Describing and Explaining Grammar and Vocabulary in ELT

Key Theories and Effective Practices

Dilin Liu

ESL & Applied Linguistics Professional Series

DESCRIBING AND EXPLAINING GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY IN ELT

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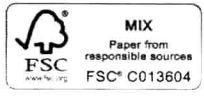

DESCRIBING AND EXPLAINING GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY IN ELT

Language description plays an important role in language learning/teaching because it often determines what specific language forms, features, and usages are taught and how. A good understanding of language description is vital for language teachers and material writers and should constitute an important part of their knowledge. This book provides a balanced treatment of both theory and practice. It focuses on some of the most important and challenging grammar and vocabulary usage questions. Using these questions as examples, it shows how theory can inform practice and how grammar and vocabulary description and explanation can be made more effective and engaging.

Part I describes and evaluates the key linguistic theories on language description and teaching. Chapters in this section conclude with questions for consideration and discussion. Part II discusses and gives specific examples of how challenging grammar and vocabulary issues can be more effectively described and explained; each chapter focuses on one or more specific grammar and vocabulary issue. These chapters conclude with suggested teaching activities. The book also contains an annotated list of useful free online resources (online corpora and websites) for grammar and vocabulary learning/teaching and a glossary of important terms in language description and teaching.

Dilin Liu is Professor of Applied Linguistics/TESOL, Department of English, The University of Alabama, USA.

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To Yun and Jiajia (Julianne)

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PREFACE

This book is based on my many years of reading and research on the learning and teaching of English grammar and vocabulary, arguably the two most important aspects of language. As an ESL learner, teacher, and teacher educator, I have always been interested in not only how the English language works (especially its grammar and vocabulary) but also why it works the way it does. At the same time, I have been equally interested in how to best describe and teach English grammar and vocabulary usages, especially those that are difficult for students to understand and challenging for teachers to explain. In fact, many of the grammar and vocabulary usage questions I have explored were first raised by my students and colleagues. The search for answers to these questions has involved extensive reading and research (including many corpus-based studies). In the process, I have learned not only a lot about the English language but also about the importance and challenges of grammar and vocabulary description and explanation for teachers in general. The latter understanding has been the motivation for writing this book, which is intended to provide language teachers (including pre-service teacher trainees) and material writers with a solid understanding of grammar and vocabulary description and explanation both in theory and practice.

Grammar and vocabulary description refers to the analysis and description of how the lexical and syntactical components of a language work together to convey meanings. It constitutes an essential part of language description (which includes, in addition, the analysis of phonology, a part of language that this book does not cover, except for a brief mention in Chapter 6). Historically, language description has focused exclusively on grammar. Yet, contemporary linguistic theories and research have shown that grammar and vocabulary are not two distinct domains but the two ends of one continuum (an issue that will

be addressed in Chapter 1). This new understanding has led to the inclusion of both grammar and vocabulary in this book. The title of this book also contains the term *explaining* in addition to *describing*. The reason for doing so is that while both terms have essentially the same meaning in this context—presenting how a given language feature/usage works, explanation often covers not only how it works but also why it works the way it does. In teaching a language usage, an explanation is often needed on top of a simple description.

It is also important to note that description and explanation constitute only one part or phase of the complex process of grammar and vocabulary learning/teaching. Besides description and explanation, the process of grammar and vocabulary learning/teaching also involves practice, reinforcement, and actual use. This book covers only description and explanation. Therefore, it is not a comprehensive book on English grammar and vocabulary and their teaching. It does not cover all of the grammatical and vocabulary aspects and issues in English. Instead, the book focuses on some of the most important and challenging grammar and vocabulary usage questions. With these challenging questions as examples, the book attempts to show how theory can inform practice and how grammar and vocabulary description and explanation can be made more effective and engaging.

Content and Organization

This book consists of an introduction (Chapter 1) and two parts. The introduction describes the purview, importance, and principles of language description. Part I (Chapters 2–5) describes and evaluates the key linguistic theories on language description and teaching, with Chapter 2 on prescriptive, structural, and generative linguistics; Chapter 3 on sociolinguistics and systemic functional linguistics; Chapter 4 on Cognitive Linguistics; and Chapter 5 on corpus linguistics. Each chapter in this part begins with an overview of the linguistic theory(ies) in question followed by a discussion of their impact on language description and teaching. Each chapter (including also Chapter 1) ends with questions for consideration and discussion.

Part II (Chapters 6–14) discusses with specific examples how challenging grammar and vocabulary issues can be more effectively described and explained, with each chapter focusing on one or more specific grammar and vocabulary issues, such as English tenses/aspects, articles, and word collocations. Each chapter in this part typically begins with a description of the grammar/vocabulary features/issues being addressed. It is followed by a discussion of the established useful practices in teaching the given grammar/vocabulary feature/issue, a discussion that is based on a survey of seven existing ESL student grammar textbook series and the observations of classroom teaching as well as my own teaching experience. Then the chapter moves on to a section titled "Explaining/teaching challenging issues with new insights," which provides explanation and

teaching practices that are informed by the most recent theories and research findings. The information in this section is based on published studies including those by the author. The main purpose of the section is to show how to apply new research and theory to enhance language description and explanation. The chapters in Part II end with some suggested teaching activities. These activities are meant only as snapshots of the types of activities teachers can use in explaining/teaching the grammar/vocabulary features in question.

There are some minor variations in the format in a few of the chapters, including Chapters 6, 7, 11, and 14. Chapters 6 and 7 differ from the rest of the chapters in this part of the book in that they offer a general coverage of the basic issues involved in vocabulary description (Chapter 6) and sentence structure description (Chapter 7). Chapters 11 and 14 are unique in that they each cover multiple, although related, topics, with Chapter 11 on *object placement*, *subject/object deletion*, and the *passive voice*, and Chapter 14 on *idioms*, *phrasal verbs*, and *formulae/lexical bundles*. In Chapters 11 and 14, no description of "established useful practices" is given due both to lack of space and the fact that some of the topics have not received much coverage in English language teaching so far.

The book includes an annotated list of some useful free online resources (online corpora and websites) for grammar and vocabulary learning and teaching, as well as a list for glossary of special terms.

Finally, this book may be used as a textbook for a pedagogical grammar, vocabulary teaching, or material development course, a self-study text, or a reference book. However it is used, I hope readers will find its information useful in their language teaching.

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First, I would like to acknowledge the valuable information and inspiration about grammar/vocabulary and grammar/vocabulary teaching that I have gained in my career from many of my students as well as many colleagues in the field. Their information and inspiration have motivated and contributed greatly to this book. A special acknowledgment should go to my renowned colleagues: Marianne Celce-Murcia, Diane Larsen-Freeman, Paul Nation, and Andrea Tyler, whom I have had the honor of working with on one or more occasions (conference session and/or book projects) and whose work has influenced me and this book tremendously.

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