

# The importance of GRAMMAR

**It is sometimes claimed that teaching grammar is elitist. This article contends that in actual fact, far from being elitist, grammar is a vital ingredient in the English language teaching mix.**

by Andrew Rossiter - 2021

## **Grammar and communication**

For well over half a century now, there has been much debate among linguists and academics about the relevance of formal grammar to the teaching of the English language, whether for native speakers or for those learning English as a second or foreign language. There was indeed a time, in the late twentieth century, when formal grammar virtually fell out of the secondary school English syllabus in Britain and the USA. Teaching grammar was deemed elitist or superfluous. On the one hand Chomsky had proposed his theory of universal grammar, suggesting that childrens' brains were all wired up to understand grammar by intuition; on the other hand Chomskyan linguistics was considered - not without good reason - beyond the grasp of teenage learners and of many of their teachers too. So rejecting earlier prescriptive and traditional approaches to grammar, many linguists concluded that it was best not to teach grammar at all. Quite rightly it was deemed that teaching generative grammar, let alone transformational grammar, to learners would be elitist, since only the best school students or EFL/ESL learners would be able to follow.

Yet when the function of grammar in language learning is looked at in a bit more detail, it should be evident that it not *the teaching of grammar* that is elitist, but the idea that all students can get by *without any formal teaching* of grammar that is an elitist approach. Complexity is not an inherent quality of grammar; grammar can be made quite simple or highly complex, depending on how it is presented.

Yes, teachers can of course try to teach English with little attention to grammar, and some students, the brightest and smartest ones, will manage just fine, as they have the ability to work out the rules by themselves; but this is an elitist approach. Most students/pupils/learners **need** a certain amount of guidance in basic grammar in order to make faster progress. The least able students, far from being those for whom grammar is "an unnecessary complication" are in many cases those who have *most* need of a grammatical approach to language learning, not *least*. The idea that somehow teachers should avoid teaching grammar to such students can be considered misguided, or even rather condescending.

More recently, after years of arguments about poor levels of literacy and language awareness, "grammar" has returned to school curricula in the UK, though with little consensus as to what should be taught, nor how to teach it. Commenting on this state of affairs, Debra Myhill, Professor

of Education at Exeter University writes (2021). " The minute grammar is mentioned, reason flies out the window and polemicism rushes through the door. What it does is generate an ever-recycled set of arguments for and arguments against, when we would be better off discussing children's actual learning."

The arguments over the teaching of grammar in the school system in the UK and the USA have spilled over into the world of EFL and ESL, though fortunately to a lesser extent, particularly when English is being taught in other countries where teachers have a different tradition. "I have led some professional development courses in other countries and it has been lovely to focus on teaching about how grammar can provide insight into how language works, and find that the teachers are all so confident with the underlying grammar!" adds Professor Myhill.

So there seems to be a general consensus nowadays ( though a trend that is strangely bucked, in the name of anti-elitism, by some universities) that grammar **is** important. Whether students use English as a first language or a second or additional language makes no difference to this; in this respect, the division of English teaching into first language acquisition and second language learning is largely irrelevant.

### **Why grammar is so important**

Languages are natural forms of communication; children quickly learn to communicate using their native language, and soon master the main rules of expression without being taught. As they learn their mother tongue, children acquire an intuitive understanding of grammar, generally without realising it. This intuitive grammar awareness is perfectly adequate for the communication requirements of a young child, but it soon reaches its limits.

Going beyond the needs of a young child, communication, specially written communication, soon requires at least some understanding of the essential principles of grammar or syntax.

If we imagine language as a big highway, the words are the cars and trucks, but the grammar is the road signs and markings that tell people driving on it where to go and how to drive. Without road signs, a big highway would quickly descend into total confusion. Without any grammar, we could manage to produce some sort of elementary communication, such as "Me Tarzan, you Jane", but we would be unable to form any more complex ideas into words. It follows therefore that to progress beyond fairly basic levels of expression, learners of any language - whether it be their native language or a foreign language - need to master the essential grammatical rules and principles.

That being said, it is generally possible to communicate **orally**, notably through dialogue, with just a minimal mastery of grammar, since oral communication and in particular dialogue are bilateral processes, in which the receiver - the person being spoken to - can request clarification and repetition from the speaker until the meaning of a message is clear. However, even when communicating orally, and even if a poor mastery of the rules will not normally prevent two people from communicating relatively effectively, we need some notions of grammar, as these ensure that speaker and listeners use the same code.

With **written** language, grammar is essential; written communication is deferred or indirect communication, and is unidirectional, so there is no possibility for the receiver to demand verification - at least not under normal circumstances. Written communication and any other form of indirect communication thus depend on correct use of grammar or syntax, as well as of vocabulary and spelling, in order to ensure that messages are immediately comprehensible to the reader, and not meaningless or ambiguous.

Common norms of grammar and spelling do not only result in better communications; their use also encourages social cohesion and social mobility. When grammar and communication skills are mastered only by an elite, society will be more divided into castes or tribes, based on educational attainment, and movement up through those castes will be much harder. A society in which a common language with its common norms is shared by all is intrinsically more inclusive and less divisive than one in which different groups of people have significantly different approaches to a common language or indeed use different languages altogether. This is not an argument against multi-culturalism; there is no requirement to abandon one's cultural background in order to become proficient in English grammar.

Then there are professional reasons for using good grammar. For any job that entails writing of any kind, or communication with co-workers, customers or suppliers – and that means most jobs except the most humdrum and basic of jobs – employers are increasingly attentive to the way applicants write and speak. Those who can't speak coherently, or can't write grammatically, are likely to get marked way down in a job interview.

### **Grammar, spelling and words as codes**

Grammatical rules, spelling and vocabulary, even pronunciation, are codes, and like any codes, for effective communication to occur, writers and readers, speakers and listeners, need to work with the same codes. When a writer uses one code, and a reader tries to use a different code to comprehend what is written, the reader may not understand, and the exercise in communication will fail, or partly fail.

This happens all the time, when readers try to understand a message in a language that they do not master; since they don't fully share the same code, communication is at best incomplete, at worst ambiguous or impossible. Even if there are plenty of occasions where, with a bit of logical thinking, readers or listeners can make a sensible guess and imagine correctly what the speaker or writer is trying to say, this is not always the case.

The worst air disaster of all time was due to a misinterpretation of language code; on March 27th 1977, two full Boeing 747's collided in fog on the runway at Los Rodeos airport in Tenerife, Canary Islands . Five hundred and eighty three people died. The inquest determined that the main cause of the disaster was confused communication between the control tower and the captains of the two Boeings. English was being used as the language of communication between pilots and the control tower, but it was not the native language of the people in the control tower, nor of one of the pilots – and communication between the three parties involved went catastrophically wrong.

This is an extreme example, but it shows how important it can be for the emitter of a message and the receiver to use the same codes.

Of course, language codes change. Grammar evolves, specially in a language like English which is spoken by so many people and has no "Academy" to formulate rules on what is accepted and what is not acceptable. The standard pronunciation of British English in the 2020s is quite a bit different from the standard pronunciation of 1942. Churchill's great wartime speeches remain perfectly understandable to today's listeners, but we recognise that Churchill does not pronounce words quite the way we do today. Shakespeare is a bigger problem; Shakespeare's plays are full of words that are no longer used today, and there are many passages that are hard to follow for anyone who is not familiar with them already. Today, text messaging has brought in a whole new corpus of words and acronyms that are quite incomprehensible to people who are not initiated. Some will be part of tomorrow's standard English, others will not. That's the way language codes evolve.

Paradoxically, Shakespeare is easier to understand today in translations than in the original English; most translations use a language of the 20th or 21st century... while children in school in the USA and the UK tend to study Shakespeare in 16th century English.

At any point in time, and for any group or nation of people, there will be normative codes of language that make communication not just possible but simple and unambiguous. For oral communication, the key parameters are vocabulary, syntax and pronunciation; for written communication they are vocabulary, syntax, spelling and [punctuation](#).

## **Is English really a difficult language to master?**

There is a common feeling among students of English as a foreign or other language (EFL / ESOL), that English is a difficult language with lots of complicated grammatical rules to master. This is not really true. As a largely "analytic" language, English has a lot less "rules" to learn than "synthetic" languages such as French or Spanish, with their long tables of tenses and endings and agreements. While English does have tenses and endings and agreements, it has far less than many languages do, and the rules for using them are often quite simple and intuitive. This is probably one of the reasons for the success of English as a world language. For example, there are only three common verbal endings in English, -s, -ing, and -ed. Compare this, if you can, to Spanish, or French, or even German.

Analytic languages like English need less grammatical inflexions (suffixes, prefixes), because they use other tools to express the relation between words. In English, the relation between words is often expressed by [word order](#) or by the use of [prepositions](#), and the time context by the use of [modal](#) auxiliaries, rather by than tenses with grammatical suffixes, as happens in many languages.

See [Five fundamental principles of English grammar](#)

## **Linguistic and pedagogical grammars**

So is the teaching of grammar elitist? The answer is *yes*, when "grammar" is equated with "linguistic grammar" or the detailed structural and morphosyntactic analysis of a language. Linguistic grammar is for a linguistically-alert elite, students and researchers in the various fields of linguistics. The answer is *no* when "grammar" is considered as a framework through which the rules and principles of the English language can be explained as concisely and clearly as possible, for the

benefit of ordinary learners. Pedagogical grammar is for teachers and students of English.

For a brief example of how they can differ, take the question of tenses. Linguists assert that English has just two tenses. In some works of linguistics, these are defined as the past tense and the non-past tense – a concept that is liable to baffle most learners *and* a lot of their teachers. There may be good linguistic reasons for explaining tenses in this manner, but there are very few, if any, pedagogical reasons for doing so. Fortunately most teachers in ESL or ELA prefer to stick to the traditional view, prevalent until the mid twentieth century, that English has six or twelve tenses – a message that is infinitely more understandable in most teaching contexts.

So are linguists wrong, or are teachers wrong? Answer: neither are wrong. Both claims are right in their own circumstances, since linguistics is not an exact science and the word *tense* can mean different things to different people.

It is not necessary, in order to become a proficient speaker, or even writer, of English, to have read and mastered one of the thick volumes of English grammar and linguistics published by the major publishing houses of the English-speaking world; if that were necessary for studying grammar, then yes, grammar would be elitist. What is not elitist, and indeed is highly recommendable, is for teachers and advanced students to have acquired and understood the **basic** rules of English grammar, which are actually quite clear. Most native English speakers never go any further than that.

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**Andrew Rossiter** is the author of *A Descriptive Grammar of English* – KDP 2020, a pedagogical reference grammar updated and reedited 2021.