

Training Teachers as Explainers: a Checklist

by *Dr Francisco Gomes de Matos*

Introduction

Although there have been significant advances in teacher training and, commendably, in learner training, a serious gap still remains namely that of preparing English language teachers as explainers. I recall my own professional preparation while getting a Bachelor's degree in English as a foreign language: no mention of what is now acknowledged as "an important pedagogical issue – the problem of explanation" (cf. Elaine Tarone and George Yule, Focus on the Language Learner, Oxford University Press, 1989, p.16). If you agree with me that teachers and learners have both rights (linguistic, pedagogical) and responsibilities, the learner's right to receive explanations should be matched by the teacher's right to be trained as an effective explainer. This is far from being the case, though. By and large, teachers of English (and other languages) improvise as best they can during the explanation phase of a class, because they have not been trained to systematize their knowledge of aspects of English grammar, (even if we focus on linguistic organizational elements alone, rather than uses or pragmatic aspects). Having helped train many Brazilian teachers of English and having written about teacher-preparation problems, I would like to draw international attention to the need for fruitful application of theoretical knowledge (concerning the structure and uses of English) to the training of teachers in giving grammatical explanations, particularly to adult learners.

To help bring about such explanatory competence, an initial, open-ended checklist is provided. Colleagues are asked to add to it and vary it so as to do justice to local sociocultural and educational contexts.

A checklist for training teachers as explainers

1. How prepared are you (as a teacher trainer) to help trainees become explainers? What reference grammars, pedagogical grammars, teach-yourself grammars do you have/use?
2. Have you ever translated scientific (descriptive) grammatical statements into pedagogically useful explanations aimed at your learners' cognitive abilities? Have you and your colleagues (in your school) ever organized and activated a file of grammatical explanations for use at different levels of teaching-learning?
3. Have you ever compared/contrasted statements from reference grammars, (such as Quirk et al A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language, Longman, 1985) with grammars for non-native users of English? What changes did you have to make on the consulted statements? How much paraphrasing and terminological adjustment did you have to do?
4. Have you ever tried constructing dual explanations, one at a more demanding intellectual level, another at a less challenging conceptual level, so as to match your students' processing abilities?
5. How do you assure yourself that your explanations are clear, accessible, effective? What kind of feedback do you get from your students on the effectiveness of your explanations? Could your learners re-explain or translate your own explanatory statement and thus demonstrate that they have understood your intended meanings?
6. Do you turn to up-to-date, context sensitive dictionaries, for realistic exemplification or do you prefer to make up your own examples? (An example of the former: the Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary. See especially the section Using the Explanations, in the accompanying workbook called Learning Real English, edited by Gwyneth Fox and Deborah Kirby, Collins ELT, 1987, pp. 11-12)

7. Are your explanations focused on aspects that (may) cause serious communicative problems for your learners or are they bits of information that could be dispensed with entirely?
8. Do you and your colleagues ever challenge yourselves to translate discursive explanations into explanatory diagrams and/or formulae? Opting for a discursive style seems to be a universal trait among language teachers. To what extent can trainees be prepared to explore different ways of presenting grammatical information? How can on-the-spot, spoken explanations be recorded for later analysis and translation into carefully systematized, written or diagrammatic equivalents?

What can teacher trainers learn from such documentation? Teacher trainers should be models as explainers. How can this come true? What needs to be done? Why? Here is a call for international co-operation and exchange.

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