

# **Understanding and Using *Some* and *Any***

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## Portfolio Assignment 1: Language Systems - Grammar

### Understanding and Using *Some* and *Any*

#### 1. Introduction

For many learners, the use of *some* and *any* presents a challenge. Although they learn the rules at an early stage, many students can still find this area of grammar confusing. In my experience, it is one of most frustrating areas of grammar outside the verb system for students. There are also some subtle uses of *some* and *any* outside the scope of the standard rules which can be problematic, even advanced learners. When I was learning the Irish language at school, I became interested in differences such as this. I realised that while there are equivalent words for *some* and *any* in Irish (eigin and aon), they are used quite differently. I have limited myself to discussion of *some* and *any*, without addressing *somebody*, *somewhere*, *anything*, *anyone* etc...

#### 2. Analysis

##### Meaning

*Some* and *any* are used when it is not easy or important to say how much or how many is referred to (Swan 1995). What they have in common is that they are both used for indefinite quantities.

The choice of *some* or *any* is not determined by grammatical form but by meaning (Lewis 1982). That is, *some* is used if the quantity is restricted or limited. *Any* is used if the quantity is unrestricted or unlimited (whether real or imagined)

For example, there is a subtle difference between the following expressions of offering:

- 1) *Would you like some dinner?*
- 2) *Would you like any dinner?*

- 1) There is the sense here that dinner has been prepared and is ready to be served
- 2) Here it is more likely that food would have to be cooked.

Also, if an affirmative answer is expected, it is more usual to ask

*Would you like some more tea?* than *Would you like any more tea?*  
(Close 1992)

When used as identifiers, *some* and *any* have very different meanings and are not interchangeable. For example:

*Some fool stepped on my toe* (restricted)  
*Any fool can tell you that* (unrestricted)

Because the latter two examples fall outside the scope of the basic introductory rules for *some* and *any*, I have found that students are confused by their meaning and don't use such phrases.

Meaning is also affected by stress e.g.

*Will you have some cake?* – polite offer

*Will you have SOME cake?* – more insistent, possibly following a polite refusal

##### Grammatical form

*Some* and *any* can be used as determiners, pronouns or adverbs. I will limit my observations to their use as determiners. A determiner is a word used in front of a noun to express, for example, number and quantity (Thornbury 1997). Both *some* and *any* refer to an indefinite quantity or number. For example:

*I need to buy some new clothes*

*Is there any milk left?*

The rules for the respective use of *some* and *any* are most commonly presented in a generalised way. For example in Headway Pre-Intermediate (Soars and Soars 1991), the rules are presented as follows:

Countable nouns are used with *some*+ a plural noun in positive sentences, and *any*+ a plural noun in negatives.

Uncountable nouns are used with *some* in positive sentences and *any* in questions and negatives, but only with a singular noun.

Thornbury (1997) usefully contrasts the above more orthodox grammatical rules with the rules found in Out and About (Lewis 1982) which “attempts to get at the underlying meaning of each determiner”.

I have found it useful to refer to the rules as guidelines, as there are exceptional uses. For example, *some* is also used in questions of offer and request e.g.

*Would you like some tea?*

*Can I have some milk?*

while *any* is used in the affirmative e.g.

*Any child could see that*

*Some* can also be followed by single countable nouns e.g.

*Some idiot locked me out* (unknown person)

*That was some game, wasn't it?* (=quite a game)

### Phonology

Both *some* and *any* are used in stressed and unstressed ways.

When unstressed, the vowel that students learn is / ə / (/s m/). When stressed they learn / ʌ / (/s m/). However, in Ireland the pronunciation of *some* almost always uses / ʌ / (/s m/) for both stressed and unstressed uses. Sometimes, my students have queried if such pronunciation differences are important. Many of them have made such an effort to get the vowel sounds “right” while learning English in their own country that they are understandably reluctant to adapt to the local pronunciation. On the other hand, those students who aurally gifted acquire the Irish vowel sounds quite easily. By and large, I have noticed that most students don't change their vowel sounds unless they stay in Ireland for a long period of time.

In general, I find that *some* is almost always over-stressed by learners. As a result, they find it difficult to realise the difference between, for example,

*There were some people in the garden*

*There were SOME people in the garden* (i.e. not a lot, but some)

### **3. Learner Problems**

Students learn the simplified rules at elementary level. The basic rules are quite easy for students to grasp. However, this seems to lull them into a false sense of security, believing that they can use them properly. Learners fail to use them correctly and confuse them even when they have been introduced to the basic rules.

It is quite common to hear mistakes such as *Do you have some tippex?* in a situation where *Do you have any tippex?* is more appropriate. The learner has not learnt that it

is only with offers “*Would you like some tippex?*” or requests *Can I have some tippex?* than some can be used in an interrogative. I have seen that students have difficulty in identifying what is a request. They have argued, with some justification, that *Do you have some tippex?* IS a request.

I have noticed that because they don’t know which one to choose, learners can avoid using *some* and *any* in certain situations by using an article or no article at all. As a result, they may avoid making a mistake e.g. *Do you have tippex?*, but they don’t use the language as it is spoken and fossilise in this particular area.

Conversely, learners sometimes persist in using some + singular countable noun e.g. *I’ve got some book.*

I have observed that having learnt to use *some* in positive statements and *any* in negative statements, students have real difficulty in understanding and using *any* in affirmative. This is particularly challenging in statements where *some* could be used as well e.g. *I forgot to get some bread* and *I forgot to get any bread.*

Learners face similar difficulties with the choice that is presented with if-clauses e.g. *If you want some/any help, let me know.* The difference in meaning is slight but significant.

Students with L1s which use double negatives often jump to the conclusion that any is a negative word. For example, if they learn that *I have no cake* is the same as *I haven’t any cake*, they may say for example, *any doctor can’t cure you* when they mean *no doctor can cure you*. For students with Latin L1s, the presence of the letter n in the word *any* is possibly a contributory factor in accounting for this error.

As they advance, some learners find it difficult to accommodate the whole truth as it is revealed to them little by little. This may be because the rules had been over-simplified for them.

#### **4. Possible Approaches**

To approach this area successfully, it may be useful to consider Batstone’s (1994) framework for teaching grammar as product, process and skill. Each approach has its own strengths and weaknesses. Product teaching allows students to focus very explicitly on specified forms and meanings. The process approach gives learners practice in the skills of language use. Teaching grammar as skill guides learners to utilize grammar for their own communication.

Although the product approach is probably favoured as a way to introduce *some* and *any*, its limitations have to be addressed by providing activities which allow students to process and use the grammar they have learnt.

I have found it effective to take the drawing of party food and drink from Cutting Edge (Upper Intermediate) and adapt its use as a gap fill exercise according to the level of the students. For example, working in pairs, one student has the drawing, while the other asks *Are there any \_\_\_\_?* The other student can answer, *Yes, there are some \_\_\_\_* or *No, there aren’t any \_\_\_\_.*

The basic *some/any* rule is usually introduced to the elementary student. There are so many complexities in this area that it seems wise to continue this approach. However, it's probably a good idea to introduce the use of *some* in offers and requests before too long. The usual criteria (e.g. age, level, background) for deciding a more or less deductive/inductive approach to teaching this area apply. Students can learn this from an activity using the table of party food and drink. This time, the questions asked are *Would you like some \_\_\_\_\_?* and *Can I have some \_\_\_\_\_?*

Another possibility would be to start with a piece of text or a story which features *some* and *any*, ask students to examine the language and to notice important differences in the grammar. "Learners need to see not only that there are specific meanings associated with specific forms, but that the meaning differences between similar forms really matter". (Thornbury 2001). For instance, it would be useful for learners to notice the difference between

*Do you have any money?* and

*Do you have some money?*

This is done most effectively through story, so that the difference can be noticed in the context.

Cutting Edge (Upper Intermediate) attempts to address the issue of supplementing the basic "*some* in positive, *any* in negative/interrogative sentences". The students are asked to examine sentences, some of which apparently contradict the basic rule. Then the students are introduced to the more complex rules and asked to explain the differences between the sentences in the light of the new information. It might be effective as a consciousness-raising activity to ask students to examine the sentences before reading the rules in order to "encourage them to think about samples of language and to draw their own conclusions about how the language works" (Willis & Willis 1996)

In this area of grammar, learners have not been encouraged to learn fixed phrases or collocations to any great extent. But there are some common expressions, not necessarily covered by the rules, which can be introduced. Some of these can be found in song titles. These can form the basis for learning similar chunks of language. For example:

"Some Guys Have All The Luck" – a limited number of guys

"Any Dream Will Do" – it doesn't matter what dream

"Some Enchanted Evening", "Some Day My Prince Will Come" – an unspecified time in the future. This would be an opportunity to point out that the latter is more common and expressions such as "some month" or "some year" would be unusual.

"Some Might Say" – meaning an unspecified number of people.

In this way, students would be sensitised to variations of form and meaning which are beyond what they have already encountered.

In order to address the learner problem associated with the double negative, I have found it useful help the students realise that the word *any* is not necessary to convey negativity. For example, if they first see that the sentence *Tom doesn't have money in his pockets* is both grammatically correct and successful in conveying that he has no money in his pocket, then they are prepared to notice that the use of *any* (*Tom doesn't have any money in his pockets*) has the function of emphasising meaning. The activity

begins with the students taking a negative statement such as *Tom has no money in his pockets* and re-phrasing it firstly as *Tom doesn't have money in his pockets* and then *Tom doesn't have any money in his pockets*. Then they come up with their own statements to be adapted in this way.

The difficulties faced by students learning to use *any* in affirmative and if-clauses can be approached in the following way. I have suggested to students that when faced with a choice between *some* and *any*, before uttering the sentence, they should rehearse the sentence to themselves and ask themselves “Do I feel like stressing some/any” or “Do I feel like opening my hands out while saying it?” If the answer is “yes”, they should use *any*. Students work on sentences such as

“*If you want some/any help, let me know*”

in particular contexts and have to decide whether it is more appropriate to use *some* or *any*.

The occurrences of some + singular countable noun e.g. *some four thousand bottles were sold*; *some idiot* and *some game* (above) are quite limited and are very particular. I suggest that these are treated separately and best are best taught in “chunks”.

## 5. Conclusion

The accepted practice in teaching this area is to present a simplified version of the rules to students at an early stage and to reveal supplementary complexities little by little as they progress from elementary to advanced. Some learners have difficulties even at an early stage because the rules as usually presented are generalised and concentrate on form and syntax while paying relatively little attention to meaning. Although the rules are useful, greater attention should be drawn to meaning at lower levels, so that the learners' use does not become mechanical. From undertaking this assignment I have learnt that a more deductive approach, which raises the students' awareness of the semantic issues around *some* and *any*, is likely to be more effective especially where certain collocations and fixed expressions fall outside the scope of the rules.

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