Bending the rules: developing learner awareness of how language really works

Webinar handout

by Andy Keedwell

Language is messy

Learners often approach language learning with the expectation that it will involve learning sets of language rules, sometimes by heart. Many teachers also share this belief and see their role as imparting these rules, which can be learnt as mathematical formula and tested in exams.

But while there may be sets of rules in subjects such as Chemistry or Physics (at least at the level we learn them at school!), this is not really true for phenomena such as language. So many rules we formulate have so many exceptions that they are not 'rules' at all: 'rules' do not have exceptions! In addition, language is constantly changing with new vocabulary entering the language – the first use of a word such as 'selfie' was only twenty years ago. Although it changes at a slower rate, the grammar of most languages is also steadily evolving.

Rather than following 'rules', language is a little like the weather – things usually or often happen, some things happen but only rarely and occasionally unpredictable events occur. Nobody would have expected that my city, Hull, in the north of England would ever have experienced a summer's day which was hotter than Cairo but in 2022, it did!

If we continue to focus on language 'rules' we are giving learners a false impression of how language works and inadvertently confusing them each time they come across exceptions, especially outside the classroom when they read or listen to authentic materials. We need to help learners to be aware, without over-complicating things, that language is messy and unpredictable and to help them cope with the underlying ambiguity of language.

Here are some strategies we and our learners can adopt to tackle messiness!

1 What we say…….

- Talk about patterns not rules……. Use simple expressions such as '**usually'** or '**often**' to describe language patterns. Avoid being too dogmatic!

- Avoid expressions such as '**you should always**' and use expressions such as '**we usually say**'.

- Everybody has their own 'idiolect' – things they say or do not say. Variations may be regional, generational or cultural - There's nothing wrong with saying '**I wouldn't use this expression myself but it's not incorrect**'.

- Encourage learners to have an open mind. Teachers often dissuade learners from looking for or finding exceptions – but these exceptions are what language is all about!

2 What we can do: don't over-complicate

Some 'rules' we introduce are unnecessary complications of what are basically relatively simple language patterns. For example, we often spend so much time over-emphasising 'backshift' in reported speech but if we look at real examples, whether the speaker uses past or present depends entirely on the context and all the following forms are 'correct':

- He said he would go there tomorrow.
- He said he was going there tomorrow.
- He said he is going there tomorrow.
- He said he'll go there tomorrow.

We often confuse learners by talking about the 'future tense' in English – but in reality, English does not have such a tense! This article by Chia Suan Chong summarising Dave Willis' 2012 IATEFL talk provides many examples of over-complicated rules:

https://chiasuanchong.com/2012/03/26/my-iatefl-glasgow-diary-part-4-dave-willis-on-grammar/

3 What can we do: investigate examples

Encourage learners to look at examples of language which are appropriate for their language level and identify patterns for themselves.

We talk about a corpus of language and concordancing – how words occur together and combine. Linguists have been using concordancing tools for a number of decades – this site from Lancaster University presents some very helpful concordancing tools which are available on the Internet:

http://corpora.lancs.ac.uk/clmtp/2-conc.php

Technically, concordancing can sometimes look a little formidable. It's just as easy to type in a phrase or expression on Google and see what happens. Try to encourage learners to do this too and they can then carry out their own research. For example, I was curious to see if people tend to say 'if I were' (the form most grammar books state as 'correct') or 'if I was'. Here are some results:

If I was	
24,060,000,000 google results	
• *If I Was' is a song by Scottish musician Midge Ure.* • *Sir Keir Starmer: I couldn't have gone to university if I was….*	

- *If I Was Dead by Carol Ann Duffy*
- *'I was treated as if I was dirty': a paediatrician decries racism against African scientists...*
- *Can I make an accident claim if I was drunk?*
- *Would You Still Love Me If I Was A Worm?*
- *If I Was a Superhero By Sally Gray*

Although this form is usually described as 'wrong' I found lots of examples – in fact, there are around twice as many results on Google as for 'If I were!'

Our aim as teachers is to help our learners who take risks and are open to new language prepared to be creative with language. Efficient language learners are interested in finding patterns in language, learn from past experience, but do not get frustrated when patterns are not clear and are not obsessed with 'rules'.

Good luck with bending the rules!

A recording of Andy's webinar can be watched here:
https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/news-events/world-teachers-day-2023/world-teachers-day-2023-friday-6-october