Teaching Grammar through Agricultural Stories: A Contextualised Approach to English Learning among Undergraduate Agriculture Students

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Abstract

Grammar teaching can become difficult when grammatical forms are presented separately from the situations in which learners are likely to use them. This can be particularly relevant for students studying a specialised discipline, where general English examples may appear disconnected from their academic experience. This paper describes a classroom-based practitioner inquiry into the use of short agricultural stories for teaching grammar to undergraduate agriculture students. The approach developed from classroom experience across two semesters with different groups of learners. Instead of introducing a grammatical rule at the beginning of a lesson, the teacher first presented a short story based on a familiar agricultural situation, such as a farmer visiting a field, sowing seeds, working on a farm or harvesting a crop. Students listened to or read the story, discussed its meaning and were then guided to identify and underline the verbs and relevant grammatical forms. The grammatical point was subsequently explained, followed by activities in which students produced their own sentences, paragraphs or short stories based on agricultural and academic experiences. The approach was initially used for teaching tenses and was later extended to voice, conditionals, reported speech and gerunds. The classroom evidence consisted of student assignments, worksheets, lesson plans, PowerPoint presentations, teacher reflections and grammar-related surprise tests. The experience suggested that agricultural contexts made grammar more relatable to students and were associated with greater interest, engagement and improved performance in grammar-related tasks. The paper argues that students' disciplinary knowledge can be used as a resource for English language teaching and that familiar stories can provide a meaningful bridge between grammatical form, meaning and use.

Keywords: grammar teaching, agricultural English, contextualised learning, storytelling, English for Specific Purposes, undergraduate agriculture students

1. Introduction

Grammar is an important part of learning a second language. However, knowing a grammatical rule does not necessarily mean that a learner can use the rule appropriately in communication. In many English classrooms, grammar is introduced through rules, examples and exercises. Students learn the form of a tense, memorise its structure and complete exercises based on it. Such activities have their place in language teaching, but grammar can become difficult when it is presented without a meaningful context.

Grammar is more than a collection of rules. It is also a resource for expressing meaning. Larsen-Freeman (2003) argues for understanding grammar as something learners use to create meaning rather than simply as a body of rules to be memorised. Similarly, Ellis (2006) discusses the role of form-focused instruction within second-language teaching and argues that grammar can be taught as part of meaningful language use.

Context becomes particularly important when English is taught to students from a specific academic discipline. Undergraduate agriculture students encounter English alongside subjects such as agronomy, soil science, horticulture, agricultural economics and other practical and theoretical areas. Their academic experiences include visiting fields, preparing land, sowing seeds, observing crops, conducting practical activities and discussing agricultural practices. These experiences can provide useful material for language teaching.

This is also relevant to English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Hutchinson and Waters (1987) emphasise the importance of understanding learners and their purposes when designing language learning. In the present context, the students' academic discipline itself provided a useful source of situations and topics for English learning. Thus, agriculture students did not necessarily need to leave their disciplinary world behind when they entered the English classroom. Their subject knowledge could itself become a resource for learning English.

The classroom approach described in this paper developed from this observation. While teaching grammar to undergraduate agriculture students, the author began using short stories based on agricultural situations. A story could describe a farmer visiting a field, preparing land, sowing seeds, observing a crop or harvesting it. The purpose of the story was not primarily literary. It was to provide a meaningful situation in which students could encounter and notice a grammatical structure.

An important feature of the approach was the order of teaching. The author did not begin by telling students which tense they were going to learn. The story came first. Students listened to the story or read it from the board and were asked questions about what was happening. The author then drew their attention to the verbs used in the story and asked them to identify or underline the forms. Only after this stage did I explain the grammatical structure.

The lesson then moved from noticing to production. Students were asked to write similar sentences or paragraphs based on their own academic or agricultural experiences. Questions such as *"What do you do in your field?"* and *"What do you do in your agronomy practical class?"* provided familiar situations for student writing.

The approach was initially developed for teaching tenses. Later, the same basic principle was used to teach voice, conditionals, reported speech and gerunds. Although the grammatical structures changed, the underlying approach remained the same: start with a familiar context, provide a short story, help students notice the relevant forms, explain the grammar and then ask students to use the structure themselves.

The approach was used across two semesters with different groups of undergraduate agriculture students. During this period, the author observed that students appeared to relate more easily to grammatical examples when the situations were connected with agriculture. They also showed greater interest in the language activities and were able to produce their own examples based on agricultural situations.

The present paper describes this classroom experience as a practitioner inquiry. It does not attempt to establish through an experimental design that agricultural stories cause improvement in grammar learning. Instead, it examines classroom materials and teacher reflections to identify recurring patterns in student engagement, interest and performance.

The study addresses three questions:

1. How can short agricultural stories be used to contextualise grammar teaching for undergraduate agriculture students?
2. What classroom patterns emerged when grammatical structures were introduced through familiar agricultural situations and followed by student-generated language?
3. How did students respond to the approach in terms of interest, engagement and performance in grammar-related tasks?

2. Grammar, Context and Storytelling

The teaching of grammar has long been an important part of second-language education. The question is not whether grammar should be taught but how it can be taught in a way that helps learners connect grammatical forms with meaning and use.

A rule-based explanation can give students information about the structure of a language. However, learners also need opportunities to encounter grammatical forms in situations where those forms have a communicative purpose. Ellis (2006) discusses the role of form-focused instruction within second-language teaching and suggests that attention to grammar can be incorporated into broader communicative learning.

Larsen-Freeman (2003) uses the term *grammaring* to emphasise the dynamic use of grammar. From this perspective, grammar is not simply knowledge that learners possess; it is something they use to construct meaning.

Batstone and Ellis (2009) similarly emphasise the importance of helping learners establish connections between grammatical forms and the meanings they express. Their discussion of the Given-to-New Principle is particularly relevant to the present approach because it recognises learners' existing knowledge as a resource for developing new form-meaning connections.

Storytelling provides one possible way of creating such a context. A story connects sentences through a situation or sequence of events. Instead of seeing individual examples in isolation, learners encounter language as part of something that has meaning. Research on storytelling and grammar teaching has explored this possibility with different groups of EFL learners. Kamaludin, Soo and Bai Rajendran (2015), for example, examined storytelling as a way of teaching grammar and compared it with more conventional classroom treatment.

The present approach differs in one important respect. The stories were not taken from general literary materials. They were short, teacher-created stories based on agricultural situations. Their purpose was pedagogical: to create a meaningful context in which a particular grammatical structure could be encountered, noticed and used.

3. Context of the Classroom Approach

The approach was developed while teaching English to undergraduate students pursuing agriculture. Since agriculture was the students' main area of study, agricultural situations were a natural source of classroom examples.

The initial motivation was practical. Students sometimes found grammar difficult when it was presented mainly as rules, forms and exercises. They could learn the structure of a tense, but connecting the structure with actual use was not always easy. The author therefore began experimenting with examples drawn from the students' academic and practical environment.

The decision to use agricultural contexts was straightforward. The students were agriculture students. Their academic environment already provided numerous situations that could be converted into language-learning activities.

A farmer visiting a field, sowing seeds, checking a crop, removing weeds or harvesting a crop could provide the content for a short story. Students could understand the situation immediately. The English lesson could then focus on how that situation was expressed through grammar.

The approach was initially used for tenses. Each lesson was built around a small story. The story was selected or developed according to the grammatical structure being taught.

The story was presented first. Depending on the lesson, the author either read it aloud or wrote it on the board. Students listened or read and tried to understand what was happening. The author then asked questions related to the story. The students were guided towards the verbs and tense forms used in the sentences.

Students were asked to identify or underline the verbs. After this noticing stage, the grammatical explanation was given.

The next stage was student production. Students were asked to write similar sentences or short paragraphs based on their own agricultural or academic experiences. Questions such as *"What do you do in your field?"* and *"What do you do in your agronomy practical class?"* were used as prompts.

The same general approach was later extended to voice, conditionals, reported speech and gerunds. The grammatical structure changed, but the sequence remained broadly similar.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The paper adopts a qualitative classroom-based practitioner inquiry approach. The approach was developed and implemented by the teacher in the normal classroom setting and was examined retrospectively using available classroom evidence.

The teaching approach was used over two semesters with different groups of undergraduate agriculture students.

The study was not a controlled experiment. There was no separate control group and no random assignment of students. The purpose was instead to document and examine an instructional practice developed through classroom experience.

4.2 Sources of Classroom Evidence

Several forms of classroom evidence were available for the inquiry. These included:

- student assignments;
- worksheets;
- lesson plans;
- PowerPoint presentations;
- teacher reflective notes; and
- grammar-related surprise tests.

Student assignments and worksheets provided examples of student-generated language. Lesson plans and PowerPoint presentations documented the instructional approach and the contexts used for grammar teaching. Reflective notes provided the teacher's observations of classroom responses. Surprise tests provided additional evidence of students' performance in grammar-related tasks.

4.3 Classroom Procedure

The procedure generally followed five stages.

Stage 1: Familiar context

A situation from agriculture or the students' academic experience was selected.

Stage 2: Short story

A short story was presented orally or written on the board. The story was built around the grammatical structure being taught.

For example, a story for a lesson on the simple present tense could describe a farmer's routine:

A farmer visits his field early in the morning. He checks the crop, observes the plants and removes the weeds. He then speaks to the workers and plans the day's work.

The purpose was not to make the story complicated. It was to provide enough meaningful language for students to encounter the target forms.

Stage 3: Noticing

Students were asked questions about the story and were guided towards the relevant verbs or grammatical forms. They identified or underlined the forms.

Stage 4: Explanation

The relevant grammatical structure was explained, including its form and use.

Stage 5: Student production

Students were then asked to create their own sentences, paragraphs or short descriptions based on similar agricultural situations.

This procedure was initially used for tenses and was subsequently applied to voice, conditionals, reported speech and gerunds.

4.4 Data Analysis

The classroom materials were reviewed retrospectively to identify recurring patterns in students' engagement with grammatical forms, their ability to relate the examples to agricultural situations and their production of similar language.

Student assignments and worksheets were considered alongside lesson plans, teaching materials, teacher reflections and surprise-test materials. Evidence from different sources was compared where possible to see whether similar patterns appeared across the classroom record.

The analysis was interpretive rather than numerical. No standardised pre- and post-test scores were used, and the paper does not claim a measured causal effect of the approach on grammatical proficiency.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Agricultural Context Made Grammar More Relatable

The most noticeable feature of the approach was the relatability of the grammatical examples. Agriculture was not an artificial context for these students. It was the subject they were studying and the area around which many of their academic experiences were organised.

For example, after a lesson on the simple present tense, students could be asked:

What do you do in your field?

The responses could draw directly on their experiences:

I go to the field in the morning. I check the crop. I remove the weeds. I observe the plants.

The significance of such an activity was not simply that students produced sentences in the target tense. They were using the tense to communicate something familiar.

A similar prompt could be used for an agronomy practical:

What do you do in your agronomy practical class?

Students could write about observing crops, examining plants, recording observations and discussing results.

The context therefore reduced the distance between the grammar lesson and the students' own experience. Instead of having to understand both an unfamiliar situation and an unfamiliar language form, students could focus on expressing a situation they already knew.

This connects with Batstone and Ellis's (2009) argument that learners' existing knowledge can serve as a resource when they develop new form-meaning mappings.

5.2 The Story Came Before the Rule

A second important feature was the decision to present the story before formally explaining the grammatical rule.

Students first encountered sentences such as:

The farmer visits the field every morning.

They could understand what the farmer was doing before being asked to analyse the verb *visits*. The teacher could then draw attention to the form and explain the simple present tense.

The grammatical rule therefore became an explanation of something students had already encountered.

This was not a purely inductive approach. Students were not expected to discover all the grammatical rules by themselves. Explicit explanation remained part of the lesson. The difference was the sequence:

context → exposure → noticing → explanation → use

This sequence gave students an opportunity to connect the grammatical form with its meaning before dealing with the terminology and rules.

The approach is consistent with the view of grammar teaching proposed by Batstone and Ellis (2009), who emphasise awareness of form-meaning relationships and opportunities to use new mappings under meaningful conditions.

5.3 From Recognition to Student Production

Another important pattern was the movement from recognising grammatical forms to producing them.

Students were not asked only to underline verbs in the teacher's story. After the explanation, they were asked to construct their own sentences and paragraphs.

For example, after working with the simple present tense, students could write:

We go to the field in the morning. We observe the crop. We record the observations. We discuss the results.

Such writing showed students using the target grammatical structure to describe their own academic activities.

This stage was important because it changed the nature of the activity. The students were no longer simply answering a grammar question. They were using grammar to communicate something.

The same approach could be applied to other structures. For example, students could encounter passive voice through agricultural processes:

The seeds are sown in the field. The crop is harvested after maturity.

They could then be asked to produce similar sentences.

The activity thus moved from teacher-provided language towards student-generated language.

5.4 Agriculture Provided Natural Contexts for Grammar

One advantage of the agricultural context was that it provided situations suitable for many different grammatical structures.

Tenses could be taught through farming routines, ongoing field activities and completed agricultural operations. Passive voice could be connected with processes:

The seeds are sown in the field.

Conditionals could be introduced through agricultural conditions:

If the crop does not receive enough water, it may not grow properly.

Gerunds could be introduced through agricultural activities:

Sowing seeds requires proper preparation.

Reported speech could be introduced through conversations involving farmers, students, teachers or agricultural workers.

The important point is that the context was not merely added to the examples after the grammar had been selected. The agricultural situation itself provided meaningful reasons for using the grammatical structure.

The approach therefore became more than teaching *about* agriculture in an English lesson. It involved using students' disciplinary knowledge as the content through which grammar was taught.

This is particularly relevant to ESP. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) emphasise that language teaching should be connected with learners' purposes and needs. The present classroom approach works at a smaller, classroom level, but follows a similar principle: the disciplinary context can inform language teaching. In this case, agricultural activities provided the situations through which grammar was introduced and practised.

5.5 Increased Interest and Participation

The classroom experience also suggested that students became more interested in the language activities when the content was familiar.

This observation developed gradually rather than from a single lesson. Across the two semesters, the author noticed that students appeared more willing to participate when they were asked to talk or write about agricultural activities they already understood.

The stories gave students something familiar to respond to. They did not have to invent an unfamiliar situation merely to practise a tense.

This does not mean that every student responded in exactly the same way, nor does the present inquiry provide a numerical measure of motivation. The observation is based on classroom experience, assignments, teacher reflections and repeated interaction with different groups of students.

Research on storytelling in language classrooms has also explored its use as a way of making language learning more engaging. Kamaludin, Soo and Bai Rajendran (2015), for example, examined storytelling as a way of teaching grammar to low-intermediate learners. The present study differs in its focus on undergraduate agriculture students and its use of agriculture-specific stories, but the broader classroom principle is similar: meaningful narrative contexts can create opportunities for students to engage more actively with English.

The present study differs in its focus on grammar and in its use of agriculture-specific stories, but the broader classroom principle is similar: meaningful narrative contexts can create opportunities for students to engage more actively with English.

5.6 Performance in Grammar-Related Tasks

The classroom evidence also suggested improvement in students' performance in grammar-related activities.

This observation came from assignments, worksheets, surprise tests and continuing classroom observation. Students were able to move from identifying grammatical forms in teacher-presented stories to producing their own sentences and short paragraphs.

The agricultural context appeared to help students understand what they were expected to express. Once they knew the content, they could focus more directly on the language form.

For example, a student who understood the routine of field work could use the simple present to describe it:

I visit the field in the morning. I check the plants. I observe the crop growth.

The value of such an activity lies in the relationship between the known content and the new language form.

However, the evidence does not justify claiming that the storytelling approach alone caused the improvement. Students were receiving regular English instruction, and their development could have been influenced by several factors.

The more appropriate conclusion is that the contextualised approach appeared to support engagement with grammar and was associated with better performance in the grammar-related tasks observed during the teaching period.

This cautious interpretation is also important because classroom experiences with storytelling may vary across learners and contexts. Kamaludin et al. (2015), for example, examined storytelling as an approach to grammar teaching, but the learners and setting were different from those in the present inquiry. The present study therefore does not attempt to generalise beyond its own classroom experience.

6. Discussion

The central insight emerging from this classroom inquiry is that relatability can be an important starting point for grammar learning.

The students already possessed knowledge about agriculture. They knew what happened in a field, what farmers did, what happened during sowing and harvesting and what took place during practical classes. When this knowledge became the content of the English lesson, students could concentrate on expressing familiar meanings through language.

The approach therefore treated disciplinary knowledge as a resource rather than as something separate from English learning.

Another important feature was the sequence of teaching. The story came first, followed by questions and noticing, and then by grammatical explanation. This allowed students to encounter the form before analysing it.

The approach also shows that contextualisation does not require teachers to abandon explicit grammar teaching. In this classroom, grammar rules were still explained. What changed was the route through which students reached the rules.

The basic sequence was:

Familiar agricultural context → Story → Understanding → Noticing → Grammar explanation → Student production

This sequence brought together meaning and form while still retaining explicit instruction.

The student-production stage was equally important. When students were asked to describe their own field activities or practical classes, they had to adapt the grammatical structure to their own meaning. This provided an opportunity to observe whether they could move beyond recognising the form.

The approach also suggests a practical way of implementing ESP principles in a general English classroom. A course does not necessarily have to become a completely specialised agricultural English course for teachers to make use of agricultural contexts. Even individual grammar lessons can be connected with students' disciplinary experiences.

7. Implications for Teaching

The classroom experience has several practical implications.

First, teachers of agriculture students can use agricultural activities as sources of grammar examples. Fields, crops, farming operations and practical classes can provide meaningful situations for language learning.

Second, stories do not need to be long or complicated. A short story containing several examples of the target grammatical structure can be sufficient.

Third, teachers can experiment with the order of grammar instruction. Rather than beginning immediately with a rule, they can begin with a familiar situation and allow students to encounter the form before explaining it.

Fourth, students should be given opportunities to produce language after the explanation. Asking students to write about their own field or practical experiences can help connect the grammatical structure with personal meaning.

Finally, the approach can potentially be adapted to other disciplines. Engineering students can work with laboratory or machine-related situations; nursing students can work with clinical situations; commerce students can work with business situations. The context changes, but the principle remains the same: learners' existing knowledge can provide a bridge to new language.

8. Limitations

This classroom inquiry has several limitations.

First, the study was conducted in the researcher's own classroom. The teacher was therefore both instructor and observer. The observations are consequently interpretive.

Second, there was no control group or random assignment of students. The study therefore cannot establish that agricultural storytelling was responsible for the observed changes in performance.

Third, although surprise tests were part of the classroom evidence, the study does not present a statistical analysis of test scores. The tests were part of classroom assessment rather than a controlled research instrument.

Fourth, the students belonged to an agriculture programme. Their response to agricultural contexts may not necessarily be the same as that of learners from other disciplines.

Finally, the analysis was based on naturally occurring classroom materials and teacher reflection. Future research could examine the approach more systematically through pre- and post-tests, student interviews, questionnaires, comparison groups and longitudinal analysis of student writing.

These limitations define the scope of the claims made in this paper.

9. Conclusion

This paper described a classroom-based approach to teaching grammar through agricultural stories to undergraduate agriculture students. The approach developed from a practical classroom observation: students appeared to engage more readily with grammar when the examples were connected with situations they already knew.

The procedure was simple. A familiar agricultural situation was presented through a short story. Students first listened to or read the story and understood what was happening. They were then guided to notice and underline the verbs or relevant grammatical forms. The teacher explained the grammatical point, after which students were asked to produce similar sentences or paragraphs based on their own experiences.

The approach began with tenses and was later extended to voice, conditionals, reported speech and gerunds. Across two semesters with different groups of learners, student assignments, worksheets, lesson plans, PowerPoint materials, teacher reflections and surprise tests provided a record of the classroom experience.

Three patterns were particularly noticeable. First, agricultural contexts made grammar more relatable because students already understood the situations being discussed. Second, presenting the story before the grammatical explanation provided a meaningful route from understanding to noticing and then to explicit grammar learning. Third, asking students to write about their own agricultural and academic experiences provided opportunities to move from recognising grammatical forms to using them.

The approach also appeared to generate greater interest in learning English and was associated with improved performance in grammar-related classroom tasks. These observations should not be interpreted as experimental evidence that agricultural storytelling directly causes grammar improvement. Rather, they suggest that familiar disciplinary contexts can provide useful support for grammar teaching.

For agriculture students, English does not always have to be taught through situations unrelated to their academic lives. Their knowledge of agriculture can itself become a teaching resource. A field, a farmer, a crop, a practical class or a harvesting activity can become the setting through which a grammatical structure is understood and practised.

The experience ultimately suggests a simple principle: students may engage more readily with grammar when they already have something meaningful to say through it. For undergraduate agriculture students, agricultural stories can provide that meaningful starting point.

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