

Practising text-based grammar teaching: *Grammar-to-go*

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Abstract

This paper examines opportunities for enhancing English grammar instruction within the context of teacher education in Norway, while briefly acknowledging the challenges associated with traditional approaches. Despite the acknowledged importance of grammar instruction in language learning, student teachers often lack opportunities to teach grammar during their practicums, partly because practice teachers may avoid the subject, finding it challenging to teach. To address these issues, the paper introduces the Grammar-to-go approach, developed by Hæge Hestnes (2011), which integrates grammar instruction into functional, text-based activities. This inductive method encourages meaningful engagement with language through creative and collaborative tasks, such as reading, writing, and vocabulary exploration, before focusing on specific grammar topics.

The paper highlights the successful implementation of Grammar-to-go by in-service teachers, who report increased pupil engagement, improved learning outcomes, and renewed enthusiasm for teaching grammar. Examples of lesson plans illustrate how this approach fosters a deeper understanding of grammar while making learning enjoyable. Reflections from teachers reveal a transformative shift towards more implicit and integrated grammar teaching, enhancing both teacher confidence and pupil motivation. The paper concludes by advocating for the inclusion of the Grammar-to-go approach in teacher education programmes to inspire more effective and engaging grammar instruction.

Keywords: Text-based grammar teaching, Grammar-to-go, teacher education

1. Introduction

As a teacher educator of English language and didactics in Norway, I have visited many classrooms during my student teachers' practicums, but rarely have I seen any of them teaching English grammar. A recent study reveals that student teachers seldom get the opportunity to teach grammar during practicum (Holmbukt, 2024). According to the student teachers, one reason for this is that practice teachers might avoid grammar because they find it challenging to teach. Additionally, student teachers report negative experiences with grammar in their own previous schooling, often associating it with boredom and failure, partly due to traditional workbook approaches to grammar instruction (Holmbukt, 2024).

These challenges and negative perceptions highlight the ongoing debates on grammar instruction in language education. Discussions often focus on the significance of teaching grammar and the

various methods employed (Harmer, 2015; Pinter, 2017). Despite differing opinions on the role of grammar in language learning – such as debates over the effectiveness of implicit versus explicit language teaching – there is some consensus that grammar instruction is essential in language pedagogy. For instance, it is recognised that drawing learners’ attention to specific language forms can significantly enhance the learning process (Ellis, 2006; Harmer, 2015; Pinter, 2017).

In preparing student teachers of English to teach grammar, I believe it is important to introduce them to methods that may bring enthusiasm back into the teaching of this field. One such method is the *Grammar-to-go* approach. This approach has been an integral part of in-service teachers’ continuing education courses for English for several years. It has been positively received by the in-service teachers, who have reported favourable experiences in putting the method into practice.

Building on this, Section 2 of this paper introduces the original Grammar-to-go approach, developed by Hæge Hestnes, along with my adaptation of the method to suit the contexts of my teaching. Section 3 explores experiences and reflections on Grammar-to-go teaching schemes, while Section 4 provides concluding remarks.

2. Grammar-to-go

Hæge Hestnes, a Norwegian teacher educator of English, proposes the method Grammar-to-go as an approach to teaching English grammar (Hestnes, 2011). This method corresponds with a functional, text-based approach, “developed to build bridges between the actual language in use and the underlying systems, grammar that accompanies and helps you in your use of the language” (Hestnes, 2011, p. 19). The method is inductive, starting by presenting a text – in her example, the short poem *Today I saw a little worm* by Spike Milligan:

*Today I saw a little worm
Wriggling on his belly
Perhaps he’d like to come inside
And see what’s on the telly.*
(Spike Milligan, n.d.)

Hestnes suggests a range of tasks based on the poem – not only grammar (in this case, adverbials of time) but also reading, speaking, writing, rhyming, and other creative tasks. This variety of tasks encourages meaningful interaction with both the text and peers, aligning with the communicative approach, which emphasises language learning through active engagement and collaboration. The class can read the poem aloud with the teacher and write it down in their workbooks to practice writing and spelling. They can focus on vocabulary, for example, the word ‘wriggling’ and the fact that the ‘w’ is silent. The pupils can also be encouraged to read the poem in chorus using their range of voice, from whispering to loud voices to exercise reading and pronunciation. Hestnes further suggests that the pupils illustrate the poem by drawing or by making a presentation of the text, digitally or by hand. In addition, the teacher can introduce the pupils to rhythm and rhyme, and they can use this knowledge to make their own poems. After these activities, Hestnes suggests that the teacher focuses on the grammar item, adverbial of time. By translating the poem into Norwegian, they will note that the word order is different than in the English version, and a discussion on word order and the different functions of word order may follow. Raising awareness of adverbials of time will encourage the pupils to find other adverbials of the same category. This facilitates the pupils’ further understanding of how adverbials contribute to meaning in writing or speech, aligning with a functional approach to language learning.

As a teacher educator, I have been inspired by Hestnes’s Grammar-to-go method. In the following, I present a Grammar-to-go assignment which is part of the course readings of in-service teachers’ continuing education for English, Language Learning and Communication, 15 study points, which I

have taught for more than 10 years at The Arctic University of Norway, UiT. The Grammar-to-go assignment is an established component also of ordinary student teachers' 15 study point courses in English language and didactics. The assignment is about trying out a Grammar-to-go lesson plan in an English classroom and making a multimodal report about it. This task has been very successful with in-service teachers in particular because they have had the opportunity to test their Grammar-to-go plans with their pupils. The student teachers to a much lesser degree have had the same opportunity to experience their lesson plans in real life. The following is thus based on reports and feedback shared by in-service teachers over the years.

2.1 Multimodal text

The assignment has been formulated as follows:

You have been introduced to the Grammar-to-go approach, and you have chosen a short text, which you will use in your teaching scheme based on the Grammar-to-go approach. You will also plan and carry out your Grammar-to-go teaching scheme in the near future.

You have been asked to include 3-4 aspects in your scheme as listed below, including a grammar topic. In some cases, it might be more meaningful to focus on vocabulary (if your pupils are young learners).

- *Oral and written work*
- *Vocabulary and etymology (the study of the origin of words) <http://www.etymonline.com>*
- *Poetic analysis*
- *Other creative work (e.g. drawing)*
- *Specific grammar topics*
- *Assessment*
- *Reflection on learning*

When you have tried out the scheme with pupils, you are expected to report on your teaching and how it went in the form of a multimodal text. The multimodal text is to be submitted in Canvas. Your report should include:

- *Level/age and the number of pupils in a class*
- *Description of the teaching scheme including the text chosen*
- *Your evaluation/reflection of the scheme (e.g., your experience with it, any changes to make for improvement, pupils' involvement/response, etc.)*
- *Reflections on your learning*

3. Experiences and reflections

Over the years, I have seen a range of successful examples of Grammar-to-go teaching schemes, based on poems, song lyrics or other short texts. There has been a general enthusiasm among the in-service teachers about this teaching approach, and some of them have reported back that the concept has spread to other subjects in their schools, not only English. The poem below, *The Little Plant*, by Kate Brown, is an example of texts used by in-service teachers for lesson plans on Grammar-to-go.

The Little Plant

*In the heart of a seed,
Buried deep, so deep,*

*A dear little plant
Lay fast asleep.
"Wake!" said the sunshine,
"And creep to the light."
"Wake!" said the voice
Of the raindrops bright.
The little plant heard,
And it rose to see
What the wonderful
Outside world might be.
(Discover Poetry, 2025)*

To illustrate how the poem can be used in a Grammar-to-go assignment, the following gives an outline of one in-service teacher's work with a Year 6 class:

In the first session, the teacher began by reading the poem aloud, with pupils repeating each sentence/line. This method proved effective for some pupils in learning new vocabulary, such as "seed", "buried", and "creep". The class discussed the poem's meaning and explored its underlying themes, encouraging pupils to share their interpretations. As they noted the rhymes and read the poem aloud multiple times, their fluency and expression improved, bringing the poem to life. To further engage with the text, the pupils created drawings to display on the wall.

In the subsequent sessions, the focus shifted to working on grammatical elements within the poem. The pupils and their teacher explored some of the grammar elements through collaboration and dialogue. They began by sorting verbs into different forms, focusing on past and present tenses, and clearly identifying each verb in its respective form for both tenses. As part of this process, they also distinguished between regular and irregular verbs. Similarly, the class examined adjectives in the poem, comparing regular and irregular forms and their usage. The lesson further addressed the use of articles, highlighting differences between English and Norwegian, such as "the plant" versus "planten". Through these activities, along with the previous drawing exercise, where the pupils visualised elements of the poem, the teacher facilitated a deeper understanding of both the language and the poem. The drawing task invited the pupils to connect more deeply with the poem and thus enhance their understanding.

The teacher's reflections on their work indicated renewed motivation through this method. Engaging with grammar via selected texts became a rewarding experience. The teacher spent additional time in preparation for the Grammar-to-go lesson, however, this was done with enthusiasm. The extra effort elicited positive reactions from the pupils, leading to increased oral participation in the classroom. Moreover, test results revealed enhancements in both oral and written English (cf. Hestnes, 2011). By incorporating this method, the teacher has enhanced their own skills and as reported, has transformed English classes into more dynamic and engaging sessions, making grammar an integral part of each lesson.

The experiences and reflections reported by this teacher mirror other in-service teachers' opinions and reflections. According to Holmbukt and Mellegård's recent study (2025), in-service teachers in continuing education courses find the concept of text-based, contextual grammar teaching interesting and professionally educative. They are introduced to and learn about the Grammar-to-go method, and since the assignment includes trials of their lesson plans, they also experience teaching grammar in this new way to their pupils. This experience often makes them rethink and evaluate their practice of teaching grammar (Holmbukt and Mellegård, 2025). The Grammar-to-go approach increases their awareness of grammar instruction and indicates that transitioning to a context-driven, inductive method of teaching grammar generally boosts both pupil engagement and the teachers' motivation to teach grammar (Holmbukt and Mellegård, 2025). According to two in-

service teachers, gaining new insights into grammar instruction through the Grammar-to-go method resulted in significant changes in teaching practices and awareness (Holmbukt and Mellegård, 2025):

I forhold til grammatikk så underviser jeg jo mye mer implisitt enn før, og nå så baker jeg det mer inn i arbeidet med temaer. Så det er en veldig tydelig endring. Jeg merker at de [elevene] synes det er litt gøy også. De elsker timene mine (Lærer 1).

I now teach grammar a lot more implicitly, and I integrate it more into thematic work. This is a very significant change for me. I notice that the pupils think it is more fun as well. They love my English classes (Teacher 1, my translation).

Den største endringen jeg merket selv var at jeg plutselig syntes det var fryktelig gøy å undervise grammatikk, egentlig. Og at jeg på en måte hadde vært sånn litt redd for det tidligere, fordi jeg lurte på hva som var riktig å gjøre. Jeg ble veldig bevisst på hva jeg kunne, og hva som var viktig for elevene å lære, hvor du starter, og hva de trengte for å komme videre. Det ble lettere for meg å kjenne igjen litt hvor elevene var nivåmessig, og hva de trengte å lære videre for å komme videre i språkutviklinga si. Undervisninga mi er blitt mer implisitt, og jeg er mye mer bevisst på den (Lærer 2).

The biggest change in my teaching practice was that all of a sudden, I actually found it really enjoyable to teach grammar. In a way, I had been a little scared of it; I felt unsure about what was right to do. I became acutely conscious of my own knowledge and what is important for the pupils to learn, where to start and how to proceed. It became easier for me to recognise the pupils' language levels and what they need to learn to progress in their language development. My grammar teaching is now more implicit, and I am a lot more conscious of it (Teacher 2, my translation).

These reflections from Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 highlight a transformative shift in their approach to teaching grammar, emphasising a move towards more implicit and integrated methods. This aligns with Hestnes (2011), who views grammar as “an inherent part of the language they [the pupils] are learning, and not as something apart from that language” (p. 31). Such a change not only enriches the learning experience for pupils but also boosts the teachers’ confidence and motivation to teach English grammar.

4. Conclusive remarks

Based on feedback from in-service teachers, the Grammar-to-go approach represents an advancement in the teaching of English grammar. This engaging and context-driven method breathes new life into grammar instruction and appears to benefit both teachers and pupils alike. Integrating grammar into text-based activities encourages more active pupil participation compared to traditional workbook-based grammar instruction, while also enhancing learning outcomes. Given its success, it is highly recommended that student teachers are provided with opportunities to familiarise themselves with the method and to adopt it in their teaching practice in the future. It is the responsibility of teacher educators and practice teachers to facilitate this, both through university courses and practicum experiences. This innovative and creative method may inspire and pave the way for more effective and enjoyable grammar teaching practices in the future.

Endnotes

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