

English Grammar: An Investigation of Hong Kong ESL Books

Jackie F. K. Lee
Department of English
The Hong Kong Institute of Education

Peter Collins
Linguistics Department
The University of New South Wales

Abstract

Over the past decade the need for explicit grammar teaching in ESL curricula has been quite widely accepted. However, how well are learners served by the presentation of English grammar in ESL materials? This study of 41 current textbooks and grammar books published and used in Hong Kong suggests that while textbook writers have incorporated meaningful tasks for learners, many grammar book writers are reluctant to engage with the task-based approach recommended by the Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council. The findings also suggest that both textbook and grammar book writers need to pay more heed to the insights presented in the influential and authoritative descriptive grammars of recent years. Teachers and textbook writers are encouraged to become more aware of the problems identified in the study—which we assume are not limited to Hong Kong—and to find ways to address them.

Issues in Grammar Teaching in ESL books

Attitudes towards the importance of grammar teaching in ESL have shifted dramatically over the past few decades. Grammar teaching was popular when the Grammar-Translation Method and the Audiolingual Method were in vogue. With the popularity of the Communicative Approach and the subsequent shift of focus from grammatical accuracy to meaningful communication in the seventies and eighties, the emphasis on grammar teaching declined, and grammar became invisible in many textbooks. In recent years, however, grammar teaching has come back into prominence, with ESL theorists (e.g. Ellis, 2005; Littlewood, 1993; Tsui, 1991) expressing the view that there are some grammatical forms that cannot be learnt merely on the basis of comprehensible input and that formal instruction is necessary for learners to master them.

Nowadays the issue is not whether grammar should be taught but how it should be taught. Traditionally, authors and publishers have designed ESL books to focus on grammar rule explanations, with example sentences followed by learners' application of those rules in disconnected sentence drills (Stern, 1992). The writers and publishers seem to assume that knowledge of language forms will lead to increased communicative competence. A number of contemporary English language teaching scholars (e.g. Byrd, 1994; Ellis, 2005; Littlewood, 1993; Millard, 2000; Nunan, 1998; Petrovitz, 1997), however, have highlighted the importance of contextualizing grammar so that it is not only structure that is taken into account, but also meaning and use. They emphasize that effective communication involves appropriate grammatical choices in context.

How pervasive and successful is grammar teaching in Hong Kong? Despite the fact that grammar learning is emphasized in schools and that many students have received grammar instruction for more than ten years by the time they take the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination and the Hong Kong Advanced Level of Examination, annual examination reports consistently raise concerns over candidates' difficulties with basic grammar.¹ For example:

They [the candidates] exhibited a poor command of sentence structure. Their grammar was sloppy, showing that they had a limited understanding of the mechanics of the language. More emphasis needs to be put on the learning of basic grammar and the various linguistic devices needed for effective writing. (Hong Kong Examinations Authority, 1999, p. 121)

Too many of the reports were characterized by language errors of which many were of a very basic nature. Candidates must at least be able to master basic language structures to express their ideas clearly and to edit their work. (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2005, p. 138)

This unfortunate situation is undoubtedly the result of a whole range of factors, one of which is most likely to be the quality of the ESL books used. Textbook use is pervasive in Hong Kong classrooms. Richards and Mahoney (1996) reported that 63% of the teachers in their study always used textbooks in teaching English, the majority adopting different books for particular skills (e.g. grammar, writing) and supplementary work. The teachers generally agreed that ESL books provided effective material for the stated level and that ESL books gave accurate information on the language. In Lee's (1999) study of Hong Kong secondary school teachers, over 90% of the respondents indicated that they either "always" or "often" used grammar exercise books in their teaching. One danger is that learners usually attach a great deal of credibility and authority to educational materials, and therefore are unlikely to be critical of them. Further, learners are frequently required to absorb and assimilate the textbook material in minute detail, and as a result, they are susceptible to their influence. If the ESL books used are of high quality, they can enhance students' learning. On the contrary, if the daily used books are of poor quality, the negative impact on students will be immense.

Some previous textbook studies have revealed that there are shortcomings in the presentation of grammar in traditional grammar practice books. For example, in his pioneering study of pedagogical grammars Huddleston (1989) provided a critique from a linguistic point of view of the approach to grammatical description and prescription found in school texts. Fortune (1998) sought students' views on different types of self-study grammar practice exercises and found that experience of inductive exercises caused a significant number of informants to prefer the inductive approach to the more familiar deductive one. Collins, Hollo and Mar's (1997) critical analysis of English grammar books and language books used in Australia revealed a low level of awareness of developments in contemporary linguistics. Millard (2000) examined a number of adult ESL grammar books to analyze how well they incorporated communicative language teaching principles and form-focused instruction. The analysis suggested that textbook writers and publishers needed to address more fully how to integrate grammar instruction in communicative language teaching, and that

more needed to be done to contextualize the grammar at more than the sentence or text level, with more emphasis on function and pragmatic usage.

Several studies have focused on the situation in Hong Kong. Newbrook (1989) identified an unacceptably large number of grammatical errors in Hong Kong textbooks. Tsui and Bunton (2000, p. 301) reported that many English language teachers in Hong Kong were critical of locally-produced textbooks, ascribing the teachers' sentiments to the „poor quality“ of some of the textbooks which contained conflicting statements.

In recent years a task-based learning approach, which places emphasis on learning to communicate through purposeful interaction in the target language, has been recommended by the Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council. This move has not, however, undermined the importance of grammar teaching at either the primary or secondary level. The primary and secondary syllabuses for English attach equal importance to both language form and function. The primary syllabus reads that „learners need to use a range of grammar items and structures to serve various communicative functions“ (Curriculum Development Council, 2004, p. 21). Likewise, in the secondary syllabus prominence is given to the exploration of grammar with respect not simply to form, but also to meaning:

Task-based learning does not preclude the teaching of grammar (i.e., language items and forms). Fluency and accuracy are complementary, and learners must have a good command of language forms if they are to understand and express meanings effectively. (Curriculum Development Council, 1999, p. 49)

According to the secondary syllabus (Curriculum Development Council, 1999), traditional methods such as mechanical drills and decontextualized exercises should be discouraged. The secondary syllabus includes a detailed discussion of how grammar should be taught using the task-based approach:

1. Within the framework of task-based learning, grammar is a means to an end and it should not be taught as a system of rules or a stand-alone body of knowledge. In selecting what language items and structures to focus on, teachers should use tasks as a starting point and consider what language support learners need to carry them out.
 2. In order for learners to see that grammar is a dynamic resource for expressing and creating meaning, learners should be exposed to authentic use of the language as well as gaining adequate experience in using the language meaningfully. Teachers should not explain various grammatical rules alone. Also, they should not introduce grammar through a heavy concentration on decontextualized and mechanical drills.
 3. Involve learners' personal experience.
 4. Get learners to discover language patterns on their own.
- (Curriculum Development Council, 1999, pp. 50–51)

The emphasis in the Primary and Secondary Syllabuses for English on giving learners ample opportunities to apply their knowledge of grammar in interaction and communication, and on helping learners to see the relationship between language

forms and functions and internalize the forms through meaningful everyday use is in line with the beliefs of many English language teaching scholars (e.g. Ellis, 2005; Littlewood, 1993; Tsui, 1991).

Despite the fact that grammar instruction has been an essential component in English learning in Hong Kong, there has been little critical scrutiny of the grammar presented in ESL books published and used in Hong Kong. With the recent introduction of the task-based approach by the Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council, the treatment of grammar in locally produced ESL books has become an important issue. In this regard, this paper focuses on how grammar is presented in a selection of textbooks and grammar books published and used in Hong Kong.

The Present Study

The corpus for the present study (see Appendix 1) comprised two types of school texts—grammar books and English language textbooks. While the former enjoy a degree of freedom in the selection of content, format and approach, the latter are required to comply with the official English Syllabus and have to be reviewed by the Education Bureau (formerly known as the Education and Manpower Bureau) prior to publication. In this study a total of 25 grammar books and 16 textbooks which were published in the late 1990s and early 2000s were examined. The selection of these books was guided by their comparative popularity, this being determined via consultation with teachers and booksellers. A group of 48 in-service teachers who undertook a BEd programme in an education institute were invited to indicate what textbooks and grammar books they used in their schools. Many popularly used books were published by well-established publishers in Hong Kong (e.g. Longman, Oxford, Macmillan and Aristo), including *Longman Target English Grammar*, *Grammar Focus*, *New Oxford English*, *New Way to English* and *Living English*. Some grammar books published by less well-known publishers were used mainly for self-study (e.g. *An Instant Approach to English Grammar for HKCEE and ASL Students* and *English Made Perfect through Common Mistakes in Written English*), according to two of the booksellers interviewed. One limitation of this study was that no statistics were available showing which grammar books or textbooks had the largest share of the market. Nevertheless, the currency of the books and the method by which they were selected suggest that they exerted some influence upon student learners of English in Hong Kong at the time of the study.

The two main questions addressed in the study are as follows: (1) Do the books follow the task-based approach advocated by the Curriculum Development Council in their presentation of grammar items? (2) Do writers take on board the insights presented in the most influential and authoritative descriptive grammars of recent years (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985), or do they merely continue to espouse the principles of Traditional Grammar?

To answer the first research question, the ESL books selected were analyzed via a checklist based on (1) Millard's (2000) study and (2) the recommendations of the secondary English syllabus (1999) on how to adopt a task-based approach, with the aim of assessing how well they integrated grammar learning in Hong Kong secondary school classrooms. The checklist included 13 statements belonging to three main

categories: context, activities and explanations (see Appendix 2). The first four statements related to the use of decontextualized sentences, texts, tasks and contexts. Statements 5–10 dealt with the communicative focus and interest level of the activities. The last three statements were concerned with grammatical explanations. A 4-point likert scale was used:

- 1 = never present
- 2 = rarely present (the feature being present in less than 30% of the chapters and activities)
- 3 = sometimes present (the feature being present in more than 30% of the chapters and activities)
- 4 = often present (the feature being present in more than 70% of the chapters and activities)

Since some ESL books selected had different volumes for students at different levels, and each of the volumes followed a similar approach, only one volume from each set of books was randomly selected for this checklist analysis. A total of 14 grammar books and five textbooks were examined. To address the issues of reliability and validity, one of the authors took responsibility for the rating, after discussing the methodology with the other investigator, and then 20% of the analyses were randomly checked by the second author. When there was more than a one-point discrepancy, the grammar book or textbook was rated by each rater again independently. The level of inter-rater agreement was 93%.

To address the second research question we followed the approach used in Huddleston's (1989) and Collins et al.'s (1997) Australian textbook studies, and organized our critical analysis according to four general areas in which Traditional Grammar was demonstrably deficient: the handling of form-meaning relationships, the maintenance of the distinction between class and function, the presence of Latinate bias, and the existence of prescriptive content. We also examined the occurrence of factual errors in the selected ESL books.

Results and Discussion

The discussion of the findings in this section addresses the two research questions presented above. While the focus is on the qualitative findings, quantitative results are included where appropriate.

(1) Do the books studied follow the task-based approach?

A marked difference was observed between the English language textbooks and grammar books in their presentation of grammar items. The findings revealed that while textbook writers incorporated meaningful tasks for learners, many grammar book writers were reluctant to engage with the task-based approach recommended by the Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council. Appendix 3 shows the checklist ratings for each of the 19 books examined. The results revealed relative consistency in variation across the two types of books examined. A comparison of the mean values of the first four statements revealed that the five textbooks recorded higher mean values than the grammar books in terms of grammar presentation at the text level (3.8 vs 2.64) and task level (3.2 vs 1.21), and contextualization (4 vs 2.43), while the latter

recorded a higher mean value in terms of grammar presentation at the sentence level (2 vs 3.29).

The two types of books examined also revealed substantial differences in communicative focus and in the interest level of the activities (Statements 5–10). While the textbooks had higher mean values than the grammar books for the statements on activity open-endedness (3 vs 1.31), variation (3.6 vs 2.31), learner cooperation (2.8 vs 1.08) and involvement of learners' personal experience (3 vs 1.62), they recorded lower mean values on form-focused instruction (2.8 vs 3.77) and the use of mechanical drills (1.8 vs 3.54).

There were nevertheless some similarities found between the two types of books. Both recorded very high mean values on the use of metalinguistic terminology and simplified explanations (4 for grammar books and 3.6 for textbooks for Statements 11 and 12). This is understandable since clear grammar explanations are essential in grammar teaching and learning. However, neither type of book tended to adopt the inductive approach, as suggested by Harmer (1987) and the secondary English syllabus (Curriculum Development Council, 1999) (Statement 13). While the mean value for the grammar books analyzed was 1.14, that for the textbooks was 1.2. It seems that many book writers did not understand that the use of discovery techniques could be highly motivating and beneficial to students (Harmer, 1987).

The qualitative analysis supports the statistical finding that the task-based approach to grammar instruction was adopted in the five textbooks examined. For example, in *New English Treasure 1B* (Unit 10), after learning how to make comparisons, students are asked to listen to a radio programme about a world record and to use the information collected to write a report for the school newsletter, the final task being one where students set their own class record for oral presentations. Similarly, in *Longman Express 4A* (Unit 4), given a context where a cousin is coming to Hong Kong and asks for suggestions about the trip, the students are provided with the cousin's letter, the reply, a leaflet about Hong Kong, and grammar explanations on comparatives and superlatives as input materials. The pre-task activities—comparing two shopping centres and completing a travel agent's advice column in a newspaper—are designed to help students complete the final task, conducting a survey about tourism. The strength of these activities is that learners' grammar needs are determined on the basis of task performance. Students are immersed in tasks that require them to negotiate meaning and engage in naturalistic and meaningful communication.

By contrast with the textbooks, many of the grammar books surveyed fail to reflect changes that have been occurring since the 1970s. Their approach is traditional, presenting deductive explanations of arbitrarily sequenced grammar rules which are followed by applications of the rules in disconnected drills and exercises. For example, in the chapter on "making comparisons" in *Smart Grammar 2*, Harris (2001) begins with a short dialogue between two young people who compare two different means of transport, and this is followed by a discussion of the structure of the comparative adjectives and adverbs. The exercises that follow are (a) slot-filling with options given, (b) slot-filling without options, (c) column-matching, and (d) completing a cloze passage in a multiple-choice format. Extracts are as follows:

(a) Slot-filling with options given:

- | | |
|--|------------------|
| 1. Must you go now? It's still _____. | early/earlier |
| 2. This box is too small. We need a _____ one. | large/larger |
| 3. You look _____. Why don't you take a rest? | tired/more tired |

(b) Slot-filling:

- You can go there by MTR. It's _____ (fast).
- John sits behind me in class because he is _____ (tall).
It's very noisy here. Let's go somewhere _____ (quiet).

(c) Use the correct form of the adjectives/adverbs in Column B to complete the dialogues in Column A:

Column A	Column B
1. A: What does the weather forecast say? B: It'll be <u>f. hotter</u> tomorrow. The temperature may rise to 32°C.	a. safe b. strong c. late
2. A: You made several typing mistakes in your letter. B: I'm sorry. I'll be <u>h. more careful</u> next time.	d. heavy e. young f. hot g. slow h. careful

(d) Cloze passage:

A man who had broken the right leg (1) ___ to hospital a few weeks before Christmas. Although the doctor did his best, the man's recovery was (2) ___, and as Christmas drew (3) ___, the man became more (4) ___ ...

- | | | | |
|--------------|-------------------|---------------|----------------|
| (1) A. sent | (2) A. not faster | (3) A. nearer | (4) A. nervous |
| B. was taken | B. slow | B. closely | B. impatiently |
| C. go | C. took longer | C. quick | C. worry |

The major problem with these exercises, especially (a) and (b), is that the decontextualized sentences presented do not help learners understand the use of comparative structures to express comparisons. One further problem is that although only comparative forms are accepted as answers by the writer, a number of blanks can be filled by plain adjectives as well (e.g. *You can go there by MTR. It's fast/faster; This box is too small. We need a large/larger one; John sits behind me in class because he is tall/taller*). Students may learn something about form by performing mechanical drills of this kind, but it is unlikely that they will learn anything about the functions or meanings of comparatives.

Smart Grammar is not alone in its use of decontextualized exercises. The following are some examples taken from other grammar books:

(a) Slot-filling:

Fill in each blank with an adjective or an adverb. Use the words given in brackets.

1. The child fell asleep (early) _____ than I expected it would.
2. Jessica has a (fair) _____ complexion than any other girl in her class.
3. Home grown tomatoes are (expensive) _____ than imported ones.

[*An Easy Approach to English Grammar*, p. 40]

(b) Multiple-choice:

That car is superior ... this one but it is ... too.
 than ... more expensive
 then ... most expensive
 to ... more expensive
 than ... cheaper

[*English in Focus: Teach and Test 4*, p.71]

Another problem with such exercises is that students are not given any opportunities to use English for authentic or meaningful communication and the materials used are not related to their personal experiences. The advice of the Hong Kong Examinations Authority (1999) that students should be given ample opportunities to communicate in English and exposed to a variety of situations is generally not heeded by grammar book writers. In only a small number of the grammar books examined are students provided with opportunities to negotiate meanings with peers. One of these, *Longman Target English Grammar Book*, was rated highly for task, context and activity design (Appendix 3, Statements 3, 4 and 5–10), indicating that it succeeded in moving beyond the traditional approach. For example, when learning the „present continuous tense“, students are presented with a letter talking about a photo, with the associated forms highlighted and explained. This is followed by a number of exercises about two characters with contexts given. The final task requires students to bring in their holiday photos and tell their partners about the photos. This task, which involves authentic communication among learners about their personal experiences, makes the learning process more meaningful and interesting. Meanwhile, *Easy Grammar* and *Classroom Grammar*, although in need of improvement in the design of open-ended activities which foster cooperation for learners“ meaningful communication, also scored highly on contextualization and activity variation.

Unfortunately, a tendency for the context-based exercises presented in some books to be somewhat unnatural and artificial was noted. Consider the contrived use of grammar in (1), where the answers are given in full rather than with the expected ellipsis of recoverable elements:

1. Your friend, Amy, is in the entertainment room of a youth centre with some of your classmates and you are talking with her on the phone.
 Form questions to complete your conversation.
 You: _____ Hello, Amy. Where are you now?

- Amy: I'm in the entertainment room of Choi Ming Youth Centre with Peter, John, Sam, David, Mary, Susan, Maria and Tony. Guess what they're doing.
- You: Is Peter playing computer games?
- Amy: Yes, Peter is playing computer games.
- You: Is John reading a comic book?
- Amy: No, John is not reading a comic book.
- You: Are Sam and David having a snack?
- Amy: Yes, Sam and David are having a snack.
[Living English 4A, p. 16]

Another example is the overuse of participial clauses in writing exercises such as that in (2), which may result in students developing the misconception that it is advisable or necessary to use this structure frequently.

2. You have decided to write a letter of complaint to the tour company.
Remember ... use some present and past participles at the beginning of sentences in your letter, e.g. *Expecting an exciting eco-tour, I felt very ...*; *Appalled by what the guide did, ...*
[Longman Express 4B, p. 39]

One other instance relates to the formal style of the text in (3), which suggests that e-mail is an inappropriate choice of register:

3. Nancy is Tony's student. She is very interested in Tony's photos. She sent an e-mail to her friend, Anne, and told her about the photos. Complete her e-mail with the appropriate pronouns.

Dear Anne,
Today my teacher showed us some photos taken during his visit to an African village. I (1) myself found the photos very interesting. In one of the photos, there was a girl who carried a pot on her head all by (2) herself. My teacher told us that the dress she wore was made by (3) herself. During a festival, the villagers washed (4) themselves in a river and later dried (5) themselves along the river bank. My teacher also told us that he (6) himself helped to catch a crocodile. ...
Bye,
Nancy

[English in Life 2, p. 132]

The consequences of subjecting students to artificial sentence structures as discussed above are recognized by the Hong Kong Examinations Authority (1999, p. 100), which comments as follows with respect to candidates' rhetorical style:

Though it cannot yet be classified as a "problem", the overuse of particular rhetorical conventions ... can lead the marker to suspect that a candidate's range of grammatical structures is limited. ... A fair number of answers to Question 3 seemed to be entirely composed of sequences such as "Having waited until the store was closed, we came out of our hiding place ...", "Escaping from the dummies, we ran into the Art Department ...". "Being

scared, we ...” etc. As markers are instructed to assess both the candidates’ skill in handling sentence structures and how wide their vocabulary is, candidates would be well advised not to limit their prose to a few well-rehearsed structures.

The findings of the present study suggest that the influence of the task-based approach to grammar teaching is evident in the textbooks examined, with authors exploring grammar with reference to the broader social functions of language and to the nature and structure of discourse. Grammar items are typically practised with respect to specific contexts of discourse, and students are required to use the grammar items learnt to carry out meaningful tasks. However, a number of grammar book writers did not adopt the task-based approach recommended by the Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council, with the presentation of materials not contextualized adequately to encourage the learners’ use of the target grammar items for meaningful interaction.

(2) *Do writers take on board the insights presented in the most influential and authoritative descriptive grammars?*

As reported earlier, a common feature of all the books examined is their frequent use of deductive grammatical explanations to discuss the forms and meanings of the grammar items concerned. But how effective and accurate are the explanations offered? Do writers take into account the information readily available in contemporary descriptive reference grammars? To address these questions we followed the approach used by Huddleston (1989) and Collins et al. (1997) in their Australian textbook studies, and organized our critical analysis according to four general areas in which Traditional Grammar could be demonstrably deficient: the handling of form-meaning relationships, the maintenance of the distinction between class and function, the existence of Latinate influence, and the presence of prescriptive content. In addition, we consider the occurrence of labelling errors and other inaccuracies.

Form-meaning Relationships

The failure of most of the ESL grammar books to do justice to grammatical forms and their complex interrelationship with grammatical meanings (about 70%) is reflected in the frequent use of rules-of-thumb, simplified notional rules with the design being evidently motivated by a perceived need to satisfy learners’ needs.² These are typified by the definitions of the parts-of-speech presented in *Grammar Made Easy*:

4. English words are generally classified into eight parts of speech and they are as follows:

Noun	a noun is a word used to show the name of a person, place, thing or idea.
Verb	a verb shows an action, an event or a state.
Adjective	an adjective is used to qualify a noun or a pronoun.
Adverb	an adverb is used to modify a verb, an adjective or another adverb.

Article	a word used with a noun to show whether the noun refers to a particular example of something.
Preposition	a word or phrase used with a noun or its equivalent to show the relationship between the noun. ³
Conjunction	a conjunction is a word or phrase used to join words, phrases, clauses or sentences.
Interjection	an interjection is a word or phrase or sound expressing a sudden feeling or emotion.

[*Grammar Made Easy*, p. 78]

The problem with such definitions is that they fail to exclude members of other part-of-speech categories. For example, it is not just verbs that refer to actions, events or states but also nouns (e.g. *destruction*, *fright*). Definitions of this type require us to know in advance that a word is a verb (and that therefore a noun such as *destruction* does not qualify) in order to accept it as a member of the class. The exercise of defining the parts-of-speech is therefore a circular one. The only way to avoid this circularity is to resort to considerations other than those of meaning: structural criteria of distribution and inflection. For example, verbs are distinctive in their capacity to be inflected for number, tense and aspect (for instance, we can say *destroys*, *destroying* and *destroyed* but not **destructioned*).

As another example, consider the notional definitions of the present and past tenses found in most of the ESL books, in which it is wrongly assumed that these formal categories are mapped exclusively onto the semantic categories of present and past time respectively, as in:

5. We use the simple past tense to talk about actions or situations in the past (*yesterday*, *the day before yesterday*, *last week*, *two years ago*, *in 1980*, *when I was small*, etc.).

[*New Exercises in English 1*, p. 35]

6. Simple past tense is used to show a past action and the time of doing the action is given.

[*An Instant Approach to English Grammar*, p. 35]

Such definitions certainly capture the characteristic use of the simple past tense, but they overlook additional uses (e.g. the future-referring use of a past tense, as in *If I left tomorrow, I might arrive in time*, and the present-referring use as in: *I didn't realise that Peter now had a BMW*). Such notional definitions may disrupt the balance between simplicity and accuracy that is needed in teaching grammar. The danger here is that learners will need to unlearn much of what they have been taught at the elementary stage once the inaccuracy of such rules becomes apparent to them. Unless formal descriptions are introduced early as well, learners may fail to appreciate their crucial role in determining categorial membership.

Class vs Function

Another weakness that is evident in about 80% of the ESL grammar books examined is one that is very common in traditional school grammars: a failure to

maintain the fundamental distinction between grammatical class and grammatical function.⁴

Consider the class of adjectives, one of whose primary functions is that of modifier in noun phrases. This function can however be served by other parts-of-speech: by nouns as in a *steel rod*, or verbs as in a *speeding car*, as well as by relative clauses (e.g. *a rod (which is) made of steel*). In the following examples the writers confuse—or rather, coalesce—the function of modifier and the word classes that may serve this function. In (7), for example, *diamond* is a noun, not an adjective, albeit here a noun used as a modifier. In (8), *imported* and *living* are verbs, not adjectives.

7. With the help of the pictures and the adjectives in brackets, write a list of the things that have been stolen.

Mrs Lucy Cheng lost a diamond necklace. (diamond)

[*Classroom Grammar 1*, p. 136]

8. Adjectives ending in *-ed* and *-ing*:

We can use these adjectives in phrases to qualify a noun or pronoun.

These phrases usually come after the noun or pronoun they qualify.

Cars imported from Japan are usually cheaper than those imported from Germany.

People living in that district complained that many streets were always flooded when there was heavy rain.

[*New Exercises in English 3*, p. 151]

It is a similar sort of confusion between class and function that leads to the misclassification of prepositional phrases as adverb phrases in (9) and (10):

9. The complement can be an adverb of time or place, e.g. *The meeting is at ten o'clock / in the school hall.*

[Longman Target English Grammar 2A, p. 74]

10. *Mike reserved a table for two at one o'clock.*

The adverb phrase at one o'clock cannot be used before the verb.

[*English Made Perfect*, p. 177]

In (9) and (10) *at ten/one o'clock* and *in the school hall* are prepositional phrases which are used as adverbials of time and place respectively. Without being headed by an adverb, they are not adverb phrases.

Latinate Influence

The influence of traditional grammar in their presentation of descriptions that are based on Latin grammar, but irrelevant to the grammar of contemporary English, was also found in all the school texts examined. One example of this is the assumption of a direct correspondence between Case and syntactic functions in the English personal pronoun system.⁵ For example, the writer of *Smart Grammar 1* (p. 69) presents nominative pronouns such as *I* and *he*, and accusative pronouns such as *me* and *him*, as subject and object forms respectively:

11. A pronoun can have two forms: the subject and the object forms. We use the subject form when the pronoun is the subject of the verb. We use the object form when it is the object of the verb.

However, while Case and syntactic functions are closely related concepts, they are not identical: in Latin, Case is the main marker of syntactic function, but in English it is word order. Accordingly, learners will not be prepared by their school texts for instances of non-correspondence between Case and syntactic functions in cases such as *Who's there? Me* and *She's smarter than him*, where accusative pronouns are used as subject in informal constructions involving the ellipsis of a verb phrase.

As another example, consider the Latin-based gender classification of nouns presented in *English in Focus: Teach and Test 4* (pp. 119–120):

12. Gender
 1. masculine (or male): *boy, brother, uncle, father, bull, lion, tiger*
 2. feminine (or female): *sister, mother, cow, aunt, Peter's sister, niece*
 3. neuter: *ship, country, car, smoke, test, stone, tree, results, boxes*
 4. common: *baby, cousin, friend, relative, spectator, doctor, patient*

This classification is purely semantically-based: unlike Latin, in which all nouns are inflectionally marked for gender even if they do not have biologically male or female referents, English does not have grammatical gender. This is not to suggest that the distinctions posited in (12) have no relevance to the language classroom. However, it would be more appropriate to explore them in the context of a discussion of word formation and vocabulary extension. Such an exploration might focus on the principles by which the English vocabulary is organized around significant semantic categories, and the place of features such as male/female alongside others such as human/non-human and adult/non-adult in this organization.

Prescriptivism

Pleasingly, the ESL books examined generally manage to avoid the zealous prescriptivism found in many traditional school grammars, appropriately recognizing that English—like all living languages—is subject to dialectal and stylistic variation. For example, in (13) and (14), the traditional prescription that *shall* should always be used with 1st person subjects and *will* with 2nd and 3rd person subjects, one that is out of touch with the facts of contemporary usage, is replaced with an appropriately register-sensitive account:

13. *Shall* is sometimes used with *I* and *we* in formal English. In informal English, however, *will is* used for all persons.

[*Living English 4A*, p. 86]

14. We sometimes use *shall* with *I* and *we* in very formal English. However, in spoken English, we use *will* for all persons.

[*Longman Express 4B*, p. 48]

Some authors, likewise, invoke considerations of stylistic variation when, instead of simply prescribing indicative *was* in *if*-clauses, they detail its alternation with the typically more formal subjunctive *were*:

15. We can use *were* or *was* to express imaginary situation with *I/he/she/it*, e.g. *If it were/was summer, we could go swimming*. There is no difference in meaning although *were* is more formal.
[*Grammar Focus*, p. 234]
16. We can use *was* or *were* after the pronouns *I/he/she/it*. There is no difference in meaning but *were* is more formal.
[*Longman Express 5*, p. 10]

Inaccuracy

There was an alarmingly high incidence of labelling errors in the ESL books examined. Consider the following selection:

17. You also use the simple present tense to:
give orders and instructions.
Shut the door!
Turn off the car engine before you put in the petrol.
[*Easy Grammar 3*, p. 12]
18. Relative clauses:
When we talk about the time that something happened, we use *when*.
e.g. *I saw an accident when I was going back home by minibus.*
[*Classroom Grammar 2*, p. 131]
19. Phrasal verbs have two or three words that go together to make a new meaning.
Many statues of him were put in temples.
The crown was not entirely made of gold.
[*New Oxford English 2A*, p. 105]
20. We also use a gerund after most prepositions.
They have given up trying to find the missing child.
[*Living English 2A*, p. 68]

In (17) the author has confused the simple present with the base form that is used in imperative clauses. In (18) *when I was going back home by minibus* is not a relative clause but rather an adverbial clause. In (19), *put in* and *made of* are not phrasal verbs; *in* and *of* are prepositions. By contrast, *up* in (20) is not a preposition, but a particle used to form the phrasal verb *give up*.

There follows a small selection of the wide variety of other types of inaccuracy that appear in the ESL books:

21. Fill in the blanks with the active or passive voice of the following verbs.
begin, fall, locate, increase, ...
The bus fare has been increased from \$4 to \$5.50.
[*Easy Grammar 3*, p. 63]
22. We use the emphatic pronouns:
when the subject and object are the same, e.g. *Jane made herself a cup of coffee.*
[*Smart Grammar 2*, p. 47]

In (21) the author fails to recognize that the active form *has increased* is available as an answer as well. In the example provided in (22) *herself* is not used emphatically: it is not in apposition to *Jane*, but rather the indirect object within the clause.

Conclusions and Implications

While all the textbooks examined in the study adopt the task-based approach as recommended by the Curriculum Development Council, most of the grammar books do not. The textbooks reveal insufficient support for the communicative approach, where learners are required to complete meaningful tasks involving particular grammatical items and structures. By contrast, many of the grammar books are over-reliant on mechanical drills, where the primary motivation seems to be memorization of set patterns, perhaps for regurgitation in examinations.

In other respects there were no significant differences between the textbooks and the grammar books examined. In both we noted a tendency—one probably not limited to Hong Kong publications—to confuse the distinction between form and meaning as well as that between class and function, to rely on inadequate Latin-based descriptions, and to present inaccurate information on the English language. Of course there will inevitably be a trade-off in pedagogical grammar between the often competing demands of descriptive adequacy and learnability. Nevertheless writers and educators should be encouraged to avail themselves of the mine of accurate and relevant information in such comprehensive and authoritative reference grammars as Quirk et al. (1985), Biber et al. (1999), and Huddleston and Pullum (2002).

One limitation of the present study is that the checklist ratings were based on holistic impressions of the books surveyed, which made direct statistical comparisons difficult. In future studies, we suggest, books might be rated across a set of grammatical features such as passive voice and present tenses. In addition, it might be of interest to solicit the views of users, including teachers and learners, on both the presentation of grammar and the kind of grammar exercises and activities that they find motivating and useful.

Notes

1. The Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination is a public examination for Secondary 5 students and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination is a public examination for Secondary 7 students.

2. This percentage was determined on the basis of whether a textbook contains at least one instance of the problem mentioned.
3. It is noteworthy and worrying that ungrammatical structures, e.g. „between the noun“, are occasionally found in local school texts.
4. This percentage was determined on the basis of whether a textbook contains at least one instance of the problem mentioned.
5. „Case“ refers to the inflectional system that is characteristically used to signal grammatical functions such as subject and object with personal pronouns in Modern English.

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Appendix 1 Book List

Grammar Books

1. Booker, R. (2003). *Grammar focus*. Hong Kong: Longman.
2. Chan, D. (2002). *Grammar made easy: An analysis of common mistakes in students' writing*. Hong Kong: Greenwood Press.
3. Etherton, A. R. B. (2001). *English in focus: Teach and test 4*. Hong Kong: In Focus.
4. Harris, C. (1999). *New exercises in English 1*. Hong Kong: Aristo.
5. Harris, C. (1999). *New exercises in English 2*. Hong Kong: Aristo.
6. Harris, C. (1999). *New exercises in English 3*. Hong Kong: Aristo.
7. Harris, C. (2001). *Smart grammar 1*. Hong Kong: Aristo.
8. Harris, C. (2001). *Smart grammar 2*. Hong Kong: Aristo.
9. Harris, C. (2001). *Smart grammar 3*. Hong Kong: Aristo.
10. Harris, C. (2003). *Certificate English usage*. Hong Kong: Aristo.
11. Hill, P. (2002). *An instant approach to English grammar for HKCEE and ASL Students*. Hong Kong: Manley Study Centre.
12. Ho, Y. L., Poon, K. P., & Yeung, C. K. (2002). *English in life 1*. Hong Kong: Pilot.
13. Ho, Y. L., Poon, K. P., & Yeung, C. K. (2002). *English in life 2*. Hong Kong: Pilot.
14. Ho, Y. L., Poon, K. P., & Yeung, C. K. (2002). *English in life 3*. Hong Kong: Pilot.
15. Lee, M., & Daniels, B. (2004). *Longman target English grammar, Book 1A*. Hong Kong: Longman.
16. Lee, M., & Daniels, B. (2004). *Longman target English grammar, Book 2A*. Hong Kong: Longman.
17. MacKenna, M. (2001). *An easy approach to English grammar, Level 1*. Hong Kong: Fillans.
18. Reive, M. (1998). *Grammar practice 2000*. Hong Kong: Macmillan.
19. Yung, L. (1998). *English made perfect through common mistakes in written English*. Hong Kong: Youth Bookroom.
20. Wong, K. (1998). *Easy grammar 1*. Hong Kong: Longman.
21. Lee, M. (1998). *Easy grammar 2*. Hong Kong: Longman.
22. Yu, A. (1998). *Easy grammar 3*. Hong Kong: Longman.
23. Ho, D. (2000). *Classroom grammar step by step, Form 1*. Hong Kong: Classroom.
24. Notarianni, R. C., Wang, T., & Lau, D. (2000). *Classroom grammar step by step, Form 2*. Hong Kong: Classroom.
25. Kwok, J. (2000). *Classroom grammar step by step, Form 3*. Hong Kong: Classroom.

Textbooks

1. Etherton, P., & McArthur, G. (2001). *New Oxford English, 1A*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
2. Etherton, P., & McArthur, G. (2001). *New Oxford English, 1B*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
3. Dean, M., Etherton, P., & McArthur, G. (2001). *New Oxford English, 2A*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
4. Dean, M., Etherton, P., & McArthur, G. (2001). *New Oxford English, 2B*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
5. Etherton, P., & McArthur, G. (2001). *New Oxford English, 3A*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
6. Dean, M., Etherton, P., & McArthur, G. (2001). *New Oxford English, 3B*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
7. Nancarrow, C., Thomas, G., & Yuen, K. S. (2004). *Living English, 1A*. Hong Kong: Aristo.
8. Nancarrow, C., Thomas, G., & Yuen, K. S. (2004). *Living English, 2A*. Hong Kong: Aristo.
9. Nancarrow, C., Thomas, G., & Yuen, K. S. (2004). *Living English, 3A*. Hong Kong: Aristo.
10. Nancarrow, C., Hsing, B. M., & Yuen, K. S. (2004). *Living English for the certificate exam, 4A*. Hong Kong: Aristo.
11. Sampson, N. (2001). *New way to English, 2A*. Hong Kong: Macmillan.
12. Sampson, N. (2001). *New way to English, 2B*. Hong Kong: Macmillan.
13. Vickers, E., Wheeler, J., & Lee, I. (2003). *Longman express, 4A*. Hong Kong: Longman.
14. Vickers, E., Wheeler, J., & Lee, I. (2003). *Longman express, 4B*. Hong Kong: Longman.

15. Vickers, E., Wheeler, J., & Lee, I. (2003). *Longman express 5*. Hong Kong: Longman.
16. Williams, A., & Dawson, C. (2004). *New English treasure, 1B*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Appendix 2 Textbook Checklist

	Never			Often		
1. Materials are presented at the sentence level.	1	2	3	4		
2. Materials are presented at the text level.	1	2	3	4		
3. Materials are presented at the task level.	1	2	3	4		
4. Materials are contextualized.	1	2	3	4		
5. Activities are open-ended.	1	2	3	4		
6. Activities vary from unit to unit.	1	2	3	4		
7. Activities emphasize form over meaning and function.	1	2	3	4		
8. Activities foster cooperation.	1	2	3	4		
9. Activities emphasize mechanical drills.	1	2	3	4		
10. Activities involve learners' personal experience.	1	2	3	4		
11. Metalinguistic terminology is used.	1	2	3	4		
12. Simplified explanations are used.	1	2	3	4		
13. The inductive approach is used.	1	2	3	4		

Appendix 3 Checklist Findings

Grammar Books	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13
<i>Grammar Focus</i>	2	4	1	3	1	3	3	1	2	2	4	4	1
<i>Grammar Made Easy</i>	4	3	1	1	1	2	4	1	4	1	4	4	1
<i>English in Focus</i>	4	2	1	1	1	2	4	1	4	1	4	4	1
<i>New Exercises in English</i>	3	3	2	2	2	2	4	1	4	2	4	4	1
<i>Smart Grammar</i>	4	2	1	3	1	2	4	1	4	2	4	4	1
<i>Certificate English Usage</i>	4	3	1	2	1	2	4	1	4	1	4	4	1
<i>An Instant Approach</i>	4	1	1	1	NA*	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	4	4	1
<i>English in Life</i>	2	3	1	4	1	3	3	1	3	2	4	4	1
<i>Longman Target English Grammar</i>	3	4	3	4	3	3	3	2	3	3	4	4	2
<i>An Easy Approach</i>	4	2	1	2	1	2	4	1	4	1	4	4	1
<i>Grammar Practice 2000</i>	4	2	1	2	1	2	4	1	4	1	4	4	1
<i>English Made Perfect</i>	4	1	1	1	1	1	4	1	4	1	4	4	1

* *An Instant Approach to English Grammar for HKCEE and ASL Students* does not contain grammar exercises.

Grammar Books	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13
<i>Easy Grammar</i>	3	3	1	4	2	3	4	1	3	2	4	4	1
<i>Classroom Grammar</i>	1	4	1	4	1	3	4	1	3	2	4	4	2
Total	46	37	17	34	17	30	49	14	46	21	56	56	16
Mean	3.29	2.64	1.21	2.43	1.31	2.31	3.77	1.08	3.54	1.62	4	4	1.14

Textbooks	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13
<i>New Oxford English</i>	2	4	4	4	3	4	3	3	2	2	4	4	1
<i>Living English</i>	2	3	2	4	2	3	3	3	2	3	4	4	1
<i>New Way to English</i>	2	4	3	4	3	3	3	2	2	2	3	3	1
<i>Longman Express</i>	2	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	1	4	4	4	1
<i>New English Treasure</i>	2	4	3	4	3	4	2	2	2	4	3	3	2
Total		10	19	16	20	15	18	14	14	9	15	18	6
Mean		2	3.8	3.2	4	3	3.6	2.8	2.8	1.8	3	3.6	1.2

Grammar Practice / Activity Books. Composition & Writing books. Guide to all the best ESL books on the market to help teachers like yourself. These books will provide your students with helpful practice. Composition and Writing - One of the major skill areas that ESL teachers need to focus on, writing can be a challenge to cover in an interesting manner in the ESL class, so these books will be welcome additions to any ESL teacher's library. ESL Book Categories.