

CONTRASTIVE GRAMMAR

By Bryce Hedstrom

“Contrastive Grammar” is a term and technique invented by **Susan Gross** to help students understand new grammatical features by contrasting them with previously mastered grammar. Contrastive Grammar questions are not grammar lessons in the traditional sense. This is a meaning-based technique that promotes comprehension. Because all words are used in context, the students see that different forms have different meanings. It is effective and it takes very little time to do. It takes advantage of the meaning in the classroom at the moment.

Contrastive Grammar questions are valuable because our students are different. Anyone can learn a language, but students learn at different depths and at different rates. Even if they start at the same level, students will quickly spread out in ability. And the variability in language is enormous.

Harvard linguist and cognitive scientist Steven Pinker in his book *Words and Rules* claims that the spread in adult vocabulary size is enormous. It can range between 6,000 words (non-cognitively impaired non-readers—those that can read but don’t) to over 100,000 words (regular readers). This is not the slight 30% difference between a D and an A (65% vs. 95%); it is a 1600% difference. A student that reads may know more than 16 times as many words as the student that does not read often. We may not have students at the extreme ends of the bell curve, but there will still be amazing variability among our students and we need to have tools to deal with it. Contrastive Grammar questions are one of those tools.

Vocabulary size often correlates with how well students can understand grammar—the understanding of how language works and what it means is plastic, very variable. We need to deal with the challenge of different student levels with specific tools. Contrastive Grammar questions can help us to do that.

OBJECTIVES: Attendees will...

- Understand the benefits of differentiating grammar instruction
- Learn how to enhance awareness of how language works in students
- See how short, pointed questions are more efficient than long explanations and practice
- Learn ways to facilitate grammar proficiency quickly and with minimal interruption

DESCRIPTION OF THE TECHNIQUE

- This technique was also described as “**Pop Up Grammar**” by Michigan teacher and author **Kristy Placido** because each question takes only seconds. The explanation “pops up” like a quick on-line ad and then disappears.
- Students are held individually accountable for grammar questions about language that was used in the classroom just seconds before—but at different levels.

BENEFITS

- Gives precise checks for understanding
- Differentiates between levels of students
- Provides a micro brain break
- Interrupts the flow of communication in the TL only briefly

PROCEDURE

ASK QUESTIONS TO INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS. Ask quick Contrastive Grammar questions to individual students. If you normally ask for choral responses, use your body language, a verbal cue or a procedure to indicate that only one specific student is going to answer this question because it is different. I simply ask the Contrastive Grammar questions in English. Since almost all other language in the class (at least 90%) is in the TL it is instantly obvious that a different thing is happening here. Students recognize that this is a different type of question with a different goal than normal questions. If you like to use the TL for everything, you will need to establish a clear signal that you are asking a Contrastive Grammar question.

SHOW THAT THESE ARE NOT NORMAL QUESTIONS. Contrastive Grammar questions are not normal questions. These are not questions for students to raise their hand if they know the answer. They are also not general comprehension questions for the entire class where we expect choral answers. Students cannot blurt out the answer because then we will not know if certain students understand certain aspects of what we are trying to do.

USE FOR DIFFERENTIATED COMPREHEHSION CHECKS. Contrastive Grammar questions are specific checks for understanding at various levels. They are targeted at specific students and the level of each question depends on the usual performance of particular students. You are trying to see if specific levels of students understand specific elements of what you are teaching. This the HOW of differentiated instruction that we need.

STAY TIGHTLY FOCUSED. We are not giving a lesson or expounding on broad principles of grammar here. We are just making sure that students understand what is going on with one phrase that we are using right now in this class.

ASK THESE TYPES OF QUESTIONS REPEATEDLY. You ask Contrastive Grammar questions several times per class period. Each question and answer should take only seconds but it will reap great rewards because you finally have a way of knowing what they are getting.

USE THE FEEDBACK. Take advantage of this real time informal assessment to adjust you lesson. Alter the input and check again.

WHO ARE CONTRASTIVE GRAMMAR QUESTIONS FOR?

All three types of questions below can be asked one after the other about the same content. If this is done artfully and often the understanding of all the students in class will increase.

With Contrastive Grammar questions **the teacher will know that:**

Slow processing students are getting the meaning and are following the narrative. If they understand our teaching qualifies as comprehensible input and they will acquire.

Average students are aware of how language can be used beyond the narrative. Most students in the class will be in this group. Ask more than one contrasting question here.

Fast processing students are stretching themselves beyond the course level and thinking about how language can be used with more advanced structures—maybe even points of grammar that we have not modeled much yet, but that they have picked up by listening or reading.

If you are not sure who's who in your classroom, take a seating chart and guess. Mark each student with a color. Check to see which kind of question you should ask to which students. Experiment and adjust until you get it about right. Students will change on different days and with different topics, so you will have to change your template often but at least give yourself a place to start so that you can get going with the technique.

A NOTE ON "SLOW" AND "FAST": This is not discriminating against slower students in an evil sense. Slow does not mean inferior and fast does not mean superior. Slow does not mean that they cannot learn as well, or even better, with time and effort. Slow just means that they are not acquiring the meaning as quickly as that average student right now. Besides, the students know who's who. You are not broadcasting it or labeling students publicly, but they already know. The slower students know they are slow. They are almost always overlooked and no one knows what they don't get or why. They usually appreciate the attention and the help of asking questions focused on them. The faster students also know they are different. We need to challenge them by asking about the class content in a different way.

DIFFERENT QUESTIONS FOR DIFFERENT STUDENTS

1. Slow Processing Students

Understand meaning and form

Demonstrate comprehension of phrase

“What does ___ mean?” or “What did I just say?”

- This is directed to one student to see if he/she understands the meaning.
- Focus these types of questions on low performing students only.
- Do not broadcast a low level question to the entire class because you will not be able to tell if your slower processors are getting it.
- Teacher gives prompt in English about a phrase that was just said in the TL.
- The student responds in English.

Most speech (at least 90%) in a language class should be in the TL, but the Contrastive Grammar questions are asked in *English* to indicate to students that something else is going on. This language shift immediately shows students that we are not talking about *content* like we usually do. We are focusing on understanding an aspect of *meaning* or *grammar* in the one particular sentence that was just used.

- This can be a whole sentence or a phrase that was just used in class.
- The question for slow-processing students is a pure check for understanding with no elaboration and no added commentary.
- It can be as simple as asking for a translation of a word or phrase that is already written on the board. The low performers may surprise you with how little they actually understand.

Remember that it is not comprehensible input if the student does not understand you. Asking questions like this is how you know. Even though a word is already written on the board in front of them, they still may not get the sound/writing connection and they may not be able to express it quickly and confidently.

EXAMPLES

Structure: **quiere comer** (*wants to eat*)

Instructor: *What does **quiere comer** mean?*

Student: wants to eat

Structure: **la casa de mi padre** (*the house of my father; my father's house*)

Instructor: *What does **la casa de mi padre** mean?*

Student: the house of my father

Instructor: *What else does **la casa de mi padre** mean?*

Student: my father's house

2. Average Processing Students *Describe meaning of related forms*

“What is the difference between ___ and ___?”

- Teacher gives prompt in English
- Student responds in English
- Student shows she gets the difference between two words/phrases
- Most students will be in this group. Ask more than one contrasting question here.
- Compare and contrast what they know with the newer grammatical structure.

Structure: **quiere comer** (*wants to eat*)

Instructor: “What is the difference between **quiere comer** and **quiero comer**?”

Student: **quiere comer** means “wants to eat” and **quiero comer** means “I want to eat”

Structure: **la casa de mi padre** (*the house of my father; my father’s house*)

Instructor: “What is the difference between **la casa de mi padre** and **la casa de su padre**?”

Student: “the house of my father” and “the house of his/her father”

“my father’s house” and “his/her father’s house.”

An alternative at this level is to ask for a specific decontextualized word in a phrase.

“What does ___ mean in that phrase?”

EXAMPLES

Structure: **quiere comer** (*wants to eat*)

Instructor: “What does **comer** mean in that phrase?”

Student: to eat

Instructor: “How do we know that it means **to eat** and not just **eats**?”

Student: the “r” at the end of the word

Structure: **la casa de mi padre** (*the house of my father; my father’s house*)

Instructor: “What does **de** mean in that phrase?”

Student: of

3. Fast Processing Students

*Create new utterances with the vocabulary
Demonstrate understanding of grammar principles
beyond current course level*

“What if we wanted to say _____?”

- Teacher gives prompt in English
- Student responds in target language
- Student is producing the language, not answering a grammar question.

EXAMPLES

quiere comer (*wants to eat*)

*What if I wanted to say “**they want to eat**”?*

*What if I wanted to say “**he wanted to eat**”?*

*What if I wanted to say “**he is going to want to eat**”?*

*What if I wanted to say “**he wants her to eat**”?*

An alternative is to ask a question that asks that student to explain the difference between forms:

“Why did I say ___ instead of ___?”

The high performing student briefly explains the reasoning behind the grammar.

Example: *Why did I say **quiere comer** instead of **quería comer**?*
*Why did I say **quiere comer** instead of **quiere que coma**?*

A NOTE ON FAST PROCESSING STUDENTS. It is crucial that the highest functioning students understand that actually *using* the language is the ultimate point of the class. Because they are able to think in grammatical terms they often woo the teacher into focusing on abstract points of grammar. But most students are not studying a language merely to get theoretical grammar. They want to use it. They want to be able to clearly talk about topics in class. Students are in a language class to learn to speak the language—to use it in everyday life.

Grammatical discussions, although well intentioned, can become a detour from the objective of learning to use the language. The running joke in our profession is that every conversation among language teachers eventually ends with debating a point of grammar. That can happen between teachers and high performing students too—and it leaves the rest of the students unengaged. It becomes highly demotivating to 95% of the class.

The average and slow processing students do not care about theoretical grammar; they just want to learn to speak the language. To keep class compelling, and not lose the low performing students, we

should end with the message, not with a discussion about the grammar in the message. The meaning is the thing. That is what we are focusing on. All students can eventually get the meaning and use the language correctly, but not every student will be able to explain the grammar, apply it consciously and use it in forms that occur infrequently.

If useful grammar points are posted prominently in the classroom the teacher can highlight them with a pointer when that grammar is used so that all students can see how they are being applied.

With Contrastive Grammar questions the fast-processing students get to shine, but they don't get to hog the spotlight. We acknowledge that they are special and different, but not so long that we lose the rest of the students.

HOW CAN TEACHERS ACQUIRE THIS TECHNIQUE?

PRINT REMINDERS. Print out the sample questions above and post them prominently in the back of your classroom so that you can see them and be reminded to use them often. The students do not need to see them.

PRACTICE. Any new skill requires deliberate, focused practice over a long period of time. Practice using the Contrastive Grammar questions by writing them into your lesson plans. Think ahead. Imagine the lesson you will be teaching and write out the specific questions you will ask to specific students. This will be slow and mechanical at first, but the more you practice the more fluid you will get with the technique. Plan on asking at least five (5) sets of Contrastive Grammar questions each class period.

When I started this technique I kept 3 x 5 cards on a ring with me to flip through and ask during each lesson. It was slow and ungainly, but I eventually learned how to do it more fluidly and naturally.

KEEP PRACTICING. Keep the Contrastive Grammar questions posted on the back wall of your classroom for as long as it takes until you internalize them and can use them confidently and without hesitation.

CONSIDERATIONS. You may think that students will not need tiered questions like these. On the simplest grammatical structures they may not. But experiment and I wager that you will find, as I have, that students do not always get everything that I think they do. Time and time again I think they all get it perfectly and then I am stunned to find out that some do not. And if our students do not understand we are wasting our time because speech they do not understand is not comprehensible input; it does not count. And worse: When they don't understand and we press on anyway we are creating students that believe they are no good at language. Don't do that. Keep the differences between each student in mind and meet each one where he or she is.