

English Grammar in Schools¹

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1. Introduction

The last hundred years of linguistic scholarship have produced remarkable advances in our understanding of the grammar of English, and, as we move into a new century, one might expect that such knowledge would by now no longer be the preserve only of university linguistics departments, but would have reached the wider community, at the very least schools. This, however, is not the case: studies of school textbooks conducted in 1997 by Collins, Hollo and Mar and in 1989 by Huddleston show, in the words of Collins et al.:

Like Huddleston (1989), ... we found that the accounts of grammar given were generally little different from those which one might have expected to find up to half a century ago. To be more specific, the texts surveyed revealed little awareness of the principles of the 'structural' approach to grammatical description, despite its widespread acceptance within the academic linguistics community ... (Collins et al 1997:34)

Collins et al. (1997:34) were also critical of the influence of Hallidayan systemic-functional grammar (SFG) which appeared in some of the textbooks, in particular the premise, effectively similar to that held in traditional grammar (TradG), that there is a direct relationship between grammatical form and grammatical meaning. SFG was introduced into the school system as the theoretical foundation for the NSW K-6 English Syllabus in 1994 (NSW Board of Studies (NBS) 1994), and has been retained in the current Syllabus (NBS 1998). This may surprise those who recall the critical response to SFG in 1995 by Bob Carr, the NSW Premier, from which it may have been understood that SFG would be dropped from the syllabus. All that actually happened was that the **terminology** was changed: SFG terms which had caused some furore in the community ('participant', 'process', 'circumstance'), were largely abandoned in favour of traditional terms (noun, verb, adverb). By 1998, the influence of the SFG approach had reached the junior high school level, and had become especially prominent in the text approach to student writing where grammatically characterized 'genres' are used.

Huddleston and Collins et al. examined student textbooks only. This paper reports on a study with a broader framework: a short time into the preliminary research, it became apparent that a number of schools and teachers do not use student grammar books and textbooks. In such cases, teaching is more dependent upon teachers' individual knowledge, leading to the question of teacher-training in linguistics and the quality of teacher-reference materials. The study incorporated these areas of research into its framework, and acquired data on them by visiting 24 Sydney schools during 1998. The

¹ I would like to thank the teachers involved in the research for their time and cooperation.

schools were chosen, as far as possible, in equal numbers regarding location across Sydney (northern, southern, eastern and western suburbs). Within these areas, the selection was random. The breakdown of schools was: 11 public primary schools, eight public high schools, two private schools – one primary, the other high, and three Intensive English Centres. The investigation was done, in part, by means of two questionnaires. The first dealt with teacher-training issues; the second asked teachers to respond to some basic questions on grammar, such as ‘How would you explain the concept of tense?’. At every school, three teachers were asked to complete both questionnaires. Thus, in all, 72 copies of each questionnaire were distributed. Participation in the study was, in relation to both teachers and schools, anonymous.

The purpose of the study was to investigate whether the approach taken was TradG, SFG, or ‘structural’ (descriptive) linguistics (SL). The findings, which were examined from an SL perspective, revealed the following: (a) TradG continues to hold an entrenched, profoundly influential position; (b) in teacher-training and in syllabus and teacher-reference material, SFG has a considerable presence; (c) any awareness of SL is at its most minimal.

Finally in this introductory section, while the paper raises questions as to the application of TradG and SFG, the intention is not of course to devalue individual teachers who take these approaches; rather, the focus is on teacher-training. Though much effort in recent years has been spent on exposing teachers to certain elements of the SFG approach, no such attention has been devoted to SL, knowledge of which still remains largely behind the walls of academia. The aim of this paper is to make some contribution to changing that situation, specifically, to bring the findings of the study to the notice of the academic community, and to urge that SL be incorporated into teacher-training programs, syllabus documents and teacher-reference materials.

2. Findings

Two areas of the research were outlined above, namely, teacher-training in linguistics, and teachers’ responses to some grammatical issues. Because of limited space, only a small number of items in each of these areas is reported on here. In the case of teacher-training (see section 2.1 below), three items have been selected: studies in linguistics, time spent on grammar teaching in the classroom, and teachers’ views on the necessity of linguistics to their work. In the case of teachers’ responses to some grammatical issues (see section 2.2 below), two of the questions (which will be set out in full later) are addressed. These concern noun/verb explanations, and teachers’ approaches to non-standard grammar.

2.1 Teacher-training

The teachers participating in the study were asked the following question.

Question 1

Have you done any studies in linguistics? If so, what was the approach taken in the linguistics you did, e.g., systemic-functional grammar, structural linguistics, etc.?

The 59 responses received to this question are given in Table 1.

Table 1

ITEM	LINGUISTICS TRAINING	NUMBER OF RESPONSES		
		Number	% Basic	% Detail
[1]	Yes, Systemic Functional Grammar	15	= 50.9%	= 44.1%
[2]	Yes, Transformational Grammar	2		
[3]	Yes (no type specified)	8		
[4]	Functional/Structural	1		
[5]	Short courses, In-Services	4		
[6]	No	29	49.2%	6.8%
TOTAL		59	100.1%	

The basic data show that, of the 59 teachers, 30 or 50.9% (items [1] to [5]) , had done some studies in linguistics, while 29 or 49.2% (item [6]) had had no training at all in linguistics. In more detail, it can be seen that the linguistics training in the case of four teachers, or 6.8%, (item [5]) represents merely short courses or in-services – and we will briefly examine course length in a moment.

As to the approach taken, it will be noted that SFG (item [1]) is by far the largest at 15. In the case of SL, no specific information can be gained: eight responses do not state the approach taken (item [3]) .

Table 2 provides details as to course length. The item numbers relate to those of the previous table.

Table 2

ITEM	COURSE LENGTH	NUMBER OF RESPONSES	
		Number	%
[1]-[4]	From 10 weeks to 3 years	26	44.1%
[5]	10 hours, 3 days, or short course	4	6.8%
[6]	No linguistics training	29	49.2%
TOTAL		59	100.1%

Keeping in mind the three groups in regard to course length set out in Table 2, we move on to a further question asked of the teachers about time spent on grammar teaching, as follows.

Question 2

These days, language and grammar are usually dealt with in context, e.g., within a piece of literature: that given, could you say (approx.) how much time on average per week you spend on teaching English grammar?

The responses to this question are set out in Table 3. It should be noted that, though there were 59 responses, only 46 were clear, so the analysis is based on these 46.

Table 3

ITEM	LINGUISTICS TRAINING	TIME SPENT ON ENGLISH GRAMMAR PER WEEK		
		Hours	Minutes	%
[1]-[4]	From 10 weeks to 3 years	25	45	39.7%
[5]	10 hours, 3 days, or short course	8	12	12.6%
[6]	No training	30	58	47.7%
TOTAL		64	55	100.0%

The intention in this question is to show the amount of time spent on grammar teaching as against the extent of training in linguistics which the teachers involved had undertaken. The purpose is to suggest that grammar presentation needs to be done by teachers who are trained in linguistics. To this end, the three categories established in Table 2 are used again in Table 3.

We can conclude the following from Table 3. Of the entire teaching time spent on English grammar, almost 40% is where teachers have a linguistics background where the training is of a reasonable to substantial length (items [1]-[4]). However, a larger percentage, 47.7%, is where teachers have no training at all in linguistics (item [6]). In the middle is a small group of 12.6% whose linguistics training amounts to courses of only 10 hours, three days, or a short course (item [5]). If we view training of this short duration as insufficient, then the time spent on grammar teaching by untrained or inadequately trained teachers moves up to 60%.

But what do teachers themselves think about the necessity of linguistics to their work? The final question dealt with in this section responds to this.

Question 3

In general, i.e., knowledge of linguistics in a broad sense, do you think that such knowledge is necessary for teaching with regard to English grammar?

There is space here for only the straight ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ responses of the 52 received. Over half, 32, or 61.5%, responded ‘Yes’; however, quite a high number, 11, responded ‘No’: at 21.2%, this is over a fifth of the responses. Cross-matching these 11 with responses to the first question dealt with in this paper, it was found that eight of the 11 had done no studies in linguistics. Of the three who had, no reason was given for their responses to Question 3.

Of the 32 teachers who viewed linguistics as necessary for teaching English grammar, some gave strong endorsement to their position, for example:

- (1) i Yes, and it should be taught more fully at university as part of teacher-training.

- ii Yes, especially with regard to ESL students, explaining sentence structure, etc.
- iii Yes! especially if **English grammar** is used in Basic Skills tests, English competitions, etc. as a form of **Assessment!** (emphasis: teacher)

The paper moves on now to the second part of the research being presented, teachers' responses to some grammatical issues, but before examining the data, let me reiterate what was said at the outset: the intention is not in any way to personally criticize individual teachers; the concern is more one of teacher-training.

2.2 Teachers' responses to some grammatical issues

As mentioned earlier, only two of the questions asked of teachers are presented here. The first is:

Question 4

If students ask you to explain (a) a noun, (b) a verb, how would you do this?

Overwhelmingly, the explanations were of a semantics-based or notional type similar to those documented by both Huddleston and Collins et al. in their studies of student textbooks. Of a total of 56 responses, in the case of a noun, 54 gave a description along the lines that a noun is 'a naming word', 'the name of a person, place or thing'; in the case of a verb, 55 responses said that a verb is 'a doing word', 'a word that expresses action'. Five contained some SL analysis: this was that nouns are usually preceded by *the* or *a* or *an*. However, these descriptions comprised only part of the five explanations: in each case, the other parts were notional.

One particular response which demonstrates only too clearly the pitfalls of this type of notional description is reproduced in (2).

(2) **Explanation of a verb**

Verb: a doing word.

Exercise: Can you get/do a '_____'?
(*chair*: no; *jump*: yes)

This is an explanation of a verb, and in the blank in the exercise, the student presumably has to fill in the word 'jump'; however, in this instance, 'jump' is of course a noun not a verb.

The second question in this section concerns non-standard grammar:

Question 5

How do you deal with phrases from students such as: *she done it, me and me friends, I don't know nothing?*

The purpose of this question was to investigate how teachers deal with differences in language usage, for example, social dialect, style, context, etc. The data indicated that teachers viewed a language item simply in terms of whether it was 'correct' or 'incorrect'. Of the 52 responses received to this question, 51 took a firmly prescriptive approach of the type, in one teacher's words:

- (3) I correct them. They are grammatically incorrect even though students speak and often write like this.

To give some idea of the extent of this kind of thinking in teachers, three more of the responses to this question are reproduced in (4).

- (4) i I quickly correct them and inform them that she/he is speaking incorrectly and give them an example of what they should have said. For example, *My friends and I*, *She did it*, *I don't know anything*.
- ii *She done it*: explain that they need to look up meaning of *done it* (*dunnart*). Ask them if they are one. Suggest they use *did* or *has done*. *My friends and I* – politeness. *I don't know anything*: explain why – double negative.
- iii Constant correction, explanation, e.g., if you don't know **nothing** you must know **something**. Explain that it's a double negative. *Who went? Me went?* Then they realize that it's *I went*. That you put other people first, yourself last, so *My friends and I*. ...*done* and *did*, *saw* and *seen* are so common: with *done it*, I also urge them to use another verb instead, e.g., *I done my homework*: use *I finished*, *I wrote*, etc., and try to get away from the *done*, *did* problem. (emphasis: teacher)

These responses indicate that teachers believe, in good faith, that they are helping the student, but they raise the following concerns: first, no recognition of non-standard grammar, for example, *done*, a past tense in this particular fairly common variety; second, lack of awareness of contextual appropriateness, for example, while phrases such as *my friends and I* would be expected in, say, a classroom exercise, *me and me friends* might be absolutely appropriate in the playground; third, we see that the so-called double negative, a linguistically inappropriate rule from an era long predating modern linguistics - harking back in fact to the eighteenth century - is still being applied in present-day schools.

This is not of course to suggest that students do not need to be made aware of the fact that, in a context requiring standard English, language of the type *I don't know anything*, *She did it*, etc. is necessary. They also clearly need to be taught that, if in these circumstances they do not use such language, then they may well be at a linguistic and social disadvantage. What is being suggested is that both standard and non-standard dialects be recognized by teachers as different but valid forms of communication, viewed as appropriate varieties of language within their relevant contexts.

3. Conclusion

The findings reported in this paper show that overwhelmingly the teachers surveyed approached the teaching of English grammar from a TradG perspective. On examining the data from Table 2 regarding linguistics training, this result may initially seem surprising: though one would prefer the number of linguistics-trained teachers to be higher, the data do at least show that 44% have a reasonable to substantial background in linguistics.

It is notable, however, that of the 30 linguistics-trained teachers (see Table 1 again), 15 or 50% are trained in SFG (see item [1] of Table 1). This suggests that SFG, or at least SFG training, may be inadequate to handle the grammatical issues reported on in this paper. One striking inconsistency is that the favourable aspects of SFG – its emphasis on context, audience, purpose, and systemic differences, are not at all apparent in the responses of SFG-trained teachers, which are all of a thoroughly prescriptive nature, no different in essence from those of non-SFG-trained teachers. Evidence for this is found especially in the question on non-standard grammar (Question 5). Some responses also indicate that, though SFG terminology is used, the TradG approach continues to be applied, for example (5), where both SFG and TradG descriptions, respectively ‘participant’/‘process’ and ‘a naming word’/‘the action or doing word’, appear.

- (5) i A noun is a naming word. It names things a person, place or thing. Lots of examples. Sometimes called a ‘participant’.
- ii (A verb) This is the action or doing word, sometimes called a ‘process’.

Further, when we examine some of the SFG-based material, we find that its grammatical analysis is identical to that of TradG. For instance, definitions of nouns and verbs are given in only semantic terms, as we see in (6), an excerpt from the current primary school syllabus.

- (6) (the student) identifies words that name people, places and things and knows that these are called nouns; (the student) identifies action words and knows that these are called verbs. (NBS 1998:34)

And in teacher-reference material, there are other descriptions of the grammar which contain structural errors of a very basic nature. One such example, taken from a book used in a large number of schools, is presented in (7). It is a reproduction of the first four lines of an example of the genre of exposition, beginning with the heading for the entire (page-long) text.

- (7) Expositions use the simple present tense.
- I **think** the Canterbury Council should **construct** more Activity Centres in most local areas. Firstly, children can **keep busy** as well as **have fun** in the

holidays. (Callaghan & Rothery, 1993:81)
(emphasis: authors)

First, *busy* and *fun* are not even verbs, let alone present tense, but respectively an adjective and a noun. And of the verbs in the four bolded items, only one, *think*, is an instance of the present tense; *construct*, *keep* and *have* are all base forms of the infinitival type used with modal verbs (*should construct*, *can keep*, etc.). If we refer to them as ‘simple present tense’, this would allow the ungrammatical **the Canterbury Council should constructs*, and, had the main verb been *be*, **the Canterbury Council should is*. And in the complete text where 18 verb forms were bolded, only eight were simple present tense forms: the other 10 were again base forms following modal verbs.

TradG is of course well-known for its anecdotal, uncritical presentation of the grammar. The concern, then, is that where applications of a current linguistic theory coincide with characteristic weaknesses of TradG, there is a danger that the previously discredited analyses found in TradG may be given renewed vigour and credibility. Teachers who do not have a linguistics background may feel assured that they are approaching the teaching of grammar, not from an outdated traditional view, but from that of a modern linguistic theory. The success and speed with which SFG has taken hold in schools suggest that there has been little opposition from the wider linguistics community. Apart from Collins et al. (1997), two academics have voiced their concern about SFG (Huddleston 1996, Hudson 1986), but while this work is much valued, a great deal more needs to be done.

Over the last decade Australia has entered a period of savage reductions to the funding of universities. This is therefore a difficult time to be calling upon academics to add yet another task to their undoubtedly heavy workloads. Nonetheless, it seems reasonable that university linguists – and not only those of an SFG persuasion – should have some involvement in the standard of English language education in schools. In particular there is a need for SL linguists to take a direct and practical interest in teacher and school education generally so that SFG no longer holds the monopoly, and some inroads are finally made into the entrenched position occupied by TradG.

At the school level, it is debatable in any event whether English language education should be based on only one theory, SFG, particularly one which has only recently appeared on the scene, and which seems to have just slid swiftly, silently, and uncritically into the NSW education system. There is an urgent need for dialogue and discussion to take place between SFG and SL academics, with the aim of incorporating an SL component into teacher-training, syllabuses and teacher-reference material.

It is time that schools and teachers began to benefit from the advances made in modern linguistics.

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