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Storytelling as a Framework for Teaching Grammar: A Professional Experience

El storytelling como marco para la enseñanza de la gramática: una experiencia profesional

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Abstract

Teaching grammar to young learners is challenging, particularly when multiple grammatical structures must be covered within a limited period of time. This paper presents a professional experience focused on the design of a continuous story to support grammar instruction for young EFL learners aged eight to ten. Instead of introducing each grammar point through unrelated stories, a single narrative accompanied learners throughout the course, allowing grammar to develop progressively while recycling previously learned language. Drawing on theories of child development, storytelling, contextualized grammar instruction, and materials design, the paper reflects on the pedagogical decisions behind the story's creation and highlights the potential of teacher-designed materials to promote coherent, meaningful, and engaging grammar learning.

Key wordw: storytelling, grammar teaching, young learners, materials design, EFL.

Resumen

La enseñanza de la gramática del inglés a niños como lengua extranjera supone un desafío cuando es necesario abordar múltiples contenidos en un tiempo limitado. Este trabajo presenta una experiencia profesional centrada en el diseño de una historia continua para contextualizar la enseñanza de la gramática a estudiantes de entre ocho y diez años. En lugar de introducir cada contenido gramatical mediante historias independientes y desconectadas, se diseñó una única narrativa que acompañó a los estudiantes a lo largo del curso, permitiendo desarrollar los contenidos de manera progresiva y, al mismo tiempo, recuperar y reciclar el lenguaje previamente trabajado. A partir de aportes sobre desarrollo infantil, storytelling, enseñanza contextualizada de la gramática y diseño de materiales, el artículo reflexiona sobre las decisiones pedagógicas que guiaron el proceso de creación y destaca el potencial de los materiales elaborados por docentes para promover una enseñanza más significativa, coherente y articulada.

Palabras clave: storytelling, enseñanza de la gramática, aprendices jóvenes, diseño de materiales, Inglés como lengua extranjera.

Introduction

Teaching grammar to young learners remains one of the most demanding aspects of English language teaching. In many educational contexts, teachers are expected to introduce a wide range of grammatical structures within a relatively short period while simultaneously expanding learners' vocabulary and communicative competence. Although commercially published materials provide valuable support, teachers often need to adapt these resources to respond to the specific characteristics of their students and classroom realities.

Storytelling has been widely recognized as an effective pedagogical resource for teaching English to children because it contextualizes language, promotes motivation, and creates meaningful opportunities for communication (Cameron, 2001; Ellis). However, teaching grammar through stories also presents an important challenge. In many textbooks, each grammar point is introduced through a different narrative, requiring learners to constantly adapt to new characters, settings, and situations while simultaneously processing unfamiliar linguistic structures.

This paper presents a professional experience that emerged from this pedagogical challenge. Faced with the need to teach an extensive grammar syllabus to a heterogeneous group of young learners, I designed a single continuous story that accompanied students throughout the course. Instead of treating grammar as a sequence of isolated topics, the story functioned as a common thread connecting different grammatical structures through recurring characters, settings, and adventures.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the pedagogical decisions that guided the design of this material and to discuss how storytelling can support coherent and contextualized grammar instruction for young EFL learners. More broadly, it seeks to highlight the role of teachers as material designers who transform theoretical knowledge into pedagogical resources adapted to the needs of their learners.

How it started: Identifying a Pedagogical Need

The experience presented in this paper emerged during my work as an English teacher at a private language institute in Rosario, Argentina, in 2022. I was responsible for teaching a third-level group of approximately twenty young learners between eight and ten years old. The course followed Team Together 3; students were expected to acquire a considerable amount of language including grammatical structures such as the Present Simple, Present Continuous, Past Simple, Future Forms, Comparatives, and Superlatives, together with topic-related vocabulary and communicative functions.

Although the textbook provided carefully designed lessons and meaningful communicative activities, I soon encountered a pedagogical challenge. My classroom was highly heterogenous. Students differed not only in age but also in their previous exposure to English, learning pace, and confidence when using the language. While some learners quickly incorporated new grammatical structures others required considerably more contextual support before they could understand and use the target language independently.

Initially, I followed the sequence proposed by the textbook. Each unit introduced a different story through which the target grammar was contextualized before moving to controlled and communicative practice. The stories were coherent and visually attractive, and they effectively introduced the language of each unit. However, after several weeks of teaching, I noticed that every new grammar point was accompanied by a completely different narrative which made little to no reference to the explanation of the grammar point itself. It was only meant to work as input for the discovery of grammar.

This observation led me to reflect on the cumulative nature of grammar learning. Language learning is not a sequence of isolated grammatical topics but a gradual process in which new knowledge builds upon previously acquired structures. Nevertheless, the materials available presented grammar through independent narratives that rarely established explicit connections between one unit and the next. As a result, students often perceived each lesson as an isolated experience rather than as part of a continuous learning process.

At that moment, I began asking myself different questions. Instead of thinking about how to teach each grammatical structure separately, I wondered whether the story itself could become the element that connected the entire syllabus. What would happen if learners followed the same simple, relatable, well-known characters throughout the instruction of grammar? Could a simple continuous narrative help them integrate new grammar while naturally revising what they had already learned?

These questions became the starting point for the experience described in this paper. I decided to create a single, simple narrative that would accompany learners. The story would evolve as students progressed through the curriculum, introducing increasingly complex grammatical structures while maintaining familiar characters, settings, and vocabulary. In this way, grammar would no longer be presented as a succession of disconnected topics but as part of an ongoing adventure that encouraged learners to build new knowledge upon previous learning.

The decision to design an original story did not emerge solely from the desire to create more engaging materials. It represented an attempt to respond to a pedagogical problem commonly faced by teachers of young learners; how to teach an extensive grammar syllabus within a limited period of time without sacrificing meaning, motivation, or continuity. The process of creating this story gradually became an opportunity to rethink not only the materials used in class but also my own role as a teacher and material designer.

Pedagogical Foundations of the Design Process

The decision to create an original story was guided by theoretical perspectives that shaped the way I understood children's language learning and the role of storytelling in grammar instruction. Rather than serving as an extensive review of the literature, these principles informed the pedagogical decisions made throughout the design process.

One of the first considerations was the developmental characteristics of young learners. Scott and Ytreberg (2004) explain that children between eight and ten years old rely heavily on imagination, visual support, and meaningful experiences when learning a foreign language. Likewise, Cameron (2001) argues that children acquire language more effectively when it is presented through purposeful communication rather than isolated rule explanation. These perspectives led me to design a story in which grammar emerged naturally through the actions of the characters instead of being introduced as disconnected structures.

Another important principle concerned the relationship between meaning and grammar. Ellis (2008) argues that learners should focus primarily on meaning while gradually noticing grammatical forms. Similarly, Larsen-Freeman (2003) proposes that grammar should be understood through the interaction of form, meaning, and use. Consequently, the story was designed so that each grammatical structure appeared within meaningful situations before becoming the focus of explicit instruction.

The story was also influenced by research on children's cognitive and emotional development. Kennedy (2006) emphasizes that meaningful and emotionally engaging experiences strengthen learning and memory, while Egan (1992) explains that children make sense of the world through stories, imagination, fantasy, and clear oppositions such as heroes and villains. These ideas encouraged me to create a fictional world in which grammar became part of the narrative rather than an abstract body of knowledge.

Finally, the experience reinforced my understanding of teachers as material designers. Graves (2000) and Tomlinson (2013) argue that teachers are uniquely positioned to design materials that respond to their learners' needs and contexts. Creating an original story therefore became not only a creative task but also a pedagogical decision intended to provide greater coherence throughout the grammar syllabus.

From Theory to Practice: Designing the Story

The theoretical principles described above guided every stage of the design process. Instead of creating a different story for each grammar point, I decided to write a single continuous narrative that accompanied learners. The objective was to ensure that grammar developed progressively while allowing students to revisit previously learned language in familiar contexts.

The first design decision was the creation of the protagonist. Since verbs are central to sentence construction and appear in every grammatical structure included in the syllabus, I created a character named Verb, inspired by a popular animated character familiar to many of my students. By turning an abstract grammatical concept into a recognizable character, I was able to make grammar more accessible and memorable.

The second decision was to introduce a time machine as the central element of the story. This narrative device provided a meaningful reason for the protagonist to travel across different moments in time, naturally supporting the progression from present to past and future forms. At the same time it allowed me to make changes to the main character, helping students notice that the base structure was the same but it would change from present to past or future. Rather than presenting verb tenses as isolated topics, the storyline itself justified the grammatical sequence established by the curriculum.

To further support learning, grammatical concepts were personified as characters. For example, Don't and Doesn't became recurring villains who challenged Verb throughout his adventures. Transforming grammatical structures into characters allowed students to associate abstract language forms with concrete situations, making them easier to remember.

Unlike the textbook, where each unit introduced a different story, the same characters and fictional world accompanied learners throughout the course. Every chapter introduced a new grammatical objective while revisiting vocabulary and structures from previous lessons. In this way, the story became the thread connecting the entire syllabus, allowing grammar learning to develop as a cumulative process rather than a series of isolated lessons.

The First Story: Verb and the Beginning of the Adventure

The story was initially designed around the grammar syllabus rather than around a fictional plot. The main objective was to create a narrative capable of contextualizing the grammatical structures introduced throughout the course while maintaining continuity between lessons. To achieve this, the protagonist was intentionally named Verb, a young inventor whose adventures would serve as the framework for grammar instruction.

Verb's greatest invention was a time machine that allowed him to travel between the present, the past, and the future. This narrative device was deliberately chosen because it provided a meaningful context for introducing verb tenses. Whenever Verb travelled through time, the language naturally shifted from present to past or future forms. When he remained in the present, he used a special transformation cape that enabled him to change into different versions of himself, symbolizing the way verbs change form according to different grammatical structures.

Grammatical concepts were also personified through a set of recurring characters. For instance, negative auxiliaries such as don’t, doesn’t, and later didn’t were given an antagonistic role, preventing Verb from undergoing the expected transformation. As a consequence, whenever these characters appeared, Verb was forced to remain in his original

form. This metaphor was intentionally designed to help learners understand one of the grammatical features that many young learners find difficult: in negative sentences, the auxiliary carries the tense and agreement, while the main verb remains in its base form.

This approach transformed abstract grammatical concepts into concrete characters and actions that students could visualize and remember. Instead of perceiving grammar as a collection of isolated rules, learners experienced it as an integral part of an ongoing adventure in which every narrative element served a pedagogical purpose.

Professional Reflections

Designing this story transformed my understanding of grammar instruction. Initially, my objective was simply to make grammar lessons more engaging; however, the experience demonstrated that a coherent narrative could also provide continuity across the curriculum and support the cumulative nature of language learning.

Creating my own materials also reinforced the idea that teachers are active material designers rather than passive users of textbooks. While published materials offer valuable support, adapting—or creating—resources that respond to learners' specific needs can increase both coherence and engagement. Most importantly, this experience reminded me that grammar does not need to be separated from meaningful communication. When embedded within an engaging story, grammatical structures become tools that help learners understand and interact with the narrative rather than isolated rules to memorize.

Final Remarks

This paper has presented a professional experience that emerged from the challenge of teaching an extensive grammar syllabus to young EFL learners within a limited period of time. Designing a continuous story offered an alternative way of organizing grammar instruction by connecting different grammatical structures through a single narrative that accompanied learners throughout the course.

Although this experience reflects a specific teaching context, it highlights the potential of storytelling as a framework for designing coherent, meaningful, and developmentally appropriate grammar instruction. More broadly, it illustrates how teachers can draw upon theoretical knowledge and classroom experience to create materials that respond to the particular needs of their learners. It is hoped that this experience will encourage other language teachers to view materials design not only as a creative endeavour but also as an opportunity to reflect critically on their own pedagogical practice.

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