English Grammar in Current Hong Kong Textbooks: A Critical Appraisal

Peter Collins, The University of New South Wales, Australia
Jackie F. K. Lee, The Hong Kong Institute of Education, P.R.C.

Despite some commentators' opposition to explicit grammar teaching in the 70s and 80s (e.g., Krashen, 1985), grammar instruction has come back into prominence. Those who are in favour of grammar teaching (e.g., White, 1987; Ur, 1988; Tsui, 1991; Ellis, 2005) argue that some grammatical forms cannot be acquired merely on the basis of comprehensible input and that formal instruction is necessary for learners to acquire those forms. They make a distinction between the learning of the first language in natural contexts where the amount of time and exposure to learning is so great that there is no necessity for formal grammar instruction and for the learning of a language in a second/foreign learning environment where the time available and motivation are much less, and organized grammar teaching is essential to acquiring the language. The issue now therefore is not whether grammar should be taught or not, but how to teach grammar.

A number of English language teaching experts have made critical comments on grammar instruction. Byrd (1994), Petrovitz (1997) and Nunan (1998) highlight the importance of contextualising grammar so that not only the structure is taken into account, but also the meaning and use. They emphasise that effective communication involves appropriate grammatical choices in context. Meanwhile, some studies (e.g., Collins, Hollo & Mar, 1997; Fortune, 1998; Millard, 2000) reveal that there are shortcomings in the presentation of grammar in some traditional grammar practice books. For example, 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 with little change in grammar teaching approaches over the past 50 years. Millard (2000) studied adult ESL grammar textbooks and suggested that textbook writers should address more fully how to integrate grammar teaching within communicative language curricula.

In Hong Kong, the government's concern about how to present grammar effectively is evident in its publication, *Teaching Grammar and Spoken English: A Handbook for Hong Kong Schools* (Education Department, 1993), in which it states that:

> It is equally important for students to learn about grammar as well as how to put it to purposeful, communicative use. Both language form and function converge on a continuum of language learning where students first learn to grasp the basic formal elements and structures and then practise using them in meaningful contexts. The teaching of grammar is thus seen as a means towards an end, and the ultimate aim is to help students progress towards general fluency and successful communication (p. 2).

In recent years, the task-based learning approach has been adopted by the Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council. This, however, does not undermine the importance of grammar teaching at either the primary or the secondary level. The Primary and Secondary Syllabuses for English (published in 2004 and 1999 respectively) attach equal importance to both language form and function. The Secondary Syllabus states that:

> 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 (p. 49).

The need for grammar instruction is widely accepted in Hong Kong, as revealed in Lee's study (1999) of Hong Kong secondary school teachers. Over 90% of Lee's respondents indicated that they either "always" or "often" used grammar exercise books in their teaching. However, they rarely questioned the linguistic accuracy or clarity of the textbooks they used. The aim of this paper is to critically assess the presentation of English grammar in textbooks published in Hong Kong and used by secondary students. The corpus (see Appendix) comprised 25 grammar practice books, their selection being guided by their comparative popularity, which in turn was determined via consultation with teachers and booksellers. Some of the books chosen, published by well-established publishers (e.g., Longman and Aristo), including *Longman Target English Grammar, Grammar Focus*, *Smart Grammar,* and *Easy Grammar,* are popularly used in the classroom while others which are published by less well-known publishers are 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*). One limitation of this study is that there were no statistics available showing which grammar books had the largest share of the market. Nevertheless, since all the books studied were current and were on sale in bookstores at the time of writing this paper, their potential influence on Hong Kong English users is not in doubt.

The influence of the communicative approach in language teaching is evident in the books examined, with authors exploring grammar with reference to the broader social

functions of language and to the nature and structure of discourse, and not merely as an autonomous system to be learned as an end in itself. But how adequate is the grammar instruction presented in the textbooks? Do writers take on board the insights presented in the most influential and authoritative descriptive grammars of recent years (Biber et al., 1999; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002; Quirk et al., 1985), or do they merely continue to accept the principles espoused in traditional grammar? To address this question we have followed the approach used by Collins and his associates (1997) in their Australian textbook study, and have organized our critical analysis according to four general areas in which traditional grammar is demonstrably deficient (the handling of form-meaning relationships, maintenance of the distinction between class and function, the presence of Latinate bias, and the existence of prescriptive content). Other issues addressed include the occurrence of factual errors in the textbooks examined, text/exercise artificiality, and *structural malaise.*

Notional Definitions

Most of the books surveyed rely heavily upon notional (solely meaning-based) definitions of grammatical categories. For example, consider the following definitions of the noun:

(1) A noun is a word used to show the name of a person, place, thing or idea.

(*Grammar Made Easy,* p. 78)

(2) A noun is a word that names a thing, a place, a quality, an action, a person.

(*An Easy Approach to English Grammar,* p. 1)

The problem with such definitions is that they fail to exclude members of other part-of-speech categories. For example, it is not just nouns that refer to qualities (e.g., *generosity*) but also adjectives (*generous*), and certainly not just nouns that denote actions (e.g., *demolition*) but also verbs (*demolish*).

The problem with notional definitions of this type is that we need to know in advance that a word is a noun (and that therefore an adjective such as *generous* or a verb such as *demolish* 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, nouns are distinctive in their capacity to be modified by adjectives and relative clauses, and in their capacity to take plural and possessive inflections (for example, we can say *extreme generosity* but not *extreme generous.*)

Such rules may disrupt the fine balance that is needed between simplicity and accuracy in teaching grammar, too far towards simplicity. The danger here is that as the inaccuracy of such rules becomes apparent to learners they will need to unlearn much of what they have been taught at the elementary stage. Unless formal descriptions too are introduced early learners may fail to appreciate the crucial role of formal considerations in enabling all the members of the class to be satisfactorily identified.

Consider, as another example, the following typical (notional) definitions of the subject:

(3) The subject of a sentence is the person or thing we talk about.

(*New Exercises in English* 2, p. 68)

(4) The subject tells us who or what is doing the action.

(*Grammar Practice 2000, Stage 1*, p. 1)

In the absence of supplementation from a formal perspective, these definitions will not satisfy the needs of learners. The definition in (3) overlooks the fact that there are cases in English where the subject could not be plausibly said to represent what the sentence is about. (For example, a sentence such as *No one likes Jane* is more sensibly interpreted as being about *Jane* than about the subject *no one*.) As for the definition in (4), the person or thing which does the action may not be the subject (as in *Jane was contacted by Peter*, where *Peter* is the doer but not the subject), and the subject may not be a doer (as in *Jane is upset*). The subject function in English is most effectively characterised in terms of a cluster of structural properties (including agreement with the verb, use in interrogative tags, and association with nominative case).

Grammatical Class and Grammatical Function

Another weakness that is evident in a number of the textbooks examined—albeit one less pervasive than that reported in the section above—is one that is very common in traditional school grammars: a failure to maintain the fundamental distinction between grammatical class and grammatical function.

Consider the class of adjectives, one of whose main functions is that of modifier in noun phrase structure. In the following example it is correctly assumed that this function can also be served by nouns (such as *factory* in the phrase *factory regulations*). The formulation “noun used as adjective” used by the authors, however, indicates that they have confused—or rather, coalesced—the class of adjective and the function of modifier (the noun *factory* for example can never be an adjective, but it can be used as a modifier).

(5) Some words are often used as nouns but can be used as adjectives.

nouns: Those *factories* make *shoes*.

adjectives: Please read these new *factory* regulations.

Those are *shoe* factories.

(*English in Focus: Teach and Test 4*, p. 56)

It is a similar sort of confusion between class and function that leads to the misclassification of prepositional phrases as adverb phrases in (6):

(6) Adverbs modify a verb, an adjective or another adverb. We can use an adverb phrase or clause instead of an adverb.

e.g., with a phrase: *The bus stopped outside this shop.*

You can go home in a few minutes' time.

(*English in Focus: Teach and Test 4*, p. 59)

Latin Bias

Approximately one quarter of the texts follow traditional grammar in their inclusion of categories derived from Latin grammar, but which have no place in the grammar of contemporary English. The most obvious examples are inflectional, where we find the complex verb paradigms of Latin—a highly inflecting language—being applied to the grammatical description of English, despite their marginal relevance to the comparatively simple paradigms of English. For example, it is assumed in a number of the textbooks, including *An Easy Approach to English Grammar*, that case is applicable to common and proper nouns as well as to pronouns in English—a suggestion that has validity only up to the beginning of the Middle English period:

(7) When a noun or a pronoun is the subject of a clause, that noun or pronoun is in the Nominative Case. This case tells us who or what does something.

When a noun or pronoun is the direct object of a verb, that noun or pronoun is in the Objective Case. This case tells us which person or thing the action of the verb is directed towards.

The pronoun which is the indirect object of a verb is in the Dative Case. The noun which is the direct object of a verb is in the Accusative Case. The object of a preposition is in the accusative case.

When a person or people are addressed, we use the Vocative Case (e.g., *Tony, are you going to eat your dinner or not?*)

(*An Easy Approach to English Grammar*, pp. 7-8)

Some of the textbooks present a Latin-based four-term gender classification of nouns, as in the following:

(8) 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*

(*English in Focus: Teach and Test 4*, pp. 119-120)

This classification is purely semantically-based: unlike Latin, French and German, English does not have grammatical gender. It would therefore be more appropriate if the categories posited were explored in a discussion of word formation and vocabulary extension.

Prescriptive Bias

Approximately one third of the textbooks examined include some prescriptive content—not inappropriately, given their pedagogical orientation. However, the textbooks generally manage to avoid the uncritically conservative stance and puristic zeal that are characteristic of many traditional school grammars. For example, in (9), even though the distribution of *shall* and *will* is stated too categorically, at least the author avoids the prescriptive formulation found in many traditional grammars—one completely out of touch with the facts of contemporary usage—that in all contexts shall should be used with first person subjects and will with second and third person subjects.

(9) In formal English, we use "shall" with "I" and "we". However, in spoken English, we use "will" for all persons.

(*Grammar Focus*, p. 27)

Unlike those traditional grammarians whose prescriptions tend to be insensitive to the fact that English, like all living languages, is subject to dialectal and stylistic variation, the author of *New Exercises in English 1* invokes considerations of stylistic variation in discussing the use of contracted forms of have in forming the present perfect:

(10) In conversation, we usually use the contracted forms (*I've heard the news; it's stopped raining*).

(*New Exercises in English 1*, p. 57)

Factual Errors

There was an alarmingly high incidence of factual errors in the textbooks examined. A small selection follows:

(11) When the noun followed by the prepositional phrase is the subject, the verb agrees in person and number with the first noun, not with any other noun in the prepositional phrase.

e.g., *The book on the table is mine.*

The books on the table are mine.

(*Smart Grammar 1*, p. 112)

This description is incomplete: in a sentence such as *The history books on the table are mine* the verb *are* agrees not with the first noun *history* (which premodifies the head noun *books*) but rather with the second noun *books*.

(12) Adjective

surprised, shocked, amazed, astonished + at/by

We were surprised at/by the news.

She was shocked at/by his behaviour.

(*Smart Grammar 2*, p. 150)

In (12) *surprised* and *shocked* are misclassified: they are surely verbs rather than adjectives when used with a *by*-phrase complement.

(13) We use the passive voice when it is not important, or it is not known, who or what does the action.

(*Smart Grammar 3*, p. 28)

This characterization applies to agentless passives only. The primary motivation for the selection of passive rather than active clauses is information structuring (insofar as a passive clause presents a different element as topic than its active counterpart).

(14)

noun	adjective	verb	adverb
choice	choosy	choose	choice

(*An Instant Approach to English Grammar*, p. 222)

In (14) *choice* is correctly labeled as a noun, but not as an adverb.

There is evidence in some of the textbooks that their authors are not fully in command of English.

(15) *Who serve dinner in restaurants every day?*

The waiters. Dinner is served by the waiters in restaurants every day.

(*English in Life 2*, p. 116)

Here the use of the definite article is unidiomatic.

(16) The object of a preposition is in the accusative case (e.g., *He phoned to me yesterday*).

(*An Easy Approach to English Grammar,* p. 7)

In (16) the presence of *to* renders the example unacceptable.

Artificiality

It was pleasing to see the textbooks embracing the communicative notion that as an instrument of communication, language should be taught within the context of its broader social functions. Unfortunately, however, we noted an occasional tendency for the context-based exercises presented in the textbooks to be unnatural and artificial. Consider the implausible dialogue in (17), where the answers are given in full rather than with the expected ellipsis of recoverable elements:

(17) There has been a traffic accident and a policeman is asking people about what happened. Using the question words in the box, complete the questions he asks.

1. Policeman: <u>When did the accident happen</u>?
   Witness: The accident happened at about 5.15 pm.
2. Policeman: <u>Who was driving the car</u>?
   Witness: A young man was driving the car.

(*Grammar Practice 2000, Stage 1,* p. 11)

In the following mechanical drill the use of the passive in the responses sounds quite unnatural because the topical flow is disrupted (*Mimi* is the topic in Jenny's questions, and would be retained in the answers if they were active).

(18) Last year, Jenny's sister, Mimi, was a clerk. Now she is working as a secretary. She is talking to Jenny about her work and her plans. Help Mimi answer Jenny's questions in the passive voice.

Jenny: *What did you do as a clerk?*

Mimi: *<u>Letters were typed by me</u>.*

<u>Notices were photocopied by me</u>.

<u>The telephones were answered by me</u>.

Jenny: *What about now as a secretary?*

Mimi: *Letters are written by me.*

Reports are drafted by me.

Coffee is made by me.

(*Easy Grammar 2*, p. 160)

Structural Malaise

Structural malaise refers to the widespread insensitivity to the structure-based analysis of language that we encountered amongst textbook writers. The primary focus of attention in traditional grammar was on the word and the sentence, and it is therefore not surprising that we should encounter a good deal of confusion in the treatment of phrases in the textbooks. Consider the following examples, each of which indicates the writer's ignorance of the internal structure of noun phrases. In (19) *my* is a constituent of the noun phrase *my old camera,* and in (20) *not enough* is a constituent of the noun phrase n*ot enough players*.

(19) We use possessive adjectives to show that someone or something belongs to someone or something. We always put a noun or a noun phrase after a possessive adjective.

Poss adj	N		Poss adj	N Phr
This is my	*camera.*		*This is my*	*old camera.*

(*Longman Target English Grammar 1A*, p. 24)

(20) The pattern with the word *enough* in negative statements is:

—*not enough* + subject + verb + …

e.g., *Not enough players turned up to field a team*

(*An Easy Approach to English Grammar*, p. 63)

Conclusion

The recently released results of the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers show that only 35% of self-claimed teachers passed the error explanation section (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2005),[1] and they were advised to study grammar books more often to improve their structural competence. However, as we have seen from the present study, a number of locally produced grammar books which language teachers use every day do not always provide accurate information about the details of English usage. This will have a negative impact on both the teachers' and the students' knowledge of English structure and use.

While it was pleasing to observe writers supporting the trend towards the context- and discourse-driven approach towards grammatical instruction that has been popularized in the communicative approach in recent decades, there is nevertheless considerable room for improvement. As we have seen, a number of textbooks surveyed failed to provide an adequate treatment of the fundamental relationships between form and meaning and between class and function, some betrayed the influence of traditional Latinate descriptions, some hid mechanical drills in artificial contexts, and—most alarmingly—many were guilty of straightforward factual errors. Although the present study examined only grammar books used and published in Hong Kong, our findings are relevant to ESL/EFL teachers in other countries, who will undoubtedly find similar problems in their textbooks. All teachers need to cultivate a critical stance in assessing the quality of grammar presentation when selecting and using textbooks.

References

Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., & Finegan, E. (1999). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English.* Harlow: Longman.

Byrd, P. (1994). Writing grammar textbooks: theory and practice. *System, 22*, 245-255.

Collins, P., Hollo, C., & Mar, J. (1997). English grammar in school textbooks: A critical survey. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics, 20*, 33-50.

The Curriculum Development Council. (1999). *Syllabuses for secondary schools: English language secondary 1-5*. Hong Kong: Government Printer.

The Curriculum Development Council. (2004). *English language curriculum guide (Primary 1-6)*. Hong Kong: Government Logistics Department.

Education Department. (1993). *Teaching grammar and spoken English: A handbook for Hong Kong schools.* Hong Kong: Education Department.

Ellis, R. (2005). *Controversies in grammar teaching*. Paper presented at Dr. Tien Chang Lin Technology Innovation Foundation Lecture Series. The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Fortune, A. (1998). Survey review: grammar practice books. *ELT Journal, 52*, 67-80.

---

[1] All English teachers who are not English majors and have no relevant language teaching training are required to pass the benchmark test, which was first held in March 2001. They have to pass the test by 2006 to stay in their jobs. The test is open to the public. “Self-claimed teachers” refer to those candidates who identified themselves as teachers for the examination registration.

Huddleston, R., & Pullum, G. K. (2002). *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Krashen, S. (1985). *The input hypothesis*. London: Longman.

Language proficiency assessment for teachers. (26 May 2005). Press release of results. Hong Kong: Hong Kong SAR Government.

Lee, F. K. J. (1999). *Acceptability and usage in Australian English and Hong Kong English.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

Millard, D. J. (2000). Form-focused instruction in communicative language teaching: implications for grammar textbooks. *TESL Canada Journal, 18*, 47-57.

Nunan, D. (1998). Teaching grammar in context. *ELT Journal, 52*, 101-109.

Petrovitz, W. (1997). The role of context in the presentation of grammar. *ELT Journal, 51*, 201-207.

Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985). *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. London: Longman.

Tsui, A. B. M. (1991). Don't throw the baby out with the bath water—the place of grammar in communicative language teaching. *Curriculum Forum, 3*, 77-82.

Ur, P. (1988). *Grammar practice activities: A practice guide for teachers.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

White, L. (1987). Against comprehensible input: The input hypothesis and the development of second language competence. *Applied Linguistics, 8*, 95-100.

Appendix

Grammar Practice 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 One*. 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.

About the Authors

Peter Collins is currently the Head of the Linguistics Department at the University of New South Wales. He is the author of English Grammar: An Introduction.

Jackie Lee is a lecturer in the Department of English at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, where she is responsible for teaching language system courses.