



ORIGINAL PAPER

English Conditionals – IF Clauses – Rules and Language Structures

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Abstract:

English grammar is the one that sets the basis of speaking and writing correctly in this language. English grammar can be seen as a separate subject/ discipline for learners because it comprises key information, rules and examples of correct language structures. All of these enable English language to be learnable and accessible to those who want to study and afterwards use it. Through English grammar, the learner can create his/ her own grammatically correct sentences and links/ connections between words. In English, the verb category is considered the most complex one due to the fact that each context and placement in time lead to changes of the verb tense. In addition, English has conditional structures in which verbs have to follow a set of rules in order to form correct sentences / phrases.

English Conditionals or If Clauses have a complex aspect because they need to apply different rules that change the verb tenses in correlation with what the speaker wants to transmit. An English Conditional sentence has two parts: one part – the conditional one that is introduced by **if** or a similar word (e.g. even if, unless) and the other part includes a verb that has to take a certain tense.

In fact, the hypothetical or potential situation is very important because it determines the type of conditional that should be used. For English learners, If-Clause sentences are difficult to master because, in most languages, a hypothetical or less likely to happen situation does not come with the need to have a certain verb tense.

Keywords: *English grammar, conditionals, types, rules, different verb tenses.*

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English Conditionals – IF Clauses – Rules and Language Structures

English grammar is well-structured, offering the learner the possibility to exercise the same verb tense, the same grammatical structure or part of speech in different contexts.

In English, each grammatical structure has a specific function that follows certain patterns. The English learner has to master the main parts of speech (verb, noun, adjective, adverb, pronoun, preposition, etc.) in order to go further and deal with: verb tenses, conditionals (if-clauses), reported(indirect) speech, passive voice, modal verbs or gerunds and infinitives.

English conditionals do not represent a unique trait for this language because we can find conditional structures in Romanian language as well as in German. The only difference is that English employs verbs at different tenses according to the clause/conditional type. It is obvious that these structures cannot be taught to an A1 or A2 English learner/ student. Such conditional structures can be introduced to B1 students and they can contain a higher level of difficultness for the B2 and C1 students.

As students improve their English language, teachers can involve them in more complicated grammar structures. When and how these structures are introduced, are decisions that the English teacher has to take. For *how* – there are several teaching methods and even devices (the smart table and the projector) which can be used during English classes/ courses.

The teaching methods, even for English conditionals, can involve, at a certain point *the didactic game*. This didactic game:” ... is an attractive activity in a lively, humorous and motivating atmosphere in which the students carry out instructive – educational tasks. This is the element that prevents the appearance of fatigue and monotony in foreign language classes” (Chirițescu&Păunescu, 2024:237)

As mentioned, the didactic game can be employed when teaching English conditionals at least for generalities.

English conditionals or IF-clauses structures can be divided in three parts (except zero conditional and mixed conditionals), or in other words, there are three types of conditionals based on the given context.

English Conditionals: Types and Examples

English conditional sentences are often created in order to emphasize a point of view:

e.g. Unless they stop this discussion the agreement is down. = If they do not stop this discussion, the agreement is down.

Most English grammar books present If-clauses structures as divided in three. The first type of conditional offers a predictive situation therefore is based on reality. The second conditional is also hypothetical presents imaginary situations from the present or future. These hypothetical contexts are unlikely to happen.

The third type conditional is counterfactual conditional because the context belongs to the past and the speaker imagines how things would have turned out if he had done something different.

Along with these three types, English grammar books also mention zero conditional, mixed conditionals as well as exceptions to the general rules. In his book, *Explaining English Grammar*, Yule George states that: “English has a general tendency to move longer or ‘heavier’ chunks of information to the end of sentences. Known as END-WEIGHT, this process creates a strong motivation for putting lengthy if-clauses in final position” (Yule, 1998:137)

e.g. People have no other alternative than to pay if local authorities decide to increase taxes for vehicles made before 2000 and for private properties.

Such examples demonstrate that English conditionals can be included in longer sentences and phrases and that they are useful in expressing a point of view, a condition, a supposition, a possibility or a hypothetical situation.

The English conditionals are as follows:

- Zero Conditional – used for general truths and proven scientific facts. It has a simple structure: if + Present simple tense + Present simple tense:

e.g.: *If I heat water, it boils. / If you press start, the game begins. / If I drop glass, it breaks. Do not use gloves if you want to get a good mix of ingredients, / Ask her to check the result if she finishes the exercise before me.*

- First Conditional is used for real future possibility meaning that the action is most probably to happen. *Its structure is: if + Present Simple Tense + Simple Future Tense*

(will+ verb base):

e.g.: *If I learn this, I will get a good grade. / If you skip this class, your teacher will notice.*
/

If he submits his project he will participate in the contest. / If I need help, I will ask you to come. / If you do not call her, she will not know you are interested in the job.

- Second conditional expresses hypothetical situations in reference to what could happen if certain facts or events were possible. *The structure of this type of conditional is: If + Past Tense Simple + Present Conditional (would and verb base):*

e.g. *If it were colder, I would turn the heat on. / If he did not eat so much fast food he would be thinner. / If I were you, I would change the title. / If she saved money she could go in that exotic trip to Mexico.*

In this type of conditional we can replace if with was/ were followed by subject and infinitive. The meaning of the sentence does not change, denoting the same hypothetical situation:

e.g.: *Were people from that country to win the project, they would rebuild some factories. / Were I to listen to your advice I would sell the car. / Was he to see the Taj Mahal he would tell you in the video.*

- Third conditional refers to the past. More precisely they things that did not happen although we imagined how a situation could have been different if another situation had happened. The situation described by the 3rd type conditional is an impossible one and the sentences / phrases that are formed are unreal and truly hypothetical because they describe a context in the past that can no longer be changed in the present.

We form the 3rd type like this: If + Past Perfect Tense ++ would+ have + past participle of the verb:

e.g.: *If you had told me the truth I would have behaved differently. / He would have accepted my request if I had asked him to. / If he had seen that movie he would have known the plot. / Mary would have bought those shoes if she had received her salary.*

Other considerations regarding If Clause/ Conditionals in English

The learning strategies for English conditionals rely on the student's previous patterns in acquiring knowledge. Moreover, the role of teachers is essential for correct guidance because the aim is according to Scortan: "... each student must be able to master:

English Conditionals – IF Clauses – Rules and Language Structures

the transformation of information into knowledge. This is a fundamental process for academic success. The child and then the adult are in possession of tools, instruments, methods which will allow them to learn throughout their life” (Scorțan, 2023:77)

It is clear that English classes and courses are designed to help the student acquire correct grammatical structures which will help him communicate in the targeted language – English.

At first sight, English conditionals seem to be quite accessible because they follow a set of rules. Nevertheless, in some cases there are exceptions which can act as extensions for the existing patterns. *For example, the use of should, were and had as replacements or as key words that lead to the omission of if:*

e.g.: Should he come, prepare something to eat. – If he comes, prepare something to eat.

Were I you, I would submit the article as soon as possible. – If I were you, I would submit the article as soon as possible.

Had he called, I would have prepared dinner. – If he had called, I would prepare dinner.

Another rule that can be extended and modified *is the use of will/ would after if*. It is well known that future forms are to be avoided after if, but in exceptional situations, things change:

e.g.: If you would not mind waiting, the manager will see you right away. (polite request)
If you would check our website, the discount will be applied immediately. (polite request – if you do not mind checking our website...)

If he will drink so many energizers it is not surprising that he is so agitated. (To insist on – if he continues to drink so many energizers....)

If they will eat so many sweets daily it is not surprising that they have increased levels of glycemia. (To continue doing something – If they continue to eat....)

As for other exceptions, if can be omitted and the result is an Implied Conditional (Ellipsis):

e.g. He never would have passed the exam without my help. (this sentence implies – If I had not helped him, he would not have passed the exam)

Jim would have missed Math classes, but he realized their importance.

(this sentence implies – If Jim had not realized the importance of Math classes, he would have missed them)

Moreover, English language provides alternatives for if. Expressions like: **unless, as long as, in case, provided (that), but for, whether**, etc.; can be used as a substitute for if:

e.g.: He can go out with his friends as long as (if) he learns for the Math exam afterwards.

The bank will lend you the money provided that (if) you sign the contract.

Once (if) he starts playing video games, he will find it difficult to stop.

Without the ambulance's intervention, the victim would not have survived. (If the ambulance had not intervened, the victim would not have survived)

In addition to the exceptions mentioned above, English conditionals also work in a mixed way. In certain contexts, we can find mixed conditionals – between second conditional and third conditional. Mixed conditionals express either a present result for a past situation or a past result for a present/ continuing situation:

e.g. If he had paid attention to what you said, he would not be in trouble (a present result from a past situation). This example is a combination between third and second conditional.

If she applied for the job, she would have been hired by now (the result of her action from the past). This last example is a combination between the second and third conditional.

All these examples demonstrate that although English conditionals have exceptions to the general rules, they still represent English language with all its grammatical varieties.

ESP integrates English conditionals

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) integrates English conditionals during its courses. Although ESP courses are designed for specialized vocabulary and terminology, they also integrate grammar parts. Teaching If-clause in ESP courses requires a careful approach from the teacher. The ESP teacher has to keep in mind that English conditionals have their varieties and exceptions from the rules. To try and explain to ESP students all these exceptions and different contexts in which IF may be omitted or replaced, could become boring and students may lose interest. A long and detailed explanation in the grammar part is not so dynamic and interactive therefore ESP students may lose interest during the ESP course.

Students who take part in ESP courses are focused on accumulating the necessary English terminology for their domain so the grammar part should be structured in an accessible way. English conditionals for ESP courses need: "... to combine frequency and range, that is, to make sure that the examples selected are not only frequent but also appear in many different text types in order to ensure representativeness." (De Knop, De Rycker, 2008:105)

Therefore *IF-conditionals structures* can include specific terms from the student's field of study. For example, a student in the IT domain may find interest in conditionals if they are presented like:

e.g. 1st type – *If I press the start button, the computer will turn on.*

2nd type – *He would recover his files if you deleted them from the computer.*

3rd type – *If I had applied for the software analyst position, I would have got the job based on my experience in this domain.*

Such examples demonstrate to the ESP student that English conditionals are an important factor in their communication and that the *If – clause rules* are to be learnt because such English structures are useful in their targeted domain as well as in general conversations.

ESP courses are based on diverse methodologies that are involved in Teaching English as a Foreign language. Every ESP teacher has his/her way of combining different teaching activities that have: "... emerged, each with its unique theoretical underpinnings and instructional strategies. From the Conventional Grammar-Translation and Direct Methods to the more contemporary Communicative Language Teaching and Task – Based Language Teaching approaches..." (Lăpădat, 2023:253)

All these teaching methods may be applicable to English conditionals depending on the level of English for each class/ course. These methods can be adapted to the needs of the course and the exercises should reflect specific terminology if we speak about ESP courses.

English conditionals are essential for each student who decides to join ESP courses. If-Clauses help the student in his English communication showing a certain level of language proficiency if he uses them correctly. As a result, the grammatical theory

English Conditionals – IF Clauses – Rules and Language Structures

behind If-clauses should be packed in an attractive way and it should be backed up by a lot of practice.

Many English learners including those from ESP courses need accessible, short, eye-catching, easy-to-understand explanations related to grammar. “To learn, how and when to use a certain grammar rule, is essential for a good and comprehensive communication in English. Each part of speech has its importance in the *infrastructure* of a language” (Stoian, 2023:334)

English conditionals can be seen as a metaphoric milestone that, if passed successfully by students will offer them more flexibility in using English as a foreign language. It is obvious that:” English grammar can be challenging for foreign learners. Even if they learn the main parts of speech (the noun, the verb, the adjective and the adverb) with all their exceptions; English learners should also know how to connect these parts of speech, how to give as many details as possible, in other words – to speak and write English fluently” (Stoian, 2024:211).

If we speak of connections, we can state that English conditionals have the purpose to link our thoughts from the past to present and those from present to future.

Another discussion that can arise from teaching English conditionals is how to present them to digital natives. “A digital native is a person who includes in his everyday communication web applications that he considers to be part of his life: Twitter, WhatsApp, chat, Facebook, online games, etc.’ (Bărbuceanu, 2020:137).

To convince these teenagers to grab a pen and a piece of paper and to start writing grammar rules or the key points of IF-clauses could be an impossible mission. Therefore, alternative teaching methods are suited for digital natives, especially the methods that employ technology: to project the course, to create PowerPoint slides, to use visual aids including tables and diagrams for the presentation of IF-clauses types, to have digitalised multiple - choice exercises, to send via internet useful English materials, etc. All these are ways to keep digital natives connected and, at the same time, to be focused on the information that they receive in English courses.

The advent of social networks and the connection through the World Wide Web (WEB) has made a great transformation because: “Media transformation actually means the decisive transformation of social systems, a revolution in communication methodologies, both at the individual and social level” (Lăpădat,2022:12)

Consequently, teaching English grammar means to include technology during courses and in the assignments given to students. The presence of technology during an English class/ course includes all types of approaches – from ESP classes to English taught as a foreign language in other contexts.

Conclusions

English conditionals are a vast subject in English grammar. To teach IF-clauses can be challenging in the context of digitalization. To learn how to use them requires a lot of practice and practice requires patience. So, the entire process: teaching - receiving – learning - using English conditionals needs effort and concentration from the teacher as well as from the student side.

If-clauses help English users to express probability, possibility, regret/ criticism of something that happened in the past. By using conditionals, English learners are encouraged to speak about imaginary or hypothetical situations and to express the cause and effect of certain actions.

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Article Info

Received: October 28 2025

Accepted: November 16 2025

How to cite this article:

Stoian, A. M. (2025). English Conditionals – IF Clauses – Rules and Language Structures. *Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques*, no. 88, pp. 218-224.