth mentioning that, by trying to have more spontaneous interactions, the students are likely to use words and phrases they have learned before. They can form and test their own hypothesis, and use different kinds of interactive strategies.

Game description: The students work in groups of four. Each group then divides into two teams, Teams 1 and 2, with two members per team. First, Student A on Team 1 looks at some cards (see Figure 4 next page) and explains them one by one to Student B on the same team. When explaining, the speaker has to make 'to-infinitive' sen-

Cards for Team 1, Student A

paper clips	company cafeteria
the locker	Malaysia
a car	the meeting room
the staff ID	Makuhari

Figure 4: Example cards for the game

tences. For example, a student could say, “I use this to enter this building” to describe the words “the staff ID.” Student B from Team 1 has to listen and guess the word. If he guesses correctly, the team earns a point. Student A of the opposing team must make sure that the speaker, Student A of Team 1, makes sentences using ‘to-infinitives’ properly in order to explain each word. Student B of the opposing team will record the score. When Team 1 is finished, Student A

on Team 2 describes the words on his cards and Student B guesses what they are. Then, Student B speaks and Student A listens. In this way, the students take turns and each student has a chance to play every role.

The aim: Through this game, the students may acquire strategies to search for alternative ways to get their message across when their first attempt did not succeed (repair, amplification, clarification, repetition, etc. in discourse). Also, the words on the cards are related to their job, thus personalization is likely to happen.

References

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