



Mari Nakamura & Marian Hara

The *Younger Learners* column provides language teachers of children and teenagers with advice and guidance for making the most of their classes. Teachers with an interest in this field are also encouraged to submit articles and ideas to the editor at the address below. We also welcome questions about teaching, and will endeavour to answer them in this column.

Email: younger-learners@jalt-publications.org

How Should Grammar Be Taught to Children?

Lesley Ito

lesleyito@gmail.com

The father of the young student was very concerned about his son's grammar mistakes: "He's eight years old now and has been coming to your school for two years, yet he still makes mistakes such as writing 'He go,' rather than 'He goes.' When I was in the second grade of junior high school, after learning English for two years, I mastered this rule and didn't make these kinds of mistakes."

Why do children, even returnee children who are otherwise near-fluent in English, make the same grammatical, spelling, and punctuation mistakes repeatedly? Why can't they correct their own grammar mistakes after being taught the correct form? What is the best way to teach grammar to children?

While much has been written about how to teach grammar to teenage and adult EFL students, very little has been said about how to teach this to children. In fact, most of the advice from experts seems to focus on what *not* to do. Ellis (2002) states that consciousness-raising (C-R)—making students aware of correct grammar so they can correct their own mistakes—is slowly replacing the traditional way of teaching grammar, which focused on teaching rules and meta-language (e.g., grammatical terms such as *noun*, *verb*, *past participle*, and so on). However, he concludes that C-R may not be an appropriate method to use with children. Cameron (2001) and Pinter (2006) agree that children under the age of ten should not be taught grammar the way it is taught to adults, especially not by using meta-language. While Pinter (2006) says that activities that raise awareness of grammatical forms can be appropriate for children *older* than ten, Cameron (2001) advises teaching younger children grammar through "rote learnt chunks" (p. 104) encountered in storytelling, books, songs, or chants. She also argues that although the explicit teaching of grammar

rules is not appropriate, showing learners how the language works in patterns would be fine, if they expressed interest in this.

Another issue in younger learners' accuracy in English, is that children are still developing their L1. Teachers and parents cannot expect a child to do something correctly in their L2 before they can do it in their L1. Furthermore, students may not be making a grammatical mistake because they do not understand the lesson; the issue may have more to do with the fact that a native-speaking English child would naturally make that mistake at that age and stage of language development. To reassure parents about this, I have often asked them to do a Google Image search of letters written by children to President Obama while he was in office. Here are children, whose first language is English, trying to do their best to write a letter to an important person, yet these eight- and nine-year-olds still make basic grammatical, spelling, and punctuation errors!

Despite the research concluding that C-R was inappropriate for children, I was intrigued to see that Linse and Nunan (2006) suggested using a checklist to remind students of what grammatical errors to look out for as a way to provide feedback without making students feel embarrassed about their mistakes or dampening their enthusiasm for writing. With that, I decided to conduct an action research project at my English school, with 43 of my students aged from 6 to 15.

Top Ten Errors Campaign

My students write very short weekly book reports as part of their homework. I noticed that the same errors were being made week after week, despite corrective feedback from the teacher. One week's worth of errors were analyzed and we discovered that the top ten errors made by students were:

- *not pluralizing a noun*
- *not using possessive 's*
- *neglecting to capitalize the first letter of a sentence*
- *neglecting to capitalize a proper noun*
- *incorrect use of third person singular verbs*

- not using the past tense form of a verb
- using “the” before a proper noun
- using “he’s” instead of “his”
- misspelling the word “interesting”
- writing “She is poor,” instead of, “I feel sorry for her.”

One omission from this list was actually the most common error, which was incorrectly using the articles *a* or *the*. I decided to leave this out of the top ten (with the exception of error #7) to avoid undue frustration, as Lightbown and Spada found that “even advanced learners have difficulty using these forms correctly in all contexts” (2006, p.32). Once the target errors were identified, a “Top Ten Mistakes” poster was drawn up, to remind the students not to make them, avoiding the use of meta-language in the explanations.

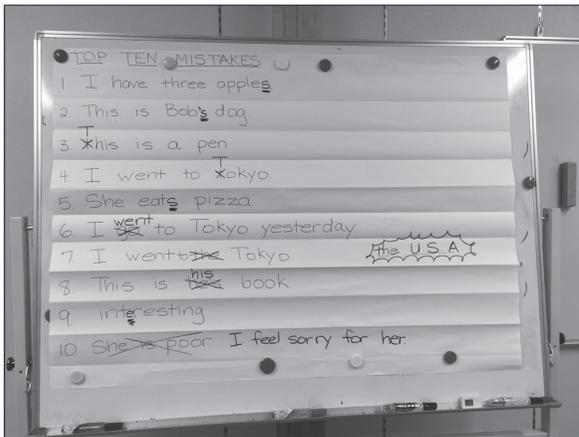


Figure 1. 'Top Ten Mistakes' Poster.

For four consecutive lessons, the teacher individually checked students’ book reports in front of them with a red pen while the student watched. Then, the ‘Top Ten Mistakes’ poster was hung up on the board and reviewed as a class. Students were asked to look at their corrected reports to see if they had made any of the errors on the poster. In order to reduce embarrassment over mistakes made, students were told not to look at their classmates’ reports.

If this method of getting students to notice their errors and correct them in the future was effective, then the number of errors should have decreased over the four-lesson period. However, that did not happen. The number of errors showed no pattern, sometimes decreasing and then sharply increasing in the next lesson. There seemed to be something I was missing, so I began a new cycle of action research.

For the second cycle, I asked the students to write a short book report in class. First, the students had a short story or a chapter of a novel read to them. Then, the ‘Top Ten Mistakes’ poster was hung on the whiteboard and reviewed. Finally, students were given five minutes to write a book report. This process was repeated for two consecutive classes. The book reports were collected by the teacher to create a dossier for further analysis. After taking a close look at them, it was apparent that most of the errors were made by students who were ten years old or younger. In contrast, the book reports written by older students were usually error-free.

Questionnaires were given to the students to get their opinions on the action research project. The reactions were overwhelmingly positive (see Table 1).

Table 1. Post Action Research Project Questionnaire Results.

Read the sentences. How do you feel? Circle.
 😊 =YES 😐 =SO-SO ☹️ =NO

1. I think the Top Ten Errors campaign helped me make fewer errors in writing book reports.	😊	😐	☹️
	18	20	3
2. I think the Top Ten Errors campaign helped me notice my errors when I write.	😊	😐	☹️
	18	18	5
3 I think I will make fewer errors in the future when I write.	😊	😐	☹️
	20	19	2

However, further analysis of questionnaire results from students between the ages of six and eight showed that most of the negative responses were from this age group (see Table 2).

Table 2. Post Action Research Project Questionnaire Results (students aged from six to eight).

😊 =YES 😐 =SO-SO ☹️ =NO

1. I think the Top Ten Errors campaign helped me make fewer errors in writing book reports.	😊	😐	☹️
	1	4	3
2. I think the Top Ten Errors campaign helped me notice my errors when I write.	😊	😐	☹️
	2	3	3
3 I think I will make fewer errors in the future when I write.	😊	😐	☹️
	1	5	2

The results of my action research project confirmed the previously mentioned advice that

children under the age of ten should not be taught grammar explicitly. Upon the conclusion of this action research project, we made a few changes to the school's curriculum based on the results. Red pen corrections were no longer made on writing assignments for students under the age of ten. It was also a good reminder that while there is no harm in showing correct grammar forms to students under the age of ten, teachers cannot expect such young students to master them. We must be patient with mistakes made by these younger students and realize that this is normal for their developmental stage.

This action research project answered a lot of my own questions about my students. I've had returnee students who were nearly fluent in English, yet made very simple errors when they wrote. I taught them for many years, and they kept making the same errors, no matter how many times I pointed them out. One boy refused to put spaces between his words. Another rarely capitalized proper nouns. A third used apostrophe-s when she wanted to make a noun plural. After years of frustration, I noticed that each of them eventually stopped making these errors one day. I could have saved all of us a lot of grief if I had known they would correct these mistakes on their own once they turned ten!

References

Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ellis, R. (2002). Grammar teaching-practice or consciousness-raising. In J.C. Richards & W.A. Renandya (Eds.), *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice*, pp. 167-174. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511667190.023

Lightbown, P., & Spada, N. M. (2006). *How languages are learned* (3rd Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pinter, A., (2006) *Teaching young language learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lesley Ito is a well-known teacher, teacher trainer, school owner, and award-winning materials writer based in Nagoya. She has taught in Japan for over twenty-five years, won "Best of JALT" in 2011, and has presented professionally throughout Japan, and at the ER World Congress in Dubai, UAE. Winner of the 2015 LLL Award in the Young Learner Category for *Backstage Pass*, her ELT writing credits include teacher's guides, workbooks, graded readers, and *Fifty Ways to Teach Young Learners: Tips for ESL/EFL Teachers*. She recently received an MSc in Teaching English to Young Learners from Aston University.



[JALT PRACTIS] BOOK REVIEWS



Robert Taferner & Stephen Case

If you are interested in writing a book review, please consult the list of materials available for review in the Recently Received column, or consider suggesting an alternative book that would be helpful to our membership.

Email: reviews@jalt-publications.org

Web: <http://jalt-publications.org/tlt/departments/book-reviews>

This month's column features Robert Taferner's review of Cambridge Academic English: Upper Intermediate.

Reviewed by Robert Taferner, Hiroshima University, Department of Integrated Global Studies

Cambridge Academic English: Upper Intermediate

[Martin Hewings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. (Includes CD, DVD, Teacher's Book and access to online lectures.) pp. 176. ¥3,449. ISBN: 978-0-521-16520-4.]

Cambridge Academic English: Upper Intermediate is part of a series of textbooks (Intermediate, Upper Intermediate, and Advanced) and supporting materials focusing on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) for second language (L2) learners of English.

