

Preface

When you see a mother and son writing a book about teaching grammar, you might assume that there is a story behind their effort. The story behind this book dates back to Andy's ninth-grade English class. His teacher was Mr. T., who diligently taught us the *traditional* rules for English grammar.

One day, Mr. T. opened the class with the following statement: "You young people have much to learn about the English language. Of utmost importance is learning how to conjugate verbs. I am passing out several sheets of paper with all of the conjugations used in English. You are to study them tonight, for there will be a test on them tomorrow."

Upon returning home and raiding the refrigerator as fortification for the task ahead, the dutiful Andy sat at the kitchen table to pour over Mr. T's worksheets. When his mother (Evelyn), a newly minted college professor of linguistics, came into the kitchen, she observed Andy's perplexed expression. She asked him what he was studying.

"I have an English test tomorrow," said Andy.

"I love English," said Mom.

"I know you do," replied Andy.

"What are you learning about?" pressed Mom.

"How to conjugate verbs," answered Andy.

"Don't you already conjugate verbs?" quizzed Mom.

"Apparently not, according to Mr. T.," mumbled Andy.

"What do those sheets say?" asked Mom, as Andy pondered the wisdom of doing his homework in the kitchen under the watchful eye of his mother.

Andy sighed, "They contain all of the tenses and forms used to conjugate English verbs."

Mom peered over Andy's shoulder. Mom asked, "How many tenses and forms are on these sheets?"

"Eight," groaned Andy.

She clucked. She huffed. She puffed. Then, with conviction, she announced, "English only has two tenses. Any *linguist* will tell you that. These sheets are neither correct nor accurate!"

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“They are tonight,” deadpanned Andy. “And they better be tomorrow when I take the test. You can tell me the truth tomorrow.”

Luckily, Andy got a good grade on the test and put the weekend to good use by forgetting everything he had studied for the test by shooting baskets.

This household event was one of many in which Evelyn challenged the merits of traditional ways of teaching grammar. Not that Evelyn didn’t love grammar and everything related to this sometimes arcane subject. But she was now working with great teachers of language and linguistics at Teachers College at Columbia University and had a new and broader perspective, which often found its voice at our kitchen table. This book, which we have titled *English Grammar Instruction That Works! Developing Language Skills for All Learners*, is the culmination of our discussions and deliberations, combined with classroom practice, teacher workshops, and the research and wisdom of wonderful writers who have expanded our knowledge and understanding of the English language.

OUR POINT OF VIEW

The major purpose of this book is to guide teachers in teaching the grammar of English as it is, *not as we wish it to be*. These italicized words—*as we wish it to be*—may seem odd for a subject that, until recently, has been a mainstay of the English curriculum. However, if we examine the history of grammar teaching in schools, we discover that for generations, “school grammarians” have wanted English to be modeled on Latin—a *noble* language perhaps, but one that is no longer active and, furthermore, is extremely different in its structure from modern English.

Bill Bryson in *The Mother Tongue* (1990) exemplifies the point of view in this book, humorously stating that the teaching of grammar (in school) is confusing for one very simple reason: “. . . its rules and terminology are based on Latin—a language with which it has precious little in common. . . . Making English grammar conform to Latin rules is like asking people to play baseball using the rules of football. It is a patent absurdity” (p. 137).

Yet for generations, and until this very day, our school grammar books (unfortunately called *English* books) continue to perpetuate this misguided belief that English grammar should be based on Latin grammar, either stated or inferred. Some of us (including Evelyn) managed to learn what we were taught. We accepted and memorized the statements of teachers who told us that “English has eight parts of speech,” or “English has nine [or was it eight?] tenses such as the preterit, the imperfect, the conditional, the progressive, the future, and so forth.” We accepted that a “noun is a person, place, or thing” and that words such as *dog*, *joy*, *mathematics*, *discussion*, and *determination* are all *things* since they are not persons or places.

Some of us (but neither of the authors) enjoyed sentence diagramming. A sentence one of us had to diagram referred to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*: “A pair of star-crossed lovers take their lives.” First, we had to remove the article from the noun so that the phrase could be Latinized since Latin has (or had) no articles. Then the adjective, which in English generally precedes the noun, had to be removed and shifted to come after the noun as in Latin. Finally the word *such* as *their* as in “their lives” would have to be removed because Latin did not have this type of construction. The sentence “A pair of star-crossed lovers take their lives” was reduced to “Lovers take lives!”

Some of us too might have enjoyed underlining the subject once and the predicate twice or finding the direct and indirect objects. We might have been gleeful over locating sentences that were declarative, interrogative, or imperative because this task seemed like a “no-brainer.” And some of us might have liked the challenge of locating predicate nouns and predicate adjectives in sentences made up by the publisher of the grammar book. Some of us probably worked hard at grammar because we wanted to get a good grade and some of us hoped (both authors) that knowing Latinized English grammar would make us good writers.

Then there were some of us who despairingly went along with what we had to do, but never quite caught on. We split infinitives, confused transitive verbs with intransitive verbs, never quite got the meaning of terms like “perfect” and “imperfect” as they applied to tenses (rather than people), and worried why in a sentence such as “It is raining,” the subject was “It” when deep in our hearts we knew that “raining” was what the sentence was about.

So if the Latinized grammar of English is NOT useful, except as a game or “exercise of the brain,” what grammar should we teach if, indeed, we teach grammar at all? A statement by VanTassel-Baska, Johnson, and Boyce (1996) illustrates what grammar is and supports why we believe it does have a place in teaching and learning, provided that we follow the premise of this statement: “Grammar serves meaning. . . . The rules of grammar . . . bend themselves to the needs of meaning . . . and these determine the success of the communication” (p. 156). Two statements from Crystal (2006a) also add to the importance of this topic, one of which is “No sentence can begin without grammar” (p. 96), and the other is Crystal’s definition that “grammar is the study of all the contrasts of meaning that it is possible to make within sentences” (p. 97). Let’s look at three examples of meaning and the *grammar* used to convey that meaning. One is from Eric Carle, one is from Dr. Seuss, and one is from A. A. Milne, three very respectable writers:

“Neigh! Neigh!” said the horse. “Want to go for a ride?”

“Moo! Moo!” said the cow. “Want to eat some grass?”

“Cock-a-doodle do!” crowed the rooster. “Want to catch a pesty fly?”

And the spider caught the fly in her web . . . just like that! (*The Very Busy Spider*, Eric Carle, 1984)

Back feet

Front feet

How many different feet you meet (*The Foot Book*, Dr. Seuss, 1996)

“You see, what I meant to do,” he explained, as he turned head-over heels, and crashed on to another branch thirty feet below, “what I meant to do——”

“Of course, it was rather——” he admitted, as he slithered very quickly through the next six branches.

“It all comes, I suppose,” he decided, as he said good-bye to the last branch, spun around three times, and flew gracefully into a gorse-bush, “it all comes of liking honey so much. Oh help!” (*The World of Pooh*, 1957, A. A. Milne, p. 13)

Perhaps you’re thinking, or you can hear your colleagues thinking, the following: “This is fine and good for an established author who probably already knows the *correct* way to write and doesn’t have to write the *correct* way. But my students . . .,” and so forth. We understand the dilemma. When young students are learning to communicate, either in speech or writing, we feel that they must be grounded in the correct or standard ways and that by having these ways, they can then innovate or deviate because deep in their psyches they will know what is right. Perhaps there is

truth to this idea because both of us, as parents, have tried to infuse in our own children this idea or ideal of “good and proper *standard*” English.

So what is the answer? That is, what is there about grammar that we should teach, and how should we go about teaching it? This is the question we hope to answer in this book, because if grammar indeed serves meaning, then the inclusion of well-defined grammar can be a powerful partner in the building of literacy. In this book, we hope to provide a fresh and accurate perspective, with practical application, that gives teachers the necessary background about the English language, combined with specific, lively, student-centered activities.

We have drawn from the research and writing of exemplary linguists and educators who offer teachers and students the knowledge and joy that comes from knowing how to write and speak and *is supported by understanding the grammatical structure of English*. Throughout this book, we cite the current and substantiated works of Chomsky, Pinker, McWhorter, Bryson, McArthur, Crystal, McCrum, Cran, and MacNeil, among others (in the References), who address the relationship between the structure of the English language and the educational needs of diverse speakers.

OBJECTIVES AND KEY POINTS

We have set out the following objectives to give teachers the linguistic background and structure of the English language so that their students will learn the following:

- How to apply knowledge of English grammar to improve their communication skills in a variety of situations and for a multitude of purposes.
- How English got to be English.
- The differences between spoken English and written English.
- Why different speakers of English speak different English.
- Different aspects of language—dialect, slang, standard, and more.
- Specific language terminology or metalanguage—sentences, parts of speech, vocabulary, written conventions, and more.
- Ways that language can be fun—riddles, oxymora, idioms, and more.
- How English grammatical structures relate to other languages.

By having in-depth knowledge of the English grammatical structure, your students will attain a high level language background that supports all aspects of literacy. We, therefore, address these questions:

- What should students know about language generally?
- What should students know about English grammar, specifically?
- What is the role of vocabulary in relationship to grammar?
- How do we help students enlarge their sentence-making repertoires?
- What strategies relate grammar to speaking, reading, and writing?
- How do we integrate grammar with language arts and other subject areas?
- How can knowledge of English grammar help students who speak a language other than English?
- How do we make grammar fun to learn, really, really fun, and memorable and meaningful?

As in our previous books, *Writing as Learning* (2007) and *Write for Mathematics* (2007), we provide specific strategies, tables and figures, and accurate resources that can guide you in making the teaching of grammar lively, interesting, and above all, beneficial to your students' language needs. We've tried to keep this book user-friendly with activities for all ages and abilities which you can use directly with your students or modify them as necessary.

The 13 chapters of this book, summarized as follows, are organized to fulfill our objectives and are written in the order of what we believe will give you both an historic and application perspective of English grammar and its components. We hope you read it through and then go back to the chapters and sections that apply best to your students' needs and interests.

Chapter 1. The **Introduction** discusses

- what grammar is.
- the history of teaching grammar in America.
- current standards on the teaching of grammar.

Chapter 2. **Language and Metalanguage** provides

- an overview of the aspects of language and metalanguage and the terms we use to describe language.
- the origins and historic changes of the English language.

Chapter 3. **Builders of Linguistic Intelligence** gives an overview of five aspects of language that are essential to developing high level language and literacy skills, which are

- Phonology—The “sounds” or vocal aspects.
- Morphology—The structure of words.
- Syntax (or grammar)—The speaker's internalized rules for constructing sentences.
- Semantics—The deep structure meanings that sentences provide for both speaker and listener.
- Etymology—The history or story of words.

Chapter 4. **Parts of Speech and the English Language** focuses on English as primarily a morphological language where

- the majority of its words or lexicon has multiple forms (e.g., play, players, playful, playfulness).
- a limited number of non-morphological words (e.g., the, in, but, or) provide the “glue” for constructing sentences.

Chapter 5. **Syntax and Semantics** note the relationship of grammar to meaning and explain how

- the meaning of words is derived from sentences.
- the deep meaning or semantics is the basis of comprehension.
- students benefit from studying both aspects—syntax and semantics—in unity.

Chapter 6. **The Polyglot of English** explains how and why the lexicon of English is composed of vast numbers of Latin and Greek words and offers students the plethora of

- Latin stems, roots, and words or the Latin DNA that make up a large part of “high level” spoken and written English.
- Greek stems, roots, and words infused in science, literature, social studies, religion, and other subjects.

Chapter 7. **The Polyglot: Beyond Latin and Greek** adds the lexical contributions of the languages of peoples worldwide who have contributed to the diversity of the English-speaking world and includes the following:

- Germanic, French, Spanish, and Italian words.
- Words from African Americans and Yiddish speakers, as well as words from China, Japan, and India.
- Writing activities that provide students with expanded knowledge of the English polyglot.

Chapter 8. **Return to Parts of Speech** is mainly about the non-morphological English words that bind words into sentences, provide multiple meanings, and often defy classification as parts of speech, such as

- prepositions.
- two-part verbs.
- conjunctions.
- transitions.

Chapter 9. **Sentences, Paragraphs, and Other Structures of the Written Language** is mainly about written structures that guide students in

- converting spoken sentences into written sentences.
- working with sentence units known as phrases and clauses.
- finding sentence boundaries in written sentences.
- finding deep structure meaning in written sentences.
- working with subjects and predicates.
- learning about tenses and agreement.
- learning whether “to split or not to split.”
- working with paragraphs.
- learning about writing formats such as *formal to friendly* and *friendly to formal*.

Chapter 10. **Grammar for Word Play** is to make “grammar” really fun by writing joyfully, using

- oxymora.
- eponyms.
- colorful words.
- affixes awry.
- comedic characters.

Chapter 11. **Reading, Writing, and Grammar** combines these aspects of literacy with student activities from

- fairy tales and other children’s literature.
- the autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845/2003).
- author Lewis Carroll.
- the novel *The Phantom Tollbooth* (Juster, 1989).

Chapter 12. **Punctuation, Spelling, Text Messaging, and Other Consequences of Grammar** offers students lively activities that have them

- do a personal punctuation assessment.
- clarify their writing by gaining a deep understanding of how punctuation attempts to “imitate” speech.
- explore why we use apostrophes, colons, semicolons, dashes, and parentheses.
- relate spelling to grammar.
- contribute to the new grammar of text messaging.

Chapter 13. **Additional Learning Activities** build sentence power and include the following:

- Plan to Expand.
- People in Apposition.
- Verbs of Locomotion for Getting Places.
- To + Verb = One Great Sentence.
- Past Tense Openers.
- Transitions for Unity.
- Powerful Paragraph Starters.
- Numerous Combinations.
- World-Wide Words.
- African American Proverbs.
- Double Meanings.
- Acrostic Varieties.

We have had the privilege of having our manuscript submitted to a variety of teachers and university faculty and have received many insightful comments and valuable suggestions for making this book “useful” in the classroom. We have incorporated what they have told us in as many ways as possible and know that this book has benefited from their careful reading and deep reflections. Hopefully, we have done justice to their suggestions.

Last, we want to thank the many teachers who have taken our courses in Linguistics and the Structure of the English Language and who have shared their own knowledge and provided us with invaluable feedback on what has worked (or not worked) for their own students. This book is our special tribute to these “students” of the English language.

We look forward to hearing from you. Your questions, comments, and successes will all be welcomed.