

# Grammar: Form, Meaning, and Use

The concept of grammar and how to teach it includes a wide range of perspectives. Some teaching approaches focus on formal rules of grammar that precede language practice or performance. This *deductive* approach to the teaching of grammar provides a general rule and then gives students opportunities to practice the language using specific examples. Other approaches provide students with examples of language and ask them to state the grammar rules that apply. This *inductive* approach expects students to discover the grammar rule by reference to the examples. A good deal of research has been undertaken in the differences and effectiveness of inductive and deductive approaches to teaching grammar (Ellis, 2002) that shows the effectiveness of both approaches in different contexts and with different types of grammar rules. Of course, within the inductive/deductive dichotomy of teaching grammar, a variety of different techniques can be used, which suggests that adopting a single approach to grammar teaching does not account for many relevant factors such as the various reasons and purposes for learning English, the contexts in which it is learned, the age of students, the class size, the relative difficulty of the grammar feature in question, and the proficiency level of students. Thus, ensuring that student needs are being met requires a wide range of approaches and techniques in

grammar teaching. To meet these needs, a very basic question must first be answered: what is the main purpose of grammar teaching?

The perspective adopted in this book is that grammar teaching in L2 contexts seeks to help learners gain grammar ability so that they can use grammar accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately. These three adjectives that define grammar ability—*accurate*, *meaningful*, and *appropriate*—may be quite different from other teachers' views of grammar. Reflection, however, reveals that grammar knowledge does not just relate to accuracy. Relevant components of meaning (semantics) and use (pragmatics) are important parts of grammar knowledge. Knowing the distinctions between these components of grammar knowledge can help grammar teachers be more effective.

## Form, Meaning, and Use

One useful way to think about grammar is through a form, meaning, and use (FMU) perspective made popular by *The Grammar Book* (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 2015), as well as Diane Larsen-Freeman's book *Teaching Language: From grammar to grammaring* (2003). Each of these components are discussed in more detail ahead.

*Form* refers to the structure of a phrase or clause. In a given context, certain forms are required in English to be considered accurate. Form describes either the required form of a word (*She likes to travel* is preferred to *She like to travel*) or a required word order (*I can't tell you* is preferred to *I no can tell you*). Form is often described by reference to rules that speakers follow (either consciously or unconsciously) and is likely what most people think of when they think of grammar.

### REFLECTIVE QUESTION

- Thinking about your own understanding of English grammar, would you characterize your grammar knowledge as mostly explicit, mostly implicit, or a combination of both explicit and implicit?

Grammar ability involves not just explicitly learning or describing rules but also using language for real communicative purposes. Of course, rules

provide helpful guidelines for understanding grammar and clearly have their place in the grammar classroom, but being able to state a grammar rule does not mean that one can actually use it. The distinction between stating a grammar rule and using grammar suggests that one type of knowledge (explicit knowledge) does not necessarily translate into another type of knowledge (implicit knowledge). The curriculum designer or teacher must ultimately decide to determine the extent to which the class addresses formal rule-learning, but all teachers and curriculum designers should be aware that grammar does not consist entirely of formal rule-learning.

In addition to form, grammar contains a semantic (*meaning*) component. In fact, if people paid no attention to meaning, what would be the point of communication? If grammar teachers only focus on form, they quickly run into problems. For example, *I saw a movie* means something very different from *I am seeing a movie*. A learner may produce either structure accurately (the forms of both sentences are accurate), but the two sentences have very different intended meanings. Thus, learners need to know how to use the correct structure to reach an intended meaning.

## REFLECTIVE QUESTION

- What other examples of meaning distinctions in grammar might cause confusion?

Moreover, certain types of grammar forms are preferable over others, depending on the context. For example, sentences with contractions (*I'm happy to see you're here*) are much more common in spoken language or informal types of writing than in written academic contexts. Common distinctions such as conversation versus writing or formal versus informal illustrate systematic differences in how grammar is used in the two contexts. When teachers caution their students, “Don’t talk like you write” or “You wouldn’t say that in a formal presentation,” they are talking about *use*. The relationship between grammar and context is found in research on *register variation* (Biber, 1988, and Biber & Conrad, 2019). Research in this area is based on the idea that the form of language depends on the contexts in which it is used. Register analysis shows systematic differences between grammar form in contexts such as conversation, academic writing, news writing, and fiction. *The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*,

or LGSWE (Biber et al., 1999), provides a comprehensive description of grammar from a use perspective. The next chapter looks at register variation in more detail.

## REFLECTIVE QUESTION

- What are some situations where you feel you use different grammar rules?

One useful way to consider form, meaning, and use is by examining how these different perspectives can describe a single grammar feature. Table 2.1 provides a description of how reference to form, meaning, and use can describe two different features of grammar.

**Table 2.1. Form, Meaning, and Use of Phrasal Verbs and Present Progressive**

Grammar feature	Form	Meaning	Use
Phrasal verbs	<p>A multiword verb that</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Consists of a lexical verb and a particle (e.g., <i>give up</i>)</li> <li>● Has particle movement (<i>give up the idea</i>; <i>give the idea up</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Can often be substituted with a single verb (e.g., <i>surrender</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Used most in spoken language; frequent in fiction; rare in academic registers</li> <li>● More common in less formal contexts</li> </ul>
Present progressive	<p>Auxiliary verb <i>be</i> + gerund:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>She is reading on her own these days.</i></li> </ul> <p>Different from semi-modal:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Larry is going to see if he can come.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Expresses an ongoing or continuous action in present time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● More frequent in conversation than writing</li> <li>● Used primarily with dynamic verbs (<i>go, run, walk</i>) than stative verbs (<i>know, love</i>) or copular verbs (<i>seem, appear</i>)</li> </ul>

As seen in Table 2.1, any given grammar feature can be described from three perspectives. Phrasal verbs, for example, consist of a lexical verb and a particle. They also allow for movement of objects (particularly when the object is a pronoun) to reside between the verb and its particle. From a meaning perspective, phrasal verbs often have single word synonyms. From a use perspective, they are more common in spoken, informal contexts than in written formal contexts, but this is not to say that formal academic writing does not contain phrasal verbs. The present progressive form requires a gerund to follow the auxiliary verb *be*. Progressive aspect is used to show that an action is ongoing. Progressive verbs are also more frequent in conversation as opposed to writing and tend to occur with specific semantic classes of verbs. Describing grammar features as in Table 2.1 has a number of advantages over focusing solely on form, meaning, or use separately.

First, some teachers may have explicit knowledge of certain pieces of a grammar feature but may not have explicit knowledge of all three aspects. For example, a teacher may be very comfortable explaining how to form the present progressive but may not be able to explain how to use it in authentic discourse. Teachers with explicit knowledge of all three aspects of a given grammar feature are better equipped to explain a given feature to students and to devise activities that raise students' awareness of grammar.

Second, viewing grammar from an FMU perspective shows that knowing grammar does not just mean knowing rules (and exceptions to rules); it involves knowing how to use form to gain an intended meaning in a given context. Furthermore, FMU can guide teachers in their selection of grammar features to teach. Consider these two examples:

1. Speaker A: *What does she like to do?* Speaker B: *She like to travel.*
2. Speaker A: *What did you do last night?* Speaker B: *I am seeing a movie.*

In both examples 1 and 2, speaker B makes a grammar mistake. In 1B, the subject of the sentence (*she*) should agree with the verb (third-person singular subjects require verbs in different forms than other types of subjects). By contrast, in 2B uses the incorrect tense and aspect and expresses an incorrect meaning. So, what do these examples illustrate? Grammar errors that result in meaning confusion (example 2) are likely more worthy of a teacher's focus than those that are purely formal (example 1). Additionally, understanding the nature of the errors that students may make may help

teachers: a form-based error in example 1 does not affect meaning and may be more frequent and persistent exactly for that reason; a meaning-based error such as the one in example 2 perhaps merits closer attention because it interferes with meaning. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that teachers should pay no attention to form-type errors, but it does illustrate that the FMU distinction is a useful guide to help teachers decide the focus of their lessons as well as how to describe and explain grammar to students.

Finally, providing such descriptions can serve as an impetus for students to be active participants in their own learning and understanding of grammar. Raising awareness not only of form and meaning aspects of grammar but also of grammar use allows students to be active consumers of different types of grammar knowledge and may even help them to notice how grammar is used in different contexts and promote their active participation in their own grammar learning. As discussed in Larsen-Freeman (2003), engaging students in the three goals of grammar teaching—accuracy, meaningfulness, and appropriacy—can be achieved by raising their awareness of the components of grammar knowledge—form, meaning, and use—and foster dynamic involvement for students to engage in grammar learning in some of the same ways that students can be engaged in learning reading, writing, speaking, and listening. In fact, Larsen-Freeman encourages this type of participation in grammar learning by coining the term “grammaring” as a “fifth skill [that] is intimately interconnected with the other skills” (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 143).

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- In what ways can the goals of accuracy, meaningfulness, and appropriateness and the components of form, meaning, and use relate to how the learning of grammar can be seen as a skill? Is “grammaring” a fifth skill?