



My Brain is Not Braining! Brain-Based Grammar for Real-World Understanding

Seminar handout

by Katherine Reilly

Introduction to Brain-Based Grammar

Traditional grammar instruction often focuses on memorizing rules and exceptions. However, **cognitive science** shows that the brain learns grammar through **patterns, prediction, repetition, and visualization** rather than rote memorization. This handout explores **interactive, brain-friendly grammar techniques** that make learning engaging, effective, and fun!

Quick Technique #1: Inductive Grammar Approach

Instead of presenting grammar rules **first**, expose students to **whole language patterns** and let them **discover** the rules themselves.

Example:

- Instead of explaining "**used to + verb**", present full phrases: *"I used to live in London."*
- Let students notice the structure before explaining the rule.

Activity: Grammar Detective

- Provide students with a set of example sentences.
- Ask: *"What do you notice? What patterns can you find?"*
- Encourage them to **formulate their own grammar rule**.

Quick Technique #2: The Power of Prediction

The brain **anticipates** what comes next in a sentence based on patterns. Harness this by using **sentence completion and prediction exercises**.

Examples by Grammar Category:

- **Conditionals:** "If she had studied harder, she _____."
- **Tenses:** "By next year, she _____."
- **Wishes:** "I wish _____."

Interactive Classroom Activity:

- Provide **incomplete sentences** and let students **predict** the endings.
 - Have students justify their choices, reinforcing **critical thinking**.
-

Quick Technique #3: Repetition & Variation

Repetition **reinforces learning**, but slight variations help avoid monotony and enhance retention.

Example Progressions:

- **Tenses:** "She likes swimming." → "She used to like swimming." → "She has always liked swimming."
- **Comparatives:** "This book is interesting." → "This book is more interesting than that one." → "This is the most interesting book I've ever read."

Classroom Challenge:

- Give students a **base sentence** and ask them to modify it in **three different ways** using different tenses or structures.
-

Quick Technique #4: Context Over Correction

Direct error correction often discourages students. Instead, use **implicit correction techniques** like **recasting, expansion, and clarification requests**.

Examples:

- **Student:** "She go to the store."
Teacher (Recast): "Oh, she goes to the store?"
- **Student:** "I *buyed* a book."
Teacher (Expansion): "Oh, you bought a book? Nice! What's it about?"
- **Student:** "Yesterday, she *go* to the market."
Teacher (Clarification Request): "Sorry, yesterday she...?"

Encourage **self-correction** rather than interrupting fluency.

Quick Technique #5: Mind-Map Grammar

Using **visual structures** helps students organize grammar rules meaningfully.

How to Use Mind Maps in Grammar:

- **Modal Verbs:** Map "Can, Could, Must, Might" with example sentences.
- **Conditionals:** Show the differences between zero, first, second, and third conditionals with branching examples.

Classroom Application:

- Have students **create their own grammar mind maps** using **colors and drawings** to reinforce learning.

Quick Technique #6: Role-Play Grammar (Scientists & Fairy Tales)

Approach 1: The Scientist Experiment (Conditionals Role-Play)

Students act as **scientists** conducting experiments, using **conditionals** to describe their hypotheses.

Examples:

- **Zero Conditional:** *"If you heat ice, it melts."*
- **First Conditional:** *"If we mix baking soda with vinegar, it will bubble."*
- **Second Conditional:** *"If I were a scientist, I would invent a time machine."*

Activity:

- Have students conduct simple experiments and describe outcomes using conditionals.
- **Bonus:** Assign a "science journalist" to report the findings using **reported speech**.

Approach 2: Fairy Tale Role-Play (Prepositions & Tenses)

Students act out **fairy tales** while practicing **prepositions, past tenses, and conditionals**.

Examples:

- **Prepositions:** *"Little Red Riding Hood walked **through** the forest."*
- **Past Tenses:** *"Cinderella **was cleaning** when the fairy godmother appeared."*

Encourage **improvisation** for greater creativity and engagement!

Quick Technique #7: Storytelling Grammar

The brain remembers **stories** better than isolated grammar rules, making storytelling a powerful learning tool.

Activity: Story building with Grammar Focus

1. Start a **sentence**: "*Yesterday, I was walking through the city when I saw...*"
 2. Each student adds a **sentence**, but they must use a target grammar structure (past continuous, reported speech, conditionals, etc.).
 3. The class **builds a full story**, reinforcing grammar through creativity!
-

Quick Technique #8: Grammar & Emotion

Emotional engagement **boosts memory retention** and helps students relate grammar to real-life expression.

Activity: Emotion-Based Sentence Construction

- Provide different **emotions (joy, anger, fear, surprise)**.
 - Students **rewrite a neutral sentence** using grammar structures to **reflect emotion**.
 - *Neutral*: "She told me the news."
 - *Excited*: "She was practically shouting when she told me the news!"
 - *Regretful*: "I wish I had paid more attention when she told me the news."
-

Slang & Evolving Grammar

Grammar evolves! Slang phrases **follow internal grammar rules**, even if they seem unstructured.

Popular Social Media Slang & Grammar Insights:

- **"She's giving main character energy."** ("*Giving*" acts as a linking verb, describing an aura or presence.)
- **"That food is bussin'."** ("*Bussin'*" = an intensified adjective meaning "delicious".)
- **"No cap."** (Used to emphasize truthfulness.)

Classroom Challenge:

- Show slang phrases and ask students to **translate them into standard English**.
 - Discuss how grammar **naturally shifts over time**.
-

Interactive Activities for Teachers

1. Grammar Auction

- Write correct and incorrect sentences on cards.
- Students "bid" on the sentences they think are correct.

2. Reverse Translation Challenge

- Provide a standard English sentence.
- Students rewrite it using **slang or informal grammar**, then translate back.

3. Speed Grammar Chains

- One student starts with a sentence, the next student changes **one** element (tense, voice, word choice, etc.).
- Continue the chain while maintaining coherence.

Final Reflection & Takeaways

- Grammar is **best learned through interaction and discovery**, not just memorization.
- **Prediction, visualization, and context-based correction** enhance retention.
- **Role-play, mind maps, and real-world connections** make grammar meaningful.

References:

- Langacker, R. W. (2008). *Cognitive grammar: A basic introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Newman, J. (2001). Cognitive grammar. In D. Geeraerts & H. Cuyckens (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of cognitive linguistics* (pp. 421-462). Oxford University Press.

More information and ELT materials can be found at: katherinereilly.blog

A free digital copy of the book, 'The Show Must Go On' can be downloaded here: [The Show Must Go On](#)