
Keys to Teaching Grammar to English Language Learners: A Practical Handbook and Workbook for Keys to Teaching Grammar to English Learners

Review by Neil McBeath

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KEYS TO TEACHING GRAMMAR TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK. Keith S. Folse. Michigan Teacher Training Series. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 2009. ISBN 978-0-472-03220-4. 368 pp. Paper: \$28.95S.

WORKBOOK FOR KEYS TO TEACHING GRAMMAR TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS. Keith S. Folse and Ekaterina V. Goussakova. Michigan Teacher Training Series. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 2009. ISBN 978-0-472-03338-6. 272 pp. \$24.95S.

On July 26, 2010, someone called “superfly snuke” (sic), posting on the Saudi Arabian discussion threads of Dave’s ESL Café, suggested, “Grammarians; get a life,” opining that “Teaching ESL does not require a textbook understanding of grammar.”

The infinitely more distinguished Keith Folse obviously disagrees with such pernicious nonsense, and in these two volumes he offers a comprehensive resource book and a set of highly practical exercises. Professional teachers are likely to find both extremely useful.

I would question, however, whether these books are likely to live up to the billing in the blurb, which states that they “are for all teachers, whether they are teaching grammar directly, or indirectly in a variety of classes—including grammar class, a writing class, a speaking class, an ESP class or a K-12 class.”

Clearly, these books were never intended to be read from cover to cover, but having done so for the purposes of this review, it was hard for me to ignore the fact that Folse has very little to say about K-12 classes. This is particularly obvious in the *Workbook*. The exercises run parallel with the *Handbook*, and there is meticulous cross-referencing, but all the examples refer to adult concerns, there are no illustrations at all, and the superficial impression is that the *Workbook* is dull.

This is unfortunate because *Keys to Teaching Grammar* is more than comprehensive. It is divided into five chapters and three appendices, and it is clearly the result of years of experience and a wealth of learning.

The “Introduction to Grammar for English Language Learners (ELLS)” (pp. 1-30) begins with a Pre-Test on what the reader already knows before moving into a section that considers teaching approaches. This examines the roles played by the students, setting, course and teaching situation, but as these are factors that quite clearly vary from teacher to teacher, it is difficult for Folse to do more than generalize.

“Basic English Grammar; Usage and Terminology” (pp. 31-88) would probably be dismissed by people like “superfly snuke,” but teachers who have only a very little more professional dedication will find this interesting. It would be particularly valuable for teachers-in-training and those who are at the start of their careers.

There then follows “15 Keys to ELL Grammar” (pp. 99-262), a chapter which examines typical grammar errors, provides detailed explanations, offers contrast with seven (yes, SEVEN) other languages, and then suggests ways in which each grammar point can be taught.

The grammar points selected include verb tenses, countable/uncountable nouns, use of articles, phrasal verbs and the passive. There are few surprises there, perhaps, but the section on contrastive linguistics will be a godsend to anyone who is teaching students for whom Arabic/Chinese/French/Japanese/Korean/Russian or Spanish is the L1, and who does not have a basic awareness of the potential pitfalls.

“Being in the Hot Seat; Grammar Questions from ELLS” (pp. 263-286) offers a further 20 specific questions that, in Folse’s opinion “ELLS frequently ask about” (P. 264). This, however, is a personal selection that seems to be based on intuition rather than on statistical evidence, and it is hard to estimate quite how useful some of this material could be, unless the teacher is prepared to openly refer to the answer in front of a class.

“Specific Techniques for Teaching ELL Grammar” (pp. 287-311) offers fairly sound advice on a further 25 areas, such as #1— You don’t need a grammar book to start a lesson; #8—Simple exercises might not be so simple; # 10—Use songs to practice ELL grammar; and # 25 Develop your own system for correcting grammar errors.

Again, teaching contexts may affect the extent to which this advice can be adopted. Particularly in the case of # 25, large institutions may prefer that their teaching faculty employ a common system that can work across levels, and at least one institution in Saudi Arabia would dismiss any teacher who attempted to employ #10.

On balance, therefore, it must be said that *Keys to Teaching Grammar* might be a little less practical than Folse intended, and it is certainly less practical than the blurb suggests. Teachers, students and teaching contexts now vary so widely in their wants and needs that any attempt to offer a one-size-fits-all approach is almost bound to raise

questions among experienced practitioners. As a resource book for grammar exercises, however, *Keys to Teaching Grammar* has a great deal to recommend it, and at the very least, a copy would be welcome in most staff rooms and/or teacher or self-access resource centers.

About the Reviewer

Neil McBeath served as a uniformed Education Officer in the Royal Air Force of Oman from 1981 until he refused to renew contract in 2005. During that time he took two Masters Degrees and received the Distinguished Service Medal. He is now a Course Coordinator at the Sultan Qaboos University, Oman.