

## Surviving grammar

How's your grammar knowledge? Before you read about surviving grammar, take this short test to find out how much you know and how much grammar you are comfortable with!

### Grammar test

1. What is the most apt term for the following words: *mine, yours, his, ours*? 1 point
  - a. subject pronouns
  - b. possessive pronouns
  - c. possessive adjectives
  - d. object pronouns
  
2. When do we use the superlative form of an adjective? 1 point
  - a. for adjectives that have a positive connotation, e.g. *super*
  - b. to compare things or people to a whole group they are part of
  - c. to compare things to other things, not people
  - d. to describe things that are equal
  
3. What is the most apt term for the following words: *put up, take off, head out*? 1 point
  - a. verbs
  - b. phrasal verbs
  - c. prepositional phrases
  - d. intransitive verbs
  
4. Which of the following sentences contains a modal verb? 1 point
  - a. She's a bit moody today.
  - b. The two of them get along well together.
  - c. It was a dark and stormy night.
  - d. You shouldn't do that, really.
  
5. Which word does not form a collocation with the noun *traffic*? 1 point
  - a. strong
  - b. heavy
  - c. busy
  - d. slow-moving
  
6. Match each sentence with its function. 4 points

<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. I'll take that for you.</li><li>2. May I go to the toilet?</li><li>3. He's a bit fat, with a big nose.</li><li>4. What I mean to say is ...</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. describing</li><li>b. clarifying</li><li>c. asking for permission</li><li>d. offering</li></ol>
--	--

## Surviving grammar

7. Match each typical ELT sample sentence with the correct verb form. 6 points

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. If I won the lottery, I would buy a house on the beach.                                    | a. present simple, third-person singular |
| 2. Have you ever eaten Chinese food?  | b. <i>going to</i> for future plans      |
| 3. I was having a bath when the phone rang.   | c. second conditional                    |
| 4. Brazil will win the World Cup.   | d. <i>will</i> for predictions           |
| 5. What are you going to do after the lesson?   | e. present perfect for experiences       |
| 6. John gets up at 7 o'clock. He has a shower and gets dressed. He goes to work at 8 o'clock. | f. past simple and past continuous       |

8. Which is the odd word out in each group, grammatically speaking? 3 points

- |          |       |       |        |
|----------|-------|-------|--------|
| a. open  | close | shut  | start  |
| b. water | sand  | music | guitar |
| c. good  | fine  | great | kind   |

9. Which of the following sentences contains a relative clause? 1 points

- He's the man who lives at number 10.
- He became prime minister after he won the election.
- He was popular ten years ago but isn't so popular now.
- Although he's won three elections, he's relatively young.

10. What pair of words does the following explanation describe? 1 points

'We use X and Y with the present perfect. We use X with a period of time and we use Y with a specific point in time.'

- X = *while*; Y = *during*
- X = *for*; Y = *since*
- X = *in*; Y = *on*

**Total:** 20 points

You will find the answers at the end of this article.

**Your score:**

18–20: You have a solid knowledge of grammar.

13–17: Your need to work a bit on your grammar.

<13: Uh oh! You need to take a TEFL course (or read through your notes if you've already done one) and begin brushing up on your grammar.

## Surviving grammar



One issue of pressing concern to many novice native-speaker teachers is that of grammar knowledge ... or lack thereof. Non-native-speaker teachers, on the other hand, often feel comfortable with grammar but less confident with advanced vocabulary, collocation and pronunciation.

There are probably very few, if any, native-speaker language teachers that can confidently say that they have never felt a moment of sheer panic about grammar. These moments, more often than not, come in the heat of a lesson, when a student asks a 'sticky' grammar question. Here is a list of some such questions that many teachers dread:

*Why can't I say ...?*

*If this is ..., then what is ...?*

*I was watching an English film and somebody said ... Is that correct?*

*You told me ... was incorrect but look at this email from a native speaker. What is going on?*

*Is ... better than ...?*

*What is the rule for ...?*

Faced with these questions year in and year out, teachers usually develop coping strategies. These range from avoidance to outright fabrication. There are several stock excuses that teachers use to dodge a 'grammar bullet'. These are things like:

*We'll be covering that next week.*

*Good question. Does anyone know the answer?*

*That's just how we say it in English.*

*I know – English is very difficult.*

*Let's just concentrate on speaking fluently.*

However, while these might help you get out of an immediate tricky situation, in the long run you are going to have to face the fact that, like it or not, grammar is seen by the majority of students and teachers as important when learning a language.

Here, then, are some principled tips on how to survive grammar.

- Do not avoid a grammar point in your coursebook because you don't understand it. This often happens to teachers early in their careers, especially when teaching higher-level learners or preparing learners for an exam.
- Do the grammar exercises yourself first. Then, check with the answer key. Does it make sense? If not, why not? Don't just follow the answer key – try to find out why.
- Be patient. Most native-speaker teachers take at least a couple of years to become familiar with the grammar points that arise teaching learners up to advanced level.
- Make sure you know at least the following main parts of speech and can label a sentence correctly: noun, verb, adverb, article, adjective, conjunction, pronoun, preposition. While this may not always be immediately helpful to learners, it will do your confidence a lot of good if a student asks 'Is this a conjunction?' and you can answer 'Yes' with confidence. It will also help you to understand grammar explanations you find in teacher's books and grammar reference books.
- Get a grammar book. *Teaching English Grammar* (Jim Scrivener) is a good starting point. It is very accessible to teachers. There are also advanced and elementary editions. *Learner English* (eds. Michael Swan and Bernard Smith) contains chapters describing typical difficulties for learners of different nationalities and is an excellent reference book, especially if you are teaching monolingual groups.

## Surviving grammar

- If you can't explain a grammar point, admit it! Tell the students that you don't know – but that you will find out. Then, find out and report back. Keep a record of 'sticky' questions and notes on how they can be dealt with.
- Become a grammar detective – seek out grammar in texts. Don't bore or annoy your friends analyzing their grammar when they speak but listen, read and notice things. For example, pick up a newspaper article, look at all the verbs and work out why they are used in the form they are used.
- Use peer teaching. Very often, learners know quite a lot about grammar. Get them to explain points to each other. This isn't a cop-out. You will need to be prepared to step in and clarify things yourself, if necessary, but you will save yourself lots of unnecessary presentation and explanation, and be able to concentrate on learners' real difficulties with the language.
- Don't overteach grammar. Once you have mastered a grammar point, there is a temptation to celebrate by teaching it to every group of students you come across. Remember that, very often, working on vocabulary and pronunciation are more important for learners who are trying to improve their ability to communicate in English and it is in these areas that they need your help most.
- Discuss grammar with colleagues. Don't be afraid to ask a colleague whether they understand the difference between *will* and *going to*. Asking questions like this is not a sign of stupidity. Most language teachers are very interpersonal people and learn best from each other.
- Don't blind learners with grammar terminology. It may be useful at times to label language – 'This is an adverb' or 'This is the present perfect continuous' – but, remember, this doesn't signify knowing grammar. It is knowing when and how to use a particular form that is most important to learners, not what to call it. So

don't begin a lesson by saying 'Today we are going to study the third conditional.'

- Finally, play to your strengths. For your learners, you are an expert in vocabulary, what sounds right when and how to pronounce things, so make sure you give these elements of language prominence in your lessons, especially while you are still finding your feet with grammar. Don't avoid teaching grammar (or you will never learn it!) but keep a sense of proportion.

### Key:

1. b
2. b
3. b
4. d
5. a
6. 1. d  
2. c  
3. a  
4. b
7. 1. c  
2. e  
3. f  
4. d  
5. b  
6. a
8. a. *shut* (It has an irregular past tense.)  
b. *guitar* (It's the only countable noun in the list, although *water* can, in some contexts, be used as a countable noun, e.g. Can I have a water?)  
c. *good* (It has irregular comparative and superlative forms.)
9. a
10. b