

REVIEW

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Martin Parrott. 2000. *Grammar for English Language Teachers*. Cambridge University Press. 514 pp.

This volume offers prospective and current teachers of English, first or second language, comprehensive information on English Grammar. The aims reflect the down-to-earth approach Parrott takes:

- To help you develop your overall knowledge and understanding of English grammar
- To provide a quick source of reference in planning lessons or clarifying learners' problems.

In glossing these aims he points out that the book

[p]rovides a broader perspective of grammar than that presented to students in course materials. It encourages you to appreciate the complexity (and where relevant, the *ambiguity*) of grammatical description, and to recognize the limitation of the 'rule of thumb' presented to learners in course materials. (p. 1)

A simple example of his desire to give more accurate information can be seen in the definition of nouns. As he rightly points out, the popular definition of a noun is that it 'describes a person, place or thing'.

In fact we use nouns to express a range of additional meanings such as concepts, qualities, organisations, communities, sensations and events. Nouns convey a substantial proportion of the information in most texts. (p. 7)

The book is organized and presented in a reader-friendly way. The index, for example is at the beginning of the book and is entitled *Short cut to what you're looking for*. The book itself is divided into eight parts. Parts A and B deal with basic aspects that teachers that course books usually give attention to: Part A looks at word classes, and Part B deals with the verb phrase. Parts C and D deal with 'more neglected aspects of grammar'. Each Part is carefully framed, beginning with 'Key considerations relating to the topic'. The subsequent sections explore the topic in more detail. A very useful feature is 'Typical difficulties for learners'. Further further information on the aspects covered in these parts is provided in Parts F and G.

Another useful section in Parts A to E is the *Consolidation Exercises*. Unlike many other grammar books, the texts are authentic. Part H provides possible answers.

In presenting teachers with information on grammar, Parrott was concerned to use terms used in course books, rather than in academic grammars. This decision means that he opts for the word 'tense' as used in course books. An academic grammar would see English as having only two tenses (present and past). South African teachers will be unused to the term future tenses to refer to the different verb forms used to refer to time. A more common practice is to see the shall/will + bare infinitive as the future tense.

Teachers who want to 'understand' grammar will find the explanations generally clear and detailed. The excerpt below serves to illustrate the way in which 'Typical difficulties experienced by learners' are dealt with in the book:

### *Questions*

Learners may leave out auxiliary verbs which are necessary in questions and/or they may forget to change the order of the subject and the auxiliary verb.

*\*You like music*                      *\*Where you going?*

### *Questions and negative forms of be*

Learners sometimes need to spend a lot of time noticing and practising these (very irregular) forms before they are confident in using them correctly. They may over-generalise the use of *do/does/did*.

*\*Did you be here*                      *\*I didn't be* (p. 102)

This illustrates Parrott's concern for teachers to be able to approach grammar in a professional way. Here the invitation is not only to be able to have technical knowledge, but also to recognise the language learning strategies that are being employed. Mistakes or errors invite interest rather than disparagement.

Very usefully, the consolidation exercises allow teachers to apply the insights they have gained in the various sections. Here is an example relating to 'over-generalisation'.

### *Spelling* (see p. 447)

The following are spelling mistakes made by learners of English. In each case speculate about the cause of the mistake:

Cryed offerred peeled staid refered (p. 104)

On page 447, he suggests the following:

### *Spelling*

Most of these mistakes are the result of learners over-generalising rules.

*cryed* The learner has added **ed** to the infinitive without changing the **y** to **i**.

...

In Part B, he offers detailed but accessible explanations of the functions different verb forms serve. A ‘problem area’ in South Africa is the contrast between the past simple and the present perfect forms. On page 188 he annotates a text to illustrate the meaning the verb form offers in a particular context. (Unintentionally here, he illustrates the way in which text needs to be interpreted in terms of the time it was written. The text used was written when Chris Barnard was still alive!).

He consolidates the points made in simple graphic representations.

I did find, at times, that his explanations were not entirely satisfactory. On page 156, for example, he suggests that in running commentaries commentators use the simple present to ‘save time when the action is fast’. I prefer the explanation offered by Svartvik and Leech (1994: 66) that ‘the event is begun and ended at the very moment of speech’. Another example is the statement that modal verbs have no past form (p. 121). While there is some truth to this, it depends on the sense in which a modal is being used. ‘Could’ can be a past tense form of ‘can’ (*He said he could come*) as could ‘might’ be a past tense form of ‘may’.

On the whole, however, I found Parrott’s approach both interesting and informative. It could certainly help teachers (especially those in pre-set courses) to develop their knowledge and understanding of English grammar. I particularly welcome the emphasis on testing the ‘rules’ against real language.

## REFERENCE

LEECH, G AND J SVARTVIK. 1994. *A communicative grammar of English*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Longman.

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