

Integrated Skills: Grammar and Home Reading in a Legal English Class

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Abstract

Grammar is traditionally taught as a separate block within the course of English. The result often is that the students successfully cope with grammatical drills and tests, but fail to use this perfectly drilled knowledge in speaking and writing activities, especially when discussing their professional topics and thus focusing on the content, rather than on the linguistic form. The roots of the problem seem to be in the disconnection of grammatical material with the content side. This paper aims to describe an experiment undertaken in a university class of English for law students where the discussion and practice of grammatical issues was based on the student's home reading materials. The new technique allowed to relate grammar material to the particular contexts and topics the students were dealing with in other parts of the course, to fill grammatical structures with the vocabulary they were mastering and gradually make those structures part of the students' own speech. The paper also provides specific examples of exercises and activities that were used in class and could be adapted to other language learning contexts.

Keywords: integrated skills, grammar, home reading, legal English

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The present paper concentrates on teaching English grammar as part of a course of English for specific and academic purposes, with a special focus on how to integrate grammatical competence of the students with perceptive and productive skills. It will also describe a methodological experiment conducted in several groups of law school students that study English as a compulsory part of their curriculum.

Although the main accent in this paper is made on teaching Legal English in a university setting, the teaching techniques and the types of activities that will be described, as well as the underlying principles, can be effectively adapted to a wide range of settings, from different areas of specialization for ESP students to different age groups and proficiency levels (pre-intermediate and higher).

Approaches to teaching grammar have long been the focus of attention and subject for much debate for language teaching practitioners and theorists. Thus, following the recent trend for purely communicative methods and task-based teaching, there has now been a return to the more traditional way of explicit and curriculum-based presentation and practice of grammatical material (Richards & Rogers, 2001; Walter, 2015). Moreover, several researchers have come to the conclusion that explicit knowledge of grammar proves to be a more sound base than implicit, that integrating grammar in a task is not necessary and does not lead to better linguistic performance (Spada & Tomita, 2010; Swan, 2005, 2006; Walter, 2015).

While these conclusions refer to language learning in general, some additional problems come to the fore when English for specific purposes is concerned. Several years' experience of teaching English grammar in groups of law school students has revealed an interesting paradox: when concentrating on grammatical issues the students make few mistakes in tests and exercises, they do show sound explicit knowledge of grammar (provided that they are normally diligent learners), but as soon as they switch to discussing their professional topics in English, which forms the greater part of their course, they seem to forget much of what they know about grammar. This concerns both the mistakes they make and the range of grammatical structures they try to use. So, here comes the question of contextual integration of grammar.

Whether drills-based or task-based, grammar is traditionally taught as a separate block within the course of English, partly because many of the popular and reliable grammar books that are usually used in class, are not subject-oriented and are intended for the broadest audience of language learners. The result often is that the students successfully cope with grammatical exercises and tests, but fail to use this perfectly drilled knowledge in speaking and writing activities, when it comes to their professional contexts. The roots of the problem seem to be in the disconnection of grammatical material with the content side. They simply don't see the link between what they discuss in grammar class and the material they deal with in other kinds of activities.

Hence the solution: where English for specific purposes is concerned, not only the illustrative material should preferably be taken from the same range of topics that the students are supposed to discuss, but also the extensive practice should be based on these

topics and, what is most important, integrated with perceptive and productive skills, speaking and writing in the first place, in the contexts and genres that the students are supposed to master.

In this respect, grammar-book drills and mere correcting and explaining mistakes when they occur in speech or writing are simply not enough. A kind of intermediate stage that proves to be effective here is specially elaborated for each class, 'custom-made' activities that enable grammar acquisition based on and integrated with specific-content-oriented materials.

Home reading in this perspective can provide plenty of textual material and potential activities to build on. The books should be chosen to reflect the students' professional sphere of interest and to provoke extensive discussion. Grammatical tasks may be made part of the discussion process and arranged according to the length of the chunks of speech expected from the student (from the shortest to the longest), so that grammatical models gradually become part of a phrase, of a short paragraph, a lengthy deliberation on a subject and finally - part of the students' active language.

In the experiment that is going to be described herein, this teaching strategy was used in several groups of first-year law school students who study English for two years as part of their curriculum. They had 6 hours of English per week and three different classes – Introduction to Legal English, Grammar and Home Reading and Lectures on the history of English-speaking countries, all the three taught by different teachers. Grammar and home reading were combined in one class, which facilitated the process of their integration. The students' proficiency levels ranged from low-intermediate to advanced – this allowed to use a broad variety of activities, while, on the other hand, the differences in the students' levels and background knowledge made the task of the teacher more challenging. The basic books used in the course were *Grammar and Vocabulary for Cambridge First* by Luke Prodromou (2012) and different novels about lawyers or law students by John Grisham (1991; 2010; 2011), Scott Turow (1997) and Brandt Goldstein (2006) – depending on the group's average proficiency level. The examples of activities mentioned in this paper were based on John Grisham's novel *The Firm* (1991).

The students were supposed to cover one unit from the grammar book and one or two chapters of reading each week and a large part of the activities in class were a combination of grammar practice with the discussion of the book content. As the course of grammar was remedial and most of the material was more or less familiar to the students, usually a brief presentation of the new topic by the teacher was followed by extensive practice. The drills from the grammar book would usually be assigned for homework, as they can easily be checked with the key and discussed only where problems occur.

Normally, the teacher would present a new topic using both the examples from the grammar book and the ones based on the book for home reading; ideally, the examples would be found in the recent chapters, read out and discussed. The context of current university life could also provide plenty of material to be used as additional examples.

This small modification to the otherwise traditional way of presenting grammatical issues can bring a considerable positive effect, because from the very first stage grammar is put in a familiar and relevant context, in which the students are supposed to use it and thus it turns from something abstract into something really tangible.

The tasks were arranged in a way that a grammatical structure would gradually become part of longer and longer chunks of the students' own speech, but particular strategies could vary from class to class depending on the topic and material under discussion.

Thus, for example, the practice of past tenses based on *The Firm* by J. Grisham (1991) began with drills like gap-filling or phrases for translation prepared by the teacher and based on the plot of the first two chapters. Then the students suggested similar phrases to each other in pairs or teams.

The next exercise was summarizing the chapters sentence by sentence: each student added one sentence to the summary and the next person had to continue. This allowed the students some flexibility in what they wanted to say; they had to think about the content and the grammatical form at the same time; this also provided the students with an incentive to listen to each other attentively – something that is really important in a big class, but often hard to achieve. This exercise can also be done in the form of a game to add some excitement to it – the students divide the chapters and summarize them in teams; each time somebody makes a mistake he is dropped out, the winners are the ones who stay in the game till the end.

The final activity consisted in writing a letter from Mitch or Abby (the main characters of *The Firm*) to their parents describing the events of the first chapters and using as many different past tense forms as possible. This can also be used as a final revision exercise for all tenses. The first chapters of Grisham's novel are full of events, they describe Mitch's final weeks at law school, job interviews and a visit to a law firm that was offering to hire him. The students were free to choose the events they wanted to mention, so there could be no two similar letters. The letters were then read out to the group or shared and corrected in pairs.

The practice of other grammatical topics was organized in a similar way. For instance, studying modal verbs, the students concentrated on the predictions about the development of the plot and made guesses about the activity of the strange law firm where the main character became an associate. Practicing conditionals, the students discussed different possibilities for the main character, who started to guess what the real work of the firm was about and how dangerous his own position was. They also made hypothesis about the things he could have done differently. This was done through questions and answers in pairs (like "What do you think would have happened, if Mitch and Abby had found the bugs in their house earlier?" – "They wouldn't have talked about their suspicions at home") and short narratives made orally in teams or individually in written form. Making hypothesis can be turned into a great fun if it is done in teams and each next speaker continues and develops the idea of the previous person.

The practice of reported speech began with a brainstorm or a team game in which the students had to remember as many different report verbs as they could. Then they discussed the shades of meaning and tried to use these verbs in contexts. The next task was to turn the dialogues from the current chapter of the book into reported speech trying to avoid the four most frequently used verbs – ‘say’, ‘tell’, ‘ask’ or ‘answer’ – often overused by the learners, but any other verbs or expressions that were suitable. The final task was to retell a chapter focusing on the details of the conversations (which were plenty in the novel), again trying to avoid the four basic report verbs or using each of them only once.

The result of the experiment was that being presented and practiced in this way, grammatical models started to associate with particular content, familiar and important to the students, and, consequently, their performance while speaking on these topics improved in terms of grammar.

This integrated approach to teaching grammar and home reading combines the “four strands”, that Paul Nation (2007) suggested should be present in any course, in each class - meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning and fluency development, which are all linked by the same context. Grammar is thus integrated with content, which makes the transition from theory to speech much easier.

Although this paper focuses on a very narrow setting, the strategies and materials presented here can be adapted to a broad variety of teaching contexts, starting from different books selected for home reading and finishing with different areas of professional interests of the students, different ages and levels of proficiency.

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