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## **AN APPROACH TO LEARNING ENGLISH**

### **ABSTRACT**

Language learning approaches have been receiving much attention due to their importance in facilitating better understanding, quicker acquisition and proficient production of language. Some have granted importance to reading or listening while others strongly emphasized the need for writing or speaking. It should be noted that any choice for any approach will have to take into consideration the purpose of learning English. This paper suggests an approach to learning English, as a foreign language, based on reducing the work on the four skills, that is, listening, reading, speaking and writing, into two constituents, which are essential in producing language, that is, vocabulary and grammatical rules. It is assumed that the ultimate objective of the learning process is the ability of the learner to produce language. In fact, the latter is exactly like producing any other object. For instance, to produce a pull over, we need raw-material, (wool or cotton), and machines. In terms of language, it is the same, we need vocabulary, which stands for raw-material, and grammatical rules, which stand for machines. The paper also suggests tips to help improving vocabulary and learning grammatical rules. It is worth noting that this approach fits all categories of learners, and has shown encouraging results amongst learners all categories included.

**Keywords:** Learning Approach, English, Vocabulary, Rules, Method

## **UNE APPROCHE POUR APPRENDRE L'ANGLAIS**

### **RESUME**

Les approches d'apprentissage des langues ont reçu beaucoup d'attention en raison de leur importance pour faciliter une meilleure compréhension, une acquisition plus rapide et une maîtrise compétente de la langue. Certains ont accordé l'importance à la lecture et à l'écoute tandis que d'autres ont fortement insisté sur la nécessité de l'écriture et le discours. Il convient de noter que tout choix d'approche devra prendre en considération le but de l'apprentissage de l'anglais. Cette communication propose une approche de l'apprentissage de l'anglais, comme langue étrangère, basée plus sur l'acquisition du vocabulaire approprié au contexte et la maîtrise de la construction des phrases que sur l'ensemble des quatre compétences, à savoir écouter, lire, parler et écrire, sachant que l'objectif ultime du processus d'apprentissage est de permettre à l'apprenant de devenir compétent en langue. Cette communication propose également des techniques pour apprendre le vocabulaire et la grammaire. Il convient de signaler que cette approche s'adapte à toutes les catégories d'apprenants, et qu'elle a montré des résultats encourageants parmi les apprenants, toutes catégories confondues.

**Mots-clés :** Approche d'apprentissage, Anglais, Vocabulaire, Grammaire, Méthode

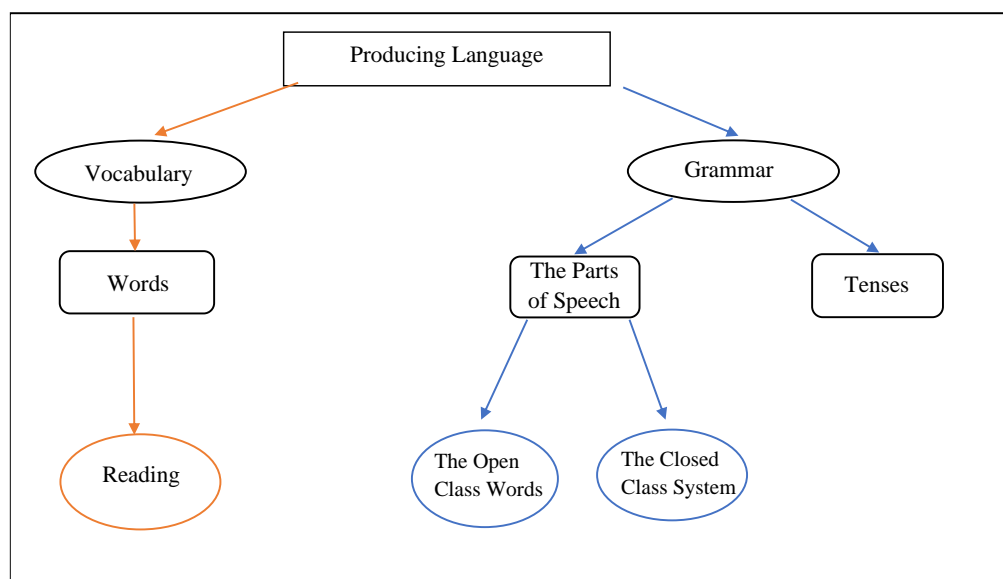
## 1. INTRODUCTION

Learning English as a foreign language is one of the most important topics. This is justified by its position among the other languages, as being the language of science and technology, business and communication. A quarter of the world population live in countries where English has official status. Over seventy percent of the scientists in the world read in English and publish their finding in English. About eighty five percent of the world's mail is written in English. Ninety percent of all information on the web is stored in English. Furthermore, the classical definition of an illiterate changed from “someone who doesn't know reading and writing “to” someone who doesn't know English and computing”. Learning anything is difficult and English is no exception. However, there are ways to make the situation easier. This paper suggests an approach based on reducing the four skills of learning a language into two constituents which are necessary to produce language. These two constituents are represented in vocabulary and rules. The research introduces an approach to guide the learner in learning and improving his vocabulary and grammar.

## 2. PRODUCING LANGUAGE

It should be reminded that producing language is exactly like producing any other object. If we want to make a table, for instance, we need wood and metal (raw materials) and machines. Linguistically speaking, the most important thing a learner needs to produce language at the beginning is a good vocabulary. Without words we have nothing to work with. Besides, the learner needs some grammar to be able to use words in the right patterns to produce language. (See Figure 1) The two main questions now are how to learn vocabulary and grammar?

Figure 1: Producing Language



Source: The Author

## 3. LEARNING VOCABULARY

Vocabulary is essential in producing language, and it is much better to learn new words from reading books, short stories and novels than from dictionaries. In the former, words are learnt within a context, that is, what is before and what is after the word, while in the latter, the learner relies on his capacity of memorizing words. In the next step, we are going to answer the questions; what to read and how to read? Before selecting the reading material, the learner should have an idea about his level. Free online placement tests are provided by various schools of languages, the British Council or Berlitz, and are available on the Internet. After the learner has done the test and gets his score and level, he can select a reading material that fits his level.

### 3.1. Techniques in Reading Comprehension

For efficient reading, the learner should use some techniques which help to understand what he reads in order to avoid getting bored and then abandon reading.

#### 3.1.1. *Using Context*

Learning words contextually makes it easier to remember them. While reading, we may find difficult words that we do not understand. We use the context, i.e., we look at the context of the word –the sentence comprising the words as well as the previous and following ones. For example, a Level Three learner probably does not understand the meaning of the word ‘dipstick’ if it stands alone, but if it is in a sentence, the context helps a lot to guess what it might mean.

Example: The car was making a funny noise, so I got out, opened the bonnet, and took out the **dipstick** to check the oil level.<sup>1</sup>

After reading the sentence, it becomes easier to guess the meaning of dipstick.

#### 3.1.2. *Breaking down Words into Parts*

This technique helps to understand the meaning of a word even if we have never seen it before. Prefixes and suffixes change the meaning of the root. If the learner is aware of the meaning of the suffix or the prefix, it helps to understand the meaning of the word.

Examples: a. doer, the word is composed of two parts, a stem: ‘do’ and a suffix: ‘er’

The suffix ‘er’ refers to a person who does an action, like in: teach + er, drive + er, play + er, so the word ‘doer’ means the person who does an action.

b. unsuccessful, the word is composed of three parts, a stem and a prefix ‘un’ which means the opposite and a suffix, ‘-ful’ means ‘full of’, so the word unsuccessful means ‘not achieving what a person wants’

#### 3.1.3. *Repetition*

The repetition of a word in a piece of writing enables the reader to guess its meaning through the different contexts used therein. The degree of certainty, about what the word might mean, may increase as many times as the word is repeated in the different contexts until the reader gets its meaning.

### 3.2. The Benefits of Reading<sup>2</sup>

Reading is the best activity to develop vocabulary. The learner should keep reading at a regular pace until it becomes a habit. Reading also helps with empathy, that is, it helps us relate to other people and encourages us to be kind and considerate of other people’s feelings. Through reading, we can learn not only new vocabulary but also grammar, punctuation and the way sentences are constructed<sup>3</sup>. Finally, reading develops imagination and creativity and helps to reduce stress.

### 3.3. Tips for Improving Reading

Reading activity should be done at the right pace, the reading speed should be adjusted to achieve good comprehension. Besides, taking notes while reading is a good strategy to improve comprehension. Sometimes the learner gets stuck in a cycle of re-reading the same sentence over and over because of its difficult words. In this case, the learner should move on reading, he may understand the overall meaning of the piece of writing by the end. In other words, the learner should not necessarily understand the meaning of each single word. The last

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Swan, *Inside Meaning*, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 21

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cornerstone.edu/blog-post/5-ways-reading-can-change-your-life-and-best-practices/#:~:text=Reading%20Grows%20Your%20Vocabulary&text=That's%20because%20you're%20learning,it%20easier%20to%20remember%20later.>

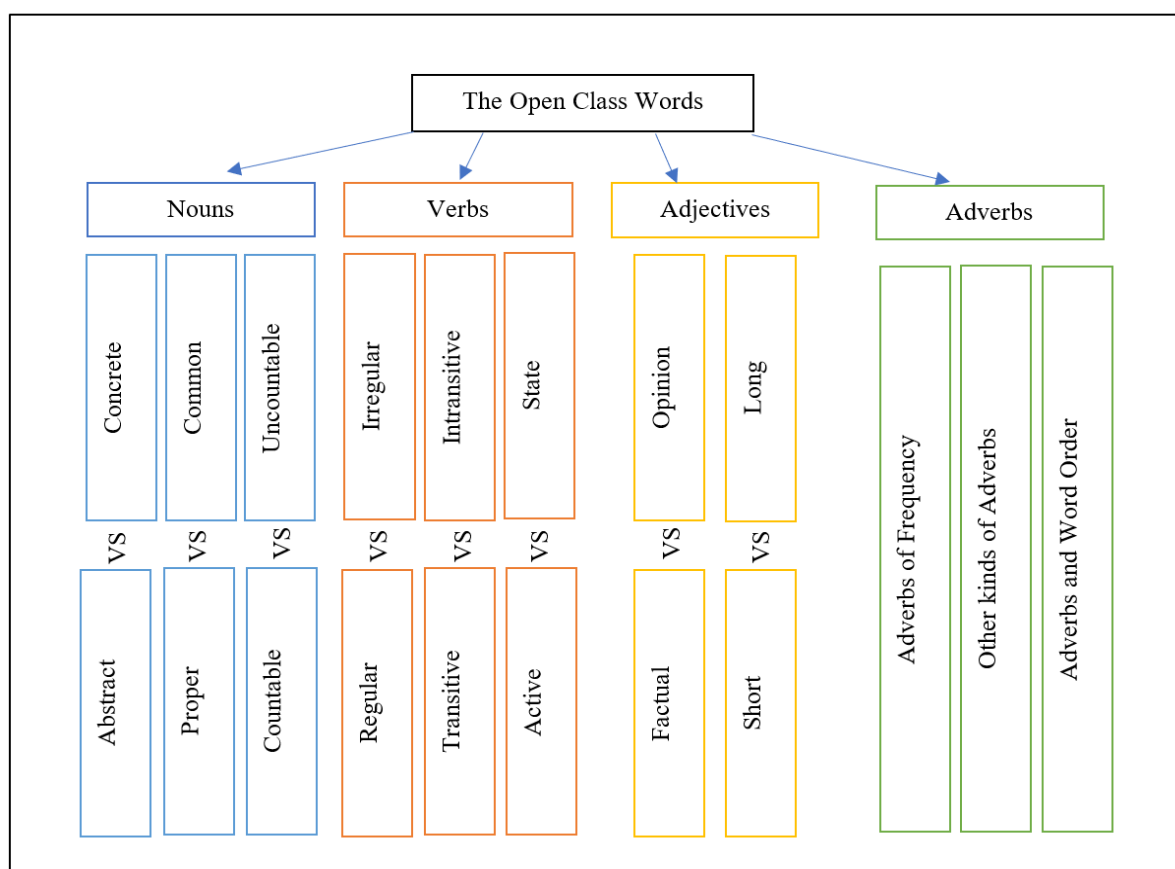
<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Hamer, *How to Teach English*, Longman, 2005, p. 68

tip a learner should be aware of is spaced reading, that is, to take breaks to avoid getting bored especially when the learner does not understand what he reads.

## 4. LEARNING GRAMMAR

Grammar is conventionally seen as the study of the syntax and morphology of sentences, that is, the study of linguistic chains and slots.<sup>4</sup> Why do we need grammar? Words without grammatical rules are useless, grammar helps to connect words into phrases and phrases into sentences. In other words, it tells us what structures are possible in a language<sup>5</sup>. In this paper, we are going to develop a step-by-step practical approach to learn grammar. It is a road map that guides the learner to avoid being lost amongst numerous grammar topics. Put it in another way, English grammar is not just one topic, it is tens of major topics, and each of them contains tens of sub-topics. So, it is important to know where to begin, and for this we need to set goals and establish priorities. This approach suggests to start with the two main categories under the parts of speech, that is, the open class words and the closed class system. (See Figures 2 and 3) For instance, the learner starts with the first topic under the open class words, that is, nouns. The latter can be dealt with through different approaches, among which, 'countable versus uncountable', 'concrete versus abstract', 'proper versus common' in addition to other topics related to nouns such as 'gender', 'plurals', etc.

Figure 2: The Open Class Words

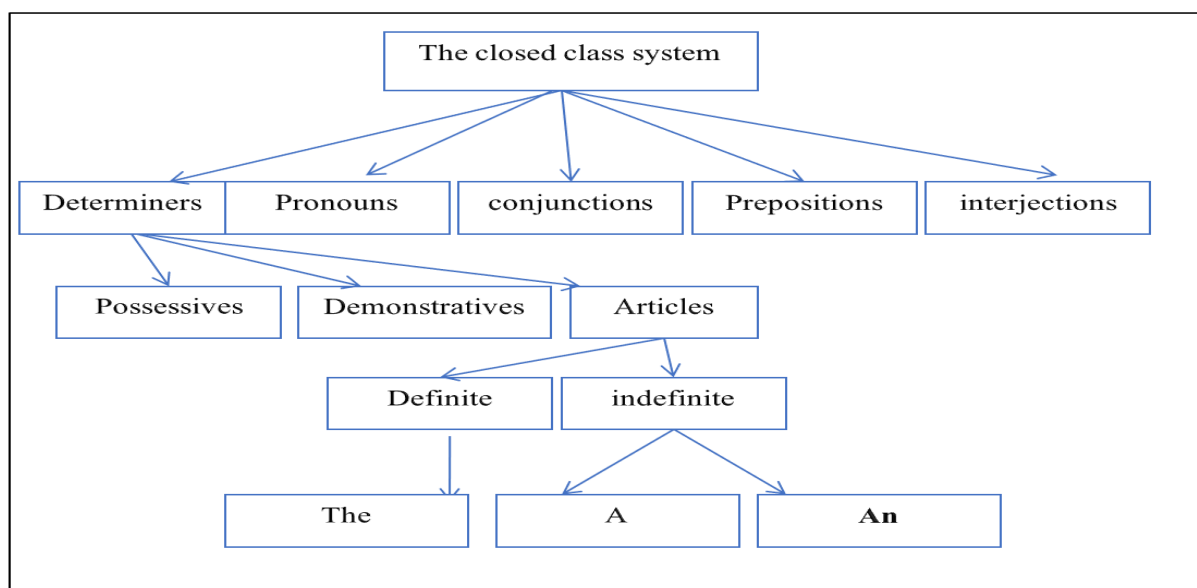


Source: Adapted from Oxford Practice Grammar by George Yule

<sup>4</sup> Scott Thornbury, How to Teach Grammar, Pearson Education Limited, 1999, p. 2

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 1

Figure 3: The Closed Class System



Source: Adapted from Oxford Practice Grammar by George Yule

Table 1: Tenses in English

|         | Simple                                 | Continuous   | Perfect   | Perfect Continuous   |
|---------|--|--|---|--|
| Present | Present Simple<br>1st form + 's'       | Present Continuous<br>am/is/are + 1 <sup>st</sup> form + ing | Present Perfect<br>Have/has + 3 <sup>rd</sup> form<br>(past participle) | Present Perfect Continuous<br>Have/has + 1 <sup>st</sup> form + ing      |
| Past    | Past Simple<br>2 <sup>nd</sup> form    | Past Continuous<br>Was/were + 1st form + ing                 | Past Perfect<br>Had + 3 <sup>rd</sup> form                              | Past Perfect Continuous<br>Had been + 1 <sup>st</sup> form + ing         |
| Future  | Future Simple<br>Will/shall + 1st form | Future Continuous<br>Will be + 1 <sup>st</sup> form + ing    | Future Perfect<br>Will have + 3 <sup>rd</sup> form                      | Future Perfect Continuous<br>Will have been + 1 <sup>st</sup> form + ing |

Source: Adapted from Grammar Express by Marjorie Fuchs & Margaret Bonner

## 5. THE LEARNER'S ATTITUDE TO LEARNING ENGLISH

The attitude of the learner to English and the way he views it will decide how well he can progress, as the British saying says: "No pain... No gain". Also, it should be reminded that learning English needs time and patience, it cannot be rushed. Second, the learner should feel relaxed, and take the matter easy. Finally, the two most important words to remember when learning English are: practice and confidence. The learner should Practise English every day and be confident. The more he uses English the better his English will become, and the more confident he becomes, then the more he would like to use it. He has to believe that he can do it<sup>6</sup>. Learning English can be seen as if somebody is asked to move a mountain from somewhere to somewhere else,

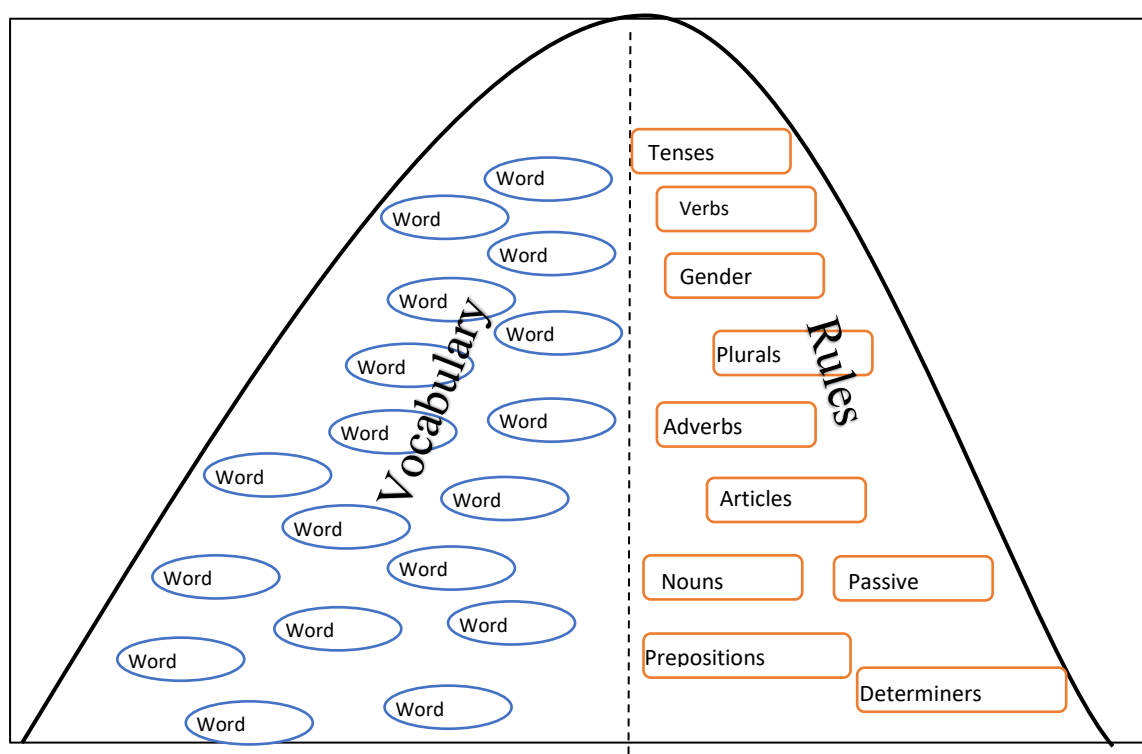
<sup>6</sup> Mister Duncan, Learning English - Lesson 1 (Introduction)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7\\_qg\\_KVByS0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_qg_KVByS0)

a task that seems to be impossible to do. (See Figure 4) Yet, if the person is given enough time and the necessary means (trucks, bulldozers, cranes, etc.) the task becomes feasible. Similarly, learning English needs time and means (teachers, books, internet, etc.). Learning vocabulary and grammar should go hand in hand at a regular and constant pace. Let us give an example about how this learning approach works. A Level Three learner begins a learning program (See the Table below) including reading a short story entitled ‘The Secret Agent’ written by Joseph Conrad. This forty-two-page short story is simplified to fit Level Three (pre-intermediate level) and to provide a step-by-step approach to the joys of reading for pleasure. The program also includes the first class under the open class words in the parts of speech in ‘Oxford English Grammar Course by Michael Swan and Catherine Walter.

|       | Reading (the short story consists of 1200 words)                    | Grammar   |
|-------|---|---|
| Week1 | A two-page daily pace (estimated number of new learned words 10-15) | Nouns (countable and uncountable nouns) <sup>7</sup>                        |
| Week2 | A two-page daily pace (estimated number of new learned words 15-20) | Nouns (singular and plural nouns) <sup>8</sup>                              |
| Week3 | A two-page daily pace (estimated number of new learned words 20)    | Nouns (‘s and s’ possessive: forms, ‘s and s’ possessive: use) <sup>9</sup> |

After three weeks, the learner comes out with about 40 new words and three grammar topics. Put another way, as if the worker on moving the mountain that represents language has moved a part of it from a place to another. After a period of time of regular work that depends on the motivation and inner capacities of the learner, the latter finds that he has acquired a good vocabulary and grammar rule that enable him to produce language.

Figure 4: An Analogy between Language and a Mountain



Source: The Author

<sup>7</sup> Michael Swan & Catherine Walter, Oxford English Grammar Course, A grammar practice book for elementary to pre-intermediate students of English, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 198-199

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.196

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 201

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has introduced an approach to learning English based on working on the two major constituents, that is, vocabulary and grammar. As was mentioned in Section Two, the ultimate objective of a learner is to be able to produce language. The latter requires vocabulary, which can be improved through reading, and it should be stressed that the reading material should fit the level of the learner to avoid boredom which leads to abandon reading. Besides, producing language requires learning grammatical rules using grammar self-study books and the Internet. It is worth noting that this approach fits all categories of learners all levels included. Finally, this approach has shown impressive results amongst learners, however, motivation remains a crucial factor for any success. Besides, learners who showed a strong will do better, as the British proverb says: Where there is a will there is a way.

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