

Grammar is Personal

by Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims, sponsored by Prentice Hall

It was 3.30 in the afternoon on the first day of the conference. People had been travelling and then listening to the opening speeches and to a plenary lecture. It was time for them to be active, to do things, to express themselves. I needed an exercise to help them into this mood. This is what I asked them to do:

"Please shut your eyes and imagine a piece of music you like. Enjoy it. Listen to the pauses, as well as the sound. Hear different instruments/voices coming in. Now stand up, and, still with your eyes shut, conduct the musicians, holding the baton in your hand".

The lecture theatre was miraculously full of conductors! I learnt this exercise from an Austrian Pilgrims colleague, Herbert Puchta.

The conducting was followed by people telling each other about their musical experiences. Now we were perhaps ready to work on grammar.

The Present Perfect

I asked people to bring one of their favourite places to mind and then to make a simple drawing of a place on the way there. If your favourite place was a church, you could draw the road leading to it. Participants were then given these sentence stems to complete:

- I've known this place for _____.
- I've been there _____ times.
- I've liked this place since _____.
- I've often _____ there.
- I've never _____ there.
- I've always liked this place, but _____.
- I've _____.

People worked in pairs, sharing their places and sentences.

Grammar Translation!

I dictated English sentences like those given below and asked people to take them down in Italian:

- She made her dress.
- Visiting relatives can be a bore.
- She watched the man without any clothes on.

In the paired work that followed the group discussed the grammatical and syntactic ambiguity of these sentences. How many translations into English can you find for:

Vestiti per piacere?

Relatives

The participants worked in pairs.

Person A had 90 seconds to orally produce sentences starting with the phrase: "I am a person who _____". Person B simply listened attentively without taking notes. Person B then role-played Person A and tried to reproduce all the sentences s/he had heard. **B** spoke as **A**, using the first person.

In one sense this exercise is a massive Skinnerian drill - at the same time it can be a powerful exchange of real information.

If the ethos you sense being created by the exercises outlined above interests you, you might have a look at **Grammar in Action Again**, Frank and Rinvoluceri, Prentice Hall, 1991 and **The Confidence Book**, Davies and Rinvoluceri, Longman, 1990.

A note-taking exercise in Teacher-Training

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The session opened with a description of how hard it is to appreciate what the other person feels and perceives in an interaction. An Algerian grabs an Englishman and plants four resounding kisses on the Anglo-saxon's cheeks. The Englishman dies four homosexual deaths. The Algerian is sure he is showing friendship and trust.

I then introduced a dialogue-writing exercise that went fiercely wrong. The instructions were not clear and fifty out of a hundred people were completely at sea. Frustration crackled round the room.

We were sitting in circles of ten and I suggested each circle conduct a post-mortem on the exercise. One extrovert person in each circle was asked to volunteer to take detailed notes on the group discussion. The scribes were not allowed to speak in the discussion. They were asked to take notes as each speaker, using first person.

After ten minutes of furious talk and fast note-taking the secretaries were asked to report what each person had said and to report in the first person. So the note-taker, Stefano, might say: "I am Giovanna and I said". The person reported on had the right to reject, correct or accept the report.

In the final phase of the workshop the extrovert secretaries gave their feedback. For such folk submitting to the world of the other can be hard and it can be frustrating for them not to be expressing their own thoughts. For some people reporting back orally as different members of the group, using the first person pronoun, was difficult. And yet seeing the other's point of view in her way is a central skill both for a trainer and a teacher.

The note-taking exercise can really help trainees who find paying attention to the other's world hard. It can have an eye-opening effect for the person concerned and helps him to appear in a very different light to other members of the group. Like many seminal ideas this is a very simple one. I learnt it from Sue Leather who once used it to muzzle me at a teacher's meeting!