

A retrospective study on designing some adapted activities to teach grammar to the first-year students at Hanoi University of Industry

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*It can be said that page-by-page teaching, even when the coursebook is worldwide recognized, tends to turn language lessons boring, stressful, and burdensome to both teachers and learners because it is unlikely that all activities in any textbook are relevant and appealing to learners. Teachers, therefore, in order to motivate students, meet their needs, and better fulfill the objectives of each lesson, should make textbooks subjective to adaptation. They can combine activities, omit some activities or redesign some activities, etc. While teaching the book *New Headway Elementary* by Liz and John Soaz (a popular integrated textbook in various universities, colleges, and language centres in Vietnam) to the 1st-year students at Hanoi University of Industry, I tried to bring some adapted activities which specially focus on grammar presentation and practice for an academic term. At the end of this period of time, in a retrospective study, my students' comments of the strategies carried out during the term are taken into considerations.*

Introduction

English, an international language which not only enables people worldwide communicate more easily but also serves as a culture bridge among countries, has drawn increasing attention in Vietnam in recent decades. It is widely believed that to be a so-called “global citizen” with more and better job opportunities, one should know English. In correspondence to this tendency, at almost all of schools, colleges and universities in Vietnam, English has become a compulsory subject. Hanoi University of Industry (HaUI), where I have been working for more than 10 years, is not an exception.

With nearly 14 years of experience in teaching English at this university, I find that the teaching and learning of the subject have not been as effective as expected. Very few students at HaUI have good command of English and they often have poor background knowledge of English grammar. English lessons are likely to be boring and burdensome to both teachers and learners. The main reason for this, perhaps, should be blamed for the teachers and management board. In order to keep to the syllabus and to save “energy”, most of the teachers of English at my university who have to work as “teaching machines” (about 30-35 periods a week), tend to be much dependent on the suggestions of the textbook and prefer the use of grammar exercises to reinforce students' grammar acquisition instead of trying something new and maybe more effective but time-consuming to design. As a consequence, students, despite their profound awareness of the crucial role of the language, do not feel motivated or feel like learning it. Much worse, many of them find English boring, difficult, are afraid of it and even find learning it a nightmare. And most all of them need retraining English in order to pass job interviews. This matter of fact has urged me to bring to my students some adapted activities occasionally to teach grammar. And it has been observed that any adapted activities are pretty appealing, impressive and motivating to students.

In this paper, I first would like to review the literature of textbook adaptation and teaching grammar. I will then include some samples of adaptation on teachers' presentation and students' practice of three grammar points (prepositions of place, superlatives, and infinitive of purpose) based on the textbook *New Headway – elementary* by Liz and John Soazs. Finally, students' retrospective comments on the adapted activities are put into considerations.

Adaptation

What is adaptation?

Definitions of textbook adaptation vary among different scholars.

Madsen and Bowen (1978: ix) considered adaptation the action of employing “one or more of a number of techniques: supplementing, expanding, personalizing, simplifying, modernizing, localizing, or modifying cultural/situational content”.

According to Tomlinson (1998b), adaptation is referred to reduction, addition, omission, modification and supplementation.

Ellis, M (1986: 47) defined adaptation as the process of “retaining, rejecting, re-ordering and modification”.

Why to adapt?

In reality, a textbook can almost never be an supremely effective tool for teachers to follow without any adaptation because of its intrinsic deficiencies such as out-of-datedness, lack of authenticity or lack of variety. Thus, as for Madsen and Bowen (1978), the purpose of adaptation is to compensate for those deficiencies.

Another purpose of adaptation, as explained by Mc Donough and Shaw (1993: 85) is “to maximize the appropriacy of teaching materials in context, by changing some of the internal characteristics of a coursebook to better suit our particular circumstances.”

A very common technique of “maximizing the appropriacy of teaching materials” is modifying them in such a way that they seem more relevant to learners’ interests and needs, and this is important to all teachers of English because it can activate learners and stimulate their motivation, and increased motivation, in turn, is likely to create a more conducive classroom atmosphere.

How to adapt?

It can be drawn from definitions of adaptation that most of the scholars’ viewpoints, by and large, agree on some kind of change and addition when mentioning “adaptation”.

In terms of addition, it can be found in the form of extemporisation which might mean the substitution in a course book example of the familiar for the unfamiliar; the paraphrase of a course book instruction that is unclear or reference to previously taught items when teaching new items. Adaptation as addition can also be exploitation which is the use of ready-made text, activity ... to serve additional purpose. For example, a text accompanied by a photograph may intend to develop comprehension skills and linguistic resources but a teacher might use it for some additional purposes. The picture might be used to predict the content or brainstorm related vocabulary; the topic and language of the text might provide the basis for discussion of students’ own experiences. Extension, the third form of addition, refers to the provision by the teachers of additional materials in order to improve understanding or learning such as further examples of a rule or further items in an exercise.

Mc Donough and Shaw suggest change as restructuring which might be an attempt to make the order more logical. A clear examples of this would include re-sequencing activities such as cutting up a text and asking students to put it together again, presenting a picture story in jumbled order or creating a group work task in which each learner must describe their picture so that the group can determine the original sequence.

When teachers are contemplating adaptation, they should consider some following principles suggested by Mc Grath (2002)

- Localisation: replacing a Western setting or context with local or regional ones that let students focus more on language objectives, rather than on the culture.

- Personalisation: devising examples and activities that relate directly to students and reflect their academic or professional interests and let them use their experience and learned knowledge
- Modernisation: changing any instances of language usage that seem out of date (Madsen and Bowen 1978); this might equally well apply to changes in the time-bound content of material.
- Simplification: making things easier for or more accessible to the learner: e.g. the editing of texts to reduce linguistic difficulty or breakdown complex tasks into more manageable pieces.

Grammar

Definition of grammar

There have existed various ways of defining grammar - a very common and familiar term in language teaching and learning.

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (1995:517), grammar is "the rules in a language for changing the form of words and combining them into sentences".

Similarly, Jeremy Harmer (1988:1) defines grammar as "the way in which words change themselves and group together to make sentences. The grammar of a language is what happens to words when they become plural or negative, or what word order is used when we make questions or join two clauses to make one sentence.". It is seen that Jeremy Harmer shares the same point of view with the authors of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary.

From Penny Ur's view (1996:87), "Grammar is a set of rules that define how words (or parts of words) are combined or changed to form acceptable units of meaning within a language".

The status of grammar in English language teaching (ELT)

The position of grammar teaching in ELT is still controversial. Some people refute the place of grammar teaching for the reason that the study of grammar is neither necessary nor sufficient for learning to use a language.

Meanwhile, some affirm the importance of grammar for effective language learning. "The evidence seems to show beyond doubt that though it is by communicative use in real "speech acts" that the new language "sticks" in the learner's mind, insight into pattern is an equal partner with communicative use in what language teachers now see as dual process of acquisition/learning. Grammar, approached as a voyage of discovery into the patterns of language rather than the learning of prescriptive rules, is no longer a bogey word." (Eric Hawkins, 1984:150-1).

In fact, grammar is one of the key components of a language. Thus, one cannot master a language without the knowledge of its grammar. Partly thanks to grammar, language can function as a means of communication, especially in written language. A person cannot write well if he lacks the knowledge of grammar. In speaking, though sometimes grammatical mistakes are acceptable, grammar makes one's speech better and more attractive, especially in formal circumstances. Learners cannot use words unless they know how to put these words together. As for Perk (1988), grammar exists to enable us to "mean" and without grammar, it is impossible to communicate beyond a very rudimentary level. For this very reason, the teaching of grammar is quite important in ELT.

What needs to be taught?

“What needs to be taught” is also a controversy surrounding the teaching of grammar. Some people are concerned foremost about the explanation of grammatical rules with all of the grammatical terminology necessary for this task. For others, the teaching of grammar means the practice of common grammatical patterns. For still others, providing learners with opportunity in a variety of realistic situations in order to learn to communicate effectively is put on top priority.

Penny Ur (1988:6) affirms “Some teachers, and/or the coursebooks they use, have a tendency to concentrate on some of these and neglect others: they may spend a lot of time on getting the forms right and neglect to give practice in using the structure to convey meanings, or they may focus on written exercises and fail to cover the oral aspects satisfactorily. It is important to keep a balance, taking into account, of course, the needs of the particular class being taught.”

Also, Adrian Doff (1988:33) suggests that when presenting a structure, it is vital to:

- “show what the structure means and how it is used, by giving examples.
- show clearly how the structure is formed, so that students can use it to make sentences of their own”

Obviously, according to Adrian Doff, teachers should teach the meaning, the form of the grammatical structure as well as how it is used.

Stages in teaching grammar

According to Celce-Murcia, M (1988), a grammar lesson has 4 stages namely presentation, focused practice, communicative practice and teacher feedback and correction in order. In the first stage, the grammar structure is introduced. The purpose of the second one is “to allow the learner to gain control of the form without the added pressure and distraction of trying to use the form for communication.” (1988:27). In phase 3, the learner practices the structure communicatively. Teacher feedback and correction, although regarded as a final stage, is carried out throughout the lesson and the strategies for this step requires flexibility in correspondence to the phase of the lesson.

Adaptation on grammar presentation and practice based on New Headway – elementary by Liz and John Soars

Adaptation 1: Prepositions of place (unit 5 – page 37)

Overall, activities for preposition presentation and practice in the textbook (page 37) are pretty effective, interesting and suitable with students. First, a picture of a living room is given to present prepositions of place. Then 2 activities are suggested for students to practise this grammar point. The first one requires students to work in pairs and complete the given pictures by asking and answering where the things go. In the second one, they are asked to find mistakes in the given picture while listening to someone describing it.

For presentation, to reinforce their memory of preposition of place, I gave them more illustrations by my hands.

Regarding to practice, to develop students’ creativity, to exploit their in-born talents, and to make it more appealing to students with a bit higher level in the class, one more activity basing on practice 1 and 2 in the textbook was added. In this adapted activity, students worked in groups, thought of their ideal office in the future, and drew it. Then a member of each group who was chosen at random stood up, described their ideal office by using structures “there be” and preposition of places. The other groups drew while their friends were describing. There were prizes for the most beautiful

picture, the picture which is the most similar to the descriptions, and the picture which is fastest drawn to bring more fun to class.

Adaptation 2: Superlative adjectives (Unit 10 - page 76-77).

Lead-in and presentation

According to the student's book (page 76), superlative adjectives will be presented by making a comparison of three hotels with information on their age, number of rooms, price of renting a room per night, time amount it takes guests to the airport. I found that because the three hotels are not familiar with my students, so the given context cannot call for their interest. In addition, the textbook suggests 11 statements for students to decide whether they are true or false in order to introduce superlative adjectives. This activity seems complex as students have to read and analyze two much meanwhile they haven't acquired the form and use of common superlative adjectives. The presenting activity, as a result, was replaced with a more realistic and localised one as follows:

- Ask students to listen to 3 pieces of music about 3 big cities in Vietnam (Ha Noi, Hue and Ho Chi Minh city) and guess the places.
- Give students some information about area, population and the number of tourists to these cities in 2011.
- Encourage students to use comparative adjectives to compare these cities (eg. Hanoi is larger than Hue and Ho Chi Minh city).
- Provide another way of comparison by using superlative (eg: Hanoi is the largest of the 3 cities).
- Elicited the use, spelling rules and forms of superlative adjectives.

Practice

The textbook offers three exercises for students to practise superlative adjectives.

Practice 1: The first practice in the textbook, which requires learners to complete the conversations using the superlative form of the adjectives basing on an example, is quite suitable regarding students' level and the purpose of language practice. However, it was substituted by the following exercises which not only requires them to form superlative adjectives but also were supposed to draw their attention and interest thanks to familiar social knowledge.

Exercise 1: Vietnam's records – Form the superlatives of the given adjectives (individual work)

1. Ho Chi Minh trail is (long) and (high) road in Vietnam.
2. (Hot) mineral water stream is in Quang Binh, (narrow) province in Vietnam.
3. Vinpearl Nha Trang is (good) resort in Vietnam in 2011.
4. Ninh Thuan is (dry) area in Vietnam.
5. My Khe and Bai Dai are (beautiful) beaches in Vietnam.
6. Bai Dinh is (large) pagoda in Vietnam.
7. Ca Mau is (far) province from the capital of Vietnam.
8. Nam Cao was one of (popular) writers in Vietnam last century.

Exercise 2: World's records - Use superlative to make a sentence about each picture (whole class).

 <p>Cheetah – 120km/h</p>	 <p>The Pacific – 165 million square km</p>
 <p>Blue whale – 190,000kg</p>	 <p>\$1.7 million</p>
 <p>The Vatican – 0,2 square mile</p>	 <p>The sahara – 66°C</p>
 <p>The Everest</p>	 <p>La Plata – 48-220km wide</p>
 <p>The Nile – 4160miles</p>	 <p>China 1,347,350,000 persons</p>



Practice 2: According to the textbook, this practice asks students to describe their classmates using the suggested adjectives (tall, small, old, young, intelligent, funny). This one is also interesting, yet to give students more chance of to practise the target language communicatively, it was modified to change into a role-play activity as follow:

In pairs, make a conversation based on the given cards as the following example.

Student A Tall	Student B Rich
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A: Do you think Thanh is the tallest in our class?

B: No, it's Hoang. His nickname is Truong. Who do you think is the richest in our class?

A: I think it's Minh. She has a Nokia 8800. How about you?

B: So do I.

Student A1 Beautiful	Student B1 Handsome
Student A2 Old	Student B2 Young
Student A3 Hard-working	Student B3 Lazy
Student A4 Pretty	Student B4 Intelligent
Student A5 Friendly	Student B5 Funny
Student A6 Strong	Student B6 Heavy

This practice is named “our class’s records”.

Practice 3: The third activity which asks each student to write the name of their favourite film star, read it to the class and compare the people to see which film star is the most popular in the class was also replaced by another one which was expected to bring more fun to class, to stimulate student’s creativity, and to enable students to speak out using the target language as well as grammar knowledge they have learnt such as can, comparative and have got. In the adapted activity, first, the whole class was divided into 4 groups, 3 of which named Son Tinh, Thuy Tinh, Vu Tinh discussed their own strong points. The other group called “My Nuong” listed their criteria about their ideal partner. Then as the name of the practice, “the best partner”, students were required to act as in the legend “Son Tinh, Thuy Tinh”. That is the representatives of groups Son Tinh, Thuy Tinh, Vu Tinh had to use superlatives, comparatives, can and have got to

persuade the representative of My Nuong group choose them as her partner. Finally, the representative of My Nuong group made her decision and explained why.

To summarise the lesson, the teacher asked students to evaluate which practice they find most difficult or easiest, and which practice they like the most.

Adaptation 3: Infinitive of purpose (unit 12 – page 92-93)

According to the textbook, students are first asked to match some places and activities people can do there, then read and listen to a conversation in which there is infinitive of purpose. After that, students are offered 4 activities to practise the grammar point orderly including asking and answering questions about the places, retelling the journey in activity one using time expressions, expanding the conversations with infinitive of purpose by using when and why with simple past and be going to. The suggested activities are arranged fairly logically, provide students with some general knowledge, and give them a lot of chance to practise the target language communicatively. However, to help students naturally get more understanding of the use of infinitive of purpose, to provide them more chance to use recycled language with infinitive of purpose, to stimulate their thinking skills, the presentation was replaced and activities in practice were also adapted by combining, restructuring, and supplementing as follows:

Lead in and presentation

- ask students to list the tenses they had learnt in the term.
- show some pictures (2 of which were drawn by my students), asking students to use the tenses they learnt to describe the action of the people in the pictures.

 <p>Next year</p>	
 <p>Yesterday</p>	

Expected answers:

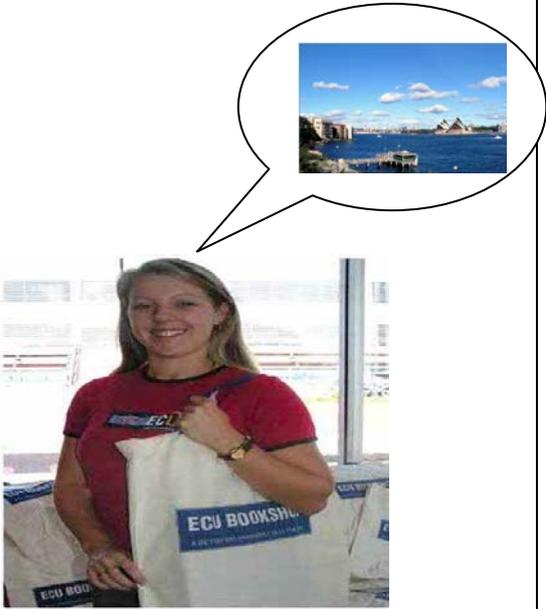
Picture 1: She is going to Australia next year.

Picture 2: He is swimming.

Picture 3: They went to the countryside yesterday.

Picture 4: She listens to the BBC everyday. He is swimming.

- ask students to look at the pictures carefully and say why the people do such things.

 <p>Next year– study at Melbourne university</p>	 <p>Keep fit</p>
 <p>Yesterday-enjoy fresh air</p>	 <p>Improve listening skill</p>

Expected answers:

Picture 1: She is going to Australia next year because she wants to study at Melbourne university.

Picture 2: He is swimming because he wants to keep fit.

Picture 3: They went to the countryside yesterday because they wanted to enjoy fresh air.

Picture 4: She listens to the BBC everyday because she wants to improve her listening skill.

- ask students to listen to the teacher's saying and compare the sentences they made and those they heard. (Example of teacher's sentences: They went to the countryside to enjoy fresh air)

- elicit the differences and similarities between sentences, then elicit the use of infinitive of purpose.

Practice 1

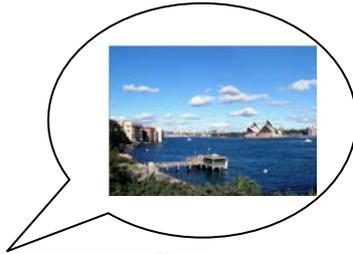
- Ask students to use infinitive of purpose to describe pictures.



Yesterday – visit their grandparents



Study English better



Next year –visit Opera House



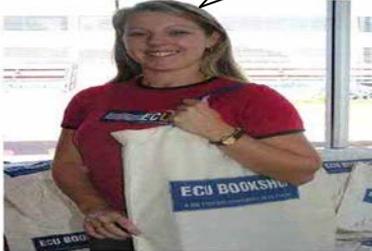
Lose weight



Yesterday – relax



Get information in English



Next year –visit Opera House



Have better health

Practice 2a (for lower level students)

- Ask students to use infinitive of purpose to make a conversation based on the given cards like the given example.

Example:

Student A go to China walk along the Great Wall	Student B go to Holland see the windmill
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A: What are you going to do next summer?

B: I'm going to China.

A: Why?

B: To walk along the Great Wall. And you?

A: I'm going to Holland to see the windmill.

B: Oh my goodness!

Student A go to France climb up Eiffel Tower	Student B go to Egypt visit the Pyramids
Student A go to France take photographs with Zidane	Student B go to Egypt swim in the Nile river
Student A stay at home watch World Cup 2006 on television	Student B find a part-time job get some experience for my future job
Student A stay at home prepare lessons for the next school year	Student B find a part-time job earn some money for the next school year
Student A go to Nepal climb Mount Everest	Student B go to Brazil visit the rain forest
Student A go to Kenya take photographs of lions	Student B go to the USA fly over the Grand Canyon
Student A go to Nepal see East Himalayan Kingdoms	Student B go to Brazil see Samba show in Rio de Janerio
Student A go to Kenya visit Hell's Gate National park	Student B go to the USA go surfing in Hawaii

Practice 2b (for higher level students when necessary)

- Ask students to take turns, using infinitive of purpose to make a conversation based on the given cards like the given example.

Example:

Student A What/do/ relax	Student B Where/go/ buy food
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A: What do you often do to relax?

B: I often listen to music to relax. And you?

A: I often access the Internet.

B: Where do you often go to buy food?

A: I often go to the supermarket near my house. And you?

B: I often go to open-air market to buy food.

Student A	Student B
1. Where/go/ spend last summer holiday	1. Where/go/ spend next summer holiday
2. What/do/ be always on time for class	2. What/do/remember new words
3. What/ do/ be a good listener	3. What/do/ avoid getting angry
4. Where/go/ buy clothes	4. Where/ go/ buy medicine?

Practice 3

- Ask students to work in groups, look at the given pictures of some places, and use infinitive of purpose to talk about their next holiday.
- Randomly ask the representatives of the groups to present their ideas.

Practice 4

- Ask students to make series of sentences using infinitive of purpose based on the given phrase in limited time.

Example: I work hard to get a lot of knowledge. I get a lot of knowledge to study abroad. I study abroad to get a good job.....

- Ask representatives of groups to present their ideas.

Students' feedback

Here are some of my students' comments on my adaptations:

- Though the teacher goes too far from the textbook, I really enjoy the lesson because the activities are new, interesting and arranged logically according to level of increasing difficulty.
- I learnt a lot because I could work in pairs and groups effectively. I felt more secure to speak in my small group.
- The lessons are useful because I could talk a lot in English using what I have learnt.
- I didn't like the lessons because I couldn't do lots of grammar exercise.
- I really like drawing activity. I also feel proud when my pictures are used for the lesson.
- I liked practice 1 in superlative lesson most because it is the easiest, and it helps me know more about Vietnam.
- I like playing dramas because it is fun.
- I often have difficulty remembering grammar theory and worry how to complete exercises with the most correct answers. Now I turn to a new way of learning grammar which works to me.
- I like pieces of music at the beginning of a lesson. They made me feel the lesson really relaxing.
- I did not like practice "our class' record" because some of my classmates made fun of me.
- I like describing pictures with different prompts and working with cards. It's easier for me because I am not a kind of quick-minded person..

Implications

It can be drawn from my students' feedback that although a textbook may be helpful in reduction of teacher's heavy load of preparation, it should not be considered as a "bible" to follow pages and activities strictly in order. In other words, teachers should be flexible, and adaptation is inevitable and essential to make teaching and

learning process more effective. And teachers should make sure they understand why, when and how to adapt and the way to make full use of them in a class. More concretely, they should bear in mind some following questions when trying to design and apply adapted activities:

- + Are my adapted activities really essential? Are objective, method and content of the suggested activity appropriate?

- + Do my adapted activities cater for my students' interests, learning styles, characters, and psychology?

- + Can I deal with the problem of multi-level class by designing different tasks for students of different levels?

- + How can I treat my students individually to satisfy their needs?

- + How can I control communicative activities in order to give my students help when necessary, observe their behaviour and interaction, prevent them from not using target language or using target language with the wrong aim, and to make they feel secure to speak out?

Also, teachers should be aware that adapted activities are not “one size fits all”, so they may run well in a certain class but not others, or even in a class, a certain activity may particularly appropriate for one students but not for another.

One more implication should be drawn here is about the decrease in heavy burden of preparation. Because designing appropriate materials is really demanding and as for Allwright (1981), it requires a number of abilities and skills that teachers need certain training to acquire, continuous training, collaboration and sharing of materials among teachers should be encouraged. Much better, the involvement of students in forming material bank is highly recommended.

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