Scott Thornbury

how to

teach grammar

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"The *How to...* series is written by teachers and teacher trainers, people who know the reality of the classroom and the support teachers need to get the most out of their students. Our aim is to build teachers' confidence, knowledge and classroom abilities – and inspire them to try out new ideas."

Jeremy Harmer, Series Editor

great teachers inspire

How to Teach Grammar is for teachers at the beginning of their careers and for more experienced teachers wanting to develop their skills in the teaching of grammar.

How to Teach Grammar offers:

- an overview of what grammar is
- reasons for why grammar should be taught, either explicitly or implicitly
- ways of judging the efficiency and appropriacy of any grammar lesson
- sample lessons for a wide variety of approaches to the teaching of grammar and for an extensive selection of grammar topics
- a Task File of photocopiable training tasks for each chapter
- an answer key to many of the tasks
- an appendix of further reading

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how to

Teach Grammar

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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.

1 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.

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

2 Why teach grammar?

- Attitudes to grammar
- The case for grammar
- The case against grammar
- Grammar and methods
- Grammar now
- Basic principles for grammar teaching

Attitudes to grammar

In 1622 a certain Joseph Webbe, schoolmaster and textbook writer, wrote: 'No man can run speedily to the mark of language that is shackled ... with grammar precepts.' He maintained that grammar could be picked up through simply communicating: 'By exercise of reading, writing, and speaking ... all things belonging to Grammar, will without labour, and whether we will or no, thrust themselves upon us.'

Webbe was one of the earliest educators to question the value of grammar instruction, but certainly not the last. In fact, no other issue has so preoccupied theorists and practitioners as the grammar debate, and the history of language teaching is essentially the history of the claims and counterclaims for and against the teaching of grammar. Differences in attitude to the role of grammar underpin differences between methods, between teachers, and between learners. It is a subject that everyone involved in language teaching and learning has an opinion on. And these opinions are often strongly and uncompromisingly stated. Here, for example, are a number of recent statements on the subject:

> 'There is no doubt that a knowledge – implicit or explicit – of grammatical rules is essential for the mastery of a language.'
> (Penny Ur, a teacher trainer, and author of *Grammar Practice Activities*)
>
> 'The effects of grammar teaching ... appear to be peripheral and fragile.'
> (Stephen Krashen, an influential, if controversial, applied linguist)
>
> 'A sound knowledge of grammar is essential if pupils are going to use English creatively.'
> (Tom Hutchinson, a coursebook writer)
>
> 'Grammar is not very important: The majority of languages have a very complex grammar. English has little grammar and consequently it is not very important to understand it.'
> (From the publicity of a London language school)

> 'Grammar is not the basis of language acquisition, and the balance of linguistic research clearly invalidates any view to the contrary.'
> (Michael Lewis, a popular writer on teaching methods)

Since so little is known (still!) about how languages are acquired, this book will try to avoid taking an entrenched position on the issue. Rather, by sifting the arguments for and against, it is hoped that readers will be in a better position to make up their own minds. Let's first look at the case for grammar.

The case for grammar

There are many arguments for putting grammar in the foreground in second language teaching. Here are seven of them:

The sentence-machine argument

Part of the process of language learning must be what is sometimes called **item-learning** – that is the memorisation of individual items such as words and phrases. However, there is a limit to the number of items a person can both retain and retrieve. Even travellers' phrase books have limited usefulness – good for a three-week holiday, but there comes a point where we need to learn some patterns or rules to enable us to generate new sentences. That is to say, grammar. Grammar, after all, is a description of the regularities in a language, and knowledge of these regularities provides the learner with the means to generate a potentially enormous number of original sentences. The number of possible new sentences is constrained only by the vocabulary at the learner's command and his or her creativity. Grammar is a kind of '**sentence-making machine**'. It follows that the teaching of grammar offers the learner the means for potentially limitless linguistic creativity.

The fine-tuning argument

As we saw in Chapter 1, the purpose of grammar seems to be to allow for greater subtlety of meaning than a merely lexical system can cater for. While it is possible to get a lot of communicative mileage out of simply stringing words and phrases together, there comes a point where 'Me Tarzan, you Jane'-type language fails to deliver, both in terms of intelligibility and in terms of appropriacy. This is particularly the case for written language, which generally needs to be more explicit than spoken language. For example, the following errors are likely to confuse the reader:

> Last Monday night I was boring in my house.
>
> After speaking a lot time with him I thought that him attracted me.
>
> We took a wrong plane and when I saw it was very later because the plane took up.
>
> Five years ago I would want to go to India but in that time anybody of my friends didn't want to go.

The teaching of grammar, it is argued, serves as a corrective against the kind of ambiguity represented in these examples.

3 How to teach grammar from rules

- A deductive approach
- Rules and explanations
- Sample lesson 1: Using a rule explanation to teach question formation
- Sample lesson 2: Teaching *used to* using translation
- Sample lesson 3: Teaching articles using grammar worksheets
- Sample lesson 4: Teaching word order using a self-study grammar

A deductive approach

First of all, here are two important definitions:

- a **deductive** approach starts with the presentation of a rule and is followed by examples in which the rule is applied
- an **inductive** approach starts with some examples from which a rule is inferred

An example of deductive learning might be that, on arriving in a country you have never been to before, you are told that as a rule people rub noses when greeting one another, and so you do exactly that. An example of inductive learning would be, on arriving in this same country, you observe several instances of people rubbing noses on meeting so you conclude that this is the custom, and proceed to do likewise. In place of the terms **deductive** and **inductive**, it may be easier to use the terms **rule-driven** learning and **discovery** learning respectively.

As we saw in Chapter 2 (page 22) the deductive (rule-driven) approach to language teaching is traditionally associated with Grammar-Translation. This is unfortunate because Grammar-Translation has had a bad press. There are in fact many other ways of incorporating deductive learning into the language classroom. We shall be looking at some of these later in this chapter.

The reasons why Grammar-Translation has fallen from favour are worth briefly reviewing. Typically, a grammar-translation lesson started with an explanation (usually in the learner's mother tongue) of a grammar point. Practice activities followed which involved translating sentences out of and into the target language. The problem is that, since classes were taught in the students' mother tongue, there was little opportunity for them to