

No More Grammar Lessons: What I learned about language acquisition “on my own skin”

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This practical experience paper draws on the author’s 10 years of experience as a professor of English to Croatian college students, and at the same time, as a learner of Croatian. Using the language acquisition experiences of her students and herself as a foundation, the paper presents practical suggestions for improving learning outcomes in the English language classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

For the past 10 years, I have been conducting a long, informal study of language acquisition – an investigation into how the human mind absorbs language. Most of this experiment has been conducted by carefully observing the thousands of Croatian college students who have enrolled in my English classes, and noting what and how they learn or, in some cases, fail to learn. But perhaps the most interesting subject of my experiment has been myself – the teacher of English who is also a student of Croatian.

While I was busy preparing lesson plans, commenting on essays and grading exams in English, I was also busy learning Croatian – but in a completely different way than I was teaching my students. I never took formal lessons or studied grammar; I simply listened, read, and spoke as much as I could, mostly unhindered by fear of making errors. Today, my Croatian is far from perfect, but I can order a pizza, make an appointment at

the doctor, or ask for a refund in Croatian. I do not think that I will ever fully master Croatian *padeži*, but I can think, live, joke, tease, argue and even dream in Croatian. In other words, I have achieved a reasonable level of communicative competence, without formal study of the language. How did this happen?

Nikad nisam učila... ali ipak sam naučila!

Sad molim Vas nemojte me krivo shvatiti. Ne želim ovdje hvaliti samu sebe. Daleko od toga. Samo želim pokušati istaknuti koliko stranog jezika ljudski mozak može absorbirati bez formalnog učenja gramatike.

In fact, each time I sat down to “break my head” over a chart of *padeži*, I eventually gave up. Whenever some well-meaning soul began a lecture on *koga*, *čega* or *komu*, *čemu*, I would smile and nod my head politely, but privately, I could feel my brain shutting down.

The same thing happened to students in my classroom: as soon as the words “indefinite article” or “present perfect continuous tense” escaped my lips, students would nod their heads obediently, while I saw the light in their eyes begin to dim.

So I learned “on my own skin” what my students already know quite well – that studying grammar theory can be not only boring and discouraging, but even sometimes counterproductive.

If we observe our students carefully and honestly, we see that very few of them learn well by studying grammar theory alone. Instead, they learn best and most naturally by absorbing language from the environment around them, when they are engaged and interested in the topics of conversation or text.

Whenever a student arrives at the first year of our college (where all instruction occurs in English) with excellent English skills, I ask how she learned the language so well. What is

the secret of her English success? Not a single student has ever answered, “I had a wonderful grammar book in elementary school.” Rather, the answer is usually, “I spend a lot of time playing Wizards of Warcraft on the internet.”

On the other hand, when a student arrives at our college having studied English diligently in school for 10 years or more, but feels nervous and frustrated trying to write a paragraph about what she ate last night for dinner, I also ask why. How did this student manage to study English for many years, earn reasonable grades, and pass *matura*, yet cannot express herself naturally and spontaneously in English? What went wrong?

Rarely is the student herself to blame, for she is usually neither lazy nor dumb. She can recite pages of irregular verbs, and, in fact, she can hardly wait to demonstrate her knowledge: “Begin, began, begun; eat, ate, eaten; take, took, taken...” She knows that the plural form of English nouns ending with “f” require a change to “v” before adding “es”. She knows that the definite article refers to a noun which is specific or known to the speaker and the audience. Yet she cannot make a joke, argue with her roommate, or explain to her professor why she was late for class in English. She has all the pieces, but not the whole.

Ultimately, my goal for my students is not that they master perfect grammar, but rather that they learn to think, joke, tease, argue and dream in English – even imperfect English, as I do in imperfect Croatian. Whether my students can explain the grammatical theory behind the words they choose, is less important. I want my students to be able to use English for successful communication in everyday life.

METHODS

So, what can we do? How can we teach English more effectively, knowing that the human mind has a great natural capacity for language acquisition, but that too much emphasis on grammar rules and terminology can shut down our learning channels? How can we make the classroom experience more interesting, more fun, and more useful?

The following guidelines have proven useful to me and to my students over the past 10 years. I present them here in the hope that they may be also useful to others.

1. I try to minimize use of grammar terms.

I try to avoid words like “intransitive verbs” or “present perfect continuous tense” whenever possible. I find that most people, particularly students, are somewhat averse to these terms, even in their native languages. (I suspect many Americans would have a hard time explaining what an “intransitive verb” is in English.) I especially avoid grammar terms on tests. So instead of instructing students to put a given verb into, say, past perfect or past perfect continuous, I simply give them a sentence with an empty space and instruct them to put the verb into the correct form. If I have done my job well, they will know which form is correct in that context.

2. I use easy-to-remember nicknames and gestures instead of grammar theory. Any time I can use pictures, diagrams, physical gesture, sound, a prop, humour, or my own voice to emphasize a point, I do so. I choose one gesture or sound to illustrate a particular structure and repeat it every time I demonstrate that point. The association between the abstract concept and a physical cue, helps to cement the idea in students’ minds. (*My own top 10 examples follow below.*)

3. I do not rush to correct students’ errors for them.

I do circle errors on their papers, but before I give them the answer, I give them a chance to correct the mistake themselves. I am surprised how often they can fix it on their own, and how much more they remember this way. (My seven-year-old son corrects my Croatian *padeži* with great pride – but I must say honestly that this does not really help me. I learn better by simply being told I have made a mistake, and then being offered the opportunity to correct it myself. Then, instead of being embarrassed about my mistake, I feel proud for being able to correct it. My students feel the same way.)

4. I do not try to mark or correct every single student error.

Trying to correct everything would be exhausting for me and discouraging for the students. Minor errors or simple awkwardness can be overlooked occasionally. Instead, I select just a few of the most important errors to focus on, and look for patterns. If the student has made the same mistake four times, then I focus on helping her understand that one concept. I find something specific and “fixable” that she can learn to correct.

5. I collect an archive of the “best” mistakes from students’ writing, (especially the funny ones,) and use them as anonymous examples in class.

I find the best examples are those from actual student papers. When I share these “best mistakes” with the class, I never identify the author of a mistake by name, but students often volunteer “Oh, that one is mine” when they see their own sentence on the board. I then always give the author of the mistake the first opportunity to correct it.

It is very useful to support every lesson with a group review of errors, particularly those which are funny or memorable. The stronger students in the class may shout out the correct answers, and with time, the slower students will also begin to see it. This creates a safe and positive atmosphere in the class, where everyone feels welcome and comfortable participating.

RESULTS

Grammar-less Lessons; Ten Tricks

Of course, every serious teacher knows that we cannot simply rely on students to just “absorb” English effortlessly. We still need to teach grammar somehow. I believe we just need to find a way to help students remember and internalize the concepts, without using so many of the formal grammar words which shut down their brains, or paralyze them with fear. The following “grammar-less” grammar tricks are based on my students’ “most popular” mistakes.

Example 1: Sorry, professor, but I am not really interesting in this subject.

Instead of giving this student a lecture on participial adjectives, I simply ask him, “Would you rather be boring or bored?” The student usually ponders this question for a few moments in confusion; he is not really sure. Meanwhile, the rest of the class tries to help by urgently whispering both answers.

When the student finally realizes that he would certainly rather be **bored** than **boring**, the whole class discusses why, *without ever using the words “participial adjectives.”* Instead, I use simple words and diagrams to explain the difference.

Words such as BORED, INTERESTED, EXCITED, TIRED, ANNOYED (which end with –ED) describe *how someone feels*. Some

outside force is having an effect on them. The person himself is passive, not doing anything, but rather feeling the effect of something else.

And then, since many students learn and remember best with concrete visual explanations, I draw a diagram for them.

Diagram 1

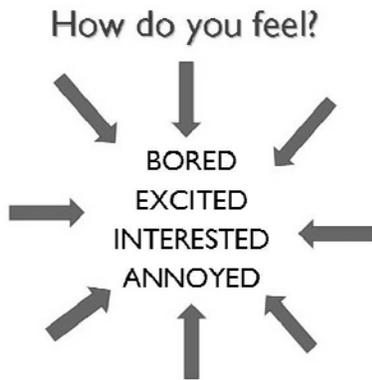


Diagram for explaining participial adjectives ending in -ED

On the other hand, BORING, INTERESTING, EXCITING, ANNOYING (which end with -ING) describe the nature of a person or thing. The person or thing is active; it has an effect on others. And so I draw this diagram:

Diagram 2

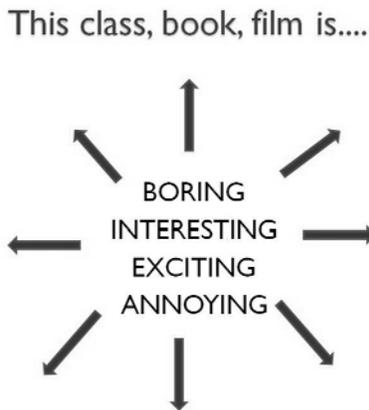
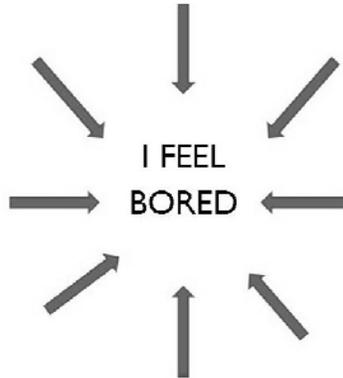


Diagram for explaining participial adjectives ending in -ING

Through the use of visual diagrams, students remember that -ED tends to describe how someone feels...

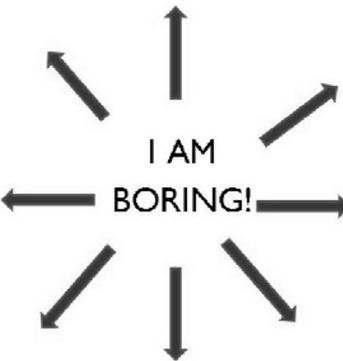
Diagram 3



Sample diagram for classroom use (-ED)

While -ING tends to describe the nature of a person or object

Diagram 4



Sample diagram for classroom use (-ING)

I have found that these simple arrow diagrams help to dispel years of confusion around one of foreign speakers' most common mistakes.

Example 2: I have been to a great restaurant last night.

Most of my students come to college knowing how to form the various English verb tenses, but still rather confused about when to use which one. Confusion between present perfect and simple past is rather common.

To help them remember (without using grammar terms like *present perfect*), I ask them, "When did this event happen?" And they answer loudly as a group, "Last night." Right. If you know exactly when it happened, use simple past.

1. I WENT to a great restaurant **last night**.

As I correct the sentence on the board, crossing out "have been" I say "Last night...I went" and I mark a loud, emphatic X on the board. The sound of the marker on the board, and the visual sight of the X actually help students remember the *feeling* of a specific action happening at a specific time in the past.

And then, to reinforce the point, I tell them a funny story, marking a big, loud X on the board each time I use a verb in the simple past.

2. Last night I...WENT to a bar. I ORDERED five drinks. I DRANK them all. I FELL on the floor. I LOST consciousness. I WOKE up the next morning on the sidewalk.

Of course they all enjoy this unexpected fictional image of their professor ... and more importantly, they begin to absorb the feeling of when to use simple past – when an action occurred at a specific, known time in the past, such as *last night*, *yesterday*, *this morning*, *in 1982*, *four years ago*.

Example 3: I am smoking a pack of cigarettes every day.

This is a very common confusion of simple present and present continuous. (To add to the difficulty, continuous tenses are also called progressive tenses in American terminology). To explain the difference, I talk about the difference between a repeated action that happens often, usually, on a regular basis, as a habit or routine, versus an action that is **in progress right now**.

3. Please don't bother me now! I **am studying** for a big test. (right now)

"I am doing" does **not** mean I do it often. It most often means *happening right now*. I reinforce this idea with a physical gesture, pointing emphatically to an imaginary watch on my wrist every time I use a present progressive/continuous verb.

4. *I study in my room for at least an hour each day.* (my usual habit or routine)

I also point out that it is simply not possible to translate verb tenses from Croatian to English. In the above example, *I am studying* and *I study* are the same in Croatian: *učim*.

Translating does not help. Instead, students need to remember that "I am smoking" means right now; the cigarette is in my hand. "I smoke" means usually, every day. It is my unhealthy habit. A few repetitions of these examples, and rigorously requiring students to identify and correct their own errors, can usually clear up this confusion permanently.

Example 4: A big role in the company plays the director.

Word order in English is also difficult for speakers of Croatian, since they are accustomed to the enormous freedom that Croatian *padeži* allow for word order in their native language. But a natural English sentence in the active voice never starts with the object.

I try to teach word order with a minimum use of terms such as *subject* and *object*. Instead, I demonstrate the importance of word order in English by asking students about the difference between the following sentences.

5. *The dog bit the man.*

6. *The man bit the dog!*

Word order makes an enormous difference in this story. *Tko je koga ugrizao?*

I then reinforce this concept with more examples.

7. *The best thing at the stadium is the atmosphere which create the fans.*

"What's wrong here? Who is creating what?" I ask. And students suddenly realize that the atmosphere does not create the fans, but rather *the fans create the atmosphere*.

I then continue with more memorable examples, such as the following sentences (of which, of course, only one is correct.)

8. *Very important is word order in English.*

9. *Word order in English very important is.*

10. *In English is very important word order.*

11. *Word order in English is very important!*

Example 5: I bought a sandwich and then I ate him.

This error, from a real student paper, is one of my favorites, and an excellent tool for teaching a lesson on pronouns. I simply put this sentence up on the board and ask, "Why is this sentence funny?"

Then, in a dramatic voice resembling a wicked witch, I intone, "I bought a sandwich... and then *I ate him!*" And then, as everyone laughs, I sigh sadly with my hand on my heart, "Ah... the poor sandwich. He was so innocent!" This improvised drama helps students remember that in English we use *he* or *she* only for people, and never for sandwiches.

Example 6: The sheriff was shot by me.

This sentence is not wrong, but it is not as strong and powerful as it should be. Something is strange about it. The reggae music fans among my students instantly recognize the title of the legendary hit song by Bob Marley, which should be, of course, "I shot the sheriff."

The problem is in use of the passive voice when the active voice clearly sounds stronger, more direct, and more natural. To reinforce this point, I actually sing a few seconds of this song in the passive for the students. "*The sheriff was shot by me... but the deputy was not shot by me.*" When the laughter dies down, and we try some more examples, they walk away with a better understanding of passive and active voice.

Example 7: I don't know where does he live.

I put this sentence on the board and ask the class, "Is this sentence a question or a statement?" Usually there is a moment of confused silence, followed by shouts of both answers. This sentence is somehow both a question and a statement at the same time. Therein lies the problem. We can improve this sentence by making it the *statement* that it is meant to be.

12. *I don't know where he lives.* (statement)

This is a statement. There is something unknown in it, but it is not a question. *I don't know...* something.

13. *Where does he live?* (question)

14. *Please ask her will she come to the party.* (incorrect)

Question or statement? It's hard to tell. That is why this sentence is wrong.

15. *Will she come to the party?* (question)

16. *Please ask her if she will come to the party.*

This is a statement, but the important word "**if**" gives us that questioning (conditional) feeling.

Often, the difference between a statement and question is simply word order.

Will she? (question)

She will! (statement)

17. *I wonder can I finish this homework on time.* (incorrect)

18. *Can I finish this homework on time?* (question)

19. *I wonder if I can finish this homework on time.* (statement)

Can I? (question)

I can! (statement)

Example 8: My grandmother made me a cookies.

Articles are, of course, one of the most difficult aspects of English for native speakers of Croatian. Many students arrive at my classes having essentially given up trying to understand these little words, which seem to them entirely unnecessary. Either students tend to omit articles altogether, or, alternatively, they sprinkle them seemingly at random throughout their writing. With students who are completely lost with articles, I find the easiest way to begin is with this simple rule: *a* or *an* means one. These articles can never be used with a plural. It is never *a cookies*, never *a problems*, never *an ideas*.

Example 9: I like to look at a moon.

Once students have internalized the concept that *a = one*, they are ready

for the next step in article use: the difference between “a” and “the.” Instead of lecturing on the concept of definite vs. indefinite, I simply give an example of an error like this one and ask, “How many moons do we have on this planet?” Only one. We are not looking at some moon out there, one of the millions in the universe. Since we have only one moon on this planet, it must be THE moon.

20. *Zagreb is not a capital of Croatia, for Croatia has only one capital city. Zagreb is the capital.*

21. *New York City is not “A Big Apple.” There is only one unique New York City on this whole globe – The Big Apple.*

Example 10: Dubrovnik is the very nice town.

This article error is the opposite of the previous example (using definite where indefinite should be.) I show this sentence on the board and ask, “How many very nice towns are there in the world?” The answer, of course, is many.

One of many = a or an

22. *Dubrovnik is a very nice town. (Just one of many in the world.)*

23. *My little brother is a clown.*

24. *My professor is a funny person.*

CONCLUSION

In my years of experience, I have found that these and other similar “tricks” truly help students learn better. I have shared these tips here in the hope they may be useful to others. More importantly, I hope these suggestions will inspire other educators to create and discover new “tricks” of their own, suited to their own teaching styles and the needs of their particular students.

Most of our students will need English much more than their parents or grandparents ever did. They will need not only to pass the state *matura* exams, but also to have English as a skill for everyday use. They will need English for communication – natural, spontaneous, comfortable expression and understanding. Their language does not need to be technically perfect

and probably never will be. Rather, our success as teachers comes when our students feel comfortable using English in their daily lives.