

Figure 9

Conditional Formatting Feature for Classmate Interview

Conclusion

Google Apps provide useful ways for students to collaborate and learn from each other, and the data enable teachers not only to track students' progress but to share students' ideas with the entire class. The data can easily be used in third-party apps such as Quizlet for vocabulary, AnswerGarden for word clouds, or even in Google Forms to check what students learned through their activities. The formats for the Classmate Interview and the Google Slide activity can be adapted to any activity in which students interview or interact with others. While there is a bit of a learning curve in getting started, the results are well worth the initial effort.

References

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[JALT PRAXIS] YOUNGER LEARNERS



Martin Sedaghat & Emily MacFarlane

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 editors at the address below. We also welcome questions about teaching, and will endeavour to answer them in this column.

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Gesturing Grammar

Adam Blankenship

Yuna didn't get prepositions. Her class had spent three weeks on four of them. Articles and the *be*-verb were occasionally dropped, but most of the eight-year-olds in the class could look at a picture and explain the positional relationship between two or more objects. Only Yuna was really struggling. In the final review week, the students were paired together, moving objects around felt boards and asking each other questions. Yuna's partner put a duck under a picnic table and asked, "Where's duck?" Yuna stared at the floor. Her partner crossed her arms and sighed loudly. I sat down with them and demonstrated the answer. It was too late. Yuna looked up at me and said in Japanese, with tears welling in her eyes, "I'm stupid."

I was desperate. Some kids never recover from sobbing in front of classmates. I brought Yuna and her partner into the kitchen and gave them some cups. I filled the cups with water and started pantomiming the flow of the water into the cup with my fingers, having them repeat *in* with a gesture: "Water is in the cup." I made simple gestures for each of the words in the sentence—inventing gestures on the fly—and had them repeat the sentence one word at a time while making similar gestures. I did the same for the other prepositions, moving the cup *under* the sink, *by* the refrigerator and *on* the microwave, all while getting them to repeat a gesture for each word in the sentence and using exaggerated, clownish gestures for the prepositions. Yuna laughed, and by the end of the review, she got it. She got the meaning of the prepositions, the sentence structure, and after some more practice, the interrogative form. Her partner even came up with the perfect gesture for *where*, spreading her arms

far apart and wiggling her index fingers in different directions.

Six years after Yuna and her partner taught me the importance of gesturing, I use it in every lesson I teach. In lower-level classes, I gesture every word I say when teaching and practicing targets. I also have students gesture every word they say as they speak. The gestures are produced redundantly with speech: a distinctive gesture is made for each word in the sentence as the word is spoken. In one 75-minute lesson, lower-level students will gesture more than 100 times. In higher-level classes, gesturing is used extensively to reinforce key grammar concepts and improve vocabulary retention, particularly for abstract words.

Research-backed Method

Research over the past 40 years has proven the benefits of gesturing, for both teachers and students (Abner et al., 2015). Much of the research has focused on memory. Can a student remember words better when they practice them with a physical movement representing the meaning of that word? Research has consistently found that they do (Jarbou et al., 2022). Neuroscience studies have tried to explain the mechanisms behind this by hypothesizing “memory traces” left in the brain when a gesture is made (Macedonia & von Kriegstein, 2012). Very simply put, when students gesture, they use a broader, richer area of their brains and catalogue language into memory as images or motions, which then can be accessed when retrieving the words. More recent evidence from neuroscientists seems to prove older theories on dual-coding or the coding of language using two separate parts of the brain.

Gestures as Training Wheels

Our school hasn’t conducted empirical studies, but our results with gesturing are consistent with the research. In fact, we’ve found many benefits beyond what’s mentioned in the literature. Overall, students have a deeper understanding of what they learn, including grammar. They exhibit better short-term and long-term retention of both words and sentence structures. Using gestures as “training wheels,” they are more confident in presenting their ideas. And they feel less anxiety with correction, knowing that the teacher can flash them a gesture to help when they stumble. Some of these benefits are challenging to quantify and measure, possibly explaining why they’re largely missing from the research.

Our system is mostly homespun. After watching the effect gesturing had on Yuna and other students

who needed different methods to understand concepts, I attended a year-long Japanese sign language (JSL) course which served as an invaluable primer. For many concrete objects and abstract ideas, we adopt standard JSL signing. But for the most part, we’ve used trial and error to build our own catalogue of gestures that are used for every word and grammar we teach.

Using Intuition

The gestures for most concrete words are intuitive. We gesture the shape of a tangible noun or sometimes an action associated with a noun (e.g., driving for the word *car*). For verbs, we pantomime the action. Gestures that show the physical form of an object, often called iconic gestures by researchers, are easy enough to devise. You do what’s natural. Gesturing, after all, is a natural and common way to communicate. We do it all the time to reinforce what we’re saying, to augment what we say, and sometimes just to help ourselves think. Not surprisingly, for concrete objects, the students themselves are often better than teachers at devising distinctive iconic gestures.

Metaphorical Gestures

What’s been particularly tricky—and ultimately rewarding for both the students and the school—has been the gesturing of grammar. For abstract grammatical concepts, we use a variety of representational gestures often called metaphorical gestures by researchers.

Be Verb

The *be*-verb is a good example. Conjugation of irregular verbs stumps even the brightest young students. *Be* is often used from lesson one of any young learner’s program, with *am*, *is*, and *are* all jumbled together during introductions. It helps students to represent the grammatical concept of a person right from the start in the form of redundant, co-speech gestures. You’re not teaching them the grammar explicitly, but you’re gesturing to help them distinguish between the words and eventually understand the differences. Gesturing is just the first step for young learners; it plants the seeds of their understanding.

We use an index finger pointing downward for *am* while the other fingers are closed in a fist (see Figure 1). It vaguely resembles the letter *I* and at the same time clearly indicates singularity. “I am Adam” would be represented by an index finger pointed directly at your face (not to be mistaken for an index

finger to the chest, which means “me”), an index finger pointing directly downward, and a side-to-side, open hand movement in front of yourself, indicating your name (another metaphorical gesture).

Figure 1

Am Gesture



We gesture *is* with an index finger pointing downward and the thumb extended outward, perpendicularly to the index finger (see Figure 2). Though two fingers are used, the image is still singular and yet distinctive from *am*. The outward thumb can represent *he*, *she*, or *it*.

Figure 2

Is Gesture



For *are*, we point the index finger and middle finger downward and move them in a quick circular motion to represent the plural (see Figure 3). You might use three fingers or four, but it's easier and clearer to juxtapose two against one.

Figure 3

Are Gesture



Spacing and Timing

Spatial considerations are important in distinguishing meaning with gesturing. The *be* gestures are made close to the body so as not to confuse them with similar gestures for *this*, *it*, *that*, and the plurals *these* and *those* when used in other contexts. In JSL, signers often use similar gestures to mean completely different things, and the viewer distinguishes them based on context and subtle differences in hand movements.

Timing is also important. When introducing new targets with new gestures, it helps to exaggerate body movements and pause a few seconds between each gesture to allow the students enough time to visualize the action and record the word and the accompanying image in their brains. As you get better at gesturing, you can make finer distinctions and accelerate.

Auxiliary Verbs

Similarly, auxiliary verbs *do* and *does* are very hard for young learners to grasp. We use a fist for *do* (see Figure 4) and a *shaka* sign, with the thumb and pinky extended outward, for *does*, with the thumb and pinky representing *he* and *she* (see Figure 5). We further distinguish between *do* the auxiliary and *do* as an action verb, with one fist lowered and close to the body for the auxiliary and two fists raised in the air for the action verb. When answering third-person present-tense questions (e.g., He swims in a pool.), a student will point a finger in the direction of a male student, pantomime the action swim, and then make a quick *s* motion in the air with their index finger to symbolize the *s* on the end of the verb.

Figure 4*Do Gesture (Auxiliary)*

Gesturing is essential when teaching tenses. One of the great benefits of learning introductory JSL is understanding how signers use their entire bodies to represent tense. A typical signer will explain what she did today by starting her story on one side of her body and gradually moving her signing to the other side of her body, like the hands of a clock moving across its face with the passage of time. For future tense, she'll present an action in front of her body, and for past tense, some of the signs will motion backwards to indicate the action was completed. JSL has wonderfully intuitive grammar.

Figure 5*Does Gesture*

For a video showing one of our students introducing himself using some of the gestures explained above, please go to candokids.jp and select the 独自教法 tab. The student uses almost 30 distinctive gestures in the span of just a minute. You'll understand a lot of what he says even without audio. He's been one of my best students for years. For a presentation day project, a couple years ago, he wrote the script to a wordless book and told it to the audience. It took 20 minutes and he gestured every word he said, hundreds of times, represent-

ing different tenses, person, possession, and other grammatical concepts.

Managing Expectations

Gesturing grammar doesn't solve confusion over person, tense, and other hard-to-learn grammar. Even after extensive gesturing, students will still make mistakes, albeit far, far fewer in my experience. Gesturing also doesn't teach them grammar in an explicit way. However, it's a critical step in communicating the grammar. Again, you're just planting the seeds of understanding. Keep your expectations in check.

Faster, Better

In our experience, during speaking tasks, eight-year-old students, like Yuna, will make less than half the errors she'd make without learning language with gesturing. Moreover, a class of eight-year-olds like hers will pick up prepositions in two classes instead of three and they'll apply it faster in novel situations, like venturing outside the classroom and using learned language to explain new situations. Again, that's anecdotal evidence after six years of teaching without gesturing and six years of rigorous, systematic gesturing.

We plan to conduct empirical research in the next two years to measure the effects of gesturing and test our observations. We hope to further the research on gesturing and by explaining how gesturing benefits not only the simple memorization of words in L2, but also the comprehension of advanced grammar. Generally, the benefits carry over from speaking into writing but this is harder to determine because of the limited amount of writing young learners do in our program.

Acclimation Period

Don't expect your students to adapt to it immediately. Gesturing is natural. Co-gesturing each word redundantly isn't. It'll take kids time to get used to. But what has amazed me more than anything is how students have grown accustomed to it. You'd think many students would rebel against such a rigorous system. They haven't. They're smart enough to know it's helping them learn. Also, it's an essential tool for correction. Showing a student, a gesture when they're lost or make a mistake is a far better approach to correction than feeding them answers orally or stopping them cold—and they know that themselves. That extra step of visualizing the language from the teacher's gesture, and then recalling the language as both a verbal input and as an image

or motion, makes a substantial difference in helping them understand and retain the language.

Flexibility

Finally, many advanced studies on gesturing note the importance of mismatches, or gestures that seem to conflict with what's being said. For young learners, I think it's effective to have them faithfully recreate your gestures at first. But as they get used to gesturing, you'll find they create their own individual styles of gesturing. There's nothing wrong with that. It can mean the student is using gestures not just to help recall language, but add information to their speech and represent language in their own original way.

Good teachers judge their performances on how their slowest students—kids like Yuna—perform. It's easy to teach quick, motivated learners. It's the slower ones we need to reach with new, innovative methods. Over the years, we developed dozens of original methods to ensure that all kids, no matter their natural aptitude for learning, can keep up with their peers and feel confident in their abilities. Gesturing is simply the best method we've found for getting all kids of all abilities to speak better and retain their language skills.

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[JALT PRAXIS] 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.

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This month's column features Ben Joicey's review of *Asian Issues Practice in Critical Reading*.

Reviewed by Ben Joicey, Aoyama Gakuin University

Asian Issues: Practice in Critical Reading

[Alistair Graham-Marr, Hugh Graham-Marr, Lewis Malamed, Martha Robertson, & Nicola DiNunzio, Joan Bailey. Abax ELT Publishing, 2019. (Textbook, audio files and Teacher's Notes are available online). ¥2,700. ISBN: Level 1: 978-1-78547-087-5; Level 2: 978-1-78547-088-2; and Level 3: 978-1-78547-089-9.]

A *Asian Issues Practice in Critical Reading* is a textbook series that has an emphasis on critical thinking (CT) and a focus on east Asian topics. The series has three levels from A1 to B1 of CEFR. The textbooks are divided into seven chapters, with two parts each. Each part can easily provide the basis for two 90-minute

