

# Grammar, grammars and intuitions in ELT: A second opinion

**Costas Gabrielatos reflects further on the suggestion that grammar books are irrelevant and dispensable**



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## Talkback

Talkback provides a forum for readers to respond to articles published in Issues

Richard Bradford (*IATEFL Issues* 167: 13) criticises the treatment of grammar in ELT materials and invites the ELT community to do something about the situation. He implies that we should stop using any grammar-related books, because they are riddled with terminology, and their content has little to do with what he terms 'humanistic', 'free-range', 'standard' English.

Although his assessment of ELT materials is valid to a large extent, the implications of some of his arguments and solutions invite scepticism. He seems to argue that grammarians are neither (human) language users, nor in touch with reality, to conflate the 'what' of grammar teaching with the 'how', to advocate reliance on native speaker intuitions, to equate 'native speaker' with '(good) language teacher', and to treat grammar books as a uniform category.

I would like to use this response to consider some issues from a different perspective, introduce more aspects to the discussion, and propose alternative solutions.

### Grammar, grammarians and statistics

Grammar is not a construct of cloistered minds – or statisticians(!). It is a systematic attempt to describe language structure and use, based on the observations of informed language users, who may use statistics as one of their tools. In its restricted sense, grammar concerns itself with forms and their behaviour in sentences; in its wider sense it also encompasses meaning and use in discourse.

### Language knowledge in ELT

The quality of ELT grammars should not decide the issue of whether to teach grammar explicitly. In fact, if we conclude that grammar should not be taught explicitly, learner grammars become irrelevant. What remains relevant is the individual teacher's perception and knowledge of language.

Our perception of the nature of language influences the way we think it is best learned/taught. What is more, learners *will* ask questions about language, and we *do* need to give feedback

on learners' language use. We cannot give clear explanations or helpful directions without drawing on our knowledge of language and language communication. But let us assume that we avoid responding directly to learners' questions and choose instead to guide learners towards discovering aspects of language for themselves. Again, it is our language awareness that will inform our selection of materials and procedures.

### Intuitions and actual use

Native-speaker intuitions are not always dependable. Being a native speaker does not automatically give us a conscious, clear and comprehensive picture of our language in all its contexts of use. What is more, intuitions vary from one user to another. Richard Bradford's opinion that 'question tags ... mostly belong to 1960s BBC broadcasts' is a case in point. The native speakers I asked think question tags are alive and well. Whether they are used with the same frequency, or in the same contexts, or by the same social/age groups, are questions that no native speaker can answer accurately just on the basis of his/her intuitions. Such sweeping statements, based on purely subjective views, suffer from the same problems that he has identified in ELT materials.

Over-reliance on intuitions also disregards the increasing availability of corpora. It is corpus research that has provided the most convincing evidence of discrepancies between intuitions and actual use. Incidentally, the corpus of current telephone service dialogues I am presently working with shows regular use of question tags. I am not arguing that intuitions are useless, or that corpora are the ultimate solution, but that intuitions should be balanced against, and enriched by, evidence of language in use (see McEnery & Wilson, 2001).

Corpora also have helpful applications in language teaching, both as a means of data-driven/discovery learning (e.g. Burnard & McEnery, 2000), and research into learner language (e.g. Granger, 1998). Finally, corpora can be instrumental in the empowerment of the non-native teacher and researcher. Perhaps then, what belongs to the 1960s is the 'native speaker fallacy' – the notion that 'the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker' (Phillipson, 1992: 192–199).

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## Types of grammar books

Whether native or non-native speakers, we would be wise to check our intuitions and knowledge against other sources. The most readily available ones are reference books, the use of which is not a sign of poor teaching skills, but rather one of professionalism. The question is: which books?

It is easy to infer that the ones Richard Bradford criticises are pedagogical grammars and course books. These books do tend to be prescriptive and a few steps behind current knowledge of language use. Their drawbacks and limitations also stem from their attempts to simplify and categorise neatly, for the sake of the learners, what is a complex system with overlapping areas and fuzzy boundaries.

But surely ELT professionals do not need to consult simplified books written for their clients. What they need is the 'undiluted' information in descriptive grammars (e.g. Biber *et al.*, 1999; Quirk *et al.*, 1985), or the detailed accounts in special reference grammars for teachers (e.g. Leech & Svartvik, 1994; Yule, 1999). Both are largely free of the problems that Richard Bradford outlines.

These grammars are informed by ongoing research on actual language use. They systematically present observations about the different forms, meanings and functions of grammatical elements, and offer detailed information about their contexts of use. They take account of the interaction of grammatical elements with lexical meaning and their behaviour in discourse. When they categorise, they also comment on the 'untidy' elements. More to the point, they do not prescribe; they leave decisions about the content, sequence and procedures of teaching to teachers and materials writers.

Of course, descriptive grammars cannot claim to contain the definitive account of language structure and use – if for no other reason than that language is constantly changing. Still, they are much more dependable than intuitions. Nor do they agree on every issue – as is the case in all fields of study. But this should not be a problem for ELT professionals, who have the knowledge and skills to cope with indeterminacy, draw their own informed conclusions and recognise the implications for teaching. In fact, the comparison of different approaches to language description can only widen a teacher's perspective.

## Terminology

Perhaps one argument against descriptive grammars (which Richard Bradford hints at) would be that they use terminology. It is true that there is no general consensus on terms, and that some are

opaque or confusing. But terminology is not as foggy an area as it is made out to be – nor can we do away with it. Use of terminology with learners may be a methodological option; use of terminology among professionals is a necessity. Professionals in any field need to develop a common specialised language to describe the entities they are dealing with and to communicate with one another. After all, 'humanistic' is no less a term than 'zero conditional'.

## Suggestions

ELT materials may leave much to be desired in terms of language and pedagogical content. However, this is not because of the information in descriptive grammars, but because of the way, and extent to which, the materials make use of it.

One step towards remedying the situation is for materials writing to take account of insights from linguistic research and translate them without distortion for language learners. But this is not enough. If we are to become more than skilled 'materials operators' (Gabrielatos, 2002), then teacher education needs to focus more consistently on research skills, as well as language analysis and its implications for ELT. Finally, if we want to maximise learners' exposure to natural English and foster discovery skills, then language schools need to invest in access to corpora and training in corpus use for ELT.

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