

Grammar monitoring for ITAs: Reawakening grammar awareness

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Many highly fluent NNES students find that, even though they can use English in complex situations, they still make a great number of grammar errors. Why does this happen?

- They may have stopped paying attention to their own grammar mistakes
- They may not know that they are misusing grammar structures- they may think that they are using a form correctly
- They lack the fluency to handle presenting or discussing a complex topic and monitoring grammar at the same time
- They learned English primarily from interacting with native speakers (eg, as undergraduates in the US, or working in a US company), but with little feedback on errors (in fact, the native speakers may tell them how “fluent” they are)
- They may have learned grammar in order to take tests like the TOEFL, but have little experience in applying those rules in communicative situations. As a result, their spoken language is often riddled with grammar errors.

How can ITA trainers help their students learn to monitor and correct their own grammar errors when speaking? How can teachers help students reawaken their awareness of grammar and grammar errors in order to handle errors in a more effective way?

This demonstration focuses on a six-session class, Advanced Grammar Monitoring, taught at the Intercultural Communication Center at Carnegie Mellon, that raises awareness of individual grammar problems, develops ITAs’ understanding of grammar and grammar errors, and gives students strategies and practice in monitoring their own grammar errors.

In order to address these issues, students need to refocus their attention on grammar, understand why learners make grammar errors, and practice monitoring grammar errors so that they can begin to hear them on their own. Teachers can help students see grammar as a series of flexible patterns, rather than as a strict set of monolithic, inflexible rules. The students begin by doing a series of critical thinking exercises that focus on grammar structure, use *and* misuse.

Steps in grammar monitoring

Critical Thinking Exercises

Exercise 1 (taken from Discover English, Bolitho/Tomlinson, 1995, p.8):

Why do these nonsense sentences sound acceptable? What kinds of grammar structures are used in these sentences?

1. He crattled his splot and scrot out a neelying groal.
2. They strentered folicly until a magan veened to famble them.

(Objective: Students identify the grammatical markers which identify these sentences as English: SVO sentence structure, subject pronouns, adjectival participles, past tense verb endings, articles, etc. This brings patterns of language to the fore.)

Exercise 2 (from Discover English, Bolitho/Tomlinson, p. 54):

Why do language learners make errors? Correct the errors in the following sentences and write down what you think might have caused each of the errors.

1. My father is a *cooker*.
2. I *am seeing* a lion in that cage.
3. He *like* football.
4. He *leaves* in a large house.
5. When I *will go* there tomorrow I will visit Mary.
6. I like Boston, because I *can see* snow there.
7. I am going to the lake *for swimming*.

(Objective: Students correct the mistakes, and then with the teacher, think about why a learner might make such an error. This leads to a greater awareness of types of errors learners make, and of the patterns of grammar and grammar errors.)

“Online” Grammar Monitoring

Consciousness-raising continues with the following types of exercises designed to simulate real-world speaking situations. Another critical aspect of grammar monitoring is learning to listen for mistakes: in videotaped speech, in transcribed writing, and in live speech, both as a listener and as a speaker.

- 1) Ss. listen to a videotape of a NNEST, and try to hear the mistakes that she makes while speaking. Ss. review what they found in groups, then they review a transcript of the videotape to see what they missed, and try to correct the mistakes they find.
- 2) Ss. look for grammar mistakes in written transcripts of presentations made by former graduate students, and try to correct the mistakes.
- 3) Ss. work in small groups to monitor themselves and each other for grammar errors while making short presentations. They look for patterns of errors, for confusing sentence structures, mispronunciations that change the grammar of the sentence, etc. Teacher monitors, and then writes some of the more egregious or frequent mistakes on the board for the class to work on together. Students may only hear a few mistakes during this exercise; that’s ok. The point is not to correct a huge number of errors, but to begin to listen to oneself again while speaking.

Grammar Monitoring one-on-one with a teacher

As part of all of our classes, we typically make use of students' videotaped in-class presentations (eg, mock teaching presentations) to do grammar monitoring; the student and the instructor review the presentation sentence by sentence, looking for specific errors. It is critical for the student to see the types of mistakes he/she is making, so that he/she can become more aware of mistakes when speaking in everyday situations. This is a good opportunity to look at a large variety of mistakes with the student, as the student will be receptive to being corrected, and may even catch many of the mistakes his/herself.

Tips for grammar monitoring one-on-one:

- **Use a videotaped presentation.** Students will probably not be able to hear their mistakes while in the course of speaking. It is also very disconcerting to try to speak if someone is correcting you every other sentence. A better strategy is to videotape the student making a presentation, then watch the videotape together. The student will be able to focus better, can take notes on problem areas, and will be able to better build awareness of patterns of grammar errors.
- **Have the student write a transcript of their presentation.** This is particularly useful for students who lack awareness of the frequency and severity of the grammar mistakes they make. Have the student transcribe a videotape of him or herself presenting without correcting it. The student can then read through the transcript with the teacher or tutor, and correct the mistakes in writing on the paper. This has helped many of our students become more conscious of the fact that they are making mistakes much more frequently than they realized.
- **Distinguish between low-level errors and errors that hinder meaning.** Some are simple errors that do not hinder the meaning of the sentence, like missing –s endings on plural nouns, but some of the errors are serious, and can cause critical misunderstandings. The errors that cause misunderstandings should take priority over “cosmetic” errors that don't sound nice, but don't necessarily cause problems to the listener.
- **Pick your battles.** Teachers probably should not focus on pointing out every single mistake every time one is made. A low-fluency student may not be able to correct mistakes in the course of speaking simply because he/she cannot take the focus away from fluency. Conversely, a high-fluency student may make many mistakes in every sentence. Teachers should use their judgment to decide which and how many errors they will focus on, taking into account the student's level of fluency or other linguistic challenges.

Let's practice Grammar Monitoring!!

Review these transcripts taken from actual presentations by Carnegie Mellon students. Think about which errors you would focus on, and then how you would get the student to correct them. Remember: there is no one formula that works with every student. Much depends on the student's level of fluency, the types of mistakes made, the student's background with formal ESL grammar instruction, and so on.

Sample 1: Bio-Statistics

"So, um, let me summarize a little bit. So, usually we collect our data from animal and friends by doing experiment. For example, if my goal is try to know um if smoking will cause lung cancer or not. If they are mouse, mice, if they are mouse, then I can let some mice smoke. But this can confounded by noise information.

What's noise information?

A special way to answer what is noise information just like... you are interested in the smoke or not will cause lung cancer or not. There may be some other noise information like you work in a factory and you smoke, you will smell lots of bad air."

Sample 2: Organic Conductors

"*Free electron* means, OK, let me give you an example. Generally speaking, if we have a nucleus, the electron can moving around the nuclear, to form a, form an atom, so it's an atom (*draws picture*). In other words, an, an atom contains a nuclei and some electrons surrounding it, surrounding the nucleus. But, so this electrons can just moving around this nucleus and this electrons can just move around the nucleus. But in metal, I don't know if it's right or wrong, this but the metal, the electrons can get away from the nuclei, they just, is easy for them to flow like a wave, to, like a water flow. To get away from the nuclear. You know what I mean? Ok."

Sample 3: Cleaning up oil spills

"About ten years ago, there is big accident in Alaska. They make fence, and they isolate this contaminate area, by surround by a fence that prevents this oils to go outside. They can keep this outside clean. And they also did, as Peggy said, some, add some enzymes of micro-organism, or even oil. . . or even they add some -----, that is a kind of chemical like salt, to remove this oil.

Some time later, U.S. Congress made a new law, and the law said: from now on all oil tankers coming to United State should have double layered tank vault . So, the law, it force people to do some activities to reduce the risk of that kind of accident. What is this activity? That's prevention."

References:

- DeKeyser, Robert M. What makes second-language grammar difficult? A review of issues. *Language Learning* 55, Supplement 1, 1-25 (2005)
- Bolitho, Rod, and Brian Tomlinson. Discover English: A Language Awareness Workbook. Macmillan Publishers Limited: Oxford, England. 1995