



Stringy Long  
Big Adjectives:  
Attributive Adjective  
Order, ESL Students,  
and Writing Tutors

Jain Willis

*Because adjective order is intuitive for native speakers, teaching correct principles can be challenging for both writing tutors and ESL students. This article contends that by understanding the rules and theories behind ordering, tutors can effectively teach proper adjective ordering. The article concludes that with repeated instruction and practice, ESL students can cease to rely on rules and charts and start to recognize the correct order intuitively.*

# Introduction

An ESL student sits down next to you and hands you her paper about mountain lions. As you read it aloud to her, you notice that she has used the noun phrase “a brown old graceful cougar.” You pause in your reading and circle it, then return to reading. As the two of you go through the paper together, you come back to the phrase and point out that it should be “a graceful old brown cougar.” She looks at you, confused, and asks, “Why? Adjectives can go in front of the noun, can’t they?” You start to nod, then shake your head as you realize you don’t know *why* it’s wrong. But you can feel the wrongness; you just know, deep down, that no one would ever meet “a brown old graceful cougar.” To her, the order she chose seems just as logical as the one you say is correct. How can you explain what you know intuitively? As writing tutors, we must be able to explain proper adjective order, a concept that appears intuitive to native speakers and arbitrary to ESL students. We can do this by using specific and repeated instruction.

## English Adjective Order

As most native speakers understand adjective order innately, we must discuss the rules behind adjective order to be able to explain them. Ask native speakers if the phrase “big three black sleepy bears” is correct, and they will tell you the adjective string is wrong, but they won’t know why. This intuitive understanding makes explaining adjective order difficult for both the teacher and the student. Since both the teaching and the learning is so challenging, Meerman and Tamaoka (2008, 3) claim, “detailed instruction in adjective order is often forgone.” We must understand what we are doing intuitively before we can teach proper adjective order.

The proper order, however, has not reached a general consensus. For this paper, we will focus on the order that Meerman and Tamaoka

used in their 2006 study. Attributive adjectives will usually follow the order described in Table 1. Not all of these categories must be present in a noun phrase, but the order remains the same no matter which categories are used. A table such as this would be helpful for a writing tutor to keep on hand.

## ESL Difficulties

A student's difficulties with English adjective order will usually begin with transfer from their first language (L<sub>1</sub>). Michael Fender (2008, 66) shows that "the transfer and/or interference of the L<sub>1</sub>, or more specifically of the L<sub>1</sub> word integration routines, influences the emergence of particular ESL word integration and sentence processing skills." Students without specific instruction on attributive adjective order will inevitably transfer their L<sub>1</sub> routines to their English writing. As our tutees come from a variety of backgrounds and first languages, the routines will differ. In languages such as German and English, an attributive adjective will precede the noun. In Spanish, the adjectives will follow the noun. In languages like French, it depends on the adjective's relationship with the noun. And finally, in languages like Japanese, there is no specified adjective order. As writing tutors, we must be aware that L<sub>1</sub> transfer does occur, so we can know how to use our resources to teach tutees the proper English order.

With an understanding of L<sub>1</sub> transfer, we can see why English adjective order would appear arbitrary to ESL students. At first glance, the only rule appears to be that an attributive adjective goes before the noun. After putting the adjectives in front, a student would feel free to put the adjectives in any order. Our first step in teaching adjective order is to show ESL

Table 1. Order of adjectives in noun phrases students how the order is not random. That way we can then demonstrate the order with specific and repeated examples.

Table 1.									
Determiner (articles and other limiters)	Observation (post determiners, limiter adjectives and adjectives subject to subjective measures)	Physical Description (adjectives subject to objective measure)				Origin (denominal adjectives denoting source of noun)	Material (denominal adjectives denoting what something is made of)	Qualifier (final limiter)	Noun
		Size	Shape	Age	Color				
a	beautiful			antique		British		touring	car
five		small	round		green				balls
his			long		brown				hair
many	smart			young		Japanese			students
an				old			wooden	rocking	chair
their	expensive	big			white				house
that	tasty		round			Belgian			chocolate
one		large			red		silk		scarf

Note: Order of adjectives in noun phrases. Reprinted from "Can Japanese ESL Students Recognize the Correct Order of Adjectives in Noun Phrases?" by A. D. Meerman and K. Tamaoka, (2006) *International Journal of Curriculum Development and Practice* 8, 1-11.

# Theories

Since native speakers of English understand adjective order intuitively, is it possible to teach the innate ability of ordering adjectives to ESL students? This is the question that Meerman and Tamaoka (2008) explored in their study, where they measured the effect of intensive instruction on Japanese ESL students' understanding of proper English adjective order. After a 70 minute lesson, students were able to "grasp and employ the rules governing adjective order" (Meerman and Tamaoka 2008, 9). They found that yes, the intuitive ability of ordering attributive adjectives is teachable. By following this study's approach of specific and repeated instruction, we can effectively teach our tutees adjective order.

Giving our students a short and specific lesson on adjective order will go a long way to helping them achieve mastery. "This necessary point of semantic adjective order," Meerman and Tamaoka (2008, 9) pointed out, "can so easily and quickly be taught." Lessons should help the students become aware of and understand the order, and they don't need to be long or difficult. When we go over adjective order with students, we should be sure to stick to simple and specific instruction.

A single lesson, however, is not enough; repetition is required for students to retain what they've learned. Meerman and Tamaoka (2008, 10) postulate that further lessons will help ESL students "respond with intuitive semantic judgment rather than mechanical grammatical recall." In order for ESL students to master the proper adjective order, the concept should be repeatedly taught. In Meerman and Tamaoka's 2008 study, half of the participating students had previous knowledge of adjective order, yet performance on a pre-test was overwhelmingly poor. The students had been taught once about adjective order, but they hadn't retained what they had been taught or still didn't understand the concept. After giving our tutees a specific lesson, we must be sure to return to the concept several times to make sure that they understand and retain it.

# Activities

As writing tutors, there are several specific activities that we can use repeatedly with our tutees to help them master adjective order. If in your first conference you notice that your tutee is having difficulty with adjective order, point it out. Using a handout with a table like Table 1, explain proper adjective order, and ask the student to practice using attributive adjectives in the next draft. During the next conference, follow up and go more in-depth if the student still needs help. By requiring students to actively use attributive adjectives, you help them practice what they've learned, which will help them retain their knowledge. For students having difficulty with attributive adjectives, some of the following activities, adapted from Marianne Celce-Murcia's *The Grammar Book* (1999, 399–400), may be helpful:

- On a piece of paper or a whiteboard, write a single noun and then list various adjectives that could describe it. Ask the student to put the adjectives in the correct order, either as one long noun phrase or as several short phrases. Go through the phrases with the student and, with a table of adjective order at hand, write out what type of adjective each word is. *Is it a determiner? Is it describing color or material?* Point out the order for each adjective. This should help the student understand the relationship between the adjective's qualities and its position in the noun phrase.
- Choose an object (a pencil, a bag, a book) and describe it with one adjective: *blue pencil*. Have the student repeat after you. Say another adjective out loud, and have the student add it to the noun phrase in the proper order: *long blue pencil* or *blue plastic pencil*. Continue listing adjectives, and then choose another object. This activity helps the student apply what they understand about adjective order.
- Choose an object (again, a pencil, a bag, a book) and ask the student to describe it. Ask the student to start with short phrases and then expound on them, putting the adjectives in proper order. In this activity, the student is responsible for supplying the adjectives. It

forces them to think creatively and to produce their own phrases while practicing the correct order.

After using these activities, remember to encourage students to use what they've learned in their next draft. These specific lessons, followed by repeated use in writing, will help students better understand and retain what they've learned. Make sure to follow up at your next conference and to clarify anything the student still doesn't understand.

## Conclusion

Ordering attributive adjectives is a concept that can be quickly and easily taught, though at first glance it may seem random to ESL students and natural to native speakers. After you have employed the methods discussed here, encourage your students to continue creating complex noun phrases. Have them ask native speakers if the order is right. Give them resources to go to when they have more questions. Once they are conscious of the order, they will be able to self-correct their own adjective strings. As students practice using attributive adjectives with specific and repeated instruction, they will be able to move away from relying on grammatical rules and move toward intuitive reasoning.



# References

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