Grammar for English Language Teachers

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Contents

Introduction

Aims

Grammar for English Language Teachers has two primary aims:

- 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.

The book provides 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 recognise the limitations of the 'rules of thumb' presented to learners in course materials.

It also seeks to nourish a love for and fascination with English grammar.

Who this book is for

This book is intended for:

- prospective and practising teachers studying language as part of a degree in English or on courses such as those leading to teaching certificates and diplomas.
- teachers who want to continue learning and exploring the grammar of English on their own.
- teachers who do and teachers who do not speak English as a first language.

Content and organisation

People sometimes associate the term 'grammar' with the different parts of speech or 'word classes' that words can belong to (*adjective*, *noun*, *preposition* etc.). Materials produced for studying English over the last three decades have, however, reflected and promoted an obsession with another aspect of grammar – the verb phrase (tenses, conditionals etc.).

The chapters in Part A look at grammar from the starting point of word class, and those in Part B deal with the verb phrase. Parts C and D, however, look at more neglected aspects of grammar, and you may want to take more time to work through these parts of the book progressively and systematically. Each of these four parts begins with a general introduction to the topic.

Each chapter in Parts A–D begins with a review of 'Key considerations' relating to its topic. It explores the topic in depth in the subsequent sections, including the 'Typical difficulties for learners' that this area of grammar causes. Information in these chapters is expanded in the relevant sections of Parts F and G.

Each chapter ends with exercises to help you consolidate what you have learned. These *Consolidation exercises* use real texts, transcriptions of conversation and examples of learners' writing; possible answers to each of the exercises are suggested in Part H. Part E (*Extension exercises*) encourages you to research how language is used in different contexts, and to evaluate classroom and reference materials. (More detailed chapter-by-chapter *Extension exercises* (and *possible answers* to these) can be found on the Cambridge University Press Website http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk/elt/).

Data

Authentic data has been used extensively in:

- formulating and checking generalisations about language use.
- obtaining and adapting examples.

Finding the information

The section headed *Short cut to what you're looking for* at the beginning of the book is organised alphabetically and enables you very quickly to locate information about a specific feature of grammar.

In the longer term, there is no 'quick substitute' for systematically reading, studying, accumulating knowledge and developing awareness of grammar. The content of the book is organised thematically, and if you want to use it for systematic study, the *Contents* page will help you to find the chapters you need.

PART A

Words

Introduction to Part A

Words and grammar are often thought of as being separate entities. In fact, in learning any word we are also learning something about its grammar.

Words belong to different grammatical classes (e.g. *noun, verb, preposition*), and the class of a word determines:

- what other kinds of words we can combine with it.
  Example: We can say *a beautiful day* but not * *a beautifully day*.
  Explanation: We use adjectives not adverbs to qualify nouns.

- the order in which we combine words.
  Example: We can say *a beautiful day* but not * *a day beautiful*.
  Explanation: We put adjectives *before* the nouns they qualify.

Grammar also determines, for example:

- which form of a word we choose.
  Example: We say *two days* and not * *two day*.
  Explanation: After numbers greater than *one* we use a plural form of the noun.
  Example: We say *more beautiful* and not * *beautifuller*.
  Explanation: We use *more* to make the comparative form of long adjectives and add *–er* to make the comparative form of short adjectives.

As teachers we need to know and to be able to explain and illustrate:

- the grammatical class of words: *beautiful* or *beautifully*?

- the grammar of words: *day* or *days*?

- the implications of 'word grammar': We can't say: * *a beautifully day*; * *a day beautiful*; * *two day*; * *beautifuller*.

In Chapters 1–8 (Part A) we look at words that belong to the following grammatical classes:

	Examples	**Chapter**
Nouns:	*book(s), child(ren), information, life.*	1
Adjectives:	*easy, old, open-ended, possible.*	2
Adverbs:	*easily, sometimes, very.*	3
Articles:	*a, an, the.*	4
Quantifiers:	*any, every, a few, some.*	5
Comparative forms:	*more beautiful, easier, fewer.*	6
Superlative forms:	*most beautiful, easiest, fewest.*	6
Prepositions:	*at, in, on top of, since.*	7
Verbs:	*speak, go, can, will, drinking, been.*	8

Because the difficulties that learners have in using pronouns is closely related to judgements about how much information needs to be stated explicitly, and how much can be left out, and because choosing pronouns also involves decisions not only about number and gender but also about grammatical function (e.g. *subject* or *object*), we look at pronouns in Part C (p. 264).

Recognising word classes

In some languages the word itself tells us a lot about what class it belongs to (for example, the spelling and pronunciation of the end of a word may show that it is a noun). In English there are very few clues in the word itself, and we usually have to look at the context. The following gives examples of different parts of speech:
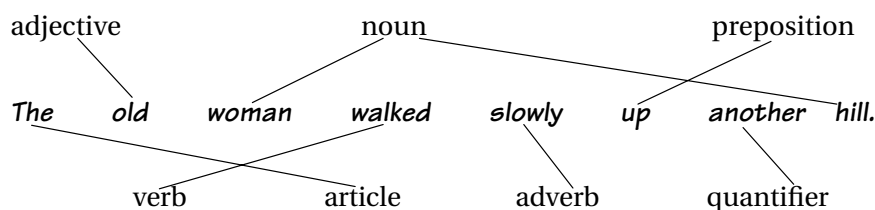
Words that belong to more than one word class

A lot of words can function as a member of one word class in some contexts and as a member of another word class in other contexts.

Examples	Word classes
abstract, *adult*, *antique*, *green*	nouns, adjectives
wonder, *rupture*, *sequence*, *drive*, *play*, *function*	nouns, verbs
fast, *hard*	adjectives, adverbs
around, *down*, *up*	adverbs, prepositions
come, *given*, *considering*	prepositions, verbs
boring, *open*, *locked*	adjectives, verbs

All quantifiers apart from *no* can also function as pronouns.

Quantifier	Pronoun
I saw *several* kangaroos.	He asked for a volunteer and got *several*.
I don't know *many* girls.	Teachers are poorly paid . . . *many* leave the profession.

Single words and multiword items

The simplest way to define a word is by looking at the written language. If there is a space before and after a group of letters, this group of letters constitutes a word.

If we look at meaning rather than at form, we see that some combinations of two or more words are equivalent to single words. These are multiword items.
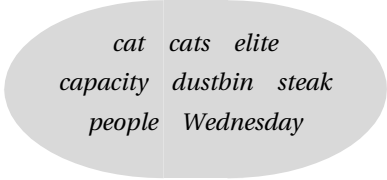
> *fed up* (adjective = 'unhappy')   *give up* (verb = 'stop')
> *with regard to* (preposition = 'about')

Grammar in course materials and in academic grammars

The grammatical terms and concepts used in course materials differ in some respects from those used in academic grammars, and in this book we follow the pragmatic distinctions and classes found in course materials. Thus, for example, we look at adverbs (single words) in Chapter 3, and consider phrases with a similar function as adverbials in Chapter 19; we look at articles in Chapter 4 and quantifiers in Chapter 5. Most academic grammars consider adverbs within the wider class of adverbials, and articles together with quantifiers within the wider class of determiners.

1   Nouns

cat   cats   elite
capacity   dustbin   steak
people   Wednesday

1.1 Key considerations

Most learners are more concerned with the meaning of nouns than with
their grammar. However, in learning to use a noun, they need to pay
attention to a variety of grammatical factors. In particular they need to
know whether a noun is countable or uncountable, and if countable, what
its plural form is. More generally, learners also need to be able to:

- use nouns to modify other nouns.
- choose and construct appropriate possessive forms.

1.2 What are nouns?

What do they do?

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.

In the previous paragraph, the following words are nouns: *definition,
noun, person, place, thing, fact, nouns, range, meanings, concepts,
qualities, organisations, communities, sensations, events, Nouns,
proportion, information, texts.*

What do they look like?

Endings

A small proportion of nouns have identifiable 'noun endings'. These
include:

*tradit**ion**, abil**ity**, instru**ment**, excell**ence**, signific**ance**.*

Many plural nouns end in ***s***, e.g. cat***s***.

Proper nouns and capital letters

Words which begin with capital letters and are not at the beginning of sentences are often the names of people, places or institutions. These are also called 'proper' nouns.

> both **Lauren** and **Jack** came   in **Africa**   a course at **International House**.

1.3 Where do nouns come in sentences?

Nouns can:

- act as the subject of a verb: **Cats** *kill mice.*
- act as the object of a verb: *Cats kill* **mice**.
- act as the complement of a verb: *They are* **men**.

They often end a phrase which begins with an article such as *a*(*n*), or a quantifier such as e*ither*, *any*, or *many*. They also often follow adjectives.

> a **drunk**   either **way**   a much older **elite**   large **mice**

1.4 Countable and uncountable nouns

What are countable and uncountable nouns?

Countable nouns ([C]) have a singular and a plural form, e.g. *book – books*. Uncountable nouns ([U]) have only one form, e.g. *furniture* NOT * *furnitures*.

[C]		[U]
Singular	**Plural**	
Another **biscuit**.	*Three* **apples**.	*Not much* **success**.

The distinction between countable and uncountable is based on whether or not we can count (1,2,3,4 . . .) what the nouns describe. Nouns which describe separate and separable objects (e.g. *book*(*s*), *centre*(*s*), *computer*(*s*)) are usually countable while those which describe liquids, materials, substances and abstract qualities (e.g. *milk*, *marble*, *putty*, *success*) are characteristically uncountable.

Although the distinction between countable and uncountable is based on the reality of what the nouns describe, the distinction is a grammatical one rather than a real one. Some learners of English are surprised to discover that, for example, the following are uncountable:

accommodation hair information money news spaghetti
travel weather

Words which come before and after countable and uncountable nouns

The words we use before and after nouns are determined by whether the noun is singular (countable), plural (countable) or uncountable:

before the noun	[C] singular	[C] plural	[U]
indefinite article (*a, an*)	*a* book	–	–
numbers	*one* book	*two* people	–
certain quantifiers, e.g. *both, each, either, many, a few, every*	–	*many* people	
certain quantifiers, e.g. *much, a little*	–	–	*much* interest

after the noun	[C] singular	[C] plural	[U]
singular verb forms	a child *has*	–	*information is*
plural verb forms	–	insects *are*	–

Closely related countable and uncountable nouns

Some uncountable nouns have a countable equivalent which is a different word.

work [U] : *job* [C]   *travel* [U] : *journey* [C].

The things some uncountable nouns describe can be 'broken up' into countable components.

[U]	[C]
money	*pounds, dollars, yen*
time	*hours, minutes, seconds*
furniture	*table, chair, desk*

With some uncountable nouns we can use particular words to itemise or count what they describe.

*three **blades** of grass   an **item** of news*

Nouns which can be countable as well as uncountable

Some nouns are countable with one meaning, and uncountable with a different meaning.

*We got lost in a **wood**. [C]   **Wood** burns more easily than coal. [U]*

Sometimes countable and uncountable forms represent two closely connected uses of one word.

*I told her a few **truths** about herself. [C]   We'll never learn the **truth**. [U]*

Some nouns that were originally plural are coming to be uncountable.

*the **data** are ⇒ the **data** is   the **media** are ⇒ the **media** is*

We can use a lot of generally uncountable nouns as countable nouns. For example, to describe:

- a kind/type of something.
  a new French cheese   a fresh orange juice
- a quantity/unit of something.
  a beer   two sugars

Countable nouns are also called mass nouns, and uncountable nouns are also called unit nouns.

1.5 Regular and irregular plural forms

Regular forms

Most countable nouns have a plural form that ends in ***s***.

See page 408 for spelling rules and page 402 for pronunciation rules.

Irregular forms

Many irregular plural forms involve a change in vowel.

*man ⇒ m**e**n   tooth ⇒ t**ee**th   foot ⇒ f**ee**t*

Learners sometimes find it difficult to remember which form is singular and which is plural.

Some nouns have the same singular and plural forms (nouns that end in ***s*** often fall into this category).

a sheep ⇒ two sheep   a series ⇒ two series
a crossroads ⇒ two crossroads

A few irregular plural forms are very different from the singular form. The most common and problematic example is *person ⇒ people.*

Nouns which have been absorbed into English from other languages sometimes keep their original plural form.

plateau ⇒ plateaux   cherub ⇒ cherubim   mafioso ⇒ mafiosi

Language change

The standard plural form of some words is changing from a 'foreign' form to an anglicised one.

foci ⇒ focuses   syllabi ⇒ syllabuses.

The original plural form of some words is coming to be used as singular.

a criteria   a phenomena

Using dictionaries

Because there is no way of telling whether a singular noun has a regular or an irregular plural form, we need to encourage learners to use a dictionary to check and learn the plural spelling and pronunciation of words that they come across as a matter of course.

1.6 Quantifying phrases

A range / variety / majority / proportion / number of . . .

We use these expressions before nouns to express something about quantity, e.g. *a variety of issues.* They are all followed by plural nouns. If the expression is followed by a verb, this is also usually in a plural form.

*A wide range of people **were** invited.*

However, some people prefer to use a singular form of the verb, particularly in formal written English.

*A variety of issues **was** raised.*

A pair of . . .

Some nouns which exist only in a plural form can be qualified by *a pair of*, e.g. *a pair of trousers / scissors / glasses.*

1.7 Collective nouns

Collective nouns are words which represent groups of people, e.g. *the* **team**, *the Conservative* **Party**. These nouns are singular in that we can talk about *an awful government* or *a big staff*.

Some people believe that these nouns should be followed by singular verb forms (*The staff* **was** *happy*) and that singular pronouns should be used (*The team won* **its** *first match*). However, most people use plural verb forms and pronouns.

> *The management team* **want** *to make* **themselves** *more accessible.*

People sometimes choose either singular or plural verb forms according to whether they are thinking in terms of a unified 'body' or of the various people who make it up.

> *The army provide**s** an excellent career.*
> *The army* **are** *investigating the incident.*

The names or initials of many organisations (*The Halifax Building Society*, *NATO*) also function like collective nouns.

> *Coca Cola are rapidly expanding.*
> *The UN are sending in peace-keeping troops.*

1.8 Combining nouns

Using nouns to modify nouns

We frequently use two nouns together

> *an insect repellent*   *a computer virus*   *a daffodil bulb*

The first 'modifying' noun usually tells us what kind of a thing the second noun describes (an *insect repellent* is a kind of repellent; a *computer virus* is a kind of virus).

When two nouns are frequently used together, they may be separated by a hyphen (-), e.g. *a battle-ground*, or written as a one-word compound noun e.g. *weekend, dustbin*. Learners may want to use a dictionary to check this.

Possessive forms

Possessive 's

We add **'s** to nouns or noun phrases (groups of words containing a noun that can replace a single noun) to show that what follows belongs to them, e.g. *the teacher's car*.

The last word in a noun phrase is not always a noun. However, we can still attach **'s** to the last word in the phrase.

> *It's that girl I told you about's book.*

Although we call this form the 'possessive **'s**', we add **'s** to the end of nouns and noun phrases to express a number of relationships as well as possession.

possession	*Jackie's disk.*
family relationships	*The other girl's twin.*
parts of the body	*The patient's leg.*
creation	*Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers'; Einstein's theory.*
places	*Asia's largest capital cities.*
time	*Two days' holiday.*

See page 413 for rules about the position of the apostrophe.

'Something' of 'something'

We can use the 'something of something' structure as an alternative to **'s**, to express family relationships, creation and place

family relationships	*The twin of the other girl.*
creation	*The fifth symphony of Beethoven.*
place	*The largest capital cities of Asia.*

We generally choose this alternative when we want to draw attention to what we put at the end of the phrase (*Beethoven, Asia* etc.). It is also more common in formal and written English

When we are concerned with abstract and inanimate things, we can't use **'s** (We say *the depths of despair* and *a pile of rubbish* or *a rubbish pile*, NOT * *the despairs' depths* or * *a rubbish's pile.*

We generally don't use this structure to express possession, e.g. *Jackie's disk* NOT * *the disk of Jackie.*

1.9 Typical difficulties for learners

Comprehension

For many learners, not knowing the meaning of specific nouns they come across is a major problem. Problems with the grammar of nouns, however, rarely impedes understanding.

Speaking and writing

Word endings

Many adjectives have related noun forms (e.g. *beautiful*: *beauty*, *cautious*: *caution*). Learners sometimes make plausible and intelligent guesses about the form of these nouns, but their guess may be mistaken (e.g. * *jealousness*; * *angriness*; * *youngtime*).

Countable and uncountable nouns

Learners sometimes use uncountable nouns as though they were countable (e.g. * *Two inputs,* * *How many money*? * *an information,* * *a good weather*).

Learners may be misled by their own language (e.g. the equivalent of an uncountable word in English such as *money* may be countable), or something may simply seem logical to them (e.g. *information* 'ought' to be countable).

They sometimes use plural nouns as though they were singular (e.g. * *The people is here*).

With *people* there are the additional problems that:

- the word doesn't look like its singular equivalent (*person*).
- some languages have a very similar word which is singular (e.g. French *peuple*).
- with a different but related meaning, *people* can be singular in English.

    The French are a *people* who enjoy good food.

They sometimes use plural nouns as though they were uncountable (e.g. * *Her clothes was torn*).

Choosing the wrong plural form

Learners may make regular plural forms of nouns that are irregular (e.g. * *a lot of womans*, * *three childrens*).

Using nouns to modify nouns

Many learners avoid placing two nouns together in any circumstances, preferring to create (inappropriate) alternatives.

They sometimes over-use **'s** (e.g. * *a computer's keyboard,* * *a wine's glass*).

They sometimes use 'something of something' (e.g. * *A flight of British Airways*).

Learners who do use nouns to modify other nouns may make the modifying noun plural (e.g. * *some pencils sharpeners*) when in fact (like adjectives) they always remain singular.

Choosing the wrong possessive form

Learners often avoid the **'s** form.

   * *It's the book of my friend.*

The form this learner has chosen is used to express other kinds of relationship in English (e.g. *glass of water*) and may be a translation of how possession is expressed in her own language.

Unusual cases

Learners are sometimes puzzled by the following, and are either reluctant to use them or make mistakes (e.g. * *the news are . . .*):

Uncountable nouns which end in **s**:	*The **news** is bad.*
Some singular nouns which end in **s**:	*a **means** of getting there.*
Nouns which exist only in a plural form:	*serious **arrears / arms / clothes***
Nouns which end in **s** that can be either plural or uncountable:	*. . . his **politics** reveal(s) . . .*

1.10 Consolidation exercises (see p. 428 for possible answers)

Pronunciation (see p. 402)

a Divide the following nouns into two categories: (i) Those whose plural form is pronounced /s/ or /z/. (ii) Those whose plural form is pronounced /ɪz/.

   wedge   wish   orange   move   knife   lunch

b What rule underlies your choices?

c Divide the following nouns into three categories: (i) Those whose plural form is pronounced /z/. (ii) Those whose plural form is pronounced /s/. (iii) Those whose plural form can be pronounced either /s/ or /z/.

lock   bath   hearth   pillow   pin   scruff

pit   cloth   cough   growth   mouth

d What rule underlies your choices?

Language in context (see p. 428)

Many nouns that are generally uncountable can often also be used as countable nouns (e.g. *Would you like a coffee?*).

a Look at the nouns in the two boxes below.

fish exposure meat steak breast lamb	unhappiness dissatisfaction society life understanding misunderstanding soil

1   For each noun decide whether it is: generally countable [C], generally uncountable [U], or both [C, U].

2   If you answered *both* for any of these words, how is the meaning generally affected by whether the use is countable or uncountable?

b Two texts follow. The first is from a cookery book and the second text is from a book that is critical of psychotherapy. Read the texts and then answer the questions below.

Grilling is a fierce and uncompromising technique, since the food is cooked by direct exposure to intense heat. Only prime cuts of meat can stand up to this barrage of heat and still emerge tender and juicy. Thus steaks, chops and cutlets are the obvious choice, although a cheaper cut like breast of lamb can be braised first, then grilled, to give a crisp exterior.

Fish presents no such problems, however, since it is never tough. Even the cheaper, oily fish such as sardines and mackerel are good cooked in this way.

> Most therapists believe that the unhappiness over which patients come to therapy is not socially caused, but is self-created, that the patients are at least partially responsible for the dissatisfaction that is felt. The therapist will often state that he or she is not in a position to alter society, to change a patient's past, or to intervene in the life of the patient. What the therapist claims to offer is understanding. But implicit in this offer is the belief that the understanding is an internal one, an understanding of what the patient has brought to the situation to create unhappiness or at least to intensify it. Here we have a rich soil for creating deep and lasting misunderstandings, and even greater misery.

1 Check your answers to **a**1 to see if you predicted the countable or uncountable uses of the same words here.
2 Explain any uses you didn't predict.
3 Underline all the nouns in the texts.
4 Identify nouns which are used here as countable nouns.
5 Identify nouns which are used here as uncountable nouns.

*Changing attitudes *

Look at the following and answer the questions about the underlined words.

(i)   The <u>media is</u> becoming very interested.
(ii) <u>Alitalia have</u> adopted a policy of apologising for any delay.
(iii) My <u>criteria</u> for making this decision <u>is</u> personal.
(iv) They have produced several <u>syllabuses</u>.

a Do you use this form yourself?
b Would you consider the form a mistake if produced by an educated native speaker?
c Would you correct the form if produced by a learner of English?