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# Mistakes teachers make when teaching reading, grammar, vocabulary and writing

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Many teachers of English have not undergone adequate preparation to face the real classroom. They take part in one-week crash training courses and are expected to go to the real world and ‘apply’ what they have been instructed to do, as if the application of theoretical principles were straightforward in real classroom practice.

When teachers go to different schools, they are encouraged to forget what they have learned before and spurred on to embrace new methods, and every new method they are introduced to, is hailed as ‘state of the art’, which is far from the truth. As an applied linguist has once put it, ‘there is no best method’. There are preferred methods at best, and the teacher will need to mobilize his intuition to take advantage of theoretical principles in a disciplined, productive way.

The tips below will cater for teachers working with different levels, regardless of the particular method/methodologies they are supposed to ‘apply’ and are based on Applied Linguistics research.

## **Reading**

When you assign a reading task, follow the usual awareness raising strategies to get students’ attention (such as icebreakers, warm-ups...), but once you’ve finished this step, allow students enough time so they can read the text silently (first reading), which allows for more concentration and focus. If you read aloud for the students (in the first reading), they might get distracted by your pronunciation or voice, rather than focusing on the meaning of the text. After the first reading, get students to move on to the activities in the book and correct them. Now you can get them to read the text again, focusing on other aspects, such as vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, etc.

Note: Personally, I do not like using an activity that was designed to focus on a particular skill (reading, listening, writing, speaking) to work on other aspects of the language, as this may overburden the students.

## Grammar

Depending on the students' age and level, as well as educational background, never start a grammar lesson by telling them something in the lines of 'In today's lesson, we are going to study the passive voice', as this will probably sound meaningless for most of your students. Instead, try to direct their attention to the language structure focusing on meaning and use, rather than theoretical terminology (auxiliary, modal, phrases, etc.). This terminology is for the teacher. Students will happily make do with a working knowledge of these terms. Do not emphasize them. If not at all possible, make sure you release students' tension by telling them they are not going to be tested on grammar terminology, that it is used only instrumentally, that is, with a view to achieving the meaning and effective use in communicative settings (in other words, grammar terms should be regarded only as a tool, not as an end in itself).

Students with a comprehensive previous knowledge of grammar terms in their own language might benefit more from emphasis on terminology, but all too often we find out that our students do not have a good command of grammar terms in their own language. If it's the case, at the beginning of the school year, get your students to sit an assessment test on grammar terms (in other words, try to find out if they are capable of defining concepts such as subject, object, verb (transitive, intransitive, etc.), sentence, clause, phrase and the like).

If not at all possible, teach grammar terms, but make efforts to do that in a meaningful way, keeping it simple, as far as possible. Teachers who have specific qualifications such as "Letras" are easily tricked into approaching grammar in heavily theoretical terms. Go easy on your students, they are not there to be teachers of English! Do not scare your students away. They are interested in learning the language to communicate, not to label it.

## Vocabulary

As far as possible, do not overload your students with definitions. Give them a synonym. For example, instead of defining the word 'redoutable', tell them its synonyms are 'formidable', 'daunting', 'intimidating', etc. Be especially careful to draw students' attention to synonyms that derive from words whose root is Latin, as some of these words are not usually used in everyday conversation. However, they are very useful for students of English whose native languages are, for example, Portuguese, Spanish or French (that is to say, languages derived from Latin).

Furthermore, avoid presupposing your students do not know the meaning of the words. For example, if you have just given students a reading passage, let them ask you the words they don't know spontaneously. Do not assume they don't know the words just because you think they are 'difficult' (what does that really mean, in the first place?), or they might be unknown to your students. If you want to work more intensively on vocabulary, try to devise an engaging activity, instead of 'testing' students with questions like: 'Do you know what this word means?' However, always encourage them to feel comfortable to ask, as some students may feel shy to demonstrate they don't know something in front of their classmates.

And, last but not least, Applied Linguistics research does offer support for recourse to translation into the students' own language. If it is simply too difficult to get meaning across to your students by miming or drawing, for example, just give the equivalent translation

fearlessly. Do not overuse it, though, as this may take away from the benefits of challenge. Ideally, translation should be used as a last resort, but dismissing it out of hand is not entirely supported by research.

## **Writing**

It takes a long time for students to progress from more loosely constructed sentences towards perfectly articulated text. This is a painstaking process that depends largely on the students' willingness and internal motivations to go to that trouble and on their ultimate objectives. At beginning stages, encourage your students to do their writing tasks, but tell them you are not going to point out all the mistakes they make in their writing, as at this initial stage you are more interested in finding out how they are able to engage what they have already learned. If students receive their compositions with many mistakes highlighted in red, this might be off-putting. Naturally, you may well find students who would prefer it if you gave them feedback on every single mistake. Try to show the student this is not necessary at this stage, but if they insist on demanding corrective feedback, just give it. No theory is more powerful than the student's own learning style.

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*Taken from* <http://blogdisal.com.br/mistakes-teachers-make-when-teaching-reading-grammar-vocabulary-and-writing-ricardo-madureira/>

## **Suggested readings:**

**Grammar for English Language Teachers**, by Martin Parrot, Cambridge University Press.

**Uncovering grammar**, by Scott Thornbury, Macmillan Heinemann

**How to teach English**, by Jeremy Harmer, Pearson.

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