

Team-based learning and English grammar: Building community and lowering affect

Sonja Launspach*

Abstract. This paper explores the initial use of Team-Based Learning (TBL) and Ungrading approaches in a synchronous on-line basic English grammar course for non-linguistics majors. The study employs TBL and Ungrading approaches to create a supportive learning community, address students' fear of grammar, and provide more effective formative and summative assessments. Qualitative analysis of students' reflective writing suggests that implementation of both TBL and Ungrading has a positive effect on students' learning experiences.

Keywords: team-based learning; ungrading; grammar instruction; online learning

1. Introduction. Teaching the grammar of standardized academic English to native English speakers can present a number of related pedagogical challenges. For instance, my students who are predominantly English and English education majors at a small state university in a largely rural state, come into the course with a varied background or with no background whatsoever in language learning. For many of them, this is the first or only linguistics course they will take. In this paper, I focus on three challenges: 1) linguistic insecurity, 2) anxiety related to grades, and 3) community building.

2. Pedagogical challenges. According to Preston (2013), "linguistic insecurity arises when one feels that they are not able to perform the linguistic job at hand" (p.324). For my students, their individual linguistic insecurity translates into a fear of having their linguistic performances of grammar 'judged' as lacking in some way. I see this every semester when, as part of the first week's activities, I ask them to write about their best/worst experiences with grammar. Being judged for how they talk or write, especially online, by "grammar police" is constantly listed. Other bad experiences include being "judged" negatively by teachers or peers. The other side of the insecurity coin is students' reluctance to ask questions in class or seek outside help.

The second challenge is systemic. When students have been largely socialized to prioritize grades over engagement with learning, they focus on earning points instead of gaining understanding. One way this plays out in the grammar classroom is anxiety. Because students often struggle with the analytical nature of grammar structures and with unfamiliar terminology, and because they feel pressured to perform, they view failure as unacceptable. Since making mistakes is not viewed as part of the learning process, students may perceive any low score as a disaster, which can create anxiety that raises their negative affect and lowers their ability to engage with the course content (MacIntyre 1995).

Finally, this was the first year I've taught online, and I needed to balance my inexperience in this teaching context with a need to keep students present and engaged beyond the camera. Many scholars argue for the pedagogical advantages of establishing a Learning Community, especially in the online environment (Garrison 2011, 2016; Darby and Long 2019; Eyler 2018). Learning Communities provide students with peer support and peer learning/teaching opportunities as well as cognitive and social advantages. The challenge lies in successfully creating an environment where the students can connect with each other, especially when they are not physically present to each other.

* Author: Sonja Launspach, Idaho State University (sllauns@isu.edu).

3. Pedagogical approaches. To address the challenges facing me in my online grammar “classroom,” I turned to two pedagogical resources: Team-Based Learning (TBL) and Ungrading.

3.1. TEAM-BASED LEARNING. I had already started experimenting with TBL in my upper division linguistics courses, so it seemed like a natural move to the grammar course, given its emphasis on group learning. I had already observed some benefits for grammar students in my F2F classes, from in-class group work and outside self-initiated study groups.

Team-based learning (TBL) is an instructional strategy originally developed by Michaelsen & Sweet (2012) that emphasizes student preparation out of class and application of knowledge in class while engaging students in active learning and critical thinking. (Michaelsen & Sweet 2011; Michaelsen, Knight & Fink 2004). Four essential elements comprise TBL: Teams, Accountability, Feedback, and Assignment design. Establishing permanent teams for each semester allows students to get to know their teammates, and to provide anonymous feedback via peer evaluation. Accountability is built into the model in order to maintain the quality of both individual and group work. Next, feedback as well as formative assessments factor into both classroom interaction and assignment design. (Michaelsen & Sweet, 2012). These elements translate into classroom practices through a series of structured activities: Readiness Assurance Activities, and Applications Activities. While TBL was originally developed for the F2F classroom, it has been adapted for online teaching (Gomez & Bieber 2005; Palsolé & Awalt 2008; Clark et al. 2018).

Due to its fairly structured instructional sequence, I followed the TBL model closely for the Fall semester, incorporating weekly group and individual Readiness Assurance and Applications Activities. However, because they didn’t fit well with either the course content or the time constraints, I dropped the Readiness Assurance Activities for the Spring semester. I made another change to address an imbalance between formative and summative assessments. My original individual homework assignment designs allowed students to draw from the team’s shared knowledge without developing their own independent grammar knowledge base. So I redesigned the assignments to provide more summative assessment information.

The current course schedule is set up so that on Tuesday, I introduce new material and relevant grammar concepts and provide interactive practice. On Thursday, we review and discuss any material necessary before the team activity. I use the break-out room feature in Zoom to give teams a virtual work space. After they complete the team activity, we go over team results as a class. Each team contributes their answers, and individuals and teams can ask questions and get immediate feedback on the exercise. This immediate feedback helps reduce the anxiety about “studying wrong” expressed by students in prior semesters.

I reviewed midterm reflections for both semesters (Fall 2020, Spring 2021) to get a sense of the students’ experiences of TBL. I had already incorporated self-reflection and meta-cognitive approaches into my course design, and the midterm asks students to reflect on their learning process and their learning goals at that point in the semester. I provide additional questions as guidelines for the reflection. Two questions relevant to this discussion are: *What is your experience as part of a team? What activities and assignments have most/least aided your learning?*

As part of my qualitative analysis, I examined what they wrote about their experiences working in teams and what impact they felt it had on their grammar learning. In addition, I identified some themes and key words in their responses. Table 1 summarizes the types of comments for each semester. In both semesters, it appears that most of the students felt the team activities had a positive effect on their learning, with only a small number describing a mixed or negative experience. The mixed or negative comments usually centered on teammates not contributing or on absences making the group size too small.

F20	Number	Percentage	S21	Number	Percentage
Positive	18	80%	Positive	11	64.9%
Mixed	2	10%	Mixed	2	11.7%
Negative	0	0	Negative	2	11.7%
No mention	2	10%	No mention	2	11.7%
Total	20	100%	Total	17	100%

Table 1. Types of comment about team activities contribution to students' learning experiences

Several themes emerged from an examination of the comments from both semesters (n=37).

Enjoy was used as a verb to describe team activities in 43% of the comments. “We have enjoyed doing the team assignments together.”

Helpful or help was also used in 43% of the comments. Students stated that team activities were helpful or that the group work helped them to see/understand or learn the concepts. Help was also used in the context of helping each other. “We all help each other get the work done and help the others understand.”

Knowledge or understanding appeared repeatedly (67%), mainly in the context of the benefits of sharing knowledge or being able to tap into their teammates' knowledge, which then enabled them to increase their own knowledge.

Other terms that were repeated were *support, working together or collaboratively, feeling more confident*. One student wrote, “I have learned that when you work in a team, you often end up growing as an individual.”

For these students, the TBL framework appears to provide a pedagogical structure that promotes the creation of group knowledge-in-interaction and supports the acquisition and application of grammar concepts. While this data represents only a small number of students, it does show that, at least for these students, TBL can help create an online learning community through team activities, peer learning, and peer teaching.

3.2. UNGRADING. In Spring 2021, I added a second change with the gradual introduction of Ungrading into the course format. Rather than sorting and judging, Ungrading keeps students focused on the learning process itself. I was already using a Check Yourself Exercise that included a self-reflection of learning. In it, students are not graded on the scores of their grammar exercises, but for self-reflection instead. I designed this exercise to help alleviate some of the anxiety around homework scores and to encourage students to embrace failure as part of their learning process. My attempts to introduce what Brooke and Carr (2015) call the “pedagogy of failure” into the course had met with limited success, as I mainly just talked about it during the first week of class. However, my introduction to *Ungrading* (Blum & Kohn 2020) brought me closer to addressing my concern about students' grade anxiety, and also highlighted an effective way to incorporate failure into the course design. Proponents of Ungrading argue that the current grade-based system of student assessment stifles learning, discourages risk taking, and sorts students into categories that discriminate against students of color (Kohn 2011; Inoue 2019, Stommel 2020; Gibbs 2020). For me, Ungrading is a means of inclusion, rather than exclusion. Instead of sorting my students into categories based on ‘errors,’ – excluding all but a few, I’m able to engage, through my feedback, with them *where they are at* in their learning process – including all of them through this dialogue.

In my efforts to include Ungrading in the course, I designated the new Knowledge Application Individual Exercises (KAE) and the Check Yourself Exercises (CYE) as ungraded. Ungraded does not mean no feedback. In fact, I include questions in KAE assignments that allow me to target my feedback to individual student needs. Taking away grades on individual exercises allows students to focus on their learning process and to feel more comfortable about making mistakes as part of understanding grammar concepts. Moreover, my role shifts away from judging students for their “mistakes.” Instead, I can point out areas students need to practice, answer specific questions, provide encouragement, and steer them to relevant resources. While I didn’t ask about Ungrading in midterm reflections, three students specifically commented on failure as a positive new part of their learning process. Below is one student’s comment.

My final thought would be that I just really appreciate the way this class is set up. This is the first class I have ever taken that has allowed me to make mistakes for the sake of learning. I get to practice without being overly concerned about the grades, and as someone who has always been my own worst critic I honestly feel like this is one of the first classes I’ve ever taken that I have had the opportunity to learn for the sake of learning.

For these students, TBL and Ungrading have eased linguistic insecurity and anxiety about grade-dependent courses; they’re not afraid of failures, because that doesn’t mean they can’t succeed in my class.

As I reflect on my teaching experiences in these uncertain times, I’m struck by my students’ willingness to be flexible and work together. Like students, instructors must also embrace flexibility to meet pedagogical challenges, especially those dealing with affect and equity. Adding Team-Based Learning and Ungrading to the course design for my basic grammar class has helped me to provide a structure that builds community and facilitates learning.

Moreover, the student responses suggest these teaching methods can be resources for implementing JEDI principles – justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion – by encouraging community building, addressing student anxieties about a ‘feared’ subject, and creating a more inclusive, equitable environment where learning is enjoyable, peers are resources, and student learning is centered.

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