R. A. Close

English as a Foreign Language

Its Constant Grammatical Problems

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Also by R. A. Close

The New English Grammar Parts 1 *and* 2
(Allen & Unwin 1964)

The New English Grammar Parts 3 *and* 4
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The English We Use
(Longman 1961, revised 1971)

The English We Use for Science
(Longman 1965)

Prepositions
(Longman 1967)

The Future
(Longman 1970)

A University Grammar of English Workbook
(Longman 1974)

A Reference Grammar for Students of English
(Longman 1975)

English Grammatical Structure
(with L. G. Alexander, W. Stannard Allen and R. O'Neill)
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PREFACE

I offer two reasons for producing a third edition of this book only three years after the appearance of the second. One is that I have found widespread confusion amongst teachers and students about the role that grammar has to play now that notional syllabuses and the communicative approach to language teaching have caused yet another revolution in the English language teaching world. A second reason is that *English as a Foreign Language* continues to be used as a standard textbook in many parts of the world, and some of its readers have kindly supplied me with ideas for further improvement.

The British and other European scholars who have developed the idea of notional syllabuses and have advocated a communicative approach have thereby made a very significant contribution to language teaching. However, although those ideas needed emphasis and have met with remarkable success, they are not entirely new. As a teacher of English and a learner of several other tongues, I, like many of my professional colleagues, have always been conscious of the need to use a language for definite purposes and to convey specific meanings through it. Many of the *notions* referred to in recent literature were expressed by the late Dr I. A. Richards in the draft of a textbook on which he kindly asked me to comment when he was working in Peking, and I in Shanghai, as long ago as 1937. That accounts for my acknowledgement of I. A. Richards's influence, mentioned in all three editions of the present book. I found his reference to certain concepts—notably those related to space, time, dimension, motion, direction, location, events and processes—invaluable when I was thinking out the original version of *English as a Foreign Language*. Similarly, by working with H. J. Uldall, I learnt the importance of distinguishing between verbs that referred to action taking place at a point of time and those referring to activities continuing throughout a *period* of time: hence my expression of indebtedness to him also. Notions of that kind have helped me towards a solution of grammatical problems: they should be distinguished from functions—such as asking for information, making requests, giving advice, and so on—which are performed through a variety of grammatical constructions.

What has disturbed many teachers is the fear that notional syllabuses and the communicative approach mean excluding grammar from the curriculum. True, protagonists of this new—or newly-emphasized—methodology, have drawn attention to the comparative futility (for all except dedicated grammarians) of the

learner's mastering grammatical structures for their own sake and of constructing perfectly grammatical sentences without being able to say what he wants or has to say at the moment when he feels compelled to say it. But experts on the new methodology had no intention of excluding grammar from the curriculum. D. A. Wilkins, author of *Notional Syllabuses* (Wilkins, 1976) states, on page 19 of his book, '. . . the notional syllabuses can ensure that the most important grammatical forms are intended'. *The Threshold Level*, by J. A. Van Ek (1975), and *A Communicative Grammar of English* by G. Leech and Jan Svartvik (1975), both key books in this context, each contains an indispensable grammatical compendium (see list of Further Reading on p. 205). There would be no sense in excluding grammar from the curriculum: the many functions that English can perform, and the many ways of communicating in our language, all more or less demand the application of those conventions that constitute its grammar. In any case, the subject of this book is not syllabuses and curricula, but the grammatical problems which arise wherever English, as a foreign language, is studied and taught.

In this third edition, I have added a chapter on notions and functions, not only to illustrate explanations that were in the book already, but also to take into account the important work that has been published on those subjects in the last few years. I have also taken advantage of the advice of readers by making what I hope are minor improvements; by re-writing much of the first chapter; by providing more examples and by adding to the list of books for further reading.

The original title of the book, *English as a Foreign Language* has been retained, if only because it is under that name that the work has become widely known (though, according to more than one reader, not widely enough). I hope that the sub-title, *Its Constant Grammatical Problems*, will help to indicate that this is not a complete grammar, but a grammar's companion, which has been designed to deal with difficulties that I have found, in my fairly long experience, to cause trouble everywhere, and whatever methodology happens to be currently favoured.

This book was written primarily for teachers and advanced students for whom English is a foreign language. It has proved welcome not only to them, but also to those 'young graduates' (to quote Professor E. W. Hawkins, Director of the Language Teaching Centre at the University of York) 'trained in our schools and attracted abroad to teach English, whose grammar . . . they have not begun to explore'.

May I conclude with a word of advice to those who think of using this book? It is not intended to be consulted in the way in which we look up isolated words in a dictionary. There are lines of argument running through it, and there are patterns, applicable to one grammatical problem, which can be applied, with variations, to a different problem dealt with in a later chapter. I have made a few cross-references; but I know that readers are apt to be irritated by constant cross-reference, which they find disturbs their train of thought. In any case, I have always thought of this book as one to be read through, chapter by chapter; and reading it first in that way will, I think, prove more helpful than picking pieces of information out of their full context.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It was the famous head of this publishing house, Sir Stanley Unwin, who insisted that I write this book. When it was finally out, he expressed his approval in the words: 'This will be revised by my successors and yours.' Sir Stanley died in 1968, aged 83. Dedicating this revision to his memory, I also express my gratitude to those of his successors who have helped fulfil his prediction thus far.

The original work bore the influence of Dr I. A. Richards, whom I first met in China and who was an immense help to me in analysing problems of English as seen from the other side of the globe. Other influences came from Mr H. J. Uldall (of the School of the great Otto Jespersen of Copenhagen) with whom I worked at the Institute of English Studies in Athens; and members of the Prague School who were such faithful friends to me when I was in Czechoslovakia from 1946 to 1950.

In this revision, I have gladly taken advantage of criticisms made by that elder statesman among European grammarians of English, Professor R. W. Zandvoort of Groningen, in his very encouraging review in *English Studies* (Amsterdam); and by Professor S. Pit Corder, of Edinburgh, in *The Modern Language Review*. I have made use of equally helpful suggestions from Professor Bruce Pattison, of the Institute of Education, University of London; by Professor Sidney Greenbaum of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; and by Professor Wolf-Dietrich Bald of the Institut für Anglistik at Aachen. I am indebted to other scholars, notably Professor Henri Adamczewski and Inspecteur Général Denis Girard, of Paris, who have urged me not to abandon 'insights' that seem to have given the original book its appeal.

In the three editions, I have benefited from the enlightened and scholarly enthusiasm of my good friend Dr A. H. King, formerly of the British Council, now Professor of English at the Brigham Young University, Utah. Above all, from the start of this whole enterprise I have had the enormous advantage of being able to draw on the wealth of ideas, brilliantly expressed in conversations, at meetings, lectures and seminars, and in his writings, by Professor Randolph Quirk, Director of the Survey of English Usage at University College, London.

I mention these scholars only to acknowledge my debt to them, and I trust I have not misinterpreted any of their work in a book written by a teacher of English for his fellow-teachers and his students.

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CONTENTS

CONVENTIONS

Oblique strokes (/. . . /) mark phonetic transcription.

A vertical line before a word or a syllable indicates that that word or syllable is stressed, as in *The dis'tinguished 'president.*

An asterisk before a word, phrase or sentence means that what follows is unacceptable.

The symbol *v* = in contrast with.

i.e. = that is; e.g. = for example;
c.p. = compare.

CHAPTER 1

Rules in English Grammar

Has English a Grammar? If it has, what are its Rules?

1 It has often been said that English has no grammar, or that, if it has, there are no rules in it. English has indeed very few of the kind of inflections, on the end of nouns and verbs, that play such an important part in the grammar of many other languages. English adjectives have no inflections at all, apart from the *-er* and *-est* of short words like *longer* and *longest*. There are still, in the nineteen-eighties, writers of English grammar who try to present their subject on the same model as, say, Latin, French or German, and produce paradigms like:

I play	we play
you play	you play
he, she, it plays	they play

But, except for *plays*, the form of the verb in the Present Tense remains unchanged; while in the Past Tense, *I played* etc., the form of the verb is invariable. Yet over half a century ago, the great Danish grammarian, Otto Jespersen, wrote, ' . . . it is impossible to see the use of such paradigms as are found in many English grammars . . . ' (*The Philosophy of Grammar* 1924). We can accurately predict the whole 'conjugation' of every verb in modern English from a small set of rules and a fixed list of irregularities (see, for example, *A Reference Grammar for Students of English* Longman, 1975, sections 1.16–1.20). Nor has English grammar a place for gender in nouns. *Cow* is not 'feminine gender' as opposed to the 'masculine' *bull*. *Cow* and *bull* are two separate words, one referring to a female of a species of animal, the other to the male. Both words can be preceded by the same set of determiners, e.g. *a*, *any*, *each*, *either*, *every*, *my*, *the*, *this*, *that*, etc., each of which has one form only.

2 English grammar is chiefly a system of syntax that decides the order and patterns in which words are arranged in sentences. The

system works largely with the help of what are called grammatical or structural words—auxiliary verbs, determiners, pronouns, prepositions and conjunctions. These words form a 'closed set', i.e. there is a fixed number of them and new members are not admitted.

3 It is true that English grammar has no rules established for it by any authority. Individual grammarians have stated their own opinions and preferences and have made up their own body of rules. Some, like H. W. Fowler (*Modern English Usage*, revised by Sir Ernest Gowers, 1965), have been and are still regarded with the greatest respect, and have helped to keep usage stable. Others are not so reliable. However, according to present-day thinking there are rules in English grammar that can be accurately formulated from the observation and analysis of a large number of examples of widely accepted educated usage. The rules so formulated can account for the way in which competent users of the language produce original acceptable utterances, sentences, speeches and written texts.

4 In these days, it is also often said that, while grammatical rules for English can be found, to conform to them is not so important as to 'communicate'. Therefore teachers are tempted to let their students express themselves freely without worrying whether the results are grammatical or not. Such an attitude could not merely lead to a degree of carelessness which I, for one, would find repugnant, but it might eventually end in the breakdown of a highly developed language as a communicative medium. Long before such a state of chaos was reached, the lack of attraction in slipshod speech and writing would have deprived efforts to communicate of much of their potential effect. Effective communication depends very largely on a complex set of conventions which both speaker and hearer, writer and reader, have to follow and understand. We can, admittedly, communicate by isolated words and phrases, as in *Fire, Fire, On the first floor!* Yet even that phrase *on the first floor* is constructed in accordance with the English grammatical system. If communication is our aim—and with any reasonable speaker and writer it normally is—then the fact remains that communication can generally be achieved most efficiently by means of a grammatical sentence or by a series of such sentences logically related.

Grammar as Fact

5 English grammar is first and foremost a matter of fact. We say *one man, two men*; *write, wrote, written*; *he may drive, he wants to*

drive, no one will stop him driving. Whoever learns English must accept such forms and constructions as facts, and must develop the habit of using them in appropriate situations. Helping us to observe and remember the facts, the linguist arranges them methodically and draws general rules from them when he can. Perhaps he can explain historically how they came to be what they are. But the facts remain, decided for us. *Men* or *I wrote* or *he wants to* is 'right'; **mans*, **I writed*, **he mays to* are 'wrong': there we have no choice.

Grammar as a Question of Choice

6 Often in speaking and writing English we have a choice of forms, each of which by itself is correct. '*How shall I know if I do choose the right?*' asks the Prince of Morocco in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. There are three ways of deciding what to select. We can let ourselves be guided by our own experience of the language—experience gained by reading or from hearing the language naturally spoken. Secondly, we can rely for an answer on somebody who knows intuitively the right thing to say (though he may not be able to explain why it is right). Thirdly, we can find a solution in a grammar book which is concerned not so much with facts as with subtle distinctions of thought, personal and inter-personal attitudes, and individual points of view. Notice I say 'not *so much* with facts'. There is always an element of fact in these problems—the exact words and phrases uttered (the linguistic facts) and the circumstances in which they were used (the non-linguistic facts). What turns these questions into problems is the element of choice and of subtle distinction which the student, learning English as foreign speech, may fail to appreciate or even to see.

7 It is this aspect of English grammar that the non-native speaker of the language finds most worrying. When to use or omit *the* or *a*; whether to say *I write* or *I'm writing*, *have written* or *wrote*; how to use *have been writing* and *had been writing*; what tenses to use with *if* or *since*; how to use *can*, *may*, *could*, *would*, *should*, *might*, *must*; whether to put the infinitive or the part of the verb ending in *-ing*; which preposition it is to be; whether to say *some* or *any*, *each* or *every*; where in a sentence to put adverbs; which of the four words *say*, *tell*, *explain*, *show* could fill the gap in *Please . . . me how this works*: these problems and others like them have been, and still are, very common in the learning of English as a foreign language. (I base this statement not only on my own experience, of over forty years, of English teaching in various parts of the world, but also on reports

on the work of candidates in the English language paper compiled by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate.

8 Failure to master these distinctions may not always cause misunderstanding. You can often make your meaning clear without using *the* or *a* at all (see **97**). Are they then superfluous, or have they roots that go deep into the thought of English speakers? To Henry Sweet (*New English Grammar*, Part 1, Section 587, 1891), 'distinctions of verb-tense, and the use of prepositions and of verbal-groups (i.e. groups of words whose nucleus is an infinitive, participle or gerund) . . . are . . . highly developed in English, and are part of the genius of the language.' In the passage from which that quotation was drawn, Sweet was explaining how tense-forms and 'verbal-groups' in English take the place of the subjunctive in certain other languages. He went on to say, 'The faculty by which we instinctively know whether a certain form or construction is in accordance with the genius of the language or not is called "the linguistic sense". This faculty is naturally more highly developed in some people than in others; but it can always be strengthened by training, and the first business of grammar is to cultivate it as far as possible.'

9 Sweet had in mind readers for whom English was a mother-tongue. Now the problems of English grammar that bewilder the non-native speaker of English most, rarely seem to bother the native speaker at all. The latter may fumble over tense-forms and prepositions as a child, and may be weak in his command of the language in other respects. Yet unconsciously he gets to know what satisfies the 'genius' of his tongue. If his linguistic sense is keen, as a good writer's is, he will use words and constructions with precision. If it is dull, he will use them erratically, in blind obedience to custom and habit. But whether his own usage is deliberate, precise and consistent, or automatic, haphazard and confused, what makes him decide to use *the*, *a*, or neither, or to choose one tense rather than another, may be as much as a mystery to him—if he ever thought about it—as it is to the non-native learner. I assume that the readers of this book are among the many who are, or will be, obliged to think about it.

10 The student can ultimately acquire this 'faculty' through the constant reading of interesting, well-written English, or by being steeped for years in a cultivated English-speaking atmosphere. He stands a good chance of developing it if he is taught by men and women whose vision of the distinctions of thought involved is clear,