

[Back to ‘Becoming a grammar teacher’.](#)

3 A brief history and geography of grammar teaching

Grammar has an extremely respectable ancestry. The earliest evidence we have¹ is from nearly 4,000 years ago, when the Akkadian-speaking scribes of Babylon learned to translate into Sumerian (which by then was already dead). Their training included learning tables of equivalent verb-forms in the two languages, so someone must have analysed these verb forms and produced a systematic framework. Rather remarkably, they ordered first, second and third person forms in that order, so that particular part of our heritage may be four thousand years old – a spectacular example of scholarly transmission.

The term ‘grammar’ comes from the Greek expression *grammatike tekne*, meaning “art of letters,” which also contains *gramma* “letter”, so its modern meaning is a narrowing of the original, though it is still closely associated with writing. The Greeks developed the tradition of grammatical analysis that dated back to the Babylonians into a more highly structured and theoretical system – or, more accurately, a series of different and competing systems – which linked not only to school teaching but also to philosophy². Somewhat later, the Romans adopted this legacy and applied it to Latin, forming the basis of the European grammatical tradition which survived, with remarkably little change, into the nineteenth century.

For the Greeks and Romans, the school curriculum (called ‘the liberal arts’) had just three parts, one of which was grammar. (The other two were logic and rhetoric.) This tradition persisted through the Middle Ages, with Latin still as the medium of instruction; so grammar was essentially the grammar of Latin, rather than of English. Grammar dominated the entire curriculum, a fact which we celebrate in the name we still give to some of the schools which were founded in the late Middle Ages (or their more recent equivalents): ‘grammar school’. By the nineteenth century the school curriculum had broadened considerably, but in public schools and grammar schools grammar still played a significant part in the teaching of foreign languages (modern as well as classical) and in the teaching of English.

How significant is ‘significant’? In foreign-language teaching the dominant approach is now called the ‘grammar-translation’ method³, a name which reflects the centrality of grammar. Another indication of significance is the supply of textbooks, which in the early twentieth century were solid, serious, rather dull and widely used. For example, in French the dominant textbook author from at least the 1930s to the 1960s was W. F. H. Whitmarsh, M.A. (the ‘M.A.’ is important as a sign of academic reliability), who wrote several dozen textbooks for schools. English grammar was similarly dominated by a single figure, J. C. Nesfield, M.A. (again), whose ‘Manual of English Grammar and Composition’⁴ was first published in 1898 and was so influential that it spawned a further generation of derivative textbooks. Nesfield’s textbook is nothing if not solid: 418 pages of tiny print, with the first hundred devoted

¹ Gragg 1994

² Robins 1967

³ For a brief discussion and exemplification, see <http://www.nthuleen.com/papers/720report.html>.

⁴ Nesfield’s book can be read online at <http://archive.org/details/manualofenglishg00nesfuoft>.

to grammatical analysis. The detailed discussion of word classes has a clear and ambitious purpose: to prepare students to apply a standard grammatical analysis to any sentence a teacher or examiner might throw at them. The only other subject that had, or has, a similarly ambitious goal is mathematics. One interesting characteristic of Nesfield's grammar is the standard table for laying out the parts of a sentence; this is an example of the notation for which I shall argue in section **Error! Reference source not found.**

This educational tradition was shared, by and large, by all of Europe, and indeed it was exported to the overseas colonies and territories. In many of these countries, grammar still has its traditional status and content, albeit with some features modernised. In most of Eastern Europe, school children still spend significant amounts of time learning how to analyse words and sentences in their own language, and build on this grammatical understanding when learning foreign languages; and the same is true in most countries whose language is descended from Latin (such as Italy, Spain, Portugal and France, and their overseas extensions)⁵. It's hard to know how successful this teaching is, especially without knowing what its precise goals are; but one measure is popularity among adults who 'did some grammar' at school. The fact is that a lot of people hated it, but (by an admittedly crude measure⁶) even more loved it.

However, the UK was different. In this country, grammar-teaching more or less disappeared in the 1960s, as it did in most other English-speaking countries⁷. The reasons for 'the death of grammar' are complex and deserve more research, but one element in the explanation is certainly the lack of grammatical research in our universities throughout the early twentieth century⁸. This left universities with nothing to teach their undergraduates about grammar, and therefore no intellectual boost for future school teachers comparable to the updating and rethinking that undergraduates receive in other subjects.

The result was a decline in the teaching of grammar in English lessons, with teachers applying half-remembered analyses from their own school days and using textbooks based directly on the previous generation of school textbooks, without any academic input. Some teachers still inspired (as mine did), and some children still enjoyed their grammar classes (as I did); but most grammar lessons were boring, dogmatic and intellectually frustrating. It is hardly surprising that English teachers started to ask what the point was, and welcomed with open arms a series of research projects which showed that grammar lessons had no impact at all on the quality of children's writing⁹. Since the standard argument for grammar was that it improved writing, this research was the end of grammar teaching – much to the relief of a great many people who had been campaigning against grammar and in favour of literature. The effect was that in the early 1960s the one remaining optional question about grammar was removed from the O-level English paper, and, effectively, grammar

⁵ For instance, a group of undergraduates from a Spanish university took a test (in English) that we used for assessing UK undergraduates' knowledge of grammatical terminology, and outperformed all the UK groups.

⁶ In May 2012, Google found 77,000 examples of 'I hate grammar' compared with 162,000 of 'I love grammar'.

⁷ Australia and New Zealand had a similar history to the UK. Although the USA shared in the grammar debates of the 1960s, grammar teaching seems much more common in English lessons there than here; but it also seems to be more focused on avoiding 'errors' than on grammatical analysis per se. I don't know the state of grammar teaching in Canada, Ireland or South Africa.

⁸ Hudson and Walmsley 2005

⁹ Andrews and others 2004b, Andrews and others 2004a, Andrews 2005

died in English. Seen from a global perspective, English (and England) had entered the Grammatical Dark Ages. Meanwhile, of course, all was by no means doom and gloom in English teaching, “in which at last a subject in the curriculum engaged with students’ voices, imaginations and responses in a way which is widely seen as being one of the most positive developments in school subject teaching of the 20th century.”¹⁰

Meanwhile, of course, grammatical knowledge was needed in foreign-language teaching so long as this was dominated by the grammar-translation approach. This kind of teaching became increasingly difficult as more and more English teachers abandoned grammar, but foreign-language teaching had its own agenda, and grammar-translation gave way to other approaches in which grammar was less central. The new ‘communicative’ syllabus, with its focus on knowing how to carry out very specific tasks in the target language, allowed teachers (and text-book writers) to replace grammar by memorized phrases. Although more recent research has confirmed that students learn foreign languages better if teaching focuses explicitly on grammatical or lexical forms, with or without attention to meaning,¹¹ foreign languages are often taught without any use of grammatical terminology. It is interesting to wonder whether foreign-language teachers would have adopted the communicative approach so enthusiastically if their pupils had come to them with a good supply of grammatical terminology learned in English.

The main point of this brief history and geography is that normal schooling does include grammar teaching, so there is nothing ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ about ignoring it. On the contrary, grammar played a central role in Western education for thousands of years, and continues to do so in many countries. We are the ones who are out of step, and the term ‘Dark Ages’ that I used earlier really is justified as a description of the grammar-free education that most of our children have received.

However, this situation can be seen as an opportunity for a new start. Paradoxically, while grammar has been ignored in schools, it has flourished in university research and teaching. In 1921 it was possible to write¹² that it was “...impossible at the present juncture to teach English grammar in the schools for the simple reason that no-one knows exactly what it is...”; nearly a hundred years later, we know a great deal about English grammar, thanks to a series of block-buster research-based grammars.¹³ At the same time, a good deal of linguistic thinking (short of grammatical technicalities) have found a place in schools, so teachers are used to teaching about non-literary genres, spoken language and variation. Most importantly of all, perhaps, Standard English has taken its place among a range of alternatives which are accepted as equally ‘correct’ in their own terms. With this background, both academic and pedagogical, a new version of school grammar can be developed which is much better than what was taught in the nineteenth century.

[**Back to ‘Becoming a grammar teacher’.**](#)

¹⁰ Gary Snapper, personal communication

¹¹ Norris and Ortega 2000

¹² Board of Education 1921

¹³ Quirk and others 1972, Quirk and others 1985, Biber and others 1999, Carter and McCarthy 2006, Huddleston and Pullum 2002.