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Tall, Taller, Tallest

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A typical presentation

'Farida is tall. Shirin is taller than Farida. Soraya is the tallest of the three.' A typical presentation, and one which many teachers would say correctly presented the following language facts:

1. An adjective has three degrees of comparison, positive, comparative and superlative. 2. The comparative form is used when two persons or things are compared, the superlative when three or more are compared. 3. The superlative represents a higher degree than the comparative. 4. The comparative form appears typically in constructions with *than* and the superlative form in constructions with *of the* . . . or *in the* . . .

Checking the grammar

Teachers and course-book writers tend to favour statements which offer the possibility of systematic presentation, often without checking whether they correspond with actual usage. How important is a satisfactory account of the language facts of comparison? For children whose mother tongue is a language of western Europe perhaps not very important, for their mother-tongue concepts, and to a larger extent expression of these concepts, match English ones. However, to be successful with Asian children whose mother tongues do not view or express comparisons in an 'English' way, it is important to have a grammar which corresponds with actual usage. The plausible-looking 'language facts' listed above do not.

'Taller' = 'more tall than tall'?

The first incorrect impression is that when we use the form *taller* (or *tallest*) we have in mind the idea of *tall*: 'Farida is *short*. Shirin is taller than Farida' is as good a pair of sentences as those beginning this article. *Taller* implies a comparison, not with *tall*, but with *a given height*; *bigger*, comparison with a *given size*; *poorer*, comparison with *a given financial position*: 'He's poorer than his brother no doubt, but he has quite a good income.'

It is unfortunate that we speak of x + *-er* as the comparative form 'of' x; for the forms have different areas of meaning as well as different functions. Thus we have *an upper storey* without

an **up storey*, and we can arrive *later* without being *late*. It is misleading to suggest that *taller* means *more tall than tall.*

'The comparative with two, the superlative with three or more'?

The second incorrect impression is that two persons or things are involved when the comparative form is used. It is simple to involve all three pupils: 'Soraya is taller than Shirin and Farida', 'Soraya and Shirin are taller than Farida', or more than three: 'Soraya and Shirin are taller than the other girls.'

'Soraya is taller than the other two girls' and 'Soraya is the tallest of the three girls' represent identical facts. The words *of the three* show that the superlative form represents Soraya as still a member of the group of three girls (though outstanding in the group). The words *the two other girls* show that the comparative form separates Soraya, in tallness, from the group of two girls.

In this sense, and in this sense only, we may say that there are two 'entities' concerned. In many presentations, this abstract twoness is unfortunately replaced by a literal twoness. If we want a classroom presentation to show inclusion in a group or exclusion from it, we shall choose situations in which the group is larger than two!

'Tallest' = 'more tall than taller'?

We have dealt incidentally with the fiction that the superlative form represents a degree of superiority over the comparative form. The comparative form shows contrast, which may be a contrast of superiority; but the use of the superlative form does not confer additional superiority. It is misleading to suggest that *strongest* means *more strong than stronger*, or *more strong than strong*: 'Try this one; it looks the strongest; but they're all rather weak.'

Occurrence with and without 'than' and 'of the'

If our first presentation is of *-er than* . . ., we are led to present *-est* with a following construction too. For one thing, if we did not do so, our pupils would wish to say **the tallest than* . . . However, the awkwardness is that the name after *taller than* becomes the unrelated expression, *of the three*. This use of *three* in a new position and function could be regularized by saying *of the three girls*, but this too does not match *in the class*, a most likely classroom variant.

Actually we often hear *-er* without *than:* 'He's a bit better this morning, thank you.' 'I know a shorter way.' 'Pass me a longer one, please.' 'Oh, the puppy's got a lot fatter.'

The superlative form is frequent in an attributive position: *the longest rope, the highest mountain, the strongest boys.* If we do not need to contrast *-er* and *-est*, this can be our first presentation of the superlative.

Of the sentences 'I know a shorter way' and 'The puppy's got a lot fatter', the first shows contrast in space, while the second shows contrast in time: various 'ways' exist at the same time in different places, whereas the 'puppy' is the same puppy at different times. From either use, but especially from the second, we discover one basic meaning of the *-er* form: *shorter* and *fatter* may be said to mean '*other*, in a specified sense'. In this use, the comparative is not paralleled by the superlative.

Considering a presentation

Now that some language facts are straighter, we may consider how best to present comparatives and superlatives.

Any teacher would prefer to present the *-er* form alone first, rather than with a *than* construction, and we see that this may be done. We can exploit previous vocabulary and a familiar activity, as psychologists approve, comparing the same things at different times. A girl is drawn on the blackboard. 'Her ears are small: Make them larger. Make her nose longer. Make her fatter . . .' A dog. 'Make his ears bigger . . . his tail shorter . . . his nose longer . . . longer . . .' The alterations may be made quickly and amusingly by pupils taking turns with chalk and duster. After the first example, three or more pupils, depending on the size of the blackboard, can respond to the same directions.

We can then have the compared items present at the same time, but attended to one after the other. Probably the school course has introduced *another* with the meanings *additional* and *different.* The pupils have probably responded to 'Give me/show me a pencil . . . another one . . .' This is now paralleled by 'Give me/show me a pencil . . . a longer one . . .', the 'otherness' specified as length. We are then ready for situations where the compared items are side by side: 'Draw a square. Draw a bigger square. Draw a bigger square . . . Write a word. Write a longer word. Who can write a longer word? Write two longer words . . .'

In this way, we give familiarity with the form, and opportunity of showing comprehension, without that overhasty expectation of immediate speech responses that is a feature of much contemporary teaching.

As we have noted, *-est* can be presented without any *of the . . .* or *in the . . .* construction. The teacher can make sure the idea of a group is communicated by having a group—not a row—of pupils, and a group—not a line—of objects, and by drawing a line to enclose the blackboard drawings which are compared. The *-est* pupil or object should be pointed to or touched—like the *-est* item on the blackboard—but not moved out of the group. The following noun may be singular or plural: 'This is the largest bag. This is the longest name. Arif and Asif are the tallest boys.'

The *-er* form followed by *than* can be presented later, using similar groups of items. The *-er* pupil(s) or object(s) should be moved outside the group, and the *-er* items on the blackboard ringed with coloured chalk.

Article usage

With Asian pupils, it is important to maintain a consistent use of articles. Article usage so far is confirmed by the presentation outlined above: *Make it bigger*, predicative adjective, no article; *a bigger square*, indefinite article because the square is still to be drawn or 'individualized'; *the biggest square*, definite article because the square is already chosen or defined or 'specified'.

In fact, article usage with adjective *-er* followed by a noun is normal. We find *a taller person, taller persons, the taller person, the taller persons,* and ('indefinite inside definite') *one* (*some*, etc.) *of the taller persons.* The pronoun *one* (*ones*) may replace the noun: *a taller one*, etc. Elementary article usage is upset, however, when we have the predicative adjective followed by an *of*-adjunct. If we present, in close succession, *Soraya is taller . . . and Soraya is the tallest . . .*, we assume a sophistication beyond our pupils' level, and in fact have encouraged **Soraya is the taller than . . .* and *Soraya is tallest of the . . .*: '*of the two*'.

Adjective *-est* can be followed by many *of*-adjuncts, but not by **of the two.* When we consider that the *-est* form indicates inclusion in a group, the restriction is understandable, for it is difficult, logically, to contrast two things or persons and, at the same time, consider them as a group; contrasted, they appear mutually excluding, and so the excluding form, the *-er*, is the rational choice.

However, school teachers in English-speaking countries have pupils who do not recognize the logical restriction and prefer the *-est* form: *Tom is the best, the quickest*, etc., *of the two.* These teachers do not have to teach the language forms which the pupils already use correctly; their concern is the mistake, and to their concern we owe an emphatic association of the comparative form with the number two, an association which, we see, is quite misleading for teachers of English as a second language.

A statistical check

I have mentioned the need for checking 'systematic' formulations of grammar, and showed it was easy to find examples proving that common statements about comparatives and superlatives are incorrect.[1] However, another kind of check is necessary. We need to check the usefulness of what we propose to teach.

When one wants to study some feature of the language from this point of view, it is helpful to ask a number of persons to write on separate slips of paper six or ten consecutive occurrences of it in whatever they happen to be reading. This procedure gives an assortment of items from a variety of sources which one has not selected oneself. Making a statement about grammar and then thinking of some illustrative examples (perhaps having to discuss with colleagues whether some of them are or are not 'English') is very different from being faced with examples one cannot disregard. A sample of only a few hundred items is unlikely to give a complete coverage of the grammar, but this is not necessary. Statistical observations of language lead us to expect a small number of high-frequency items and a large number of low-frequency items; and the former constitute our interest as teachers.

Of 308 comparisons recently got together, 127 were made with *-er* and 54 with *-est*. Of the 127 *-er* items, 15 were occurrences of *rather* and *other*, and these have been excluded from consideration here. Of the remaining 112 items, 82 were not followed by *than*; 30 were. On 25 occasions, *-er* items were predicative adjectives (12 with *than* constructions). On 28 occasions, *-er* items were adverbial (12 with *than* constructions). Of the 34 occasions on which *-er* was followed by a noun, it was a singular noun on 19 occasions and a plural noun on 15.

Of the 54 *-est* items, 11 were occurrences of *first*, *next*, and *last*. Of the remaining 43, 22 had no following adjunct, 9 had miscellaneous *of*-adjuncts and 2 had preposition groups. A singular noun followed on 12 occasions, a plural noun on 9.

Expression of comparisons involves a great variety of constructions. The 112 *-er* occurrences showed 16 constructions, not counting small differences, and the 43 *-est* occurrences showed 12. The figures confirm the reasonableness of the suggested presentation steps, which may be summarized as:

1. Teach *-er* adjectives in predicative sentence positions.
2. Teach *-er* adjectives before singular and plural nouns.
3. Teach *-est* adjectives before singular and plural nouns.
4. Later, teach *-er* adjectives followed by *than*.

[1]The 'standard' grammarians, e.g. Jespersen and Kruisinga, are reliable.

The statistical picture shows too that unless classroom work is carefully thought out, one's pupils are likely to be confused by a variety of constructions introduced casually: such constructions are liable to come in the way of establishment of the most useful ones.

The 'Conversation' Lesson

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IT IS ARGUABLE that conversation cannot be taught, that it is an art and not a skill. That is the traditional view and of course it is perfectly correct, so far as it goes. Some teachers of English as a foreign or second language would take a less rigorous view of what conversation is and yet might assert that, though conversation can be taught to a limited extent, it is not a subject to which a separate lesson should be devoted. Others may suggest that conversation ought to form part of every oral lesson and that it is no more than an extension of the aural-oral method. However that may be, the teacher of English is likely to find himself at some time or another called upon to 'teach English conversation', especially if he happens to be a native speaker of English. And it would be unkind to suggest that those who require this of him do not know what they are about. They may not have a very clear idea of the means—after all, that is the teacher's concern—but they are usually very sure of the end. They expect the teacher's pupils to be able to carry on a simple conversation in English with a native speaker of that language.

There can be few parts of the world where this need is not felt and expressed. Here is a demand and it is up to the teacher of English to meet it. Every teacher knows that at least for some of his time in the classroom he is not merely meeting a demand but actually creating the demand too. Where a ready-made demand exists he is unlikely to let the chance go by without both trying to supply what is required and also doing his best to shape the demand in accordance with his own view of what is needed.

He is likely to have a fairly good idea of what 'conversation' is not. It is not simply the uttering of a number of formal words appropriate to a given occasion or situation. Learning to reply