

# *The* Teacher's Grammar *of* English

A COURSE BOOK and REFERENCE GUIDE

Ron Cowan



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS  
[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-00755-9 - The Teacher's Grammar of English: A Course Book and Reference Guide  
 Ron Cowan  
 Frontmatter  
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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press  
 32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
 Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521809733](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521809733)

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First published 2008

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cowan, Ron.

The teacher's grammar of English : a course book and reference guide / Ron Cowan.  
 p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-521-80973-3 (alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-0-521-00755-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. English language--Study and teaching--Foreign speakers. 2. English teachers--Training of. I. Title.

PE1128.A2C69347 2008  
 428.2 '4--dc22

2008007254

ISBN 978-0-521-80973-3 hardback  
 ISBN 978-0-521-00755-9 paperback

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of my father,  
a pioneer in the field of applied linguistics and  
an innovator in the field of foreign language teaching:*

*J Milton Cowan*

# Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to a number of people at Cambridge University Press for their encouragement and help at different stages in the preparation of this book. Deborah Goldblatt guided me through the review process, and Mary Carson solicited evaluations of sample chapters from teacher trainers and ESL/EFL teachers in and outside of the United States. Rob Freire devoted considerable time and energy to insuring that the initial manuscript was completed on schedule.

Other people who were particularly helpful were Carol Boggess (Mars Hill College, North Carolina), who tried out chapters with teachers transitioning to ESL instruction in middle school and provided detailed feedback on their reactions to the material. Howard Williams (Teachers College, Columbia University) read first and second drafts of every chapter and wrote detailed critiques that resulted in many improvements. Kent Lee expanded my knowledge of discourse markers and how they might be incorporated in ESL instruction. Randee Falk did a very fine job of editing the final manuscript and the Glossary.

I am grateful to a number of people who helped me investigate grammatical errors made by English language learners whose native languages I have only a nodding familiarity with. Jinhee Choo and Gabseon Lee helped analyze a corpus of errors made by Korean ESL students and, with Doe Hyung Kim, assisted in formulating the descriptions of frequent errors that appear in several chapters. Michael Leeser (Florida State University) helped me classify the errors in a corpus produced by Spanish ESL students. He and Monica Millan checked the descriptions of Spanish that appear throughout this book. Bob Amorin was kind enough to obtain a small corpus of Portuguese EFL student compositions. My colleague Miao-Fen Tseng (University of Virginia) proposed and ran the experiment on Chinese ESL students' use of English conditionals described in Chapter 19.

Mark Cowan taught his father how to use computer graphics tools to create pages with the illustrations that appeared in earlier versions of these materials. He also stepped in and took the workload off my shoulders whenever I needed extra time for this project. Mitra Cowan shared her experiences learning French in the workplace in Montreal, providing examples of situations that were incorporated in Chapter 6. My wife Mehri displayed infinite patience when the writing of this book limited my participation in real life.

Finally, I am indebted to the hundreds of students in the MATESL program at the University of Illinois who, over the years, cheerfully filled out evaluation forms, sent e-mails and gave verbal assessments of the interest value and comprehensibility of these materials. These were of immense value to me during the writing of the book.

# To the Instructor

*The Teacher's Grammar of English (TGE)* evolved out of two courses (a core course and its prerequisite) for ESL/EFL teachers in the MATESL program that I have been teaching at the University of Illinois. Its 26 chapters contain all of the knowledge about English grammar that I feel competent, professional teachers should command, as well as information about discourse structuring principles that affect the occurrence of grammatical structures. In addition, each chapter includes analyses of students' errors based on second language research and practical teaching suggestions on how to address these errors. This book was designed to be suitable as a textbook or as a resource book for teachers in all teacher training courses – including short teacher training programs, certificate programs, and MATESL programs.

## Structure of the Book

The first three chapters of *The Teacher's Grammar of English* provide a foundation for the study of grammar and an overview of past and present approaches to teaching English grammar to nonnative speakers. Chapter 1, *Introduction*, reviews basic concepts such as grammatical competence as well as sociolinguistic and discourse related factors that influence language use. Chapter 2, *Grammatical Terms*, is provided for instructors whose students may have minimal knowledge of basic grammatical concepts. If you teach Chapter 2, you should stress that all of the grammatical terms in it will reappear and be elaborated on in subsequent chapters. Students who might be nervous about remembering grammatical concepts can refer to the *Glossary of Grammatical Terms* as needed to refresh their memory. Chapter 3, *Teaching Grammar*, examines the empirical evidence for and against the teaching of grammar to ESL students and provides an overview of past and current instructional practices.

The first three chapters can be viewed as optional, given your time constraints and the composition of your audience. Chapter 1 can be given as a reading assignment and discussed briefly in class. (The convention of marking ungrammatical sentences with an asterisk throughout the book is introduced here, so this symbol will have to be explained if you decide to skip this chapter.) Chapter 2 can usually be completed in two class sessions if the reading assignment guidelines described below are followed. There are two advantages of covering Chapter 3 before beginning subsequent chapters. First, many of the recommendations in the *Suggestions for Teaching . . .* section in the remaining chapters refer to the instructional approaches discussed in Chapter 3. Second, the content in Chapter 3 will equip teachers to better evaluate new ESL/EFL materials and to create effective teaching activities.

Chapters 4 through 26 are each subdivided into three sections. The first section is a discussion of the grammar topic. This discussion sometimes touches on concepts presented in previous chapters, but these are cross-referenced so that, regardless of which chapters you decide to teach, your students will not have difficulty understanding their content. After each main grammar point, a *Summary*, listing important terms and concepts, and one or more *Exercises* are provided to help students review and check their comprehension of the material. The second section, *Problems That ESL/EFL Students Have . . .*, describes specific errors that ESL/EFL students from a variety of L1 backgrounds make in speaking and writing when attempting to use the grammar in the chapter. These errors are documented with data from published research in second language acquisition and data from English learner corpora. An attempt is made to evaluate which errors may be transitory, and hence disappear as students receive more input and attain greater proficiency, and which errors appear to be persistent and, therefore, may warrant pedagogical intervention. The final section, *Suggestions for Teaching . . .*, provides activities for teaching aspects of the grammar topic. The proficiency level of the students who would benefit from each activity is indicated by the labels *beginning*, *intermediate*, and *advanced*.

Each chapter concludes with a list of references for further study on the topic. Several chapters (Chapter 9, *Multiword Verbs*; Chapter 12, *Adjectives and Adverbs*; and Chapter 15, *Indirect Objects*) include an appendix as a reference. A glossary, which lists many of the grammatical terms and includes example sentences, is provided for quick review. An index of terms and words is provided for further reference. An answer key is also included.

## Using the Teacher's Grammar of English

To succeed in the language classroom, ESL/EFL teachers should have a good command of the material in the first sections of Chapters 4 through 26. However, it is equally important that they be able to relate this knowledge to the problems that their students have in learning the grammar, and that they try out teaching activities that will promote its acquisition. Hence, the chapters that you choose for your course will have the greatest impact if all three sections of every chapter are related to one another in your instruction. My recommendations for achieving this are described below.

1. Select a sequence of chapters from the *TGE* that fits the time constraints of your course. (See *Selecting Content That Meets Your Needs*, which follows.) When making your selection, you will want to take into consideration the length of different chapters. Chapters 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, and 15 can each be covered in two 50-minute class periods. With the exception of Chapters 14 and 16, each of the remaining chapters can be covered in three class periods.
2. Read each chapter and decide how the content can be covered in no more than three 50-minute sessions. Determine reading assignments (assigned to be read before each class) of ten to twelve pages for each chapter. In the first section of each chapter, those pages that have accompanying exercises represent the grammatical concepts that ESL/EFL teachers should master. Sections under the heading *Additional Facts About . . .* do not have exercises, and can be assigned for reading or skipped, depending upon time constraints. In the first class period, hand out the reading assignments for the entire course and tell your students that they should be prepared to answer the exercise

- questions in class. From time to time, you may wish to have the students write out the answers to some of the exercises to ensure they are doing the reading and to check how well they are mastering the material.
3. Begin each class by going over the exercises that relate to the reading assignment. Call on students to answer the questions. If they have difficulty answering a particular question, coax them to come up with reasons why a particular answer is the best choice. Allow at least 15 minutes for answering questions and discussing any issues relating to them.
  4. In the remaining 35 minutes of class, you may wish to engage in any of the following activities:
    - Demonstrate the kinds of grammatical errors that are produced when English language learners with different L1s attempt to use the grammatical structures covered in the reading assignment (use the errors in the *Problems That ESL/EFL Students Have . . .* section). Briefly discuss the possible causes of these errors, and engage the students in a short discussion of whether these errors should be addressed through pedagogical intervention. A primary consideration in making this decision should be whether the errors appear to be transitory or persistent.
    - Use the grammar topics in the assigned reading they have completed as a springboard for a discussion about how they might be taught. I sometimes show examples of how a topic is presented in current textbooks. We evaluate the presentations in light of whether they cover the important points of the grammar and determine whether they could be improved or supplemented with the additional facts presented in the first section of the chapter. These discussions can be helpful in developing teachers' ability to critically evaluate teaching materials and improve them.
    - With the next reading assignment, introduce and explain some aspect of a grammar topic that may be particularly challenging. Do this only with difficult topics and be sure not to teach the entire reading assignment for the next class.

By the end of the second class on a particular chapter, you should have, with the exception of Chapters 14 and 16, completed all of the first section. I have my students read the other two sections – *Problems That ESL/EFL Students Have . . .* and *Suggestions for Teaching . . .* – of each chapter for the third class meeting, but I do not hold them responsible for remembering all of the details in them. This is a fairly easy reading assignment because the material is not as challenging as the content of the first section. If I have already talked about some of the errors in the previous two classes, this assignment gives the students an opportunity to read about the errors again and better understand the causes that have been proposed to explain them. In preparation for the third class meeting, I ask my teachers to examine and evaluate the *Suggestions for Teaching . . .* activities and provide recommendations that might improve those activities. In this chapter, they are also asked to share other approaches to teaching the grammar that they have seen or used. I always devote at least half an hour of the final period to a group discussion led by me evaluating the activities in the *Suggestions for Teaching . . .* section. Although I have never asked my students to try out any of the activities in these sections, some of them have done this and reported back on their results. I am happy to say that these reports have always ranged from favorable to enthusiastic.

## Term Project

I assign a term project that involves designing a teaching activity on one of the grammar points covered in the course. The activity may extend beyond one hour of instruction and includes a lesson plan. I have sometimes allowed groups of three students to collaborate on a single project. If time permits, you may wish to have these projects presented in class for the benefit of other teachers. I have included a few of the best projects that I have received over the years in the *Suggestions for Teaching* . . . section of some chapters of *TGE*. The authors are acknowledged in the Endnotes.

## Selecting Content That Meets Your Needs

As stated previously, the content in *TGE* is relevant to almost all teacher training courses. This includes those courses devoted to teaching writing skills. Since many instructors may not have the time to cover all of the chapters, suggestions as to which chapters might be most suitable for shorter courses are offered below.

- One-Semester Courses

For a one-semester course of approximately 14 or 15 contact hours, I would recommend Chapters 3 through 7 and Chapters 10 through 18. These cover most of the key structures that elementary- and intermediate-level students are taught. Teachers who feel that they need to cover more advanced-level grammar might consider replacing some of these with chapters 19 through 21.

- Short Courses (six weeks)

Short six-week courses for teachers who have little or no experience teaching ESL/EFL should probably include Chapter 3, since these teachers will need an overview of the debate surrounding the teaching of grammar as well as the survey of current instructional approaches. In addition, I would suggest Chapters 4, 6, 11, 14, and 16, because they cover key grammatical teaching points that every teacher has to deal with, and they address common problems that beginning teachers will encounter. Short courses for more experienced teachers will require a broader spectrum of topics.

- Courses Focusing on the Grammar of Writing

Chapters 21, 23, 24, and 26 discuss grammatical structures that appear more frequently in written English and relate them to topics included in ESL/EFL composition courses (e.g., topic sentences, topic shift, and discourse/information packaging factors that favor the choice of some structures over others in discourse). These chapters offer a number of ways in which grammatical structures relevant to writing can be incorporated in the teaching of composition.



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