

# Grammar detectives

Lis Pölzleitner and Laura Bergmann create a Personal Grammar Book.

Teaching grammar to young beginners (aged 10–12) is an ongoing challenge for English teachers. The concept that ‘forms convey meanings’ is one that is difficult to grasp and, often, pre-teens don’t have any notion of how language works, not even their mother tongue. This is a pitfall for teachers who try to explain grammar to learners who don’t see the necessity of grammar at all and, therefore, often fail to apply what they learn in spontaneous production.

So, what is the alternative? Some teachers avoid teaching grammar explicitly, hoping that their students will pick up the concepts if they get enough input. While this might work in an English-speaking environment, it is seldom successful if the input is limited to a few hours per week and often leads to fossilisation of incorrect forms.

## Students as language detectives

To solve our problem, we have developed active awareness raising and conceptualisation tasks that are based on the notional grammar teaching model suggested by David Newby. In Newby’s model, grammar is acquired in typical stages, starting with

awareness raising, forming hypotheses about how and when certain grammar is used, practising the new grammar in scaffolded activities and, finally, using grammar independently to communicate one’s own ideas. In this communicative model, learning grammar means making connections between *meaning* and *form*. Consequently, the learners need to figure out that rules are simply regularities – or typical relationships between the *meanings* they want to express and the *forms* that English speakers use to convey them – rather than reciting structural rules provided by the teacher or the textbook.

In order to find such regularities, the learners need adequate input showing the new forms in typical contexts and communicative situations. Based on the provided input, the learners are then invited to find the rules (ie meaning–form connections) themselves. Evidence provided by H Douglas Brown suggests that this inductive approach will lead to deeper processing and more engagement and, thus, to more permanent learning.

## Language detectives at work

In the last three years, we have created a ‘Personal Grammar Book’ for our students, to which we add

grammar chapters as we discuss them in class. We print the collected handouts for our students as a brochure at the beginning of the year, so that they can use it continuously.

With this Personal Grammar Book, our students become language detectives, trying to form their own theories about why a certain form is used or what it means. We decided that the best time to start with these challenging tasks would be right at the beginning, so that the students become aware of grammatical features as early as possible.

Our students do their first discovery task, or 'grammar challenge', in the first unit. We start with a very simple problem – the use of *a* and *an*. While the rule is obvious to us, it is surprisingly hard for the students to work out, as they have never thought about language that way. They come up with lots of interesting solutions, which makes us change our list of

words again and again to disprove their theories and point them towards the correct solution. Some of the theories that the students have produced include: *We use 'an' for things that we can eat, We use 'an' for animals and 'a' for people and We use 'a' if there is one thing and 'an' if there are more.* In formulating their first theories, the students usually look only at the meanings of the words, not the forms. This is only natural. When they come to discuss their ideas, we point out that some of the letters in the handout (see Figure 1) are highlighted, and we tell them that the marked letters are a hint. When the students have figured out the solution, they are usually very proud of themselves. Sometimes they covertly help other students in class, revealing the 'big secret'. So grammar also becomes more exciting, and we have actually heard our students reacting with 'Wow, cool!' when they learnt that their theory was correct. Can we ask for more?

## M1: a or an

A1

### Challenge 1

Look at the two boxes below. What do you notice? When do we use **a** and when do we use **an** in front of a word? **SAY the words and LISTEN carefully.**

<b>an</b> apple	<b>an</b> orange	<b>a</b> boy	<b>a</b> dog
<b>an</b> English book	<b>an</b> ugly duck	<b>a</b> girl	<b>a</b> garden
<b>an</b> ice-cream	<b>an</b> interesting book	<b>a</b> chair	<b>a</b> school

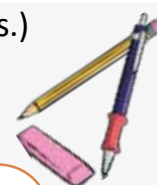


### My rule

Wenn ich am Beginn eines Wortes .....höre  
verwende ich **an**.

### Now it's your turn

Write the words in the correct boxes. (Schreibe die Wörter in den richtigen Kreis.)  
tiger, banana, book, exercise book, pencil, eraser, door, old man, internet-café,  
English teacher, blackboard, window, American film, elephant





a

an

Figure 1

## Challenge 2 for pros:

**a or an?** Scan the QR code and **listen VERY carefully**. What sounds do you hear at the beginning of these words? In which of the two circles do they go: a or an?

\_\_\_ university, \_\_\_ uniform, \_\_\_ unicorn, \_\_\_ unit in my coursebook  
 \_\_\_ mp3-player, \_\_\_ XL-pullover,  
 \_\_\_ uncle, \_\_\_ umbrella , \_\_\_ ugly bird 



Do we need a or an here? Write in the words, then **listen to the words again**.

### My rule

Ich sage \_\_\_ unicorn, \_\_\_ unicycle, weil .....

Ich sage \_\_\_ mp3 player, \_\_\_ XL-pullover, weil .....

Figure 2

The students have some help with formulating their rule and they are allowed to write the rule in their mother tongue. It is interesting to see that hardly any students use the partly formulated rule for help; instead, they keep looking at the words and try to puzzle things out for themselves.

In the second part of the challenge (see Figure 2), they have to understand that the rule only applies to the *pronunciation* of the words, not the *spelling*. Once they have mastered this challenge, they really understand the rule and are unlikely to forget it again.

## Progression

As the students become more experienced in puzzling out the *why* of grammar, they move into more difficult terrain. In year two, they are confronted with different tenses and completely new concepts (tense notions) that often have no equivalent in their mother tongues, such as different notions of the future or the present perfect tense. With these more complex challenges, the students often work in pairs to figure out why the new forms are used and what meanings they express.

In the example shown in Figure 3, the students find out that the English language has more than one concept and form to talk about the future. By analysing the sample texts, they can figure out that the *going-to* form is used to talk about the *plans* or *intentions* of the speaker, while the *will-future* is used to talk about vague *predictions*. Since neither of

these concepts is clearly defined in the students' minds, they usually paraphrase their hypotheses in relatively vague terms. They will say things like: *When I know that I will do it I say 'I am going to ...'*, *when I don't know what I will do at the weekend I say 'I will ...'*. Many children unconsciously use lots of hand gestures to explain their ideas and show the concepts of 'vagueness' or 'fixed plans' with their hands rather than with words. We encourage this and help them to become aware of their gestures and then to put the concepts into words.

## Why call it a Personal Grammar Book?

Personalisation plays an important role in learning new things. As Anna Katharina Braun and Michaela Meier put it, learning always means '*making new connections to our existing neural networks*'. As a result, any task that invites the students to apply new language to situations in their personal lives will lead to more efficient learning. Moreover, personalised exercises that refer to the students' previous experiences and life-stories will seem more interesting and more motivating, and will, therefore, lead to higher engagement and deeper processing. Using the new language patterns in personal contexts will also make it easier and less abstract for the students to understand the underlying concepts. Therefore, after the stages of awareness raising and finding the rule (conceptualisation), the students are always asked

## M9: Talking about the Future

### Challenge:

Read the following examples where people talk about the future. Highlight all the verbs (Zeitwörter).

What do you notice? What is the difference between text A and text B? Tell your teacher what you have found out.

### A

What are you **going to do** on the upcoming weekend?

This weekend I am going to Klagenfurt to celebrate my grandmother's birthday. All my cousins are also going to be there.

On Saturday evening we are going to watch all the Harry Potter movies together, my cousin Peter has them all on DVD.

On Sunday we are going to celebrate my grandmother's birthday in a restaurant. There, I am going to order Wienerschnitzel, my favorite food.

I am really looking forward to this weekend.

### My Rule:



Here we are talking about .....

We use the form .....

That sounds like fun. My weekend is going to be boring. I am going to study for Math, and I am going to work on my module in English. And then, I am going to clean up my room, it's a real mess.

### B

What **will** your life be like in the year 2040?

**I'm not sure. I think** I will live in a flat or in a house with my partner. Maybe I will have some children.

I'll work in a big company and I'll have a car of my own. It will probably be an electric car – or maybe I'll go to work in a self-driving car.

### Tip: Remember

I **am** = I'm

I **will** = I'll

### My Rule:



Here we are talking about .....

We use the form.....

Figure 3

**Your weekend**

**Your teacher's weekend**

Perhaps...

If ...

Maybe...

Perhaps, I'll go to the bookstore and buy a new book.

Maybe, my sister will visit me. She is very busy, I don't know if she has got time.

I'll go jogging if the weather is good.

On Saturday morning I am going to do my grocery shopping for the week, and I am going to clean my house.

I am going to meet my friend Nancy on Saturday afternoon. We are going to have coffee and cake and chat about work.

On Sunday I am going to sleep in and have a nice, long breakfast.

On Sunday afternoon I am going to work for school. I have a long to-do list.

**Now it's your turn:**  
What are **YOU** going to do this upcoming weekend (or in the next holidays)? Do you have any **PLANS** or **VAGUE IDEAS**?

Figure 4

to produce *true* examples themselves. These true examples link the new grammar to the students' personal experiences and are the first step towards automatic application of the language patterns (proceduralisation) and the automatic use of the language in typical contexts.

In Figure 4 (on the previous page), the students first see the teacher's *plans* (*going to*) and vague *predictions* (*will-future*) for the upcoming weekend. They then write about their own plans and vague ideas by following the teacher's examples. This way of dealing with these two notions of the future also shows the students that grammar is not black and white and one person's correct examples might be wrong for someone else. For many students, this is an eye-opening experience that really convinces them that grammar is actually important.

One problem that we are trying to avoid in our Personal Grammar Book is the use of grammatical metalanguage. We avoid metalanguage whenever possible. We have noticed that the students often try to use grammar terms that they have learnt in their first language classes randomly, without any true understanding of what they mean. For this reason, we use everyday words and age-appropriate labels for the grammar concepts in our Personal Grammar Book.

We have designed activities for all the grammar topics that are generally taught at A1–B1 level. Each topic follows the same steps: awareness raising – forming a rule – scaffolded, personalised practice. In addition to these pages, the learners are provided with more communicative practice on our Moodle platform. In order to keep our grammar book short and well-organised, these additional materials and tasks are not included in the paper version of the book. This way, our Personal Grammar Book can also serve as a short reference grammar for the students, where they will find their own short rules as well as their personal examples which will immediately ring bells when they see them.



In the last few years, our grammar book has grown step by step, and all the tasks have been revised again and again to avoid all the pitfalls that our students have fallen into. We see that our approach works very well and that – if they make mistakes – the students can quickly recall the rules and concepts by looking at the respective pages in their own grammar book.

We are thinking of publishing our materials but, as a first step, some of the ideas and activities can be downloaded from <https://epep.at/grammar>. ■



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