

Using proverbs to illustrate grammar points

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Teachers notes

Aim: To teach proverbs and use them to remind students of, and clarify, language rules which may cause them difficulties.

Skills: Reading, speaking

Age: Young adults, adults

Level: Upper intermediate and above

Time: 60 mins

Materials: Two worksheets per student (parts one and two), copies of the answer sheet (optional).

Warmer

Discuss proverbs and ask if students know any, either from their own countries or English ones. Ask what the purpose of proverbs is, e.g. giving morals to stories and events.

Procedure:

1. Give out part one and ask students to match the proverbs and their meanings. Explain the meanings of any unknown words in this context, e.g. *Spoil the broth* (=ruin the soup), *out of mind* (=forgotten), *double-edged* (= with two sharp edges), *flock together* (=join together, meet), *company* (=a socially appropriate number).
2. Give out part two. Ask the class to look at the grammar points and use the prompts to explain what problems they cause, and why. Give help as necessary. Ask students which ones *they* have problems with, and ask for suggestions as to how they could remember them.
3. For the last exercise, ask students to match the proverbs with the grammar points. Draw students attention to the example, and show how the proverbs can illustrate the grammar points. Put students in groups of three or four and give them a time limit, say ten minutes, for the task. Give help to groups as needed.
4. Ask students to explain their answers in a whole class feedback session. They may come up with different answers to those given in the key. Explain the answers on the answer sheet, if different from the students' answers, and distribute copies to the class if necessary.
5. Ask students if they think the proverbs are useful in helping them remember the grammar rules. Ask which they found most/least useful.

Worksheet: Part 1

Match the proverbs and meanings

Proverbs

1. A leopard can't change its spots.
2. Kill two birds with one stone
3. Too many cooks spoil the broth.
4. Out of sight, out of mind.
5. A double-edged sword.
6. A person is known by the company he keeps.
7. Hobson's choice. *
8. A wolf in sheep's clothing.
9. Birds of a feather flock together.
10. Two's company, three's a crowd.

Meanings

- a. If you can't see someone or something, you soon forget about them.
- b. Achieve two goals with one action.
- c. If you want to know about someone look at his friends.
- d. Some people never change.
- e. No choice at all.
- f. Sometimes it is better for one person to do something, rather than lots of people.
- g. Something that can be both an advantage and a disadvantage.
- h. Something dangerous, but looks innocent.
- i. Two people can get on better when there's no one else.
- j. People tend to join people with similar interests /outlooks.

* A man named Hobson, who hired out his horse in strict rotation, (i.e. offering no choice) is the origin of this phrase.

Worksheet: Part 2

The following structure/language points can cause problems for learners. Why are they difficult? Use the prompts to help you.

1. *I don't want no milk.
2. Turning the corner, he saw a packet in the road. (=As he turned)
3. 'I must go' he said.= He said he had to go.
4. I saw a man standing next to me. (= a man who was standing)
5. I had my car cleaned/stolen.
6. If I'd known, I'd have come.
7. Would you mind waiting a minute?
8. I hardly worked this afternoon. (compare: I worked hard this afternoon.)
9. He worked as a cricket umpire and a football referee.
10. *She is more slower than her sister.

*grammatically incorrect form

Prompts

- 1 What is the meaning of the double negative sentence?
- 2 Why do we use a participle? What is omitted?
3. Why do we use *had to* in the reported version?
4. What is missing?
5. What is the difference in meaning between the two examples?
6. What is the difference in meaning between the first and second '*I'd*'?
How do you know?
7. What answer is expected?
8. What is the difference between *hard* and *hardly*? Why is this confusing?
9. Why do we use different words to describe the same job in different sports?
10. What is wrong with this sentence? What is the rule?

Now match each proverb with a grammar point.

Example:

A leopard can't change its spots: 'I must go', he said/He said he had to go.

Some people never change, and some words never change. *Must* does not have past tense, so we prefer *had to* in reported speech.

Answer key

Part 1

1-d, 2-b, 3-f, 4-a, 5-g, 6-c, 7-e, 8-h, 9-j, 10- i

Part 2

1. It means the opposite of the negative, i.e. *I want some milk*
2. Because it's easier and more economical. The pronoun in the first clause is omitted to avoid repetition.
3. *Must* does not have a past form
4. Students can't see the relative clause because it is reduced, so they may not know it is there.
5. The first is something you ask to be done. The second is an unexpected and usually unwanted event.
6. The first means *I had* and the second means *I would*, we understand this from the words around them.
7. Probably *Of course not*. It looks like a request, but in this form is often used as an order, and an answer may not even be necessary.
8. They have almost opposite meanings: *hardly worked* means almost not at all, which is completely different from *work hard*. *Hard* (adjective) has an irregular adverb form, *hard*.
9. It depends on the word before the noun, in this case, the sport. Collocation is important.
10. Most one syllable adjectives make comparatives by adding *-er*, *more* is only used for longer adjectives. It is not possible to use both with any one adjective.

Part 3

(Students may find other possibilities.)

- *A leopard can't change its spots: 'I must go', he said/He said he had to go.*
Some people never change, and some words never change. *Must* does not have past tense, so we prefer *had to* in reported speech.
- *Kill two birds with one stone: Turning the corner, he saw a packet in the road.*
In this construction we only need one pronoun for two clauses.
- *Too many cooks spoil the broth: *I don't want no milk.*
Double negatives are not used in English. Too many negatives spoil the sentence!
- *Out of sight, out of mind: I saw a man standing next to me.*
The relative clause is reduced; *a man standing next to me* means *a man **who was** standing next to me*. Students may not realize this is a type of relative clause, because the pronoun and auxiliary are invisible, i.e. out of sight.
- *A double-edged sword: I had my car cleaned/stolen.*
This structure is used to ask someone to perform a service for you: *I had my car cleaned*, or it is something you did not expect to happen to you (usually bad): *I had my car stolen*. A double-edged sword can cut two ways, it can be both an advantage and a disadvantage.

- *A person is known by the company he keeps: If I'd known, I'd have come.*
We know what people are like by the people around them. We can tell the meaning of *I'd* (*I would or I had*) by the words around it.
- *Hobson's choice: Would you mind waiting a minute?*
This polite request form is often used as an order, and a *yes/no* answer is often not required, as with Hobson, there may well be no choice.
- *A wolf in sheeps clothing: I hardly worked this afternoon.*
Hardly looks like something positive in the context of work, yet *I hardly worked* actually it is a negative statement. It is not what it seems.
- *Birds of a feather flock together: He worked as a cricket umpire and a football referee.*
People have their own groups, so do words. *Umpire* collocates with *cricket*, *referee* with *football*.
- *Two's company, three's a crowd: *She is more slower than her sister.*
Two syllables are enough for short comparative adjectives eg *cold+er*, *slow+er*. If you try to add *more* to *slower*, it becomes three syllables, which is too crowded in this case.