Making English Grammar Meaningful and Useful
Mini Lesson #5
Helping Verbs – 5 Communicative Functions

The **purpose** of this lesson is to illustrate how **Helping Verbs** are used in informal conversational English.

Helping Verbs have 5 important **Communicative Purposes**. They are briefly described here with a few examples.

Short Answers – In conversational English, yes/no questions are rarely answered with complete sentences. Instead, whether the answer is positive or negative, it usually consists of yes or no, a subject and a **Helping Verb**.

Question	Answer
"Is it raining outside?"	"Yes, it **is**!"
"Do they often miss your class?"	"No, they **do**n't!"
"Have the students bought their books?"	"Yes, they **have**!"
"Did we cover that in class last week?"	"No, we **did**n't!"

Tag Questions – These short questions added to the end of statements are used for agreement or expected information. They are formed with a **Helping Verb** plus the subject of the sentence to which they are attached. A positive statement will have a negative tag; a negative statement will have a positive tag. The subject of the tag is usually a pronoun.

Statement	Tag
"They wrote difficult items,	**did**n't they?"
"We won't miss very many,	**will** we?"
"She hasn't finished her test,	**has** she?"
"You have finished your test,	**have**n't you?"

Agreement/Disagreement – English has several ways for a responder to either agree or disagree with something that someone else has said. They nearly all use **Helping Verbs**. Positive agreements use 'so' or 'too'. Negative agreements use 'neither' or 'either'. Disagreements use only a subject pronoun and a **Helping Verb**.

Statement	Agreement	Disagreement
"I like spicy food."	"I **do** too."	"I **do**n't."
"He writes well."	"So **does** she."	"She **does**n't."
"He won't go."	"Neither **will** she."	"She **will**."
"She hasn't finished."	"I **have**n't either."	"I **have**."

This lesson was developed by John Nelson and Tymofey Wowk, 2012

Surprise/Doubt – To express surprise or doubt about a statement, a responder formulates a short question using a subject with a **Helping Verb**, with or without using subject-verb inversion. Unlike tag questions, to show surprise for a positive statement, the response question is also positive. To show surprise for a negative statement, the response question is also negative.

Statement	Response Question
"I always get A's on my papers!"	"**Do** you?!" or "You **do**?!"
"They got perfect test scores!"	"**Did** they?!" or "They **did**?!"
"He hasn't turned in his paper yet!"	"**Has**n't he?!" or "He **has**n't?!"
"She won't be able to come to class!"	"**Wont**' she?!" or "She **won't**?!"

Emphasis – When a speaker wants to provide emphasis to a point, he/she will stress a **Helping Verb** to do so, and will insert a **Helping Verb** for this purpose if necessary.

Normal Statement	Emphasized Statement
"They speak a little English."	"They **do** speak a little English!"
"It rained a bit last night."	"It **did** rain a bit last night!"
"I have done my homework."	"I **have** done my homework!"
"They will speak at 7:00."	"They **will** speak at 7:00!"

As illustrated here, **Helping Verbs** constitute an important aspect of English Grammar, and are used in many common conversational expressions. They should be the focus of direct instruction for ELLs. Drawing ELLs' attention directly to **Helping Verbs** will provide them with a much better ability to function in English conversations naturally. This will also enable ELLs to understand and use English tenses more consistently, and how to ask and answer questions more accurately. Mastering **Helping Verbs** will enable ELLs to produce English sentences more correctly both in speech and in writing.