Section 18  *if* etc

**language notes**

Students’ grammars often give the impression that there are three main types of conditional sentence (so-called ‘first’, ‘second’ and ‘third’). While these structures certainly need special attention, the analysis is seriously misleading. Students who have been taught this are likely to be confused when they run across the many other kinds of structure that are possible in sentences with *if* (see the examples on this page). More accurately, there are two types of structure in sentences with *if*:

- Normal tense use, as with most other conjunctions (including the use of present tenses to refer to the future in subordinate clauses)
- The use of ‘backshift’, where past and past perfect forms express unreality rather than time (this happens in some other kinds of sentence besides conditionals, too).

We feel that, if possible, it is best to avoid talking about ‘first’, ‘second’ and ‘third’ conditionals. German-speaking students may make occasional slips due to the fact that German *wenn* can mean ‘if’.

*When I was you, I wouldn’t do it like that.*

Pronunciation: the CD-ROM will help students who have trouble hearing the difference in fast speech between *I* and *I’ll*, *you* and *you’ll* etc or between *will* and *would*.

**possible further activities**

The quotation and cartoon are simply provided to introduce the relevant structures in an entertaining way. No activities are necessary beyond reading, and they should need little or no explanation.

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**language notes**

See the note for page 243 on the misleading terms ‘first conditional’ etc.

In some students’ languages, future tenses may be normal after the equivalent of *if*:

*She will study next year if she will have enough money.*

**possible further activities**

*Personalisation*  Students write sentences about themselves, completing some or all of the following:

- If I’m bored, I …
- If I’m happy, I …
- If I’m depressed, I …
- If I have a free weekend, I …
- If I need help, I …

*If-chains*  Start with a sentence about the future beginning ‘I think …’ – for example, ‘I think it will rain tomorrow’. Get the class to suggest continuations with *if*. For example:

- If it rains, I’ll stay at home. If it rains, I’ll dance in the garden.

Choose one and invite continuations:

- If I dance in the garden, my neighbours will call the police. If I dance in the garden, I’ll get wet. etc

Choose one again, and go on to build up a big *if*-chain.

An asterisk (*) indicates an incorrect form or use.
OR: As a variant, give every student an opening sentence about the future beginning ‘I think …’. Each student writes the first link in the chain and passes the paper to the next student, until all the papers have gone round the class. Collect the chains and read them out, or get students to read them out.

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**language notes**

Even at this level, some students may not really understand that past tenses can be used not only to refer to past time, but also to express unreality, indefiniteness, hesitancy etc.

The use of *were* (an old subjunctive) instead of *was* after *if* is still common in formal writing, but is becoming steadily less frequent in speech. *Was* must now be considered correct in this context (although some people may feel it’s a mistake). *Were* is still very common in the fixed expression *If I were you.*

**possible further activities**

*Putting things right*  Invite students to complete the sentence ‘If …, the world would be a better place.’

*Advice*  Tell the class that you have various problems, and ask for advice (written or spoken), beginning ‘If I were you’. Help with vocabulary as necessary.

‘I’m lonely.’ ‘If I were you, I’d join a club.’

Other possible problems:

- I’m tired. I’m not feeling well. I don’t know what to do this weekend.
- I’ve just won $10,000 in a lottery. I need money. I’m depressed.
- My girlfriend/boyfriend/partner … won’t speak to me. I’m tired of teaching,

*Song titles*  Do students know, or can they find on the internet, song titles beginning with *if*?

*Internet*  Get students to find out which seems to be more common in modern English: “if I was” or “if I were”. How much more common? What about “if I was you” and “if I were you”?

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**language notes**

This lesson is provided for students who need more help to understand the use of past tenses to express unreality, indefiniteness, hesitancy etc, rather than past time.

**possible further activities**

‘*You don’t really love me.*’ Get students to complete the following, addressed to anybody of their choice (real or imaginary).

You don’t love me. If you really loved me, you would …

Who can produce the most ridiculous demand?

*Internet*  Get students to decide which of the following they think are most common.

- If cats are people. / If cats were people.
- If horses can speak. / If horses could speak.
- If dogs understand. / If dogs understood.

Then get them to check their estimates on the internet.
language notes

The double use of *could* (to mean ‘was/were able to’ and ‘would be able to’) may be confusing for students.

possible further activities

*Personalisation: extending Exercise 2* Get students to write sentences about themselves on the same lines as those in Exercise 2. (‘If I could cook I could get a job in a restaurant.’)

If we had some bacon … There is an old army joke that goes, for example, ‘If we had some eggs, we could have bacon and eggs, if we had some bacon’ (quoted on page 253). Invite the class to invent variations of the joke (or of another example if bacon is culturally unacceptable). Possible combinations: bread and butter, chicken and chips, coffee and biscuits, strawberries and cream.

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language notes

Some students may need a good deal of practice with this rather complicated structure.

possible further activities

*Personalisation* Ask students to write about a turning point in their lives, completing one of these sentences (or something similar):

- If I had(n’t) …, everything would have been different.
- If I had(n’t) …, I would(n’t) have …
- If … hadn’t …, I would(n’t) be … today.

*Sentence chains* A difficult exercise, suitable for confident and well-motivated students: get them (individually or in groups) to produce their own sentence-chain tasks like those in Exercise 2, for the other students to do.

*Story* Invite students to write a very short story beginning ‘If I hadn’t answered the phone …’ Help with vocabulary as necessary.

*Internet* Get students to find two or three interesting sentences on the internet beginning “If we hadn’t”.

*Cartoon* This is very culture-specific. It will need to be explained to students who don’t know the biblical account of the six-day creation of the world, and to others who are unfamiliar with the relevant cartoon conventions, and may not realise that the picture shows God sitting on a cloud talking to an angel.

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language notes

*Unless* is often explained as meaning ‘if not’. However, it cannot always be used in the same contexts – it would be odd to say, for example, ‘I’ll be surprised unless she passes her exam’. ‘Except if’ is a more exact equivalent of *unless*. 

➔ Section 18 continues
possible further activities

*Regulations* Can students think of three or more laws or regulations that can be expressed as follows? Help with vocabulary as necessary.

You can’t … unless you …

This could be done in groups: which group can think of the most?

*Inventing regulations* Students (perhaps in groups) write regulations for the classroom, beginning ‘You can’t come in here unless …’.

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page 261

language notes

Tense use with *if only* and *I wish* is slightly more complex than shown here, but the refinements are unnecessary for intermediate students.

possible further activities

*Time travel* Tell students that they have been transported back in time to the 17th century. Which three 21st-century things do they wish they had? They should write sentences beginning ‘I wish I had …’ or ‘If only I had …’. Then ask for everybody’s wishes – what are the most common ones?

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page 262

language notes

Many students think *in case* can be used in a similar way to *if* (often because they are misled by an apparent translation equivalence):

*I wish I had …* or *If only I had …*. Then ask for everybody’s wishes – what are the most common ones?

possible further activities

*Crazy insurance* Divide the class into groups of three or four. Each group is an insurance company, and it has to advertise three or more crazy insurance policies, each with a title and a description beginning ‘in case’. For example:

Elephant Insurance: In case an elephant breaks into your house.
Kitten insurance: In case your cat gets pregnant.

If students are short of ideas, make some suggestions, leaving students to decide on the ‘in case’ part. Possibilities:

- Crocodile Insurance.
- Floor Insurance.
- Shoe Insurance.
- Red Paint Insurance.
- Neighbour Insurance.
- Exploding Piano Insurance.
- Flying Fish Insurance.

Which group can come up with the craziest set of policies?
language notes

The use of *It's time* + to-infinitive shouldn’t cause much difficulty. *I'd rather* + bare infinitive may need more practice. And the use of a past tense in a clause after these structures will certainly take time for students to get used to.

possible further activities

*Preferences*  Ask students if they would like an irregular verb test. It is up to them to tell you what they would rather do instead, using *I'd rather* + infinitive.

*Mime*  In pairs, students mime situations in which one is telling the other ‘It’s time you …’ The others have to decide (more or less) what sentence is being mimed. Give out sentences for miming on cards if students need help. Possibilities:

It’s time you:  went to bed  woke up  had your hair cut  cleaned your shoes  got new glasses  went to the dentist  did your music practice  cooked supper  gave me a kiss