

FOCUS ON FORM

**A handbook on how
to deal with grammar
for elementary-level English
as a Second Language teachers**



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Preface

The purpose of this handbook is to help teachers integrate some form-focused instruction into their teaching practices. Form-focused instruction refers to communicative teaching that draws the students' attention to the forms and structures of the English language within the context of the interactive classroom. The practical recommendations reflect teaching practices that can be used to develop competencies.

After a brief look at the recent history of grammar teaching (Part 1), the role of grammatical knowledge in competency-based programs is examined in Part 2. Part 3 presents the characteristics of the elementary ESL learner and some of their consequences on teaching practices. Part 4 deals with the structures that teachers can focus on. Part 5 offers teachers many useful suggestions on how to focus on form in the interactive classroom.



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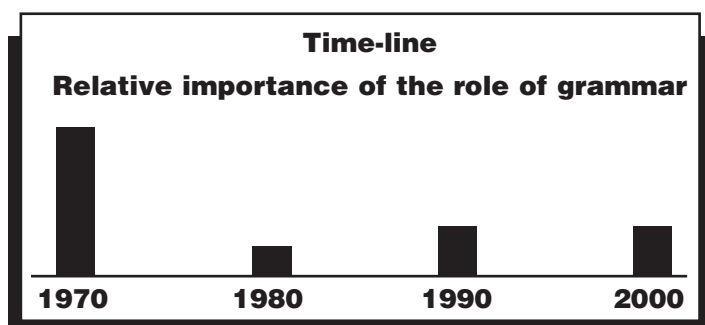
A brief history of the role of grammar in ESL teaching

We have seen grammar move from a position of predominance in the 1970s to almost “outcast” status in the 1980s, and back to a position of limited emphasis, but with far less importance than it enjoyed twenty-five years ago.

In the 1970s, grammar was central and predominant in the selection of language content to be taught. Uncontextualized drills, translation exercises, and language lessons organized around grammatical structures were prevalent. Teachers often took on the role of “drill sergeants” leading their troops through a series of unrelated manoeuvres.

The communicative approach of the 1980s held that meaningful communication was the goal of instruction. Students began to use the language to communicate actively in English and not just manipulate its structures. Instruction was organized around themes, objectives, notions, and functions. Since fluency was considered more important than accuracy, explicit grammar instruction was downplayed. There was a certain ambivalence about the extent of grammar instruction and the correction of student errors.

In the 1990s, the idea was advanced that contextualized grammar and vocabulary activities could be viewed as “enabling” the student to accomplish more complex “closure” activities. This allowed for some form-focused activities in the ESL classroom.





2

The role of grammar in competency-based programs

Grammar should never be taught as an end in itself but always with reference to meaning.

(Celce-Murcia, 1993)

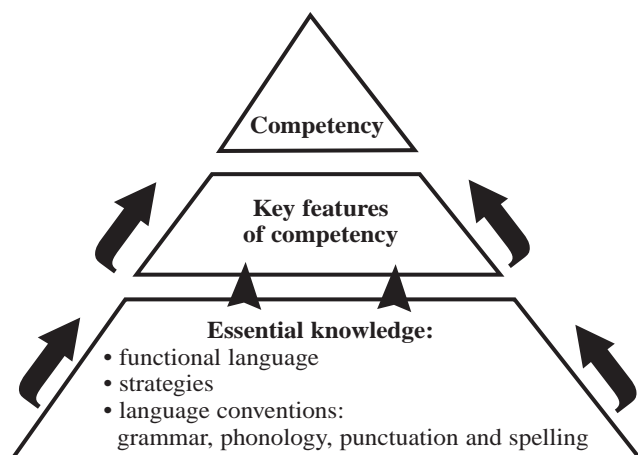
Current language acquisition research strongly suggests that some focus on form may well be necessary for many learners to achieve accuracy as well as fluency. Researchers argue that limited exposure to language is not enough; they advocate a more form-focused approach to communicative language teaching.

Research in the field of cognitive psychology has pointed out that children learn any complex cognitive skill or “competency” through frequent practice of controlled processes which in time become automatic. Learners assimilate and internalize knowledge through ample practice which leads to

reinvesting the knowledge in real communication. Essential knowledge in the elementary ESL program includes functional language, strategies and language conventions i.e. grammar and text components. Such knowledge is meaningful to the extent that it can be transferred to new situations.

Some kind of form-focused instruction and practice, then, must be integrated into the context of the interactive classroom. This does not mean a return to the traditional teaching of grammatical forms in isolation. Rather, focus on form attempts to have the student become aware of grammatical structures as they arise in carrying out meaningful tasks.

Knowledge of grammatical forms has to be viewed as an efficient resource and can provide “correct” models for students developing the oral interaction and writing competencies in a setting where few authentic models are available and where time of instruction is limited.





3

The characteristics of the elementary ESL student



Eight- to twelve-year olds will benefit from some grammatical focus only if their age, proficiency level, and characteristics are taken into account. The following grid is helpful for judging the importance of grammar for a given group.

are part of their learning process. Teachers must be tolerant and not try to correct all errors. An overly strong focus on form will inhibit risk-taking.

- Children of this age tend to view language in a holistic manner, getting the “big picture”, rather than analytically. They do not attempt to break up language into little bits.
- Most ESL learners in this age group are beginners. English is meaningful to them to the extent they can use it to do interesting things like taking part in brief exchanges with their classmates and writing to and for real people.
- Learning “inert” knowledge like grammar exercises, verb lists, and labels for grammatical categories is irrelevant to young ESL learners.
- Little explicit grammar instruction is needed. Long grammar presentations and explanations of complicated grammar rules are boring.

Variables that determine the importance of grammar

| | Less important | Focus on form | More important |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Learner variables | | | |
| <i>Age</i> | Children | Adolescents | Adults |
| <i>Proficiency level</i> | Beginning | Intermediate | Advanced |
| <i>Educational background</i> | Preliterate, no formal education | Semiliterate, some formal education | Literate, well-educated |
| Instructional variables | | | |
| <i>Skill</i> | Listening, reading | Speaking | Writing |
| <i>Need / Use</i> | Survival | Vocational | Professional |

Adapted from Celce-Murcia, 1993

- Young ESL learners are clearly identified on the left side of the grid, showing that focus on form is less important for them than it is for adolescents and adults.
- Young ESL learners are just starting out. Taking risks and making errors



4

What teachers can focus on

Teachers select the grammatical structures as instructional needs arise. There are three sources that can guide teachers in their choices.

Themes drive tasks and tasks determine the grammatical features that are taught and the order in which they are presented.

(Oxford and Scarcella, 1993)

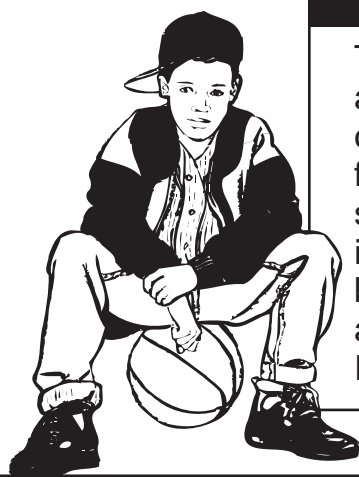
First source: The task

Teachers can focus on those structures that respond to the students' immediate needs in carrying out a task. The order of instruction is also determined by the task at hand. For example, in a task that involves students describing each other, teachers could focus on adjective position and order.



Second source: The program

The indications in the elementary ESL program (August 2001) are another source to guide teachers. They include structures that are useful and basic for young ESL learners developing the oral interaction and writing competencies.



Third source: The student

The errors that students make and their questions about how the language works are authentic sources of information. Teachers can gather valuable data from their students' speaking and writing and can use students' errors as a basis for planning form-focused instruction. Student questions about grammar should be answered. These questions signal an emerging awareness and interest in the mechanics of the English language.



5

How to focus on form in the interactive classroom

There are many ways to focus on form in the context of the interactive classroom. Interventions can be planned ahead of time, or they can be unplanned and impromptu. They can be somewhat formal or informal. Form-focused instruction can be either explicit or implicit. The focus on form can be initiated by the student or deliberately driven by the teacher.

In this section, two general types of interventions will be presented – spontaneous and planned. Whatever shape it takes, focus on form:

- does not interrupt the natural flow of a communicative task
- is closely linked to students' needs to carry out the task
- is not done in an isolated fashion
- draws the student's attention to structures in situations where the primary focus is meaningful communication.

Spontaneous focus on form

Spontaneous focus on form takes place during a communicative task with no prior planning. Teachers decide to intervene when some structural problem arises and has to be attended to in order to carry out the task at hand efficiently. This type of intervention is brief and to the point; the natural progression of the task is not impeded. Spontaneous form-focused interventions include the following:

• **Corrective feedback:**

Teachers can provide corrective feedback that will help students speak and write accurately. For speaking errors, teachers can recast the statement. For example:

Student: *Can I hand out the book?*

Teacher: *Listen carefully. Can I hand out the books?*

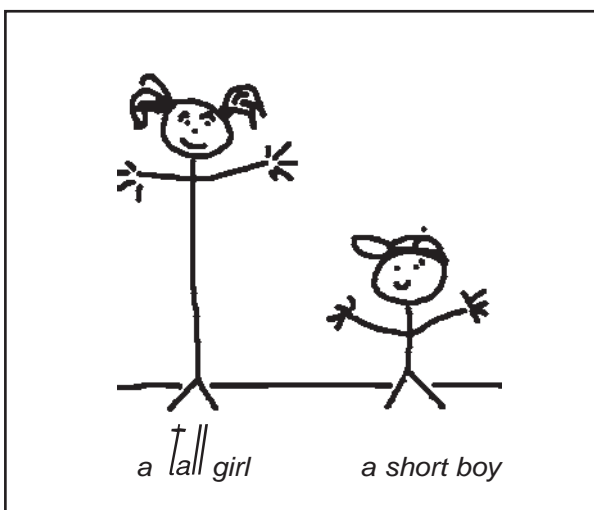
Student: *Can I hand out the books?*



5

- **Brief impromptu explanations and mini-lessons:**

Sometimes a brief explanation is needed when a particular aspect of grammar is giving many students problems or impeding their understanding of the message. The ESL teacher can intervene quickly to point out the problem. For example, several students are placing the adjective in the wrong place. The teacher explains visually using stick figures:



After this intervention, the class returns to the task in progress. The teacher notes that a planned intervention may be needed at some time in the future.

- **Answering questions:**

Student questions on structure signal an emerging awareness and interest on how the English language works. Answers should be short. For instance:

Student: *Why two feet and not two foots?*

Teacher: *Foot is different; it is an exception. One foot, but two feet.*



5

**Planned focus
on form**

In light of the teacher's past experience and students' needs in carrying out a given task, the teacher carefully plans a communicative task that includes some form-focused activities. This type of activity is integrated into the flow of the task. Planned form-focused interventions include:

- **Providing access to resources:**

Teachers can plan student access to resources such as word and expression banks, posters, and models for speaking and writing tasks. Providing essential language in the form of posters or word banks will help students speak sooner and more accurately. Modelling of speaking activities and functional language will diminish the number of errors. The teacher can model the targeted language alone or with a student or have two students act out the language.

- **Consciousness-raising:**

Teachers can point out certain structural features. For instance, a teacher uses a story as a lead up to a speaking activity in which students share their daily routines. The teacher highlights the third person singular of the present tense in a story about a pre-teen's unusual day by writing on the board a few verbs that correspond to the character's actions: gets up, has, goes, travels, ... The students then reinvest their understanding by exchanging their own daily routines. Each student then reports his partner's daily routine to the other members of the group:

Student: Kevin gets up at 7:00.
He has breakfast at 7:30.
At 8:00, he takes the bus to school...



5

• Monitoring the writing process:

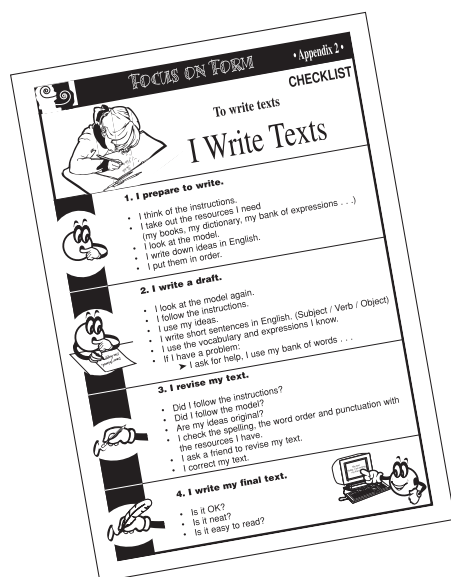
Teachers can improve writing accuracy by monitoring their students as they perform the writing process. Students can refer to a writing checklist (see Appendix 2) that outlines the steps before, during, and after the actual writing. Also, throughout the writing process, students should have access to resources: models, word banks, peers and the teacher.

• Presenting brief explanations or mini-lessons:

Teachers can plan for very short explanations or mini-lessons when the task requires such an intervention. If possible, these presentations should be visual. Lengthy explanations of rules and complicated exceptions are to be avoided. See Appendix 1 for a visual explanation of plurals.

• Interactive grammar activities:

Interactive grammar activities allow students to participate in communicative-type activities while practising grammatical structures. The main focus is on the interaction (production and understanding) of meaning with an eye on the structure being manipulated. These activities are not meant to be used in isolation; rather, they should be part of a task. They allow for personalization and student input. See example in Appendix 3.





6

Conclusion

We have seen that some focus on form can be beneficial to elementary ESL students if this focus respects the characteristics of their age group and if spontaneous and planned interventions are an integrated part of a communicative task. Teachers should keep in mind that focus on form is only part of the “bigger” picture which is to provide elementary students an interactive, meaningful, and challenging language learning experience.



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Plural - Irregular Nouns

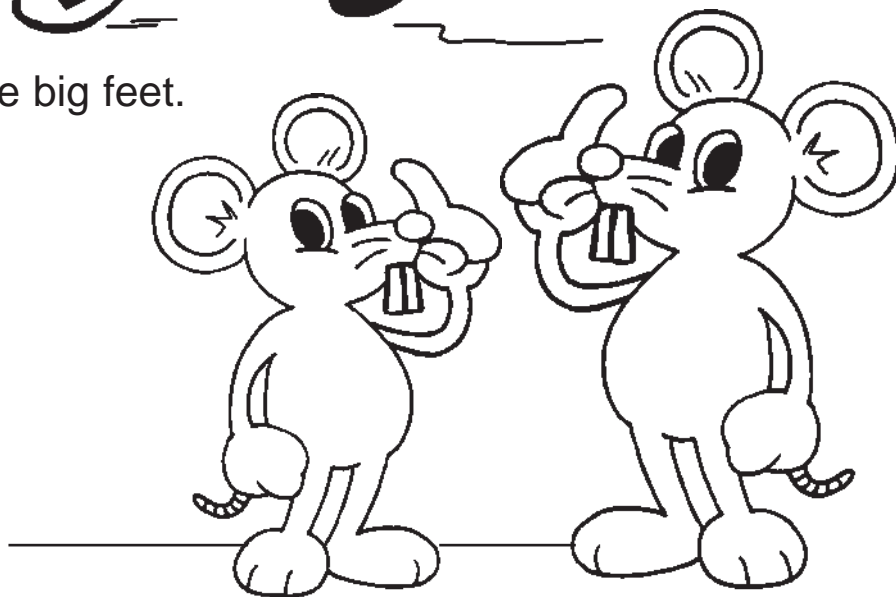
Some nouns are irregular.
We must learn the irregular plural forms of these words.

Example

one child - two children
one man - two men
one woman - two women
one foot - two feet
one tooth - two teeth
one mouse - two mice



The children have big feet.



The mice have big teeth.



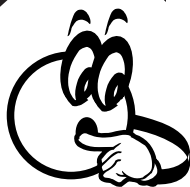
CHECKLIST

To write texts

I Write Texts

1. I prepare to write.

- I think of the instructions.
- I take out the resources I need (my books, my dictionary, my bank of expressions . . .)
- I look at the model.
- I write down ideas in English.
- I put them in order.

**2. I write a draft.**

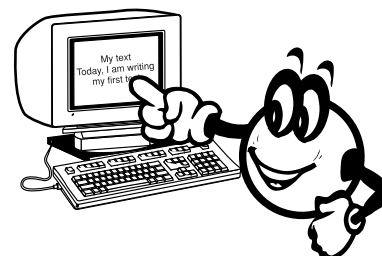
- I look at the model again.
- I follow the instructions.
- I use my ideas.
- I write short sentences in English. (Subject / Verb / Object)
- I use the vocabulary and expressions I know.
- If I have a problem:
 - I ask for help, I use my bank of words . . .

**3. I revise my text.**

- Did I follow the instructions?
- Did I follow the model?
- Are my ideas original?
- I check the spelling, the word order and punctuation with the resources I have.
- I ask a friend to revise my text.
- I correct my text.

**4. I write my final text.**

- Is it OK?
- Is it neat?
- Is it easy to read?

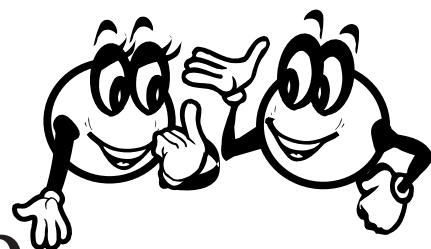


**Cycle 2****Competency link**

Competency 1

Time

30 minutes



Guess Who?

| | | | |
|------------------|---|-------------------------|--|
| Structure | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Question words: who, what• Possessive adjectives: his, her | Material | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Information cards (Reproducible 1)• Box• Focus 6 |
| Theme | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Personal interests | Classroom set-up | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pairs (Part A)• 2 large groups (Part B) |

**Setting the scene**

- Tell the students they will have to interview a person in the class so that they can participate in a guessing game.

Procedure**Part A**

- Have the students form pairs.
- Distribute a card (Reproducible 1) to each student.
- Teacher models a few questions with the class.
- Each student interviews his/her partner (5 minutes).

Part B

- When everybody is finished, students put the completed cards in the box.
- Teacher picks up a few cards and models giving the information.
(An example should be written on the board)
- Taking turns, volunteers pick a card and give out the information to the class and the other students try to guess who is being described.

Language expected**Structure**

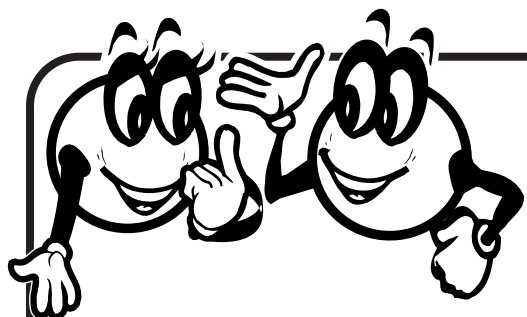
- Who's your favourite _____?
- What's your favourite _____?
- His / her favourite _____ is _____.

Interaction

- Is it...?
- Excuse me?
- Repeat please!
- It's your turn.

**Variations
+
follow-up**

- Use again later, changing the questions. For example: what sport do you like best?
- Have students prepare interview questions for homework.
- The class could also be divided into two smaller groups, with a student-moderator in each group; this would allow the teacher to observe the students in action.
- The class could also be divided into four smaller groups of 7 to 8 students. Each group takes turns describing a member of the group while the other groups try to guess who is being described. The guessing groups should consult before giving an answer and points given for a good answer.



Instructions:

Interview your partner.

Write his or her answers.

Name of your partner: _____

What's your favourite colour? _____

What's your favourite sport? _____

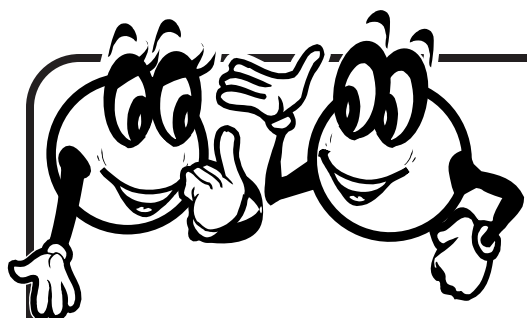
What's your favourite animal? _____

Who's your favourite singer? _____

Who's your favourite teacher? _____

Who's your best friend? _____

What's your favourite (_____)? _____



Instructions:

Interview your partner.

Write his or her answers.

Name of your partner: _____

What's your favourite colour? _____

What's your favourite sport? _____

What's your favourite animal? _____

Who's your favourite singer? _____

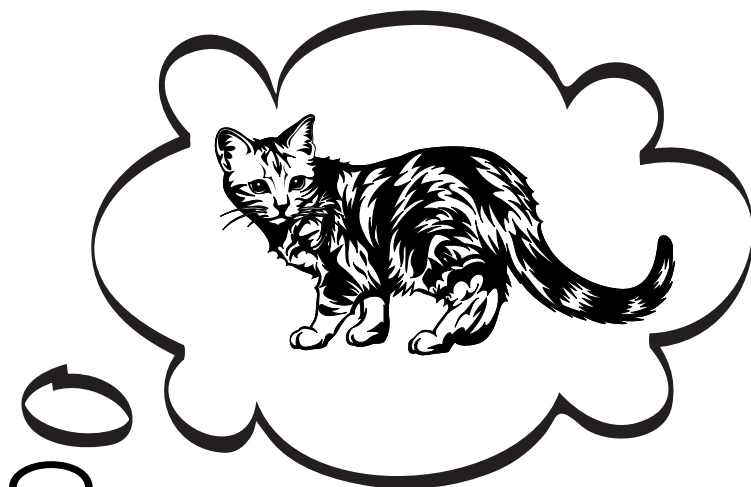
Who's your favourite teacher? _____

Who's your best friend? _____

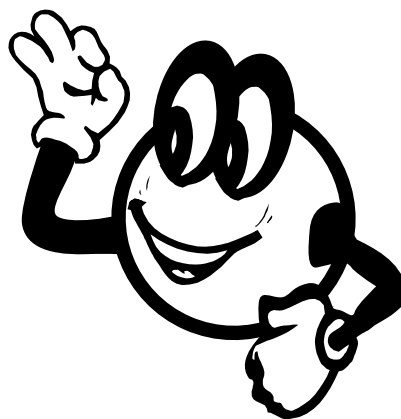
What's your favourite (_____)? _____



Possessive adjectives



Her favourite animal is a cat.



His favourite animal is a dog.