TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR

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CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS GRAMMAR?
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There are two definitions of grammar according to the *Glossary of Grammatical and Rhetorical Terms*:

• The systematic study and description of a *language*.

• A set of rules and examples dealing with the *syntax* and word structures of a language, usually intended as an aid to the learning of that language.
IMPORTANT IDEAS

• 1. Grammar is broad.
• 2. Grammar has no clear boundaries.
• 3. The KS3 Framework for English is based on grammar.
• 4. Grammar is technical.
• 5. Grammar is only a part of 'knowledge about language'.
• 6. Grammar provides tools for expressing meanings.
• 7. Every kind of English has a grammar.
• 9. English grammar is relevant to other languages.
• 10. Pupils should be taught the principles of sentence grammar and whole-text cohesion and use this knowledge in their writing.
✓ Grammar is broad

Grammar is not just syntax. It includes all of the following:

• **Syntax**, i.e. sentence structure, where we distinguish subjects and objects, subordinate and main clauses, and so on.

• **Morphology**, i.e. word structure, where we recognise roots, suffixes, inflected words, and so on.

• **Semantics**, i.e. meaning - the things, people, events and so on that we refer to when talking.
✓ Grammar has no clear boundaries

It is meant to include any of the following:

• Vocabulary and 'word families'.
• Sound patterns in words and the phoneme-grapheme correspondences of phonics.
• Intonation in speech and its effects on meaning.
The KS3 Framework for English is based on grammar

The **KS3 Framework** assumes a conceptual structure based on grammar. It follows the **Primary Framework** in dividing all the teaching objectives into three 'levels':

- *word level*
- *sentence level*
- *text level*
✓ Grammar is technical

• However we define grammar, it must include the linguistic structures found in sentences and inside words; so pupils must learn to identify and talk about some of these patterns. In short, they must learn about grammatical analysis and the standard terminology associated with it.
✓ Grammar is only a part of 'knowledge about language'

• Language changes through time, varies from place to place and is learned by our students.

• They should also be taught:
  – that language changes;
  – the sources and causes of linguistic change;
  – how meanings are affected by choice of vocabulary and structure;
  – to apply their knowledge of language variety.
Grammar provides tools for expressing meanings.

- English grammar consists of a vast collection of patterns - ways of using and modifying words - each of which is dedicated to achieving some meaning or effect. For example:
  
  "adjective + common noun" (e.g. tall man) - the adjective modifies the meaning of the common noun even when we say (an interesting man).
Every kind of English has a grammar.

- Traditionally, grammar was associated with standard English.
- In fact, every dialect has a grammar, in the sense of a set of conventions which its speakers follow, and which sometimes distinguish insiders from outsiders.
✅ English grammar is relevant to other languages

- English grammar shows many similarities to other grammars; for example, the word classes (noun, verb, and so on) of English are very similar to the classes found in most other languages - not surprisingly, perhaps, since we inherited them from grammarians of Latin, who in turn had inherited them from Greek.
Pupils should be taught the principles of sentence grammar and whole-text cohesion and use this knowledge in their writing.

Pupils should be taught:

- the organising principles and structures of language;
- how they contribute to meaning and effect;
- how to use their knowledge of language structures in their reading and writing.
DESCRIPTIVE AND PRESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR

- **Descriptive grammar** is the systematic study and description of a language. Descriptive grammar refers to the structure of a language as it is actually used by speakers and writers.

- **Prescriptive grammar** is a set of rules and examples dealing with the syntax and word structures of a language, usually intended as an aid to the learning of that language. Prescriptive grammar refers to the structure of a language as certain people think it should be used.
• **Descriptive grammar** (definition #1) refers to the structure of a language as it is actually used by speakers and writers.

• **Prescriptive grammar** (definition #2) refers to the structure of a language as certain people think it *should* be used.
CHAPTER 2

THE VALUE OF STUDYING GRAMMAR AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT
Why is grammar important?

• Grammar is important because:
  • It is the language that makes it possible for us to talk about language.
  • Grammar names the types of words and word groups that make up sentences not only in English but in any language.
  • Knowing about grammar also helps us understand what makes sentences and paragraphs clear and interesting and precise.
TEN TYPES OF GRAMMAR

• Linguists are quick to remind us that there are different varieties of grammar--that is, different ways of describing and analyzing the structures and functions of language.
• **Comparative Grammar**
  The analysis and comparison of the grammatical structures of related languages.
• **Generative Grammar**
The rules determining the structure and interpretation of sentences that speakers accept as belonging to the language.
• **Mental Grammar**
  The generative grammar stored in the brain that allows a speaker to produce language that other speakers can understand.
• **Pedagogical Grammar**
Grammatical analysis and instruction designed for second-language students.
• **Performance Grammar**
  A description of the **syntax** of English as it is actually used by speakers in dialogues.
• **Reference Grammar**
  A description of the grammar of a language, with explanations of the principles governing the construction of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences.
• **Theoretical Grammar**
  The study of the essential components of any human language.
• **Traditional Grammar**
The collection of prescriptive rules and concepts about the structure of the language.
• **Transformational Grammar**
  A theory of grammar that accounts for the constructions of a language by linguistic transformations and phrase structures.
• **Universal Grammar**
The system of categories, operations, and principles shared by all human languages and considered to be innate.
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GRAMMAR AND COMMUNICATION

Grammar in a Communicative Approach
• Even when functional communication could take place without it, it is appropriate control of the grammar that makes the forms of the communication *socially acceptable*.
• Grammar enables speakers to talk about things that are not present in the actual situation where communication takes place. In other words: it enables communication to be *decontextualised* and to serve our human need to look beyond the here-and-now.
• Grammar enables speakers to convey messages that are more *subtle* and *abstract* than would otherwise be possible. It thus enables language to reflect the complexity of our human thought processes.
HOW IS GRAMMAR INTERNALISED?

• Research suggest that the ways for internalising grammar fall into two main categories. They correspond to whether language learning is conceived mainly as learning a skill or mainly as a process of natural development.

• It should be stressed that these two ways are not mutually exclusive but may go on simultaneously.
1. Language learning = learning a skill

This kind of learning is the most familiar in school settings.

Sets of language items or language for expressing important meanings are presented to the learners so that their form and meaning become clear.

The learners then practise them so that they can use them automatically, first in controlled practice situations and later in free language use.

Throughout this process, language choices are associated with the meanings that they express, so that they can later serve the needs of communication.
2. Language learning = a process of natural development

- In naturalistic learning situations (first or second language) there is no teacher or course-writer to isolate elements of the language or organise systematic practice.
- Language develops in the context of natural language use. Provided that learners are exposed to language they can understand and are motivated to use it as a medium of communication, they follow their own spontaneous course of development.
- In natural situations the learners are not normally conscious of being engaged in a process of language learning. This is because their focus is not on language itself but on the meanings that are being communicated.
- Also, the system which learners internalise is not one which has been pre-analysed and presented by a teacher or course-writer but one which they themselves create by making their own sense of the language around them.
HOW CAN WE HELP LEARNERS TO INTERNALISE GRAMMAR?

• In the classroom we need to provide learners with opportunities to:
  (a) internalise the grammatical system of the language and
  (b) relate this grammatical system to the meanings it conveys in communication.
As a first step towards organising our classroom methods so that learners have these opportunities, we should classify the various activities for learning grammar into four main categories:

- pre-communicative language practice
- communicative language practice
- structured communication
- authentic communication
Pre-communicative language practice

• The most familiar way of doing this is to focus on some kind of situation (e.g. a picture, a text, the classroom or an area of common knowledge) and use this as a basis for question-and-answer practice or description.

How many children are there in the picture?
There are four.

How many books are there on the table?
There are six.(etc.)

• The questions may be asked initially by the teacher but it is important that they are asked also by the learners, who need experience in initiating exchanges as well as simply responding.

• This relationship between language and its meanings is often reinforced by simulating a situation that could occur outside the classroom, such as that of a stranger asking directions in the street.
Communicative language practice

• This kind of practice adds a further dimension to the kind just described: the language now expresses meanings that communicate new information to other people.
• The basic principle is that there is now an “information gap” and the learners are given the task of sharing information in order to overcome this gap.
• An example was given above of learners talking about a picture (how many children, how many books, etc.). It was assumed that all learners could see the same picture. By using two or more pictures, which are similar but contain differences of detail, we can give learners the opportunity to use the same language in simple communication tasks:
• These activities, (a) involve the students in practising predictable language, which may only recently have been taught to them, but (b) students are using this language to communicate new meanings, including (to a limited extent) meanings which are their own. These two features are carried further in the next category of activity.
Structured communication

• In “communicative language practice”, the teacher exercises control of the activity at the level of the specific language elements to be used.
• In what is here called “structured communication”, control moves up to a higher level of language use.
• Learners are able now to use whatever language they wish in order to express the meanings which arise during communication. However, the situation itself has been carefully structured so that the meanings which arise are to a large extent predictable and can be expressed with language which the learners have (perhaps only recently) been taught.
• The learners can thus practise using the language system for communication, but in contexts which shelter them from the unexpected demands which arise in authentic language use.
Authentic communication (I)

1. It is in “authentic communication” that learners begin to engage in using language to express the unpredictable range of meanings that are likely to arise in situations outside the classroom.

2. It is obviously still the teacher who organises the learning situation, but this organisation moves again to a higher level than before. The teacher sets up the context and purpose for using language but does not direct control over the meanings that need to be conveyed.
**Authentic communication (II)**

- In authentic communication, more than in previous activities, learners may need to express or understand meanings for which they have not learnt the most appropriate language. In such cases they will need to use communication strategies, e.g. guessing the meaning of unknown words from the context or using paraphrase to get an idea across.

- One inevitable result of this is that they will make more errors. This should not be a cause for worry. Indeed, in authentic communication we should encourage learners to take risks and use whatever language and communication strategies they can find, so that the grammar can become *their own* grammar in a real sense: a part of their mental make-up which they can use freely for communication and which they will develop further as they gain more experience.

- It is in authentic communication (and, to a lesser extent, in structured communication) that learners are most able to exploit not only their skill-learning capacities but also the same natural capacities for learning language which (as we saw in the previous section) are evident in first language learners and natural second language learners.
Selected Reading

- A book which gives a general survey of teaching techniques in a communicative approach:

- Five books which give a range of practical techniques similar to those described in this article:

- Two books which suggest activities for authentic communication in the language classroom:

- A book which discusses the theory and practice of using project work as a context for authentic communication:

- A book which elaborates on the principles which underlie the framework described in this article: