

## Adjectives (1)

### Kerry G. Maxwell and Lindsay Clandfield

### Tips and activities

#### Teaching tips

Research shows that people remember words through association with other words. It appears that the mind remembers not so much lists of words, but rather networks of association. Learners need strategies to help develop these networks. Adjectives, since they are content words (as opposed to function/grammatical words), are prime candidates for network building. Depending on the adjective, the best association to make is:

- with an antonym (cold – hot)
- with a synonym (kind – nice)
- with common noun collocations (an overwhelming success)

#### Low levels and adjectives

Low level learners need lots of new words, and they need them quickly. It's therefore a good idea to highlight common adjectives from an early stage in the course. It is also important to point out that some very frequent adjectives may have more than one meaning. For example, "old" can mean the opposite of young (for people) or the opposite of new or modern (for things). So when putting adjectives on the board it's worth also recording them with a noun in cases like this.

- old – an old man
- young – a young man

Low level learners need to see the same language over and over again for it to pass from short term to long term memory. Many common adjectives are quite easy to incorporate into teacher anecdotes or sample sentences when pointing out other elements of grammar.

#### Higher levels and adjectives

With higher levels there is the temptation to teach the long order of several adjectives. It is, however, perhaps not such an effective strategy. This is because long strings of adjectives are not that common (how often does one say "a lovely big old white bearskin rug?") and the work spent on this could be better used elsewhere (adjective and noun collocations for example, or adjective and preposition combinations; both of which are more frequent).

## Attributive and predicative adjectives

In teaching the grammar of adjectives, most course materials focus on: placement of adjectives and comparative/superlative forms. Attributive and predicative adjectives are explicitly addressed so seldom that many English teachers might not even know what they are. It is worthwhile pointing out this aspect of adjectives to students though, especially if they come across an adjective in a text that can only be used in one position or another (see activity on Using Texts below).

## Activities

### Adjective alphabet

With low to pre-intermediate learners you can challenge them to alter a simple sentence by adding a different adjective each time: one adjective for each letter of the alphabet.

For example: Write the sentence “He’s just a/an \_\_\_\_\_ baby.” on the board. Then say: “He’s just an amazing baby.” Ask another student to continue with an adjective beginning with the letter b.

S1 He’s just a beautiful baby.

S2 He’s just a common baby.

and so on...

### Think of...

You can ask learners to provide examples themselves of people or things which have the quality of the adjectives you have taught. Imagine you’ve taught adjectives to describe a person’s appearance (to a low level group for example). Ask the students to come up with examples of:

a handsome movie actor

a beautiful singer

a tall politician

an ugly old man

a short actress

a middle-aged TV actor

A variation of this activity would be to have students do the activity in small groups. Have each group read out their answers in front of the class. For every example that a group has *which no other group has written*, the group scores a point. The group with the most points at the end wins.

### Three adjectives – what do they describe?

Penny Ur suggests a great activity\* with adjectives, where the teacher gives the students three adjectives and the students must come up with words that these three adjectives could describe. So, for the adjectives *long, difficult and boring* a group of students I had recently came up with the following nouns: a test, a lecture, school, Monday mornings, the Lord of the Rings films (I didn't agree with the last one!).

A variation of this activity could be two adjectives joined with either AND or BUT.

Example pairs of adjectives:

long and difficult  
quick but complicated  
important but dangerous  
green and happy  
etc.

### Before or after?

With advanced classes, you can draw attention to adjectives that can go in more than one position and discuss the difference in meaning.

Here are two examples:

concerned

The police called a meeting to listen to the (1) \_\_\_\_\_ parents (2) \_\_\_\_\_  
What is the difference between placing concerned in position 1 or position 2?

responsible

We only want to talk with (1) \_\_\_\_\_ people (2) \_\_\_\_\_.  
What is the difference between placing concerned in position 1 or position 2?

### Using texts

After working on a text for comprehension, you could instruct advanced learners to find all the adjectives and discuss their position. Which ones are attributive and which are predicative? Is it possible to change certain sentences so that the adjectives are in a different position? What effect does this have on the text?

### Jazz up a text

Another option is to take a relatively simple text and ask students to add more adjectives to it to “jazz it up”. The key here would be to choose a short text. Try taking a short text from an elementary coursebook to use with intermediate students.

## Personality questionnaire

One way of practising adjectives and prepositions combinations is by having the students personalise them. Here are example “personality questionnaires” that students could either 1) fill out on their own and then discuss or 2) use them to interview another student

Personality questionnaire

I get angry with...easily.

I'm impatient with...

I'm always honest with...

I try to be kind to...

I'm sensitive to...

## Find someone who

The old favourite *find someone who* works really well with adjectives. Here are three examples of “adjective” find someone who activities.

(low level)

Colours

Find someone who...

has a black cat

drives a red car

is wearing white socks

has green eyes

etc.

(intermediate +)

Adjective + preposition

Find someone who...

was pleased with their last test

finds it difficult to study

is anxious about exams

finds irregular verbs easy to remember

etc.

\* Penny Ur, Andrew Wright Five Minute Activities, Cambridge University Press