

Course: Communicative Grammar, WS 2011

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How Communicative Are Grammar Exercises?

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1 Introduction

Until recently, I have never really questioned the meaningfulness of grammar exercises nor have I thought about that the creation of grammar activities could be based on one's theoretical approach to grammar in general. Of course, when I was a pupil I did notice that some tasks seemed to be superfluous because they were testing the same grammatical items in the same way over and over again. However, I never called this method into question because this was the way I was exposed to grammar my whole school career and this was how the tests were designed.

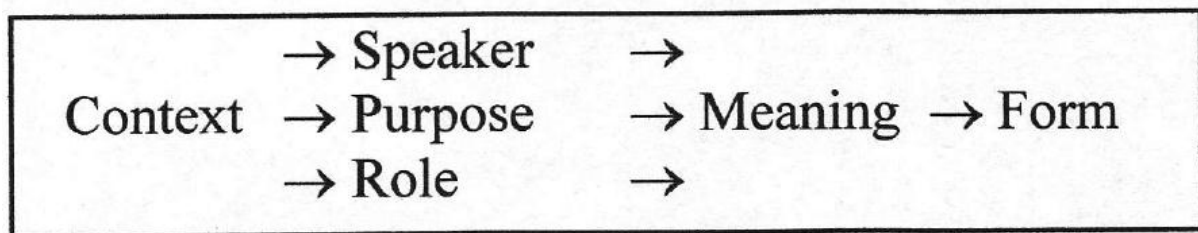
After receiving some theoretical input in this course, it is now clear to me that my teacher appears to have preferred the traditional approach, in which more prominence is given to testing declarative knowledge than to testing procedural knowledge. Judging from my personal experience as pupil and tutor, grammar exercises that apply to the traditional approach of grammar teaching are still in the majority over to that favor a C+C approach.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate grammar activities from three different school textbooks, which deal with the modal verb “to be allowed to”, according to the question of how communicative they are. It is important to mention that the paper will only be able to define tendencies. There will be no general labels such as “this activity is completely uncommunicative or this task fulfills all communicative criteria.” In order to define the tasks' communicative efficiency, they will be assessed according to the communicative criteria taken from the course handout. In the following theory part, there will be a summary and a short explanation of the C+C approach. In addition, the communicative criteria as well as other principles that are important for the analysis, such as the pedagogical principles, will be addressed in greater detail. If necessary, the analysis will include suggestions for improvement as well. The three selected school books are *English to g 3*, *More! 3* and *Friends 3*.

The paper will close with a conclusion in which the most important findings of the analysis will be recapitulated.

2 Theoretical Part

The Communicative Approach to grammar teaching became popular in the 70s. Its aims at establishing the notion in classrooms that language should be practiced in authentic real life contexts. As opposed to traditional grammar, it does not establish categories that primarily concentrate on the form of grammar but it regards forms as the final stage of an interaction process in which messages are communicated by the speaker to other people in a context. This view is illustrated by the following Communication model (cf. Newby 1998:2ff)



Currently, modern grammar teaching focuses on two approaches to grammar that are considered complementary, the Cognitive+Communicative perspective. Both approaches have in common that language is seen as a way to express meaning into form. From a cognitive perspective, language is approached psychologically, while a communicative approach highlights the pragmatic, discourse-linked and context-based nature of language. The basic principles of the communicative approach can be summed up by the following points (cf. Newby 2011:7)

- 1) Language is a system for the expression of meaning.
- 2) The primary function of language is for interaction and communication
- 3) The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses.
- 4) The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse.

Criteria for the analysis of grammar activities

Newby (2011:23) argues that following criteria can contribute to defining the communicative efficiency of grammar exercises:

- 1) **Clear and realistic context**
 - Grammar arises from an actual situation
- 2) **Realistic use/proceeding of language (authenticity of process)**

- Grammar is communication, not mathematics
- 3) Meaning of grammar and overall message of an utterance stressed**
 - Grammar helps to convey messages
- 4) Personalisation** (students link grammar to their own knowledge, ideas, experience, wishes etc.)
 - Grammar is a way of encoding experience
- 5) Open-ended exercises**
 - Grammar is part of a creative process
- 6) Task-based**
 - Grammar is means to an end
- 7) Integrated skills** (vocabulary, speech acts, speaking, writing)
 - Grammar works with other linguistic sub-systems and skills to generate meaning.

As already mentioned in the introduction, it would be wrong to expect that a communicatively efficient grammar task has to fulfill each of the presented categories. In order to define the communicative nature of exercises, the tasks will also be evaluated based on other criteria, such as the cognitive learning stages (cf. Newby 2011:19). These criteria are important because the higher the cognitive learning stage, the more communicative criteria can be met.

Awareness

- Pupils notice and focus on grammar

Conceptualisation

- Pupils understand a grammar rule; usually conscious knowledge

Proceduralisation

- Pupils are able to use grammar in scaffolded exercises without a strong conscious focus on rules

Performance

- Pupils are able to use grammar in open contexts, focus on the message.

In order to make the analysis of the school book exercises more detailed, there will be a categorization of the task type, a definition of the grammatical objectives and the learning aims. The activities will also be assessed according to their pedagogical principles. Here is a brief list of these criteria, but they are explained in greater detail in the course handout (cf. Newby 2011: 21ff)

1. Learning stages
2. Depth of processing

How mentally active are students while doing a grammar task?

1. Dual processing

Do tasks give pupils the opportunity to represent the world?

2. Personalisation

Do students get the chance to use their personal experiences?

3. Commitment filter

Does the task promote motivation among pupils?

4. Learners' schematic knowledge

Is new knowledge embedded into already existing knowledge?

5. Peer learning

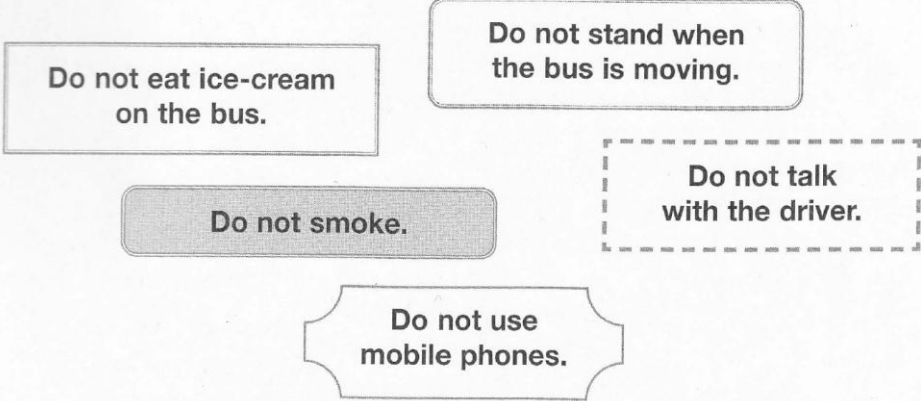
Peers can have strong influence on learning

6. Interaction
7. Test vs. teaching
8. Do you know vs. can you use

3 Analysis of Grammar Exercises

English to go 3:

4 Read the signs on the bus. Then change them into sentences using *to be allowed to*.



1 Do not talk with the driver. *Passengers are not allowed to talk with the driver.*

2 Do not smoke. We

3 Do not stand when the bus is moving. I

4 Do not use mobile phones. We

5 Do not eat ice-cream on the bus. Passengers

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Grammatical Objective: The pupils have to report permission (cf. Newby 2002: 107), they have to write sentences about general (bus) rules. The task also focuses on forming a sentence with the "to be allowed to"- structure.

Activity Type: Reformulation

Learning Aim: understand how to form the modal verb

Cognitive learning stage: conceptualisation, but it is close to awareness

Pedagogical principles: As far as the exercise's depth of processing is concerned, I do not think that this activity contributes to pupils being mentally active while doing the task. The task does not really leave any room for imagination, even the personal pronouns at the beginning of the sentences are given. The activity shows some resemblance to mathematics since pupils are required to use the same structure throughout all the five sentences. Moreover, the phrases given in the signs could be replaced by senseless expressions and the exercise could still be completed in the same way. With regard to dual processing, it seems

that the activity takes experiences of pupils to a certain degree into account. Most students, particularly in larger cities, will go frequently by bus, so they might know about certain rules themselves. However, pupils are not given the opportunity to actively use their personal experiences, but to simply reproduce the given instructions. For this reason, dual processing is very limited. In addition, this exercise does certainly not produce an ‘AHA!’ effect since important cognitive needs such as curiosity or problem solving are not addressed. I also think that this activity is restricted to testing pupils’ declarative knowledge. Therefore, this task can be considered a ‘Do you know’-activity.

Communicative principles:

Apart from conveying a message and the integrated skill writing, I do not really see any further communicative criteria the task meets. Pupils are not provided with a realistic context and there is no authenticity of process, since grammar is not presented as a means of communication in this exercise. As far as personalization is concerned, I have already mentioned that the activity draws on common knowledge but pupils are in the role of mere recipients and they are not given the chance to integrate their personal knowledge into this exercise.

Concerning the question of how these exercises could be made more communicative, there are various ways to accomplish this. For example, the instruction could just say “What are you allowed to/not allowed on a bus? Form sentences using to be allowed to. In this case, pupils would get used to the structure as well, but they themselves would have to think about the content of their sentences and therefore release mental energy. Another way to enhance the communicative quality of the task would be to expand the topic a little. The pupils could be asked “What are you allowed to do at school/at home?” These topics would actually address the students’ personal experiences and therefore promote personalization.

More 3!

11 Write 4 sentences that are true about you or other people.
Use the words from **8**.

My best friend's not allowed to


I'm not allowed to

My brother/sister/cousin is not


8 Write the phrases below the pictures.

- buy your own clothes
- dye your hair
- get a nose stud
- go roller-skating without pads
- go to the disco
- have a party at your house
- have a tattoo
- ride your bike without a helmet
- wear earrings
- talk on the mobile phone for hours
- turn the music up very loud
- watch TV after nine


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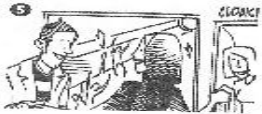
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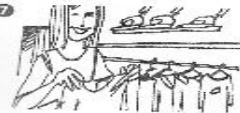
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11



12



Typical categorization: Matching

Grammatical objective: The pupils have to report permission or its negated form, to be more precise. Again, they practice the structure of the modal verb and they have to use expressions from another number to formulate their sentences.

Learning Aim: understanding of how to use to be allowed to and to form sentences with it;

Cognitive learning stage: conceptualization, students are guided very strongly, their formulated sentences only have to be slightly changed;

Pedagogical principles:

This exercise would be mentally challenging, if the answers from number eight were omitted. Compared to the previous analyzed exercise, however, I still consider it less cognitively shallow because the students are not asked to merely reproduce the sentence into another form. In addition, there is quite a wide range of possible answers which they can choose. Another advantage of the exercise is that students do not only have to think about themselves, but they also have to try to put themselves in the position of other people, their friends or relatives for example. Moreover, the task is also a little more demanding from a grammatical point of view, because pupils cannot simply copy all sentences and sometimes they have to change the possessive pronouns within the exercises. Nevertheless, this is clearly limited by the given answers. With regard to dual processing, one can say that it only happens to a small degree in this exercise.

Communicative principles: The task lacks communicative efficiency because it does not really promote personification. It could have been immensely more communicative if the students had to interview their peers and if fewer possible answers had been given.

6 What are you allowed to do?



Are you allowed to:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> watch TV until 10 p.m.? | <input type="checkbox"/> go out with your friends on Saturday? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> drink coffee? | <input type="checkbox"/> talk on the phone for hours? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> listen to loud music in your room? | <input type="checkbox"/> eat fast food four times a week? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> have your own mobile phone? | <input type="checkbox"/> drink wine or beer at a party? |

Example: *Peter is not allowed to watch TV until 10 p.m.*

Interview your partner and write down his or her answers.

7 ... and at the age of 16?

66

What will you be allowed to do when you are 16?
Write three more questions and then interview two other people
and ask them what they will be allowed to do when they are 16.

Example: *I will be allowed to go to the disco when I am 16.
What will you be allowed to do?*

Exercise 6

Typological categorization: Interview based on multiple choice questions

Grammatical objective: the students practice the structure of the modal verb and they learn how to form questions and how to negate the form.

Learning aim: interview a peer, becoming confident with using the form of the modal verb orally

Cognitive learning stage: Conceptualisation, close to proceduralisation; the instructions are still quite detailed here, but the focus on rules is not too strong.

I think this exercise is a good preparation for the following one. From a pedagogical point of view, it is a mixture of a “do you know” and a “do you can” activity. On the one hand, the students are guided very strongly, but they have to be active. Personalisation is possible here because the content of the sentences are also relevant to 13-year olds. As far as the communicative criteria are concerned, one can say that the task promotes the interaction between classmates. However, it would have been better to provide less sentences but this is done in the following exercise.

Exercise 7

Typological categorization: Composition based on the previous interview

Grammatical objective: Reporting future permissions

Learning Aim: choosing interview partners independently, formulating sentences independently

Cognitive learning stage: proceduralisation, instructions are limited, but students are still guided because of the former exercise

Pedagogical principles: By doing this kind of exercise, children will definitely be mentally active. Not only do they have to interview people, but they also have to invent questions of which they think that they are meaningful. Compared to the former activity, the depth of processing is definitely greater in this activity since they are not merely reproducing language, but they have to take an active role while completing the task. Moreover, the activity also tests the pupils' common knowledge since they have to think about what their legal rights will be at sixteen. As far as dual processing is concerned, students are clearly confronted with processing language that does represent the world. Although the task does not solely address their current situation, it deals with situations that pupils will be concerned with in the near future. In addition, this exercise fulfills the criterion of personalization since the students are asked about their personal views, they are given the opportunity to choose their questions and their answers freely, both the interviewer and the interviewee. The task also contributes to pupils committing themselves to learning grammar since it promotes their drive for communication. Another important advantage to the already evaluated exercise is the fact is that this activity supports peer learning and the interaction between the pupils. Many grammar exercises tend to neglect the oral competences, but this task manages to combine written and writing skills. Concerning the question, whether this can be considered a can you use activity, I would definitely say yes. This exercise is not limited to testing declarative knowledge, but it requires students to actively use grammar and goes therefore beyond the stage of conceptualisation.

Communicative principles:

Since the exercise goes beyond conceptualization, it automatically meets more communicative criteria. From my point of view, the grammar does arise from an actual situation because most people do reflect on their upcoming future and grammar is used here to express permission. In addition, the grammar exercise does not only help to convey messages, but it also ensures personalization, since pupils are given the opportunity to link grammar to their personal knowledge and ideas. Even though the task is not open-ended, it is

clearly task-based because it promotes a variety of integrated skills such as speaking and writing.

The following evaluated exercises can be found in the activity book of *Friends*.

What are they allowed to do?

Write sentences about the pictures. Use the correct form:

was/were allowed to – are/is allowed to – will be allowed to
 Past Tense Present Tense Future Tense

five years ago	now	in four years' time

Activity type: the pupils have to construct sentences based on pictures

Grammatical objective: practicing the “to be allowed structure”, practicing the past, present and future tense;

Learning aim: the students can get confident in using the to be allowed to for different time phases

Cognitive learning stage: conceptualisation-proceduralisation;

Pedagogical principles: I do not consider this activity as cognitively shallow. Pupils get the pieces of information they need to form sentences from the pictures and they have to choose the correct tense. What is positive about this task is that students do not receive exemplary sentences that already include names of the depicted people, so there is at least some room for imagination for that. Regarding, dual processing, however, I do not believe that this activity really enhances dual processing because pupils are not given the chance to use their schematic knowledge because they have to pay attention to the content of the drawings. Although it is beneficial that students are not provided with full sentences which should be reformulated, it would have been better if the authors had included fewer pictures. While I do

think that the pictures can be useful to pupils, I am not convinced that they are really necessary. It would have been sufficient to present on drawing for each time phase (past-present-future) and then ask the students about their own ideas.

Communicative principles:

The communicative principles are could be easily enhanced by some minor modifications. For example, the task does not really promote personalization because pupils are provided with ideas by the pictures. As already mentioned, it would be beneficial if the students were asked to formulate further sentences in which they could draw on their personal ideas and imagination, which would also lead to the exercise being open-ended.



Fill in the correct form of "to be allowed to" or "not to be allowed to". Use present tense (3), past tense (2), future tense (2)

3 My life at home

My parents are strict with us but they are also fair. We get a lot of homework at school so my brother and I _____ meet our friends until we have finished it. We _____ stay up late and watch TV because we have to get up early in the morning for school. But on the weekends I _____ go to the cinema with my girlfriends. We often watch American or British movies, but last weekend one of the new Indian films made here in Mumbai was playing. I _____ invite a friend and we went to see it on Saturday afternoon. After the film I _____ go out with my friend: I had to come straight home. It was my brother's birthday and my family was waiting for me so that we could all celebrate together. Next weekend I hope my brother and I _____ visit our cousins in the northern part of India. There is an important cricket match there and my brother wants to see it and I always love visiting my cousin because we have so much fun together. The only problem is that my brother's best friend wants to go with us on the train because he is also a cricket fan. I am crossing my fingers that he _____ come because he always teases me and I don't like it. But I will have to wait and see what happens on Friday.

4 What are you allowed to do?

What about you? What are you allowed to do? What aren't you allowed to do? Write a short story about it.

Activity type: Fill-in-exercise

Grammatical objective: reporting permission

Learning aim: to understand which tense has to be used and which form to be allowed to has to be applied

Cognitive learning stage: conceptualization, there is emphasis on grammar rules

Pedagogical principles: As opposed to many other fill-in-exercises, this task tells a coherent story and the context seems to be realistic. As far as complexity is concerned, one can say that the task does not appear to be too easy because students have to make sure that they use the correct tense, the correct person and be allowed to or its negation form. Compared to other tasks of this kind, pupils still have to be mentally active.

Communicative principles:

While I do think that it is impossible for a mere fill-in-exercise to meet all communicative criteria, this activity seems to fulfill some of them. For instance, the story shared by the girl in the fill-in-exercise is authentic to a large degree because it includes many experiences children of the same age also make such as staying up later on the weekends or going to the cinema. Moreover, students may be able to link some of the experiences told in the exercise to their own life, which could also lead to personalisation.

Number 4

Activity type: Composition

Grammatical objective: reporting permission, using further bits of grammar

Learning aim: pupils gain confidence in using the “to be allowed to” structure in situations where they are guided

Cognitive learning stage: Performance, very limited instructions, students are given the opportunity to use new bits of grammar in their stories

Pedagogical principles: This is an exercise in which students have to mentally active because they receive very few instructions. With regard to dual processing, it is salient that pupils have the opportunity here to map their perceptions of the world onto language. Moreover, students are enabled to use their own ideas in this task, they are only instructed to use the “to be allowed to” -structure and to write a short story. For this reason, this activity can be considered a can you use activity because it clearly tests the students procedural skills and not their declarative knowledge.

Communicative principles: Even though this is a written task, it meets many communicative criteria. First of all, the exercise provides a clear and realistic context, in particular for the target group of students, because many children or teenager of this age group feel that they are restricted by their parents or school, for instance. In addition, personalization is promoted very strongly because the students are asked to integrate their own experiences into their writing. What is also important is the fact that grammar is open-ended in this activity and a part of a creative process. The instruction tells to the pupils two write a short story, but there is no fixed number of words. Another significant advantage of the task is that pupils will use

other bits of language as well, which would not happen if they were only required to formulate a fixed number of sentences.

4 Conclusion

It is important to remember that this analysis does not judge or evaluate the school books *English to go*, *More!* or *Friends* in general, but that it is simply based on the assessment on the units which dealt with the modal verb to be allowed to. However, the assessed examples taken from *English to go* and *More!* were prototypical of the unit's other activities. For this reason, further tasks were not analyzed. Interestingly enough, it was remarkable while scanning through the whole books, that *English to go* offers quite often a wide range of exercises that are also communicatively efficient. Unfortunately, this was not the case with the evaluated unit.

One can say the unit in the school book *Friends* provides the greatest variety of activities that apply different cognitive learning stages, which also affects the degree to which exercises are communicative. Not only did the depicted examples enhance the interaction between students, but it also promoted personalization and managed to embed tasks into a clear and realistic context. With regard to *More!* and *English to go*, there were not many differences concerning their communicative efficiency.

What is also remarkable is the fact oral activities are not a precondition for a communicative exercise. This was proved by the fill-in-exercise presented in *Friends*. Although the task clearly enhanced the receptive skills of students, it offered a well contextualized story that left room for personalization.

It is also important to keep in mind that most exercises can be made more communicative by some minor modifications. For example, if students are guided too strongly it would be a good idea to omit some instructions or some examples provided by the book. It is also beneficial to address students directly and ask them about their experiences or knowledge because this would increase the tasks' communicativeness as well. It is essential for teachers of a foreign language to know that it is quite easy to change exercises effectively because they often are not given the chance to select the school books they want to use, so it is beneficial to know how books that favor a traditional approach to language teaching can be modified.

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