

高教社外语教师教育与发展丛书
体验英语教学系列

语法教学与研究

Practical English Language Teaching:
Grammar

■ David Nunan



高等教育出版社
HIGHER EDUCATION PRESS

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出版前言

根据教育部大学英语教学改革的精神,《大学英语课程要求》提出要培养“学生的英语综合应用能力,特别是听说能力”,其中包含教学理念和教学模式的创新。要达到大学英语教学改革的预期效果,教师是关键因素。大学英语教学改革的实践者是在教学第一线的广大英语教师。目前我国大学英语教学师资短缺,加强大学英语师资培训是摆在我们面前的一项刻不容缓的任务。为此,高等教育出版社特引进出版《高教社外语教师教育与发展丛书——体验英语教学系列》。

这是一套开放性的大型系列丛书,收入多位世界级语言教学专家的作品,具有权威性;内容涉及外语教学方法、测试、评估等诸多方面。“丛书”不仅系统介绍外语教学相关理论,更结合作者多年的教学经验,提供大量实践案例,能够开拓我国外语教师教学及科研视野,培养教师在教学问题上独立思考、研究和创新的能力,成为我国外语教师教育与发展的助力器。

《高教社外语教师教育与发展丛书——体验英语教学系列》充分体现了体验式的教育理念,配合教育部大学英语教学改革推荐教材《大学体验英语》立体化系列教材及学习系统而出版,目的在于介绍新的教学理念,推进教学理念向教学实践的转化。

近期我社还将出版供师范类学生、英语教师和英语研究者使用的英语语言教学丛书。我们由衷地希望这些教材的出版,能对我国高等院校的英语教学有所促进和帮助。

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Vision and purpose

The *Practical English Language Teaching* series is designed for practicing teachers, or teachers in preparation who may or may not have formal training in second and foreign language teaching methodology. The core volume in this series, *Practical English Language Teaching*, provides an overall introduction to key aspects of language teaching methodology in an accessible yet not trivial way. The purpose of this book is to explore the teaching of grammar in greater depth than was possible in the core volume, while at the same time remaining both comprehensive and accessible. You will not find how to teach specific grammatical points in this book. Instead the focus is on helping teachers and soon-to-be teachers reflect and develop their own approach to the teaching of grammar.

Features

- A clear orientation to the teaching of grammar including a historical overview and an introduction to major approaches to grammatical description and analysis that have informed pedagogy.
- A detailed treatment of the teaching of grammar at beginning, intermediate and advanced levels providing practical techniques for teaching and assessing grammar at each of these levels.
- Reflection questions inviting readers to think about critical issues in language teaching and Action tasks requiring readers to apply the ideas, principles, and techniques to the teaching of grammar in their own situations.
- A great deal of practical illustration from a wide range of textbooks and extracts from authentic classroom interaction.
- A “key issues” chapter which provides suggestions for dealing with large, multi-level classes, introducing technology, and catering to different learning styles and strategies.
- Suggestions for books, articles, and Web sites offering resources for additional up-to-date information.
- Expansive glossary offering short and straightforward definitions of core language teaching terms.

Audience

As with the overview volume, this book is designed for both experienced and novice teachers. It should also be of value to those who are about to join the profession. It will update the experienced teacher on current theoretical and practical approaches to grammar teaching. The novice teacher will find step-by-step guidance on the practice of language teaching.

Overview of chapter content

Chapter 1

The first chapter provides an orientation and historical overview of the teaching of grammar. The chapter also introduces key principles for teaching and assessing grammar.

Chapters 2–4

Chapters 2–4 introduce the teaching of grammar to beginning, intermediate and advanced students, respectively. Each chapter has the following format:

Goals: Summarizes what you should know and be able to do having read the chapter and completed the Reflection and Action tasks.

Introduction: Gives an overview of the chapter.

Syllabus design issues: Outlines the grammar items that are relevant at each level.

Principles for teaching grammar: Provides appropriate principles for teaching grammar at each level.

Tasks and materials: Describes and illustrates techniques and exercises for teaching grammar at each level.

Techniques for assessment: Introduces practical techniques for assessing learners in the classroom.

Conclusion: Reviews the goals of the chapter and how they were discussed within the chapter.

Further reading: Lists articles or books to enhance your knowledge of grammar teaching.

Helpful Web sites: Provides ideas of Web resources for teaching grammar.

Chapter 5

The final chapter explores key issues including the teaching of grammar in large, multi-level classes, working with learners who have different learning styles and strategies, and using technology.

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Chapter **One**

What is grammar?

At the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

Goals

- ✓ **provide** your own definition of the concept grammar.
- ✓ **describe** different approaches to grammar.
- ✓ **understand** the relationship between grammar, meaning, and context.
- ✓ **distinguish** between deductive and inductive approaches to the teaching of grammar.
- ✓ **appreciate** the importance of repetition and recycling in learning grammar.
- ✓ **understand** key issues in the assessment of grammar.

1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to consider some fundamental aspects of the topic of this book—grammar. In the first few sections of the chapter, I will introduce you to some competing ideas on what is meant by grammar. We will then explore how grammar works to convey meaning. I hope to convince you, through an exploration of grammar in action, that grammar is anything but a dry or boring subject; that, in fact, it can be fun as well as highly instructive to study. In Section Five, I discuss some of the differences between spoken and written language. I have included this section because spoken language has its own characteristics that are reflected in grammar, and these differences need to be made explicit to intermediate and advanced learners. This is a fairly new notion. Until recently, the grammar of written language was taken to be the norm, and deviations from the norm in spoken language were taken to be corruptions or slips of the tongue. In Section Six, we look at several fundamental principles of teaching grammar, including deductive and inductive teaching and the importance of repetition and recycling to the learning process. The final section of the chapter is concerned with assessment and the implementation of assessment within the grammar classroom.

2. What is grammar?

In this section, I want to look at what experts mean when they talk about grammar. In order to get us started, consider the following definitions:

Grammar may be roughly defined as the way language manipulates and combines words (or bits of words) in order to form longer units of meaning (Ur, 1988).

[Grammar is] a description of the structure of a language and the way in which units such as words and phrases are combined to produce sentences in the language (Richards, Platt and Weber, 2003).

[Grammar] is the way in which words change themselves and group together to make sentences. The grammar of a language is what happens to words when they become plural or negative, or what order is used when we make questions or join two clauses to make one sentence (Harmer, 1987).

The term grammar has multiple meanings. It is used to refer to both a subconscious internal linguistic system and linguistic attempts to explicitly

codify—or describe—that system. As Larsen-Freeman writes, “...minimally [grammar seeks] to explain the same phenomena: how words are formed (**morphology**) and how words are combined (**syntax**)” (2001a, p. 34).

From these definitions, it seems that grammar has to do with the ways in which units of language (principally, but not exclusively, words) combine together to form sentences. Such sentences are acceptable, or “grammatical”, if they follow the rules specified by grammarians.

3. Approaches to grammar

In this section, we look briefly at several contrasting approaches to grammar. The section begins by looking at the distinction between **prescriptive** and **descriptive grammars**. We then look briefly at the contrast between traditional approaches to grammar and two contemporary approaches: **transformational-generative grammar** and **systemic-functional grammar**. Each approach has its own validity, value, and purpose.

The two most influential approaches in modern times, transformational and functional grammar, offer dramatically different orientations. Transformational grammarians see language as a psychological phenomenon. They seek to describe language in terms of the mental rules that enable us to generate grammatically correct sentences. Functional grammarians, on the other hand, emphasize the social nature of language. They seek to show how the communicative purposes and functions of language are reflected in grammar.

Prescriptive approach versus descriptive approach to grammar

Some grammarians distinguish between prescriptive grammars and descriptive grammars. A prescriptive grammarian specifies what is right and what is wrong. A descriptive grammarian tries to avoid making judgments about correctness, and concentrates on describing and explaining the way people actually use language.

Descriptive linguists who research grammar are concerned with *describing* how the language is used rather than *prescribing* how it should be used. Therefore, if it is common for people to use sentences such as *Who did you give this to?* then the rules of descriptive grammar must allow for this type of sentence. Those concerned with prescription, however, might consider this to be an example of “bad grammar” and might suggest that *To whom did you give this?* would be more correct (Leech et al., 1982).

Traditional, transformational and functional approaches to grammar

In addition to prescriptive and descriptive approaches to grammar, there are other approaches to linguistic analysis. In this section, I will look at three of these: the traditional approach, the transformational-generative approach, and the functional approach. These three will give you a good idea of the wide range of grammars that are available for use when studying language.

Traditional grammar begins with the different word classes that can be found in a language and how these word classes function grammatically at the level of the sentence. In English, we have the common word classes of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, and less common classes such as articles and prepositions. Within the sentence, these word types have five different grammatical roles: subject, verb, object, complement and adverbial. Traditional grammarians recognize seven different clause types made up of these basic building blocks.

Clause type	Example
Type 1: Subject + Verb	Maria sang.
Type 2: Subject + Verb + Object	William saw a UFO.
Type 3: Subject + Verb + Complement	I became wary.
Type 4: Subject + Verb + Adverbial	I've been in the office.
Type 5: Subject + Verb + Object + Object	Malcolm bought his wife a diamond.
Type 6: Subject + Verb + Object + Complement	We think traditional grammatical analysis is rather pointless.
Type 7: Subject + Verb + Object + Adverbial	We had to take our relatives home.

Figure 1 Seven basic English clause types

There are many problems with traditional approaches to grammar terminology. Many of these problems stem from the fact that traditional grammatical descriptions and terms were inherited from the grammars of classical languages such as Greek and Latin, and did not really suit the analysis of English (or other modern languages for that matter). Traditional grammar also fails to distinguish between the way a word is formed and how it functions within a sentence. A nice example of this is provided by Butt et al. (2000), which I have adapted in the following Reflection box.

Reflection



1. What part of speech are the italicized words in the following sentence (i.e., are the words nouns, verbs, adjectives, or adverbs)?

- *Monterey* is a *town* in the *country*.

If you identified them all as nouns, you would be correct.

2. How about in the following sentences?

- Monterey is a *country* town.
- My cousin bought a *town* house in Monterey.
- Stop here for a real *Monterey* experience.

As Butt et al. point out that while the italicized words in the second group of sentences are still nouns in terms of their form, they are not functioning as nouns. In these sentences, they are functioning as adjectives. This example underlines the shortcoming of an approach to grammar that fails to take context and function into consideration when presenting parts of speech.

Transformational-generative grammar was developed by the American linguist Noam Chomsky. For Chomsky, a grammar is an abstract set of rules for specifying grammaticality. It is therefore concerned with investigating the internal structure of the human mind rather than with communication (Cook, 1996). Chomsky argued that grammar was independent of meaning. To support his view, he coined sentences such as the following: *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously*. Chomsky argued that such sentences were meaningless and yet grammatical.

While transformational-generative grammar has had a major influence on linguistic research, it has had relatively little impact on the teaching of grammar. In fact, early on, Chomsky himself specifically denied any relevance of his approach in pedagogy.

Those who subscribe to functional grammar, on the other hand, reject this separation of form and meaning. The aim of these grammarians is to show how form, meaning, and use are interrelated. To achieve this aim, we need to ask how a given sentence or utterance is formed, what it means, and when/why it is used. Larsen-Freeman provides the following examples:

1. When or why does a speaker/writer choose a particular grammar structure over another that could express the same meaning or accomplish the same purposes? For example, what factors in the social context might explain a paradigmatic choice such as why a speaker chooses a yes/no question rather than an imperative to serve as a request for information? (e.g., *Do you have the time?* versus *Please tell me the time.*)

2. When or why does a speaker/writer vary the form of a particular linguistic structure? For instance, what linguistic discourse factors would result in a syntagmatical choice such as the indirect object being placed before the direct object to create *Jenny gave Hank a brand new comb* versus *Jenny gave a brand-new comb to Hank* (Larsen-Freeman, 2001b, pp. 252–3).

Reflection



Consider the following newspaper accounts of the arrest of a criminal. Both describe the same event, and yet both do so quite differently. What is the difference and how is that difference achieved?

Police searching for a man in connection with ... were last night questioning a man arrested in a west London hotel. Armed anti-terrorist squad detectives surrounded the London Visitors Hotel on Holland Road, Holland Park shortly before 6.00 p.m. after a member of the public told them the man they were seeking was there. Mr Nat Handsworth, 35, offered no resistance as he was taken to Paddington Green police station after his arrest under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. (*The Guardian*, April 18, 1986)

...Nat Handsworth – the most wanted man in Britain – was captured last night after a dramatic swoop by armed police. Handsworth, 35, was seized in an early evening raid in West London – nearly thirty hours after a massive police hunt was launched for him following ... Last night he was being questioned by senior anti-terrorist squad officers at the high security Paddington Green police station in London. (*Today...*)

Woods, who found the two examples in the Reflection box, argues that: if we examine these texts carefully we can see that the information in each text is exactly the same. However, it is not difficult to see that the focus of the message changes. Whereas in *the Guardian* the focus is much more on the events, in the *Today* newspaper, the reporter is focusing our attention on the criminal. The two reporters are able to achieve the way the message is conveyed simply by the one using the passive voice and the other the active voice. It is in fact the grammar that has caused this shift in focus. (1995, p. 29)



Look through a newspaper or magazine and find an article that is written predominantly in either active or passive voice. Try changing the active voice to passive or vice-versa. How does changing the voice affect the meaning?

4. Grammar in action

The traditional approach to grammar described in the preceding section analyzes language at the level of the sentence. It makes no attempt to analyze grammar as a tool for communication. Nor does it study the influence of different sentences on each other within a piece of connected **discourse**. These days, many language specialists follow the argument put forth by functional grammarians, that in order to understand grammar—what it is and why it is the way it is—we need to study it in the communicative contexts in which it occurs. Furthermore, as Larsen-Freeman points out, we need to see how form, meaning, and use are systematically interrelated. In this section I will give you examples that lend support to this argument.

Reflection



Consider the following pairs of sentences. In each pair, the author has made different grammatical choices. What are the differences between the sentences in each pair, and what are the implications of each choice in terms of the meanings they convey?

Set 1

- a. That's the professor.
- b. That's a professor.

Set 2

- a. The professor's on the platform.
- b. The professor's under the platform.

Set 3

- a. The professor's on the platform.
- b. On the platform, that's where the professor is.

Set 4

- a. When there's a fire, do not use the elevator.
- b. If there's a fire, do not use the elevator.


The difference between the two sentences in Set 1 is that 1a contains the definite article *the*, while 1b contains the indefinite article *a*. Semantically, the definite article signals that there is only one professor, whereas the professor in 1b is one among several.

The difference in Set 2 is in the use of the preposition *on* in 2a and *under* in 2b. Here, we have to use our inferencing skills. Does 2b imply that the professor has fallen down? Is he drunk, perhaps? Has he had a stroke? Is he looking for something?

The two sentences in Set 3 have the same prepositional meaning in that both provide statements of location in relation to the professor. The difference here is in the distribution of the information, that is, how it is organized within the sentence. Functional grammarians describe the first element in a sentence as the theme. In 3a, the theme is “the professor.” In 3b, on the other hand, the theme is the location of the professor. We assume, therefore, that the author of 3a is interested in the individual, whereas the author of 3b is more interested in his location.

The difference in Set 4 is in the conjunction. Example 4a is a notice in the elevator in my apartment building. The notice worries me somewhat every time I see it because the use of *when* implies that sooner or later there is going to be a fire. A more appropriate choice here would be the use of the conjunction *if*, which signals conditionality. It is worth noting that 4a is an example of an authentic piece of discourse, and that in authentic language use, speakers and writers do not always make the most appropriate choices. This is something that second language learners have to learn to deal with, particularly if they are looking to native speakers and highly proficient second language speakers to provide them with appropriate models of language in use.

Reflection



Grammatically, what are the differences between the italicized parts of the following dialogues? In what ways do the different grammatical forms signal differences in meaning?

Dialogue 1

A: I've seen *Gangs of New York* twice.

B: Me too. I saw it last week and again on the weekend.

Dialogue 2

A: How about a movie?

B: No, I'm *going to study* tonight. We have an exam tomorrow, you know.

A: Do we? In that case, I guess I'll *study* as well.

Dialogue 3

A: My brother, *who lives in New York*, is visiting me here in Hong Kong.

B: What a coincidence. My brother, *who is visiting me in Hong Kong*, lives in New York as well.

Dialogue 4

A: I need you to look after the kids. You'll be home early tonight, *won't you?*

B: Oh, you'll be home late tonight, *will you?*

In Dialogue 1, A uses the present perfect, while B uses the simple past because she wants to specify when she saw the movie. For A, the specific times of seeing the movie are less important than the fact that at the time of speaking, she had had the experience twice. Therefore, the use of one tense rather than another reflects a communicative choice on the part of the speaker. This is why, ultimately, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to answer learners when they ask, "Well, which tense should I use, the simple past or the present perfect?" The answer is, "It depends on what you want to say!"

In Dialogue 2, the contrast is between the two future forms *going to* and *will*. B uses *going to* to indicate a planned future action. A responds by using *will* because he has only just decided to study on hearing B remind him about an imminent exam. This conforms to the textbook explanations of the use of *going to* for planned and *will* for unplanned future actions (although, see the Action box on page 10).

The two utterances in Dialogue 3 contain the same prepositional information. However, the dialogue illustrates the way in which the *status* of the information is affected by whether it is placed in the main clause or the subordinate clause. For A, the most important information is that his brother is visiting him. For B, it's the fact that his brother lives in New York.