

Grammar tap

Josh Kurzweil describes a way of helping students practise and remember key structures.

At the 2018 IATEFL Conference, Jim Scrivener gave a talk entitled 'Learning-Focused Practice Rather than Method' in which he encouraged teachers to think about ways of pushing learning through small changes in practice activities. He reminded us that sometimes teaching is not so much about creating a new methodology but rather experimenting with and fine-tuning existing methods and materials. By reflecting on how students are learning and what they need during lessons, teachers can come up with ideas to support their learning. This article answers Scrivener's call and discusses a classroom technique related to grammar and listening that I have called 'Grammar tap'. It is a simple low-prep way of providing regular intensive practice for students. The hope is that the technique will be useful for others and will stimulate more discussion about how to help students practise in effective ways.

I work at an intensive English programme in the San Francisco Bay Area. Our school has eight-week sessions and most of our students want to eventually go to college in the US. Some years ago, I was teaching our Foundation level class (A1/A2) with a group of eight students from the Middle East, China and Korea. We were doing a unit on 'Describing places' and students had been talking about their rooms and houses. I had introduced the grammar point 'there is/are' and gone over the meaning. In the textbook we were using, there was a typical sort of language box that is often used as a guide that can help students with the form. It looked something like the one in Figure 1. I was trying to think of ways to help them work on remembering the structure and wanted to do a kind

of controlled practice drill. I tried the basic grammar tap exercise and was happy to see how focused the students were and how intensively they were able to practise the form. Over the next few days and weeks, I continued to experiment with the technique, expanding and fine-tuning it.

The technique

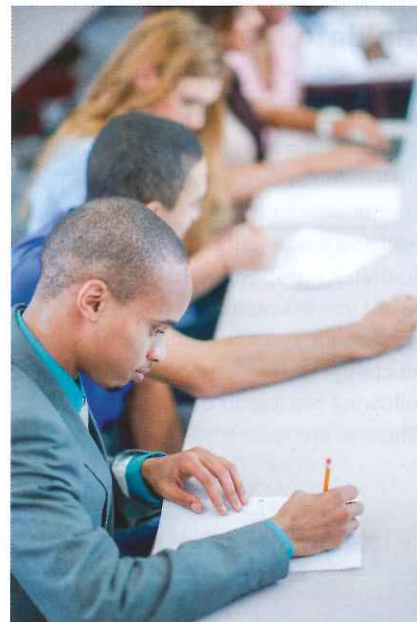
The basic idea is to use traditional grammar tables, which are often found in coursebooks, to practise listening skills and help students remember grammar structures. Essentially, the teacher says a sentence and then the students have to tap out the words that were in the sentence.

The teacher can then say sentences to the class using the words in the table. For example:

- 'There is a clock.'
- 'There are a few chairs.'
- 'Are there any pens?'
- 'There isn't a TV.'

The students listen and tap out the sentence using a pen or their fingers. The tapping can be done individually, with each student having their own paper, or with two students working together on a shared paper, taking turns tapping out the sentences and checking each other. It is important to point out here that the teacher says the whole sentence and then the students point, rather than the teacher saying each word and waiting for students to point. The idea is that students have to 'hold' the sentence or question in their head for a moment in order to point to the correct words in the table.

Later the students do the same activity but use a condensed grammar table



that uses a kind of shorthand for affirmative/negative sentences and questions (see Figure 2). With the condensed table, the students are only given key words and symbols, which makes it a bit more challenging, but the activity is essentially the same. The teacher reads the sentence and the students tap on the symbols and words.

Students can then do the same activity in pairs with one student saying the sentence while the other taps it out. The main difference is that with the condensed grammar tap table, the structure is not provided, which means that the students need to recall it, helping them remember the structures. If students have trouble remembering the structures, they can refer back to the full grammar tables from the previous lesson.

One other way to use the condensed table is for the teacher to tap out the symbols and words on the board and

have students then say the correct sentence/question. For example, the teacher can tap out:

? TV at the school

Students would then say, 'Is there a TV at the school?' The students can also do this reverse 'tap and say' with a partner as a kind of productive practice.

Incorporating 'Grammar tap' into lessons

One of the critical aspects of this technique is where it occurs in the context of the lesson. The main aim of the 'Grammar tap' exercise is to help students work on language form and bottom-up listening skills. To effectively do that, it is important that students have already encountered the structure in a communicative context and worked on clarifying the meaning/usage. The following is a lesson outline based on a 'There is/are' lesson.

Symbols

- WC = whole class,
- PW = pairwork,
- Solo = individual work,
- T = teacher
- Ss = student(s)

Day 1

1. WC. T says that today we'll be talking about our rooms. Talks about his/her room at home. Asks Ss to think about their room.
2. PW. Ss talk about what they like and dislike about their rooms.
3. WC. T elicits ideas and then elicits/tells the 'there is/are' structure using examples from the classroom. Puts the structure on the board and goes over meaning/use.
4. WC. T taps and Ss say (choral repetition).
5. WC. T hands out language table (one per pair). Ss listen/tap.

6. PW. Ss do listen/tap with each other.
7. WC. T highlights connected speech patterns, sentence stress, and intonation.
8. WC. T does listen/tap with students in pairs, speeding up and using connected speech patterns.
9. PW. Ss do listen/tap with each other, trying to use connected speech and proper stress/intonation.
10. WC. Ss say/T taps (offer correction) or T taps and Ss say.

Day 2

1. WC. Ss do listen/tap.
2. PW. Ss talk about what they like and dislike about their rooms (with a different partner).
3. WC. T introduces 'Grammar tap'. T taps and Ss repeat.
4. WC. T does listen/tap with the new 'Grammar tap' table.
5. PW. Ss do listen/tap together.
6. WC. T models tap/say, i.e. T taps out sentence and Ss say it.
7. PW. Ss do tap/say together.
8. PW. Ss talk about what they like and dislike about their rooms (with a different partner).

Days 3, 4, etc.

Recycle both 'Grammar tap' and have students talk with each other about their rooms or other places. The teacher offers feedback, vocabulary, etc. as needed.

Comments on the sequence

A key feature of the 'Grammar tap' activities is that they are short bursts of intensive practice which can be recycled throughout the week, thus taking advantage of spaced repetition, which helps students remember the target language and builds confidence. Another important point is that the focus on form comes after a communicative activity and focus on meaning. In this way, students are more likely to be motivated to practise the form because

Figure 1 Sample grammar table

There	<u>is</u>	a TV. a clock.
	<u>are</u>	two maps. a few chairs. many books. some pens.
There	<u>isn't</u>	a TV. a clock.
	<u>aren't</u>	any maps. any chairs. any books.
<u>Is there a</u>		a TV? a clock?
<u>Are there any</u>		chairs? books? pens?

Figure 2 Condensed grammar tap table

+	sofa	at the school in the room
-	TV	
-	chairs	
?	books	

they can see how they might use it in their own conversations. As mentioned in the introduction, the 'Grammar tap' activities are not a particularly new innovation or methodology of teaching. They do, however, address challenges that students often face when learning grammar and teachers have when trying to support student learning.

Working on bottom-up listening skills

In recent years, teachers and researchers (Field, 2002; Caldwell, 2018) have discussed the problem of neglecting bottom-up listening skills. Students often have great difficulty with lexical segmentation because of connected speech. By regularly including listening drills like 'Grammar tap' activities, students can systematically learn and practise many different connected speech patterns. Moreover, bottom-up listening skills have a regular place in the curriculum rather than being the occasional focus in some listening exercises.

Focus on form

Students often have trouble remembering and internalising the grammar structures, particularly negatives and question forms. 'Grammar tap' activities address this need through repetition and controlled practice drills. They are relatively short and intensive so that they do not take up lots of class time. Another benefit of 'Grammar tap' exercises is that they do not require extensive materials development or preparation from the teacher. Once the tables are made, they can be reused and recycled. Many controlled practice activities involve worksheet exercises, and when students have completed them, they can't be used again.

Using spaced repetition

It is no secret that students need a great deal of practice, but research shows that spaced practice is much more effective than massed practice (Deans for Impact, 2015). In other words, students learn more effectively when they do shorter distributed practice rather than

cramping it all into one longer session. Activities like the 'Grammar tap' can be easily spread out over several days, which can help students remember and internalise the structures. In addition, 'Grammar tap' can be interleaved with more communicative activities like talking about one's room. In other words, short bursts of intensive practice can complement other types of activities that students are doing and help them internalise the structures and sounds.

Using routines

'Grammar tap' activities are a kind of core routine that teachers can use. In other words, teachers can have students do the same basic activities but with different language structures. Teachers can easily adapt the activities to various tenses and even to more advanced structures, such as conditionals or modal/verb combinations. The advantage of routines is that once students learn them, they can more quickly focus on the content being taught and do not need to expend time or energy learning how the new activity works. Of course, there is always a balance between novelty, routine and boredom, but the judicious use of routines such as 'Grammar tap' can help students do short regular practice activities.

Conclusion

Scrivener's exhortation to find ways to help students practise and focus on their learning is at the heart of this article. Experimenting with activities like 'Grammar tap' is one way in which teachers can answer this call. By reflecting on students' learning and needs, teachers can tinker with practice activities in order to give them the push that Scrivener mentioned in his talk. Students often need a lot of practice to remember grammar structures, and they often have trouble with connected speech at normal speeds. By doing brief bursts of focused practice in which they listen and tap out the utterances on a grammar table, they can work on both areas in an engaging way. Finally, I would like to thank Jason Anderson who developed

a similar technique called 'Drill tables' (Anderson, 2017). My conversations with Jason were invigorating and helped me outline and revise this article. This type of experimenting with and sharing of techniques has entered a new era with social media, blogs and teacher-made videos. I benefited greatly from our conversations about the nitty gritty of teaching and encourage others to do the same.

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