



**The Reading Matrix**  
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***The Teacher's Grammar Book* (2nd ed.)**

**Williams, J. D. (2005)**

**Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates**

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On the whole, grammar is not the most popular subject among natives. In many cases studying grammar can be very helpful for newcomers to the language or even advanced learners; however, native speakers' knowledge of their mother tongue grammar is unconscious -unless they have received some kind of training in linguistics- i.e. we can communicate correctly in our mother tongue without having to learn the most varied sets of grammatical rules. Therefore, native students' immediate question is: 'Why do we have to study something we already know? No matter if our knowledge is unconscious and we do not know we know it!' According to Williams, the other side of the coin is that some teachers might not feel confident enough to teach grammar; it is probably for this reason that he writes a book for teachers: to make them more confident about grammar teaching.

The title of the book under review is *The Teacher's Grammar Book* and that is exactly what it is: a book for language teachers or students who will become teachers in the near future. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that anybody who might be interested in basic English grammar will certainly find this book quite enlightening as well as informative.

*The Teacher's Grammar Book* is divided into seven chapters, the majority of which include 'teaching tips' and 'applying key ideas' (the former is very useful for people in the teaching profession while the latter can be helpful for anybody interested in making sure that they have understood the theory explained in the chapter). A minor drawback is that the author does not include an answer key for those readers who might doubt whether they did the exercises correctly or not.

Chapter 1, 'A Short History of Grammar', provides an interesting perspective about the place of grammar in history: from its study in Ancient Greece to modern times. It is a "quick travel" through time, however it perfectly serves the purpose of providing the reader with a general idea about grammar and its importance in most educational systems – past or present.

In Chapter 2, 'Teaching Grammar', Williams disagrees with the way in which grammar is being taught in most American schools and also discards some false or unsound

assumptions about grammar learning and its benefits. He makes clear that most of the errors native speakers make are related to usage and not to grammar. Therefore he suggests “the blended approach” as the best way to teach grammar since it highlights the social and psychological aspects of grammar. At the end of this chapter the author presents ten activities that can be helpful for teachers interested in using the blended approach.

Chapter 3, ‘Traditional Grammar’, introduces the concept of appropriateness and draws attention to the fact that, depending on the situation, some expressions might or might not be appropriate; therefore it is obvious that, if this were the case, any errors produced would be related to usage and not to grammar. The author also explains the difference between form and function in grammar, he reveals some controversies about usage and also provides the reader with basic terminology as well as clarifying definitions.

In Chapter 4, ‘Phrase Structure Grammar’, James D. Williams compares traditional grammar with phrase structure grammar. He gives the reader a basic introduction to Reed-Kellogg diagrams, even though he beyond a doubt prefers tree diagramming since tree diagrams are more easily understood by students and at the same time represent grammatical structures in a clearer way; sometimes we can even use them to disambiguate sentences. Twenty-eight tree diagrams are included throughout this chapter so as to illustrate the structure of different types of phrases, clauses and compound sentences.

Chapter 5, ‘Noam Chomsky and Grammar’, deals with transformational-generative grammar, the theory of language developed by Chomsky, as well as its strong and weak points. Even if Williams does not totally agree with Chomsky’s ideas about language, he admits that Chomsky’s theories of language revolutionized linguistics. The last five pages of this chapter include a critique of the minimalist programme.

Chapter 6, ‘Cognitive Grammar’, is an introduction to the linguistic theory developed by Ronald Langacker and David Rumelhart (a linguist and a cognitive scientist respectively). As a teacher I especially liked the section on language errors since it shows how language acquisition is closely linked to personal experience.

Chapter 7, ‘Dialects’, is a good closure for the book. It deals with dialects in the USA: their ‘birth’ and development, their place within education, code switching, etc. As an EFL teacher, I must admit I found this chapter enlightening, thought-provoking and even fascinating at times. The only criticism I can make is that the sentences in Spanish are not always correct.

The references section at the end of the book might be useful for anybody interested in going on to do some follow-up reading; this book is a straightforward guide, therefore it does not deal with some of the issues in depth.

A full index is also included to tell us on which pages important names, theories or subjects are referred to. This way teachers can do a second reading if they need to at any point of their professional life, or just follow a topic throughout the book.

*The Teacher's Grammar Book* assumes that there are a number of teachers who find it difficult to encourage their students to study grammar; it is for this reason that it offers new points of view, teaching tips and up-to-date information on grammar instruction.

In conclusion, I strongly recommend language teachers to read *The Teacher's Grammar Book*, a definitely valuable tool not only for novice language teachers, but also for experienced ones.

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