



Grammar Without the Teacher

Unlike baseball players, such as Hunter Pence, whose special day was celebrated by Philadelphia even after he was traded to San Francisco, they do not make bobblehead dolls out of professors. And yet, I have often felt like a bobblehead in my language classes, shaking or nodding my head, as the case may be, as students attempt (guess) at complex grammar points. I stand in front of the class, helpless to provide a rational explanation for the point, forced, yet again, to direct students to mnemonic devices and other tricks to assist their learning. Is it *demand to know* or *demand knowing*? I shake or nod as appropriate.

It was out of this desperation that *Grammar Without the Teacher* was born. Actually, my dean suggested the title *Bobblehead Grammar*, but perhaps this term lacks sufficient gravitas. What we are dealing with here is an approach that enables students to learn discreet grammar points without fruitless classroom activities, during which teachers smile and move their head in the appropriate direction to indicate a correct or incorrect answer.

Some of the grammar points that require more memory than analysis include articles, prepositions, gerunds and infinitives, pronouns, modals, comparative and superlative adjectives, subject/verb agreement, and irregular past tense verbs. How can we teach that the past tense of *bring* is *brought* but the past tense of *sing* (which rhymes with bring) is instead *sang*?

For the serious language learner, intense memory work is an inevitable point in the acquisition process. An organized and succinct presentation of the grammar point is indispensable, but should we really spend (waste) valuable class time in attempting explanations when home study might provide equal preparation and more personalized learning?

To this goal, I have devised 32 ten-page lessons, each tackling a separate grammar point. Let's analyze articles, for example. Of course, articles, which are the easiest part of speech to identify in English (there are only three forms: *a*, *an*, and *the*), are also among the most difficult items to use, especially for students whose native languages lack this part of speech. I provide detailed charts that seek to explain the inexplicable. For instance, while *rivers*, *oceans*, and *seas* require the article *the*, *lakes* do not. Why are lakes excluded from the group of bodies of water? There is no rational explanation, so traditionally, teachers nod their head when Won Bin proclaims *the Indian Ocean*, but shake their head as Greta says *the Lake Titicaca*, helpless to provide guidance on the matter.

With *Grammar Without the Teacher*, students are responsible for completing one unit per week as homework. The lessons consist of a two- to three-page presentation of the

grammar point, usually in chart form, followed by ten exercises. The exercises are fill-ins, multiple choice, error correction, matching, and short answers. Answers are provided so that students can test themselves and learn from the exercises. Quizzes (20- to 30-minute multiple choice) are either taken in class in a face-to-face course or done online in a web-enhanced, hybrid, or online class.

Shifting the responsibility for the studying and learning the discreet grammar point entirely to the students enhances their memory systems, in addition to freeing up class time to introduce more teachable points. I have tested this method for three semesters and the results have exceeded my expectations. Students usually become more “grammar conscious,” often discussing tricky points amongst themselves. At Bergen Community College, students must take an examination in writing to exit the program, with a general pass rate of 75-80%. Students who have undergone *Grammar Without the Teacher* have passed at rates exceeding 90%.

Delivery

Face-to-face class. The recommended form of delivery of *Grammar Without the Teacher* to a face-to-face class is to have the school’s IT department set up a Web-enhanced course to accompany the face-to-face segment. The Web-enhanced course will have six units, each containing two chapters. This corresponds to 12 chapters in total, or approximately one chapter per week in a standard 15-week semester (taking into account the first week in which the course is being organized and the last week for final examinations).

Each chapter consists of ten pages, divided roughly in the following manner:

- An introduction to the concept, complete with grammar explanation, summary charts, and sample sentences. Students may print out this 2-3 page section or study it online.
- 8-10 exercises testing the concept. The exercises vary among multiple choice, fill-in, matching, and error correction.
- Answers to the exercises.

Students are assigned the chapter for homework and given one week to complete the work (reading the grammar introduction, memorizing the charts, and doing the exercises).

In the face-to-face delivery, the instructor may set aside one day in a four-meeting-per-week course (80 minutes each) or half a meeting in a two-meeting per week course (3 hours each) to review and summarize the grammar concept, go over select sentences from the exercises, and prepare students for the test on the chapter. The best way to conduct this class is as a quiz show. Since most of the preparation for the grammar concept is memory work, the quiz show should be rapid-fire and fun. The instructor directs questions to individual students, who then either pass forward to the next round or are eliminated if they answer incorrectly. The “game” is over when there is only one student left standing. Each game should take five to ten minutes. An alternate form is to divide the class into groups or “teams” of four. The teams may consult with each other before answering the question.

After this review or preparation class, students are ready to take their examination on the grammar chapter. The test is offered online, in the environment of the Web-enhanced course. Respondus software is used in the preparation and delivery of the examination. Respondus is quite easy to use: instructors need only import questions or an entire test

from Microsoft Word and copy the test to the Web-enhanced course. Students take the Respondus test and receive an immediate grade. The grade is also available to the instructor online. Once they have completed one chapter in its entirety (including the examination), students are ready to move onto the next chapter.

Hybrid class. The recommended form of delivery of *Grammar Without the Teacher* to a hybrid class is to use the Web-enhanced course as the online segment. The Web-enhanced course will have six units, each containing three chapters, for a total of 18 chapters (six more than the face-to-face course).

Online class. The online course will have six units, each containing four chapters, for a total of 24 chapters (six more than the hybrid course and 12 more than the face-to-face course). In delivering *Grammar Without the Teacher* to an online class, it is advisable to set the Respondus program to allow students to take the test twice. Their grade for the test will be the average of their two grades. This ensures that test taking is really a learning experience and not punitive.

Students have responded quite positively to being assigned more work during the semester. I have used *Grammar Without the Teacher* in grammar as well as writing classes. Many students are (or may become) hungry for grammar, and this quality enhances their quest for proficiency in English. They are at the stage in language learning when they cannot get too much information and can study both intensively and with more leisure before they are inundated with the rigors of regular college courses.

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