

 英语沙龙 英语教学系列丛书

how to
Teach
Grammar
如何教语法

Scott Thornbury

series editor:
Jeremy Harmer



www.longman.com

Pearson Education 培生教育出版集团

世界知识出版社 World Affairs Press

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责任编辑: 郭 磊
责任出版: 苏灵芝

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

如何教语法=How to Teach Grammar / (英) 索恩伯里 (Thornbury, S.) 著. —北京: 世界知识出版社, 2003.10

ISBN 7-5012-2082-4

I. 如... II. 索... III. 英语—语法—教学法—英文 IV. H314

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2003) 第 060276 号

图字: 01-2003-5591

Simplified Chinese edition copyright ©2003 by **PEARSON EDUCATION NORTH ASIA LIMITED and World Affairs Press**. *How to Teach Grammar* 如何教语法
Original English language title: *How to Teach Grammar by Scott Thornbury Copyright © 2003*

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Published by arrangement with the original publisher, **PEARSON EDUCATION NORTH ASIA LIMITED**, a Pearson Education Company

This edition is authorized for sale only in People's Republic of China (excluding the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong and Macau).

世界知识出版社出版发行

(北京东城区干面胡同 51 号 邮政编码: 100010)

英语沙龙杂志社排版 世界知识印刷厂印刷 新华书店经销

787×1092 毫米 16 开本 印张: 12

2003 年 8 月第 1 版

2003 年 8 月第 1 次印刷 印数: 1-11,000

发行电话: 65129295; 传真: 85114402

定价: 17.50 元

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出版前言

随着国内和国际形势以及科学技术的发展,国际交流日益频繁,我国对外语人才的需求日益增加,英语的重要性也日益突出,从而推动了外语教学事业的迅猛发展。新一轮课程改革的开展和英语课程标准的颁布也对中小学英语教学提出了更高的要求,在这种情况下,外语师资培训和自身建设的重要性与日俱增。从“师资培训”这一概念的变化——由最初的 teacher training (教师培训) 到后来的 teacher education (教师教育),再到今天的 teacher development (教师发展)——我们也可以看到教师不断充电、终身学习的必要性和重要性。

目前虽然国内其他出版社也先后引进了一些英语教学理论图书,但大多理论性太强,广大中小学英语教师理解和运用起来比较困难,因此,我们从培生教育集团引进了这套浅显易懂的英语教学法专著。我们首先奉献给大家的有《英语教学实践》(The Practice of English Language Teaching),《如何教语法》(How to Teach Grammar),《如何教词汇》(How to Teach Vocabulary),《如何教语音》(How to Teach Pronunciation)。

《如何教语法》是著名英语教学法专家 Jeremy Harmer 主编的 How to 丛书之一,由著名英语语法教学专家 Scott Thornbury 编著,全书共分 10 章:语法的定义、为什么教语法、如何用规则教语法、如何用示例教语法、如何通过语段教语法、如何进行语法训练、如何处理学生的语法错误、如何整合语法、如何测试语法、如何不教语法等。全书语言简明,示例有趣生动,详细分析了语法教学与诸如交际语言教学、任务型语言教学等各种教学法与语法教学的结合方式,可谓英语语法教学的百宝箱。

本书既可作为英语教师和英语教师培训者的英语教学法普及读本,也可用作普通中、高等师范院校、教育学院、教师进修学校英语专业学生的教学法教程。

编者

Acknowledgements

The following colleagues and friends may recognise bits of themselves scattered throughout this book – to them many thanks: Jessica MacKay, Lynn Durrant, Nicole Taylor, Theresa Zanatta, Karl Kaliski, Piet Luethi, Neil Forrest, and Albert Stahl. Thanks are also due to Jeremy Harmer, for his boundless enthusiasm from start to finish, and to Hester Lott, for her skilful and painstaking editing.

I also wish to acknowledge the help and inspiration that three books have given me: Peter Skehan's *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning* (Oxford University Press, 1998); Rod Ellis's *SLA Research and Language Teaching* (Oxford University Press, 1997); and Keith Johnson's *Language Teaching and Skill Learning* (Blackwell, 1996). I should, of course, add that no blame must be attached to those books for any flaws in this one.

Introduction

**Who is this
book for?**

How to Teach Grammar has been written for teachers of English who are curious or confused or unconvinced about the teaching of grammar. They may be in training, relatively new to the job, or very experienced.

**What is this
book about?**

Grammar teaching has always been one of the most controversial and least understood aspects of language teaching. Few teachers remain indifferent to grammar and many teachers become obsessed by it. This book attempts to shed light on the issues, but it is essentially a book about practice, about *how*, and the bulk of the book explores a range of grammar teaching options.

Chapter 1 contains a brief overview of what grammar is, and Chapter 2 addresses the pros and cons of grammar instruction.

The sample lessons that comprise the rest of the book have been chosen both to represent a range of teaching approaches, and also as vehicles for the teaching of a representative selection of grammar items – the sort of items that any current coursebook series will include. Each sample lesson is followed by a discussion of the rationale underpinning it, and an evaluation of it according to criteria that are established in Chapter 2. It is important to bear in mind that each lesson description is simply that: a description. The lessons are not meant to represent an ideal way of teaching grammar: there are as many different ways of teaching grammar as there are teachers teaching it, and it is not the purpose of this book to promote any one particular method or approach over another. Rather, the purpose is to trigger cycles of classroom experimentation and reflection, taking into account the features of every individual teaching situation. As the Rule of Appropriacy (see Chapter 10) puts it: Interpret any suggestions according to the level, needs, interests, expectations and learning styles of your students. This may mean giving a lot of prominence to grammar, or it may mean never actually teaching grammar – in an up-front way – at all.

The Task File at the back of the book comprises a number of tasks relevant to each chapter. They can be used as a basis for discussion in a training context, or for individual reflection and review. A Key is provided for those tasks that expect specific answers.

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What is grammar?

- Texts, sentences, words, sounds
- Grammar and meaning
- Two kinds of meaning
- Grammar and function
- Spoken grammar and written grammar
- Grammar syllabuses
- Grammar rules

Texts, sentences, words, sounds

Here is an example of language in use:

This is 2680239. We are not at home right now. Please leave a message after the beep.

You will recognise it as an answerphone message. That is the kind of **text** it is. It consists of three **sentences**, which themselves consist of **words**, and the words (when spoken) consist of **sounds**. All language in use can be analysed at each of these four levels: text, sentence, word and sound. These are the **forms** that language takes. The study of grammar consists, in part, of looking at the way these forms are arranged and patterned.

For example, if you change the order of the sentences you no longer have a well-formed answerphone message:

Please leave a message after the beep. This is 2680239. We are not at home right now.

Likewise, the order of words in each sentence is fairly fixed:

Beep after a leave the please message.

The same applies to the order of sounds in a word:

peeb

Grammar is partly the study of what forms (or structures) are possible in a language. Traditionally, grammar has been concerned almost exclusively with analysis at the level of the sentence. Thus a grammar is a description of the rules that govern how a language's sentences are formed. Grammar attempts to explain why the following sentences are acceptable:

We are not at home right now.

Right now we are not at home.

but why this one is not:

Not we at right home now are.

Nor this one:

We is not at home right now.

The system of rules that cover the order of words in a sentence is called **syntax**. Syntax rules disallow:

Not we at right home now are.

The system of rules that cover the formation of words is called **morphology**. Morphology rules disallow:

We is not at home right now.

Grammar is conventionally seen as the study of the syntax and morphology of sentences. Put another way, it is the study of linguistic **chains** and **slots**. That is, it is the study both of the way words are chained together in a particular order, and also of what kinds of words can slot into any one link in the chain. These two kinds of relation can be shown diagrammatically:

1	2	3	4	5
We	are	not	at	home.
They	are		at	work.
Dad	is		in	hospital.
I	am		in	bed.

Notice that the order of elements on the horizontal axis is fairly fixed. The effect of switching the first two columns has a major effect on meaning: it turns the sentence into a question: *Are we not at home? Is Dad in bed?* Switching columns two and three, or four and five, is simply not possible. Similarly, it should be clear that the elements in the first column share a noun-like function, those in the second column fill the verb slot and those in the fourth column are prepositions. Again, it is not possible to take slot-filling elements and make chains of them. *We are not at home work bed* does not work as an English sentence.

It is the capacity to recognise the constraints on how sentence elements are chained and on how sentence slots are filled that makes a good amateur grammarian. For example, different languages have different constraints on the way chains are ordered and slots are filled. Many second language learner errors result from overgeneralising rules from their own language. So, in:

I want that your agency return me the money.

the learner has selected the wrong kind of chain to follow the verb *want*. While in:

I have chosen to describe Stephen Hawking, a notorious scientific of our century.

the chain is all right, but the words chosen to fill certain slots don't fit. *Notorious* has the wrong shade of meaning, while *scientific* is an adjective wrongly inserted into a noun slot.

From a learner's perspective, the ability both to recognise and to produce well-formed sentences is an essential part of learning a second language. But there are a number of problems. First, as we shall see, there is a great deal of debate as to how this ability is best developed. Second, it is not entirely clear what 'well-formed' really means, when a lot of naturally occurring speech seems to violate strict grammatical rules. For example, in many English-speaking contexts *We ain't at home* would be preferred to *We are not at home* yet only the latter has made it into the grammar books.

Third, an exclusive focus on sentences, rather than on texts or on words, risks under-equipping the learner for real language use. There is more to language learning than the ability to produce well-formed sentences. Texts and words also have grammar, in the sense that there are rules governing how both texts and words are organised, but it is not always clear where sentence grammar ends and either word grammar or text grammar begins. But, since most language teaching coursebooks and grammars are still firmly grounded in the sentence grammar tradition, for the purposes of this book we will assume grammar to mean grammar at the level of the sentence.

Grammar and meaning

In the last section the point was made that 'grammar is partly the study of what forms are possible'. But that does not explain why the following sounds odd:

This is 2680239. We are at home right now. Please leave a message after the beep.

The sentence *We are at home right now* is possible. That is, it is grammatically well-formed. But it doesn't make sense in this context. The form the speaker has chosen doesn't convey the exact meaning the speaker requires. We now need to consider another feature of grammar, and that is, its meaning-making potential.

Grammar communicates meanings – meanings of a very precise kind. Vocabulary, of course, also communicates meanings. Take this example: a ticket inspector on a train says:

Tickets!

Here there is little or no grammar – in the sense of either morphology or syntax. The meaning is conveyed simply at the **lexical**, or word level, *tickets*. Situational factors – such as the passengers' expectation that the inspector will want to check their tickets – mean that the language doesn't have to work very hard to make the meaning clear. The language of early childhood is like this: it is essentially individual words strung together, but because it is centred in the here-and-now, it is generally not difficult to interpret:

Carry!

All gone milk!

Mummy book.

Where daddy?

Adult language, too, is often pared down, operating on a lexical level (i.e. without much grammar):

- A: Coffee?
B: Please.
A: Milk?
B: Just a drop.

We can formulate a rule of thumb: the more context, the less grammar. *Tickets!* is a good example of this. But imagine a situation when a person (Milly) is phoning another person (Molly) to ask a third person (Mandy) to forward some pre-booked airline tickets. In this case, *Tickets!* would be inadequate. Instead, we would expect something like:

Can you ask Mandy to send me the tickets that I booked last week?

This is where grammar comes in. Grammar is a process for making a speaker's or writer's meaning clear when contextual information is lacking. Baby talk is fine, up to a point, but there soon comes a time when we want to express meanings for which simple words are not enough. To do this we employ rules of syntax and rules of morphology and map these on to the meaning-carrying words, so that *Mummy book*, for example, becomes (according to the meaning the child wants to convey):

That's Mummy's book.

or:

Mummy's got a book.

or:

Mummy, give me the book.

Language learners have to make do with a period of baby-like talk and reliance on contextual clues, until they have enough grammar to express and understand a greater variety of meanings. Depending on their vocabulary knowledge and their resourcefulness, they can often cope surprisingly well. However, they will eventually come up against problems like this:

- | | |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------|
| NATIVE SPEAKER: | How long are you here for? |
| LEARNER: | I am here since two weeks. |
| NATIVE SPEAKER: | No, I mean, how long are you staying? |
| LEARNER: | I am staying since two weeks. |

Learners need to learn not only what forms are possible, but what particular forms will express their particular meanings. Seen from this perspective, grammar is a tool for making meaning. The implication for language teachers is that the learner's attention needs to be focused not only on the forms of the language, but on the meanings these forms convey.

Two kinds of meaning

But what meanings do these grammatical forms convey? There are at least two kinds of meaning and these reflect the two main purposes of language. The first is to represent the world as we experience it, and the second is to influence how things happen in the world, specifically in our relations with other people. These purposes are called, respectively, language's **representational** and its **interpersonal** functions.

In its representational role language reflects the way we perceive the world. For example, things happen in the world, and these events or processes are conveyed by (or **encoded in**) **verbs**:

The sun **set**.

Many of these events and processes are initiated by people or things, which are typically encoded in nouns, and which in turn form the **subject** of the verb:

The children are playing.

And these events and processes often have an effect on other things, also nouns: the thing or person affected is often the **object** of the verb:

The dog chased the cat.

These events take place in particular circumstances – in some time or some place or in some way – and these circumstances are typically encoded in **adverbials**:

The children are playing **in the garden**.

The sun sets **at seven-thirty**.

The dog chased the cat **playfully**.

Time can also be conveyed by the use of **tense**:

The children **were** playing in the garden.

The sun **set** at seven-thirty.

Finally, events and processes can be seen in their entirety:

The sun set.

Or they can be seen as having stages, as unfolding in time:

The sun was setting.

The difference between these last two examples is a difference of **aspect**. Tense and aspect can combine to form a wide range of meanings that, in English at least, are considered important:

The sun is setting.

The sun has set.

The sun has been setting.

The sun had set.

etc.

The second main role of language – its interpersonal role – is typically reflected in the way we use grammar to ease the task of getting things done.

There is a difference, for example, between:

Tickets!

Tickets, please.

Can you show me your tickets?

May I see your tickets?

Would you mind if I had a look at your tickets?

Please is one way – a lexical way – for softening the force of a command. A similar effect can be achieved by using **modal verbs** such as *can*, *may* and *might*. **Modality**, then, is a grammatical means by which interpersonal meaning can be conveyed.

These grammatical categories – subjects, objects, verbs, adverbials, tense, aspect and modality – are just some of the ways in which grammar is used to fine-tune the meanings we wish to express, and for which words on their own are barely adequate. It follows that in learning a new language learners need to see how the forms of the language match the range of meanings – both representational and interpersonal – that they need to express and understand.

Grammar and function

So far, we have talked about meaning as if the meaning of a sentence was simply a case of unpacking its words and its grammar. But look at this exchange (from the film *Clueless*) between a father and the young man who has come to take his daughter out:

FATHER: Do you drink?

YOUNG MAN: No, thanks, I'm cool.

FATHER: I'm not offering, I'm asking IF you drink. Do you think I'd offer alcohol to teenage drivers taking my daughter out?

Why did the young man misunderstand the father's question, misconstruing a request for information as an offer? Was it the words he didn't understand? Or the grammar? Or both? Clearly not. What he misunderstood was the father's intended meaning. He misunderstood the **function** of the question.

There is more than one meaning to the question *Do you drink?* There is the literal meaning – something like *Are you a drinker of alcohol?* And there is the meaning that the question can have in certain contexts – that of an offer of a drink. When we process language we are not only trying to make sense of the words and the grammar; we are also trying to infer the speaker's (or writer's) intention, or, to put it another way, the **function** of what they are saying or writing.

In the mid-seventies the relation between grammar and function became an important issue for teachers. Writers of language teaching materials attempted to move the emphasis away from the learning of grammatical structures independent of their use, and on to learning how to function in a language, how to communicate. It would be useful, it was argued, to match forms with their functions.

Certain form-function matches are fairly easily identifiable. For example, the form *Would you like ... ?* is typically used to function as an invitation or

offer. The form *If only I hadn't ...* commonly initiates the expression of a regret. Less clear cut is the way that the function of *warning*, for example, is expressed, as the following examples demonstrate:

You'd better not do that.
I wouldn't do that, if I were you.
Mind you don't do that.
If you do that, you'll be in trouble.
Do that and you'll be in trouble.

This shows that one function can be expressed by several different forms. In the same way, one form can express a variety of functions. For example, the form *If ..., ... will ...* can express a wide range of functions:

If you do that, you'll be in trouble. (warning)
If you lie down, you'll feel better. (advice)
If it rains, we'll take a taxi. (plan)
If you pass your driving test, I'll buy you a car. (promise)
etc.

Despite this lack of a one-to-one match between form and function, materials writers have felt it useful to organise at least some grammatical structures under functional labels, such as *Inviting*, *Making plans*, *Requesting things*, *Making comparisons* etc.

There are conventional ways of doing things with language, such as making requests. But this still doesn't help solve the problem of knowing when *Do you drink?* means *Would you like a drink?* or something else. In the end, in order to successfully match form and function it is necessary to be able to read clues from the context to understand the speaker's meaning. Teaching grammar out of context is likely to lead to similar misunderstandings as in the example from *Clueless*, a point that will be taken up in Chapter 5.

**Spoken
grammar and
written
grammar**

- A: Great sausages, these, aren't they?
B: Yes. The ingredients are guaranteed free of additives and artificial colouring.
A: Had to laugh, though. The bloke that makes them, he was telling me, he doesn't eat them himself. Want a ciggie?
B: No, thanks. Patrons are requested to refrain from smoking while other guests are dining ...

It should be obvious that there is a clash of two styles of English here: while speaker A's talk seems to display language features appropriate to casual conversation among friends, speaker B's contributions are more typical of formal written language. Thus, speaker A's vocabulary choices are characteristic of speech, e.g. *great*, *bloke*, *a ciggie*, while speaker B's are more commonly found in writing: *grateful*, *requested*, *refrain*. These differences extend to grammar, too. Speaker A omits words ([I] *had to laugh*), uses