Positioning Language Learners as Cultural Informants: Innovative Grammar Activities from Two Different EFL Settings

Tamara Mae Roose and Lana Salar Qadir

Most EFL classrooms focus on building students' grammatical accuracy by learning rules and demonstrating mastery of form through exam-oriented assessments, rather than building fluency in the language by applying grammar in communication to make meaning. Moreover, grammar instruction is often rooted in materials that lack relevance to students' interests and lives outside the classroom. In this article, we draw upon our experience teaching grammar in diverse EFL settings to share four innovative grammar activities successfully used to engage university students in communication by situating the grammar in communicative contexts within students' local cultures. These innovative grammar activities from South Korean and Iraqi EFL classrooms enhance student accuracy and fluency by focusing on both form and meaning. They are centered on high-interest topics and student-generated visuals to cultivate a highly social, interactive classroom environment to nurture language learning. For each activity, we walk through the tasks and provide materials and sample student work to illustrate their pedagogical and cultural significance.

La plupart des classes d'anglais langue étrangère (ALE) se concentrent sur l'amélioration de la précision grammaticale des apprenants en leur apprenant des règles et en s'attendant à ce qu'ils démontrent leur maîtrise de la forme par le biais d'évaluations axées sur les examens, plutôt que sur l'amélioration de la fluidité en utilisant la grammaire afin de produire du sens dans des situations de communication. De plus, l'enseignement de la grammaire se fait souvent à l'aide de matériel pédagogique qui manque de pertinence par rapport aux intérêts et à la vie des élèves en dehors de la salle de classe. Dans cet article, nous nous appuyons sur notre expérience de l'enseignement de la grammaire dans divers contextes d'ALE pour partager quatre activités grammaticales innovantes utilisées avec succès pour engager des étudiants universitaires dans la communication en situant la grammaire dans des contextes communicatifs au sein de leurs cultures locales. Ces activités grammaticales innovantes issues de classes d'ALE sud-coréennes et irakiennes améliorent la précision et la fluidité des étudiants en se concentrant à la fois sur la forme et le sens. Elles sont centrées sur des sujets très intéressants et des visuels produits par les étudiants afin de favoriser un environnement social et interactif propice à l'apprentissage des langues. Pour chaque activité, nous expliquons les tâches et fournissons du matériel et des exemples de travaux d'élèves pour illustrer leur importance pédagogique et culturelle.

VOLUME 42, ISSUE 1, 2025 pp. 147–162
https://doi.org/10.18806/tesl.v42i1/1424

Keywords: communication, EFL, grammar, local culture, visuals

Across many EFL contexts, students know *about* grammar to a great degree but not how to *use* it to make meaning (Mazher et al., 2015). The emphasis of grammar instruction tends to be on rules for writing correctly, and consequently, the conversational grammar required to engage in everyday communication is generally overlooked (Al-wossabi, 2014). Moreover, students in EFL settings are often reluctant to engage in communicative activities because they are unfamiliar with these academic practices and have had limited opportunity to build oral proficiency (Hsu, 2015). High language anxiety and discomfort using English can lead to an unwillingness to communicate (Wang et al., 2017). This can be problematic because meaningful communication is fundamental for successful language learning, giving access to comprehensible input, promoting negotiation of meaning, and encouraging learners to produce accurate output (K. Lee et al., 2020). When learning English becomes more enjoyable for learners, this can cultivate a greater willingness to use the language and the "grit" to persevere by putting continuous effort to improve in the language (J. Lee, 2022; MacIntyre, 2007).

Teachers can help students find meaning in grammar rather than focus simply on learning rules. By implementing engaging grammar activities, instructors can nurture students' communicative competence and accelerate their English language acquisition (K. Lee et al., 2020). Conversational grammar activities that are simple and fun can be integrated into the curriculum to expose EFL learners to how grammar is used to communicate meaning (Al-wossabi, 2014). Teaching grammar within interactive activities can motivate authentic language use that cultivates both fluency and accuracy, since both are crucial for communication. When adequate focus is placed on *both* form and meaning, learners can develop the language skills to accomplish their learning outcomes more efficiently. Moreover, EFL classrooms generally focus on presenting the target language culture in their materials and tasks, but it is equally important to incorporate activities that centre students' local cultures to promote their language learning (Kristiawan, 2012; Mahabadi, 2013).

In this article, we draw upon our experiences as English language educators with collectively over 20 years of teaching in diverse contexts, including Iraq, South Korea, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States, to share four innovative grammar activities we have successfully used to engage students in communicative activities that move across language skills and situate grammar within students' own sociocultural contexts. These four activities were selected because they are non-traditional grammar lessons that creatively use visuals relevant to students' local cultures to motivate them and engage them in using the language to interact with their peers. In the following sections, we introduce our teaching backgrounds, teaching contexts, and pedagogical approaches within two different EFL settings—South Korea and Iraq—by featuring diverse grammar-focused activities that position language learners as cultural informants.

Korean University EFL Setting in Seoul

Teacher Background

The first author, Tamara Roose, is a white, native English–speaking teacher from the United States. She gained a master's degree in TESOL with five years of teaching experience in a university English for Academic Purposes program in California with diverse international student populations before going overseas to teach in South Korea. This was her first time living overseas and being immersed in the Korean language and culture. This was also her first time teaching abroad in an EFL setting and teaching a

generally homogenous student population of Korean students who shared the same language and cultural background.

Teaching Context and Pedagogical Approach

Tamara worked in an English department at a university in the capital city, Seoul, where she taught several sections of sophomore-level English writing courses. Her students' English language proficiency ranged roughly from low to high intermediate, and there were around 25 students in each class. The classes met twice a week for an hour each session. As this was a new teaching context and student population, she intentionally wanted to learn about her students' interests, motivations, and goals for learning English, as she sensed these might be very different from the university international students she had taught in the United States. She designed her writing courses to address the target writing genres, skills, and grammar structures in the assigned textbook but wanted to redesign the lessons, activities, and assignments around student-selected high-interest topics to increase student motivation and willingness to communicate. She did this by surveying students' interests, simply asking them to rank the top five topics they like to talk about on slips of paper, as displayed in Figure 1. The most popular ones were music, sports, movies, relationships, travel, and food, which were then used to thematically design the course curriculum.

Figure 1

Student-Generated High-Interest Topics

Two specific activities, which centred on the themes of sports and food within the Korean context, are shared here. Both involved visual aids, more specifically student-selected photos, to cultivate meaningful contexts for grammar structures to be learned and practiced through conversations with classmates.

Activity 1: National Athletes (Comparative and Superlative Adjectives)

In preparation for this first activity, students were asked to bring printed photos of their favourite athletes to engage in a lesson on comparative and superlative adjectives. Most students brought photos of Korean national athletes, but some also had favourites from other countries as well, as shown in Figure 2.

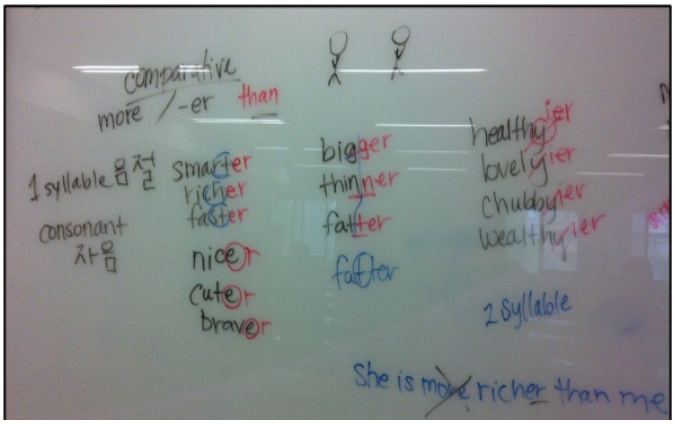
Figure 2

Students with Photos of Favourite Athletes

Students were first asked to describe their favourite athletes. They were given time to brainstorm adjectives on their own sheets of paper and then share these aloud. The teacher covered the board with their adjectives and organized them into columns without explaining how she had made these decisions, as illustrated in Figure 3. The students were then asked to look at these lists and notice what they had in common and guess why they were organized in this manner.

Figure 3

Board Work on Comparative Adjectives



Together, the class inductively unpacked rules for comparative adjectives and drafted them together as follows:

- If the adjective is one syllable with a consonant-vowel-consonant pattern, the final consonant is doubled (e.g., big → bigger).
- If the adjective is one syllable ending with an -e, -r is added (e.g., cute → cuter).
- If the adjective is one syllable ending with a double consonant, -er is added (e.g., fast → faster).
- If the adjective is two syllables ending with a -y, it changes to -ier (e.g., wealthy → wealthier).
- If the adjective is two or more syllables, *more* is added to make the comparative adjective (e.g., graceful→ more graceful; muscular → more muscular).

The class clapped and counted aloud the number of syllables for adjectives on the board and addressed some exceptions to these general rules.

The students then practiced using comparative adjectives in communication by comparing their favourite athletes with those of their partners. They rotated partners twice in this discussion activity to practice the new grammar structure. They then came up to the board and wrote sample sentences, and error correction was provided.

Afterwards, students formed groups of three and compared their favorite athletes again, now using superlative adjectives (as illustrated in Figure 4). They first practiced this together with student examples, pointing out the use of 'the' before superlative adjectives and similar grammatical patterns for *most* and -est as superlative adjectives.

Figure 4

Photos of Korean National Athletes

For homework, students were given a related writing prompt to assess their understanding of comparative and superlative adjectives. A Venn Diagram was provided as a pre-writing tool (Figure 5) and a writing prompt with various choices (Figure 6).

Figure 5

Venn Diagram Pre-Writing Activity

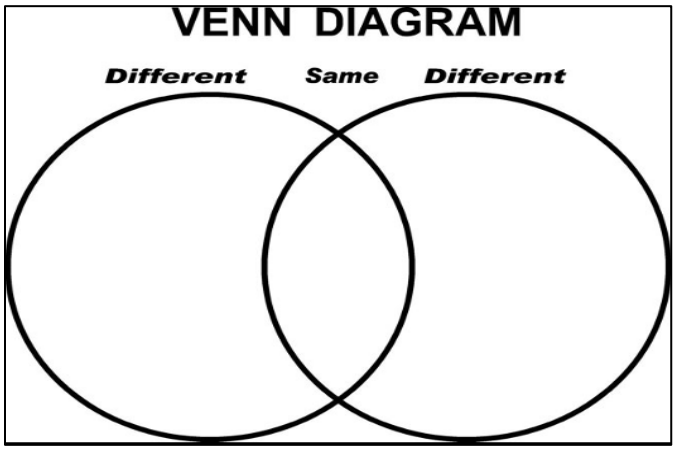


Figure 6

Homework Assignment Reinforcing Comparative and Superlative Adjectives

English Writing Assignment 3 (Sports)

Choose one topic below to write a compare and contrast paragraph (9-11 sentences). What are the similarities and differences? Which one is better, and why? Make sure you have strong paragraph structure and good paper format.

Target Structures: 3 different comparative and 3 different superlative adjectives (6 total), highlighted

sports brands	sporting events	teams	exercise machines
coaches	sports venues	sports	diet plans
fan clubs	stadium food	sports uniforms	other_____

Activity 2: Local Cafés (Prepositions of Place)

In preparation for the second activity, students were asked to bring photos of the local cafés that they liked to frequent as visuals to practice prepositions of place. These were used to replace the mundane black-and-white images in the textbooks, which had very little visual or personal appeal to teach prepositions of place. As shown in Figure 7, students shared photos they had taken or retrieved online to introduce local cafés.

Figure 7

Images of Korean Cafés

They used a photo of a café that the teacher frequently visited near her residence in Korea to demonstrate the task and grammar focus. For example, an object in the photo was circled and then sentences were written on the board using red for the prepositions of location to describe where it was in the café. For example:

There are several metal tables in front of the café.
There is a welcome sign above the front door.
I go to Paris Baguette often because it is next to my bus stop.
There is a poster about special sales beside the front door.

Students were given a few minutes to jot down notes (e.g., objects' names in English and prepositions), and then, while showing the photo to their partners, they introduced their local cafés using prepositions of location.

Before extending this activity with new partners, students circled some items they wanted to share. This time the task was more complex: without showing the photo, they described these items and where they were located while their partner drew what they heard and understood. Afterwards, they looked at the photo and drawing together and compared their understanding. For example, "There are flowers on top of each table." (This could comically be mixed up and require some clarification and communication repair if students instead said, "There are flowers under each table.") The homework assignment extended this topic of food by asking students to do a descriptive writing assignment with photos of their favourite restaurants, including at least five different prepositions of place from a word box.

Pedagogical and Cultural Significance

These two activities used with Korean university students in English writing classes were both centred on high-interest topics rooted in students' knowledge and experiences outside the classroom. They addressed the grammar structures in the assigned textbook but with content that the students were more interested in talking and writing about. This helped shift the focus in grammar learning to communicating meaning rather than simply memorizing form. Grammar instruction, practice, and feedback were incorporated into the context of conversation, which can increase student motivation and cultivate their confidence (Al-wossabi, 2014; K. Lee et al., 2020).

Moreover, these activities rightfully positioned students as cultural informants, centring their expertise and allowing them to teach their teacher, a foreign faculty member, about their culture and society. This led to collaborative teaching and learning. The native English–speaking instructor of the course was positioned as an authority on the language they were learning, but the students were positioned as the authority of the topics they were discussing (i.e., athletes or cafés). Also, these activities seemed to carry cultural significance for students. The first activity focused on national athletes, reflecting the significance of nationalism and *woori*, a sense of oneness, in Korean culture. The second activity focused on local cafés, which are found in abundance throughout Korean cities. Cafés in Korea are social places to chat, relax, and re-energize in the midst of a *balli balli* culture, a fast-paced competitive society that places a high value on social relationships.

The next section focuses on the Iraqi EFL setting and introduces two additional grammar activities. Similar to the Korean examples, they are creatively centred on visual content to cultivate communicative opportunities for students to engage with grammar structures and practice them within topics rooted in their local cultures.

American University in Kurdistan, Northern Region of Iraq

Teacher Background

The second author, Lana Qadir, is a Kurdish (Iraqi) American who grew up in California. She gained a bachelor's degree in English literature and taught for several years at a language institute in California before moving overseas to teach at a private language centre in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. She taught diverse learners there from over 70 different countries, with children to adults studying at various levels and for different purposes. Before pursuing her master's in TESOL in California, she moved to Kurdistan, Iraq, and began teaching there. She shared the same heritage language and cultural background as her Kurdish students, providing her insight into the student population, but simultaneously, since she was raised outside of the country, she also positioned herself as a learner of her students as cultural informants.

Teaching Context and Pedagogical Approach

The second author taught at an English language institute within an American university in Duhok, a city in Kurdistan within the northern region of Iraq. Her undergraduate students' English language proficiency ranged generally from beginner to low-intermediate, with around 15 students in each class. The classes met three times a week for two hours each session. Prior to beginning any course level, students were expected to take a placement exam administered by the institute, which assessed their proficiency in college-level reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Exam results then determined students' English level. Across courses, the teacher focused on communication and critical thinking in her classrooms and always planned to creatively integrate language skills in grammar instruction.

Two specific activities centred on the themes of dream cars and family trees within the Iraqi context are shared here. The themes of the lessons were derived directly from the textbook curriculum, but the instructor of the course extended these into creative activities to give students more speaking opportunities with these topics relevant to their lives. Both activities addressed grammar structures in meaningful communicative contexts through interactive activities guided by visual aids.

Activity 3: Dream Cars (Adjectives)

In the third activity, students engaged in a lesson focused on describing their dream cars using adjectives learned in class. Since the teaching context was a very extravagant campus with expensive tuition, most students came from very rich families, or in some cases royal families who drove very expensive cars. Therefore, cars were a significant part of their lives, so students were more motivated to practice grammar structures through this relevant topic.

The objective of this grammar activity was for low-intermediate level students to practice using colours and common adjectives to describe cars (see Figure 8). Students built new vocabulary words derived from the lesson "That's a cool car!" dialogue from the *American English File: Starter Student Book* (Latham-Koenig et al., 2013, p. 24). The teacher pronounced each word aloud to model an American accent. Students then repeated the word, focusing on difficult letters that Kurdish/Arabic speakers may particularly find challenging to pronounce, such as <p> and <x>. Furthermore, students began asking and answering questions about cars using the textbook dialogue as a role play with partners. Next, volunteers were asked to demonstrate the role play in class to encourage students to speak English confidently in front of an audience.

Figure 8

Images of Colourful Cool Cars

Then students read the text "What Car? Men and Women Are Different" and focused on the highlighted words: "popular," "luxurious," "convertibles," "safe," "park," and "important" (Latham-Koenig et al., 2013, p. 25). Students guessed their meaning and compared answers with a partner. In pairs, students then discussed the questions below and considered which were important for men and women:

1. Is it a nice colour?
2. Is it fast?
3. Is it big?

4. Is it cheap?
5. Is it easy to park?
6. Is it luxurious?
7. Is it safe?

Next, Figures 9 and 10 were projected on the screen and distributed as handouts to guide students in describing their dream cars for extra speaking practice (e.g., model, make, size, condition, colour, and origin).

Figure 9

Classroom Resource on Adjectives Describing a Dream Car

Figure 10

Sample Classroom Handout on Types of Cars

Then, using the new vocabulary and grammar from the lesson, students learned about the different types of cars and wrote about them. First, the students were given an example of the teacher's dream car. As she was writing about her dream car on the whiteboard, she verbally read the sentences to make sure students understood the words and heard the correct pronunciation. Second, students began brainstorming ideas and used the teacher's writing sample and fill-in-the-blank writing prompt as a guide to begin writing about their dream cars (see Figure 11).

Figure 11

Dream Car Writing Prompt

a. Talk in small groups about your car or your family's car.
    i. Example: My car is a Honda Civic. It isn't a very new car. It's small and green. It's a great car.
b. Write about your "dream" car.
    i. My car is a _____. (model) It's a/an _____ car. (nationality) It's _____. (color) It's _____ and _____. (adjectives)
c. Now tell a partner.

Source: Latham-Koenig et al. (2013, p. 25)

After the teacher had walked around the classroom to provide students with feedback and error correction, students revised and edited their work. Lastly, students shared their final drafts of their dream cars as oral class presentations to conclude the class session, maximizing speaking and communicative activities in the classroom.

Activity 4: Family Trees (Personal and Possessive Pronouns)

In the fourth activity, beginning-level students were presented with the concept of family trees and then demonstrated an understanding of personal and possessive pronouns by introducing their family members to peers. As a visual guide for the students, the teacher displayed a sample of a family tree on the screen, as illustrated in Figure 12.

In preparation for this activity, students were asked to bring printed family photos or email them to the teacher. As shown in Figure 13, a student presented her family photo taken at a local restaurant. The photo was projected on the overhead for her classmates as a visual aid. Afterwards, the student described her family to the class using possessive pronouns. For example: This is **my** mother. **Her** name is Fatima. This is **my** brother. **His** name is Mohamad.

Additionally, the class was prompted to ask questions about the photo, such as "Who is the girl wearing a purple scarf?" "What is **her** name?" This dialogue encouraged real-life conversations to take place among students, in which they applied new grammar in an interactive manner with peers. Furthermore, some students decided to create a family collage, as displayed in Figure 14.

Regardless of how they decided to share their family trees—through family photos, collages, or animated family trees—the goal was for students to use personal and possessive pronouns in meaningful ways to communicate about their families with one another, rather than merely completing grammar exercises repeatedly, lacking authentic communication practice, which is an essential part of language learning.

Figure 12

Family Tree Sample Image

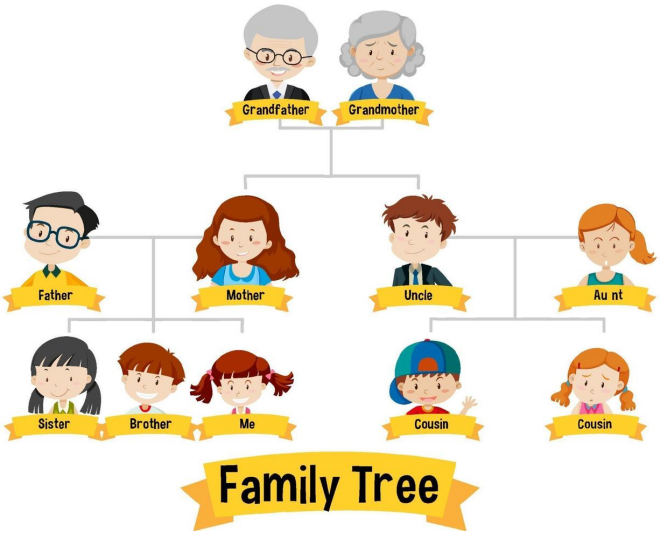
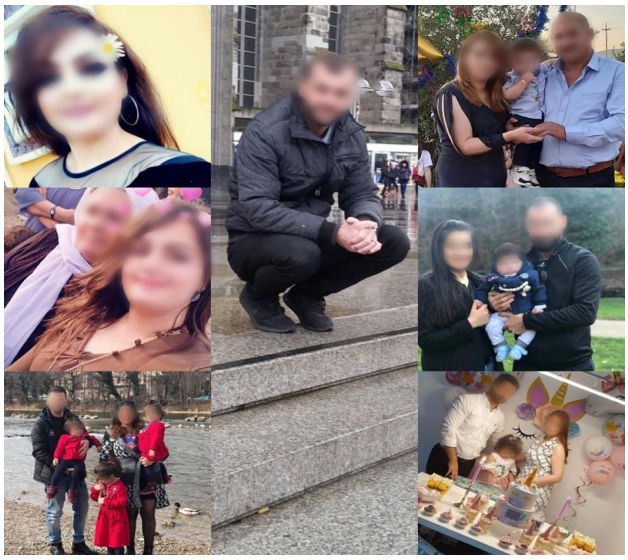


Figure 13

Student's Family Photo at a Restaurant

Figure 14

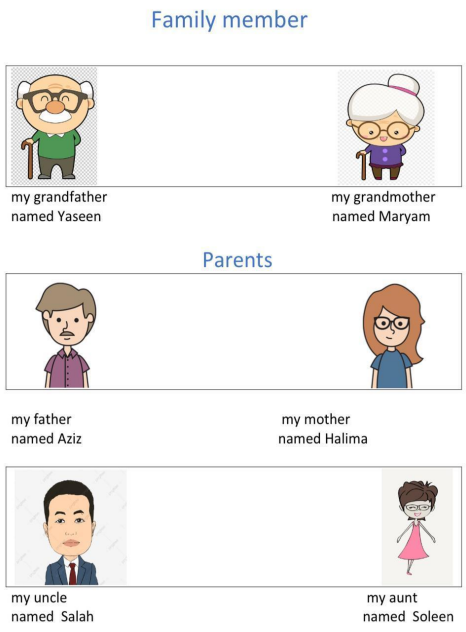
Student's Family Photo Collage



Other students decided to create animations to present their family trees orally, as shown in Figure 15.

Figure 15

Student's Animated Family Tree



Pedagogical and Cultural Significance

Activities 3 and 4, used with Iraqi university students, were both focused on communication that applied English grammar through visual presentations rooted in topics related to their lives. The pedagogical goal was to cultivate a safe learning environment for students to integrate new grammar in conversation with peers. Students were encouraged to freely practice the language, make mistakes, and learn from them along the way. Moreover, connecting culture and language is a critical aspect of engaging students in the classroom. The first grammar activity was culturally significant because, in many Middle Eastern cultures, including Iraq, cars symbolize socioeconomic status and success. If people drive luxurious cars, such as a Mercedes-Benz G-Class, they most likely come from affluent, royal families. The second grammar activity was centred on the topic of kinship and family ties, which holds high value in Iraqi culture as most students come from large families with many siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, and so on. Both grammar activities were rooted in the students' local contexts and drew upon the value systems of their societies.

Conclusion

With a heavy emphasis on exam-oriented English language classrooms focusing on form and terminology, students often lose learning opportunities because instruction feels disconnected from their interests and everyday lives outside the classroom (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Particularly in EFL settings where English is taught as a mandatory foreign language course, there can be dissonance between the cultural worlds of students' schools and their communities (Wesche & Skehan, 2002). Learner-centered grammar activities should take into consideration learners' backgrounds, needs, and goals to make learning meaningful to students (Wesche & Skehan, 2002).

However, most EFL classroom materials focus on the target culture without considering how local culture content could increase student learning. It can be difficult for students to understand material exclusively centred on the target culture because they may be unfamiliar with both the lexical and cultural items (Kristiawan, 2012). Instructors can go beyond the culture of the target language to incorporate students' cultural worlds at home and society. As this article has aimed to illustrate, the use of students' local cultures can enrich their linguistic resources and social practices. If students are familiar and confident with the content of instruction, their engagement rises, as prior knowledge with the material can increase learner motivation, level of understanding, and their willingness to ask questions and express their ideas (Kristiawan, 2012).

More specifically, these four grammar activities demonstrate how localized materials can function as a bridge to learning a language (Mahabadi, 2013). Local cultures can be integrated into grammar instruction, including topic selection, visual aids, and learning tasks. A common central component of the grammar activities we have shared is the vital role of visuals in student grammar learning (Kuen, 2010). The use of visual aids helped students understand grammar and vocabulary that could otherwise be difficult to understand (e.g., prepositions of location which tend to be confusing for language learners, and kinship terms and relationships which differ widely across languages and cultures). Moreover, visuals can motivate students to talk about cultural topics (Kuen, 2010). As we observed in our diverse teaching and learning contexts, when students have visuals to look at, they can speak more, interact with the pictures and their classmates, and build new ideas. Also, offering attractive visuals can improve subject familiarity and increase students' interest and curiosity. Furthermore, across our activities, we not only incorporated textbook and teacher-generated visual aids but also, most importantly, used *student*-generated visuals to create a context-rich learning community for grammar instruction.

With respect to the strengths of these grammar activities, they feature a communicative approach to learning with the use of visual aids and ample speaking opportunities in the classroom by applying

grammar rules in an interactive manner with peers. Some helpful considerations that teachers should keep in mind are adapting these activities to their classroom size and learners' language proficiency. For example, in a large classroom setting, the grammar activities that include individual presentations may be time-consuming. Teachers must have proper time-management skills to provide opportunity for each student to present efficiently, or alternatively, they could have students present in small groups rather than to the whole class. Moreover, time should be devoted to directly addressing exceptions to typical grammar patterns (e.g., irregular comparative and superlative adjectives) and frequent errors due to L1–L2 differences in grammar structures, such as with prepositions, which are often complex for learners from different language backgrounds.

Overall, these grammar activities employed instructional techniques that helped learners understand the *application* of different grammatical structures in meaningful communicative contexts. The focus moved beyond structural to functional objectives as students built their grammar accuracy *and* fluency. As this article has illustrated, grammar instruction can and should utilize the "funds of knowledge" that students bring from their homes and communities for concept and skill development (González et al., 2005; Moll et al., 1992). These grammar activities drew upon students' linguistic, familial, and social capital as they built upon their knowledge and experience from their language and cultural backgrounds, families and kinship ties, and social networks and communities (Yosso, 2005; Zoch & He, 2020). By positioning students as cultural informants, teachers can build their cultural awareness of their learners so they can create more culturally meaningful, student-centred grammar lessons. These multimodal grammar activities are versatile and can be adapted to different teaching contexts with diverse immigrant and international student populations, including the Canadian context, where cultural and linguistic diversity is the norm. Teachers can draw upon students' diverse language and cultural backgrounds, including their home cultures and local immigrant communities, to increase the engagement of their students in authentic, innovative grammar activities.

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