

## The Use of Terminology in Grammar Teaching, Part I

by Betty Azar

Does it help a student to be able to identify subjects and verbs? To know what a clause is? To have names for verb forms, such as infinitive or modal auxiliary?

I believe that grammar terminology and grammatical analysis in the ESL/EFL classroom are only means to an end, never ends in themselves. Often the teacher finds it useful to have temporary labels (simplified grammar terminology) in order to answer students' many questions and show students how English works.

Terminology (e.g., present perfect or noun clause) can be forgotten as soon as students leave the English class with no ill effects. These terms are just temporary teaching tools. Once students leave a program of language instruction, it seems to me they need only enough terminology to help them use a dictionary or reference book, roughly the same grammar terminology an educated native speaker of English benefits from knowing: noun, verb, adjective, sentence, comma, etc. The deeper understandings of structural patterns that help with reading comprehension and the expression of complex ideas will remain — with or without students being able to recall grammar terminology. The terminology is not what is important; what IS important is understanding the structures and the way that form conveys meaning.

The use of simplified grammar terminology in the ESL/EFL classroom is just a tool, a way of helping students understand patterns in the language. In my experience, adult students “get” patterns of form and meaning from understanding examples — how they work, what’s happening, how ideas are put together and interrelated. Explanations, which can come in many forms, are used only as needed. Our goal is for the students to understand — deductively, inductively, or any mixture of the two — examples of usage, to “see” how they work structurally, and eventually come to larger understandings, i.e., concepts, of how English works. Leveraging our adult students’ cognitive skills can be beneficial as they develop their interlanguage, but it’s just one part of a well-balanced classroom. At any rate, mastery of terminology or skill at parsing is never what we’re after.

*What are your views on the use of terminology in ELT? Join us on [Teacher Talk](#).*