

PRACTICAL ENGLISH  
USAGE  
FOR OVERSEAS STUDENTS

BY  
P. S. TREGIDGO

LONGMAN GROUP LIMITED  
LONDON  
ASSOCIATED COMPANIES: BROTHERS AND BROTHERS LTD.  
HONGKONG AND SHANGHAI  
INCORPORATED IN HONGKONG

# PRACTICAL ENGLISH USAGE

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LONGMAN GROUP LIMITED

London

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*First published 1959*

*Third impression 1960*

*Second edition 1962*

*New impression 1974 (twice)*

*New impression †1976*

ISBN 0 582 60062 6

*Printed in Singapore by  
Chong Moh & Co.*

**TO EX-STUDENTS  
OF THE FORMER  
GOVERNMENT TEACHER TRAINING COLLEGE  
WINNEBA, GHANA**

A Note to the Teachers

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## A NOTE TO THE TEACHER

THIS is a book of practical English grammar and usage for the student whose mother tongue is not English. It is written from the non-English point of view, which the author believes to be the only valid approach, whether the teacher is himself English or not. It does not set out to teach *formal* grammar, e.g. parts of speech or parsing or clause analysis, because these things, if studied for their own sake, are a waste of time for the average student. In the author's experience, grammatical terms can be explained when necessary as they arise in connection with actual cases, and students seem to be able to grasp them fairly quickly in this way because they can see the sense of them. In any case, grammatical terms are only labels, so in this book they are kept as few and as simple as possible.

Why should the student of English be taught English grammar at all? Surely for two reasons only: (a) to help him to avoid common mistakes by showing him the principles which those common mistakes transgress, and (b) to help him to extend his command of various other constructions. When dealing with grammar, the teacher should always have one of these two things consciously in mind. If he has not, he should stop teaching grammar. Of the two (a) is more immediately important than (b), and it forms the basis of the first two-thirds of this book more especially than the rest.

It is encouraging to note that formal grammar is no longer a compulsory part of the English Language paper

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in the School Certificate Examination. Perhaps one day it will not appear at all.

The present book grew out of work in a Certificate B Training College in Ghana. In general terms, it represents an introduction to the intermediate stage of English studies, and is suitable for those who have already studied English for six to ten years, in Primary, Middle and Senior Schools. It should be particularly useful in the Secondary or Training College curriculum. It is addressed primarily to West Africa, and tries to deal especially with West African difficulties (e.g. words of quantity), but it is thought that it may have a good deal to offer to learners in other countries, too.

The book should be used in conjunction with class readers. It is suggested that if there are six English periods a week, two should be devoted to the kind of work found in this book, and *at least* the same amount to reading, both intensive (i.e. passages for comprehension) and extensive (i.e. complete works of fiction or biography, read more rapidly). At a later stage, the book should be used chiefly for reference as the need arises, while the main part of the curriculum is devoted to the development in a more positive way of vocabulary, idiom, style and literary appreciation.

The book therefore has a dual purpose. First, it aims to provide the teacher with a course of practical grammar and usage which he should interpret as he thinks fit. Secondly, it aims to provide the learner with a handbook of useful principles, which he can use on his own.

The teacher is not expected to start at page one and go right through the book with his class page by page. In particular he may feel that the "Notes" sections, which normally follow an Exercise after the main point has been

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covered, should be left until they are more specifically needed, perhaps for reference only. It is recommended that the order of chapters should be followed in general, but as it is to a large extent arbitrary, this too may be changed if the teacher feels there is a special reason for it.

The actual methods of presentation are up to the teacher. In some cases he may get students to read the text aloud in the classroom; in others he will ask them to read only the examples, which he will explain in his own way. If he has sufficient confidence he will deal with the whole matter by himself, with examples on the blackboard. Maxims are dangerous in teaching, but it is a useful general rule that examples should come first or nearly first, and the main explanation afterwards; further, the class should be encouraged to discuss and question whatever is being taught. Finally, the relevant exercise should be done either orally or in writing, and students can be told if necessary to read up the text on their own.

Once a teacher is satisfied that he has dealt with a particular principle, it is most important that he should not feel that that is the end of the matter. For instance, all teachers know that students make mistakes with the sequence of tenses, so this is a principle which must be dealt with. But when the students have learnt the principle, that is only the beginning. It will not stop them making mistakes. It will simply enable them to understand the mistakes which they make. Two things follow. First, they must be given plenty of opportunity in the form of written work to make and to avoid making mistakes in the sequence of tenses. Secondly, each mistake must be pointed out and brought home to the student. The most effective way of doing this is by class demonstration: i.e., the teacher reads out the mistake or writes it on the blackboard, and invites

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the class to say what is wrong.<sup>1</sup> Mistakes of this kind which have previously been dealt with in class can be indicated in the student's book by a large cross in the margin, and it may take months of this kind of treatment to transform a general mistake into an isolated one.

### NOTE ON THE SECOND EDITION

The encouraging reception accorded to the book in many different parts of the world has prompted me to reduce the number of examples with a specifically regional background, and replace them with others of more general interest. I have also revised the text slightly, but without altering the page numbers. Linguistically the relevance of the book remains the same.

A *KEY*, which also contains a number of Supplementary Oral Exercises, is now available.

P. S. TREGIDGO

August, 1961

<sup>1</sup> In the author's opinion, some people make too much of a fetish of the doctrine that a student should never be presented with a mistake which he has not committed, though basically of course the doctrine is a very sound one. In any case, it is the author's experience that one student makes largely the same mistakes as another.



## INTRODUCTION

### DIFFERENT KINDS OF ENGLISH

ONCE you have passed the elementary stage of English studies, it is important that you should realize there are different *kinds* of English used for different purposes. This is true to some extent of all languages. If you were speaking in your own language to a high official, for instance, you would not use quite the same expressions as when speaking to your friends, and on ceremonial occasions you may even have to use a kind of ceremonial speech which is quite different from the speech of every day. But in addition there is one very important feature which English shares with all other advanced languages: it has gone far beyond the purely oral stage of development, and has a written history as well as a spoken one. English has, in fact, been written down for over a thousand years. Now when a language is written down, the written form is usually not quite the same as the spoken form, and written English is not quite the same as spoken English. This does not mean that they are always different. Most of the English you learn can be used on all occasions and for all purposes, both in speech and writing. But there are some expressions which belong only to speech, and others which belong only to writing. The English which belongs only to speech is called "colloquial" English, and that belonging only to writing is called "literary" English.

#### *Colloquial English.*

When we are speaking, we often use expressions which

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would seem careless and undignified in writing. This is true of highly educated people as well as everyone else. One of the most familiar examples is the practice of shortening certain common verbal expressions, e.g. "don't", "won't", "I'll" (=I will or I shall<sup>1</sup>), "he's" (=he is), etc. These are all extremely common in speech, but are normally avoided in writing unless the writer is purposely using a colloquial style, as when writing a letter to a friend, or when using direct speech to report the exact words which somebody has used. Moreover, in colloquial English we often say things which in writing would be regarded as grammatically wrong. Few people object to the sentence, "Who did you see?" when it is spoken, but if we are writing it we must alter "who" to "whom", because it is the object of "see" and must take the object form.

"Slang" is an extreme form of colloquial English, though even slang is widely used by all classes of people. Many slang expressions are used only in certain occupations, and may not be understood by people outside those occupations. Sailors, for instance, have their own slang; so have schoolboys, actors, thieves, and others. Uneducated foreigners (e.g. uneducated Africans and Chinese) use a simplified type of English called "pidgin English". English people living in Africa sometimes use pidgin English among themselves as a kind of slang. Expressions like "left small" (for soon) and "one-time" (for quickly) are pidgin English, and would not be understood by the average Englishman in England. Finally, a good deal of slang is impolite or obscene, and is therefore avoided by all respectable people.

<sup>1</sup> See §111.

## INTRODUCTION

### *Literary English.*

The word "literary" means "belonging to writing". It should not be confused with the word "literal" which has a different meaning. Literary English is more careful than colloquial English. Why is this? The reason is that when anything is written down, it is often a permanent record which everyone can see and check and examine, and the writer, knowing this, is careful to be grammatically correct, and to make his sentences effective or striking. Now this very careful kind of English may also be used in speech for special occasions, for instance in giving a public address of welcome to some important person; but if it is used in ordinary conversation it may sound foolish. Thus, "the person with whom I was conversing" is normal literary English, but in normal speech we would say something more simple, e.g. "the man I was talking to".

There is one other very important thing about literary English. As the years go by, every language is slowly changing. You do not notice this with a less advanced language, since if it has only recently been written down, you cannot compare the way people speak it now with the way they spoke it long ago. But in English the comparison can easily be made because we can still read the books which were written by our forefathers even hundreds of years ago. Thus, the English we read is often *old-fashioned*. This is to some extent true even of the literary English written today, because the written language always changes more slowly than the spoken. The words "thee", "thou", etc., for example, are never used in normal spoken English, but they are still sometimes used in writing, e.g. in poetry.

Students should note the following dangers connected with colloquial and literary English:

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- (a) The danger of using colloquial English in writing.
- (b) The danger of using literary English in speech.
- (c) The danger of using too much colloquial English in speech.
- (d) The danger of using too much literary and old-fashioned English in writing.

Of these four faults, the last is the commonest. Students commit this fault because they think they are being clever, but they are not. Remember, that when you are writing, you should always write simply, and never try to be impressive. If you take this advice your English will be more accurate and more sincere.

Some grammar books deal chiefly with literary English. The present book tries to be as natural and as practical as possible, bearing in mind the needs of the student both in his everyday speech and in his essay-writing. Anything strongly literary or strongly colloquial is avoided. Many of the examples given, e.g. in Chapter 2, are inspired by spoken usage rather than written usage, again for the purpose of being natural and practical; but they would also be perfectly suitable for that simple and direct kind of written English which all students ought to cultivate. In addition (e.g. from Chapter 6 onwards), plenty of attention is given to sentence construction and other topics which should give more specific help to students with their written work.

Certain other kinds of English, e.g. technical, legal and commercial, are unimportant and need never be learnt by the ordinary student.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# NOUNS AND ARTICLES

### *Countable and Uncountable Nouns*

§1.	C	U
	banana	rice
	cup	milk
	coin	gold
	virtue	honesty
	farm	earth
	night	darkness
	lesson	training

Above are fourteen common nouns, all in the singular. Look at each one and try to make it plural. . . .

I am assuming that you have a certain knowledge of English already, and if so you should be able to see that the seven nouns in the C column can be made plural easily, but the seven in the U column cannot. Why is this? The reason is plain when you realize that the C means "Countable" and the U "Uncountable". The nouns in the C column stand for things which we can count: one banana, two bananas, three bananas; one farm, two farms, three farms; and so on. But can we count rice or darkness?—can we say one gold, two golds, or one honesty, two honesties? Obviously not, because these things cannot be counted. It is very important to learn that *all* nouns in English are either C or U, for if you do not know this you may make a great many mistakes. Unfortunately there is no rule which will tell you whether a noun is C or U. There is no obvious reason why a word like "training"

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should be U and not C: it just is. Moreover, most dictionaries are not helpful on this point,<sup>1</sup> so the difficult cases must be learnt as they arise.

§2. Thus, a U word is always singular. This must be clearly understood. It is not true that a U word has a plural without s: it has no plural at all. "Sheep" is a C word, because we can say one sheep, two sheep; "this sheep is dead" or "these sheep are dead". The only unusual thing about the word "sheep" is that it has a plural with no s. But a U word like "rice" has no plural at all: we cannot say "these rices are not cooked", nor "these rice are", nor "this rice are", but only: "*This rice is not cooked*".

### EXERCISE I

(a) Write out the following nouns, labelling each one C or U:

- |                 |                            |
|-----------------|----------------------------|
| 1. water        | 6. brush                   |
| 2. road         | 7. smoke                   |
| 3. intelligence | 8. carelessness            |
| 4. clay         | 9. quality                 |
| 5. shoe         | 10. slap (noun, not verb). |

(b) Complete the following sentences with the above nouns in the order given (i.e. "water" in No. 1, "road" in No. 2, etc.) making the noun plural *if necessary*:

1. He drank two cups of — .
2. Two fine new — have been built.
3. My two brothers are good at football, but I don't admire their — .
4. I started work with two balls of — .
5. I have bought a new pair of — .
6. The two boxes were full of — .
7. The — from the two fires made me cough.
8. The essay was spoilt by two bad examples of — .
9. These two people have completely different — .
10. He slapped me twice, but the — did not hurt.

<sup>1</sup> An exception is *The Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*.



§3. Now look again at the fourteen nouns beginning this chapter. Try putting "a" (or "an") in front of each one. . . .

Again it should be plain that the C nouns can take "a", but the U nouns cannot. This is because the word "a" is a weak form of the word "one", and as you cannot count an uncountable noun, you cannot take "one" of it. This is the second important rule, therefore: U nouns cannot normally take "a". We can say "a cup" for example, but we cannot say "a milk". We often say "some milk", but in a great many cases U nouns are used without any article at all, as in the following:

1. A cow produces *milk*.
2. *Honesty* is the first duty we owe to our fellows.

This can *never* be done with a C noun. In other words, a C noun can *never* occur in the singular without an article. This is true even after an expression like "is called" e.g.:

3. In Britain not every piece of cultivated land is called *a farm*.
4. A good quality is called *a virtue*; a bad one is called *a vice*.

§4. You should now be quite clear about the principle of the difference between a C noun and a U noun. Here are the main points again:

- (a) A U noun cannot be used in the plural.
- (b) A U noun cannot take "a".
- (c) A C noun cannot be used in the singular without an article.