Grammar: a taboo word

Ricardo Madureira

Some years ago, when I used to attend English Teaching conferences on a more regular basis, I remember hearing from my colleagues in the ELT field something in the lines of "I don't teach grammar", and they would say that in a supercilious way, looking down on the lesser mortals like me, who "taught grammar". Since I already knew challenging this view was akin to committing a heinous crime, I would often try to dodge the discussion. I do not know what's been going on for some years now, as regards this thorny issue.

In this article, I am going to discuss two aspects related to the topic, namely: how has grammar shifted from most important aspect of English language teaching towards a forbidden taboo? Secondly, are there definitive answers as to whether or not we should teach grammar?

The origins of the myth

By the end of the nineteenth century, the teaching of English as a foreign language still consisted of translation and grammar analysis (**grammar-translation method**). There was not anything wrong with doing so. Quite the contrary, it was regarded as a highly prestigious way of learning, because grammar tradition was fashionable in those days, it was "state of the art".

At the beginning of the twentieth century, as the United States received a considerable number of immigrants from diverse regions in the world, whose first languages were not English, there emerged a need for a method in which classes should be taught in English only. Since teachers were mostly from the United States, and considering they did not master those foreign students' native languages, they could not help them with translation, nor was there much point in **grammar contrastive analysis**. This is how the prestigious grammar-translation method slowly began to fall apart. As can be seen, captivating though the new method might have been at first, it was not so much a result of scientific innovation as a practical, market necessity. From that very moment, talking about the teaching of grammar in ELT was equated with being retrograde.

As a long time elapsed, these points of view gained more and more acceptance with new developments in language teaching research, such as the theories postulated by Krashen,

from which the obligatory conclusion was that **explicit grammar teaching** had no effectiveness whatsoever. Basically, classroom learning would have to provide conditions in which students would be immersed in learning situations that, supposedly, were similar to the **unconscious learning** of their own native languages (the **generative grammar hypothesis**, does that ring a bell?)

Explicit grammar teaching then came in for strong criticism because its learning would entail **conscious study** of the language, which requires a lot of effort, and popular ELT methods wanted to attract students by promising them that learning English would be like a Ferris wheel ride: no heavy-going rules, just fun, challenging the "no pain, no gain" philosophy, which became instead "gain without pain".

Grammar: to teach or not to teach, is that the question?

How would you go about correcting this mistake made by your student?

"Do you can help me, please?" (a common mistake students make when they generalize the rule "do/does" for questions)

Well, if you are a defender of the "zero-grammar teaching", then you are not allowed to tell your student something in these lines:

"Do not use the *auxiliary* "do" in questions with *modal verbs*. With *modals*, as with the *verb* "to be", you use *word order inversion*, that is, *questions* are a different version of *affirmative sentences*: "You can help me" becomes "Can you help me?" by putting the *modal verb* before the *subject*.

If you preach not to teach grammar, but you use language like that in classroom and expect your students to deal with terms such as **subject**, **verb**, **auxiliary**, **modal**, **object**, **phrase**, **clause**, etc., you advocate one thing in theory, but in practice, what you really do is quite a different story.

In order to avoid the teaching of any grammar terms, you would probably want your student to **notice** that language feature (namely, **word order inversion**) naturally, without any recourse whatsoever to **explicit grammar analysis**. And these terms (**subject**, **object**, **verb**, etc.) are complex ones, by the way. Many students (and I would include many teachers as well) cannot really define an **auxiliary verb**. They can give you lists of them, but they do not know in what sense auxiliary verbs "help" the **main verb**; in other words, not everyone can **think grammatically**, which is further aggravated by the fact that the teaching of grammar in Portuguese has met with sharp criticism as well. While we have no definitive answers to the query we put above, we believe posing the right questions would bring us some food for thought:

* What is it necessary to make **unconscious grammar learning** possible (if at all) in classroom?

* Can classroom effectively replicate the conditions of learners' **first language acquisition**?

* Is there any (or enough) scientific evidence to support the view that **explicit grammar teaching** has no role at all in classroom?

* Can the results of **Applied Linguistics research** in contexts where English is learned as a **second language**, where it is effectively used in daily communication, be faithfully applied to the Brazilian context, where English, as a **foreign language**, is not widely used (if at all)? (Even in master or doctorate degrees in Brazil, for example, students are not expected to be fluent speakers of English. At most, they are supposed to rely on a **working knowledge of reading strategies**, and many still need the help of teachers of English (or "google translator") to translate their abstracts into English.

* Can the conclusions about grammar teaching debate in **mother tongue** have the same relevance as those in the teaching of a **foreign/second language**?

* When we say **explicit grammar teaching** does not work, and if we are not experienced grammar analysts ourselves, wouldn't that be only a convenient lie? (In other words: "Bad workers blame their tools, don't they?")

* Are **theories** in Applied Linguistics being treated as **laws**? If as laws, is that really useful in ELT teacher education? Or should theories be treated as **hypotheses**?

My personal views on the subject

It is very convenient for teachers who cannot **think grammatically** to support the widely accepted view (rather unproblematically, it is true) that explicit grammar teaching does not work, after all that would free them from going to the trouble of studying grammar, which is burdensome and not everyone's idea of a thrilling time.

By the same token, it would be just as convenient for those who are keen on grammar to believe that its explicit teaching would be of necessity conducive to learning; both views would therefore be hopelessly biased.

Personally, as a "grammar fan" myself, I prefer to put it this way: I like studying it so I can use it **instrumentally**, that is, with a view to achieving an ultimate goal, namely, making my students fluent in English. That does not mean in the slightest that I will teach grammar in a heavy-going fashion, nor does it mean it will be the **focus**, not even the **starting point**, of my lessons.

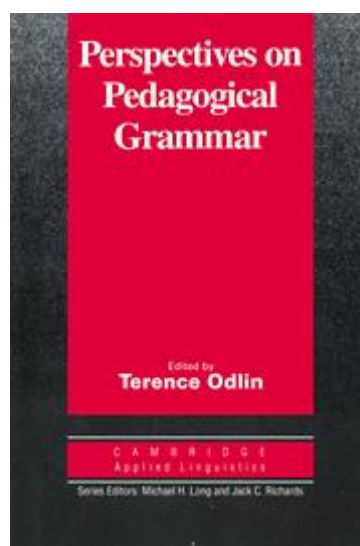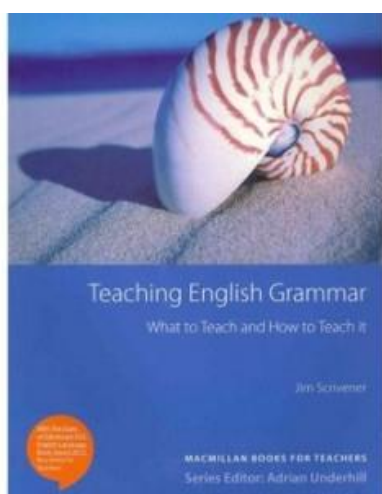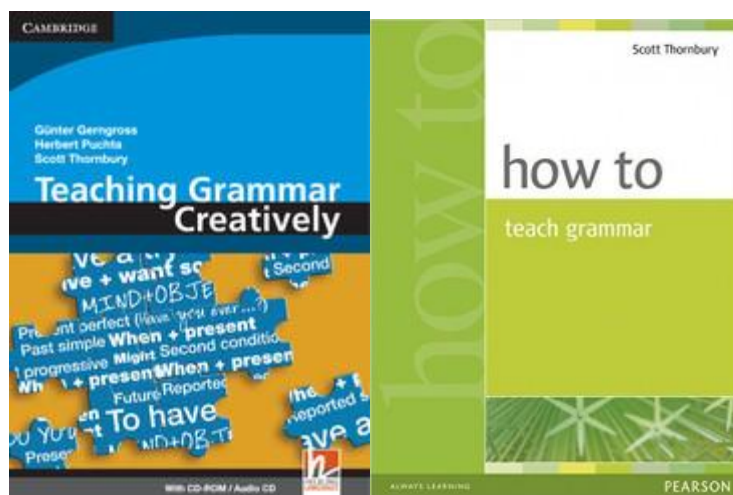## If you need to blame your tools, consider other alternatives

Let us take, for example, one of the most remarkable books ever written for the teaching of English grammar to **non-native speakers** of English, the "In Use" series, by Raymond Murphy. In his book, the author tries to approach grammar in simple terms, avoiding unnecessary, convoluted language. Murphy's grammar books are what we call **pedagogical grammars**, that is to say, they were specifically devised for classroom use. It is completely different from, say, the Oxford English Grammar, by Greenbawn, whose insights into
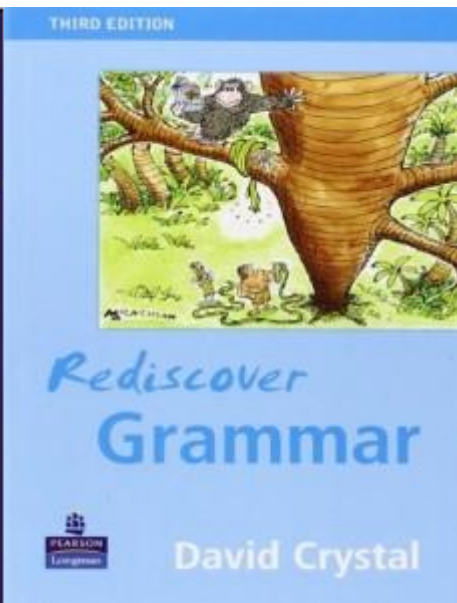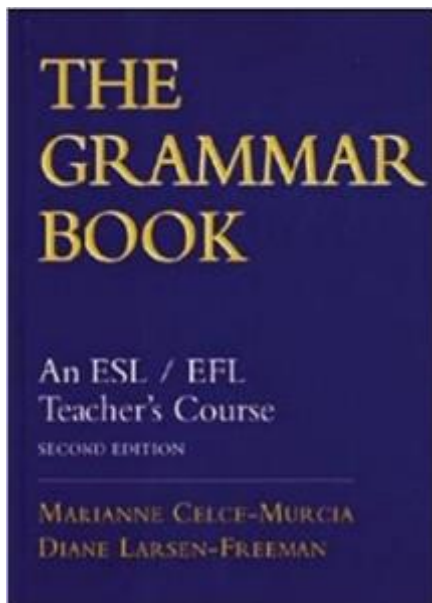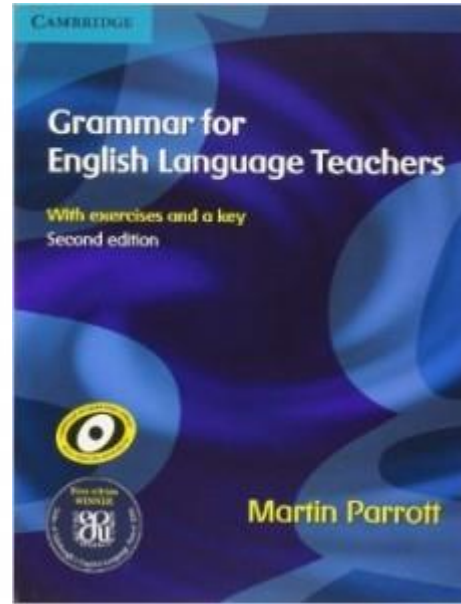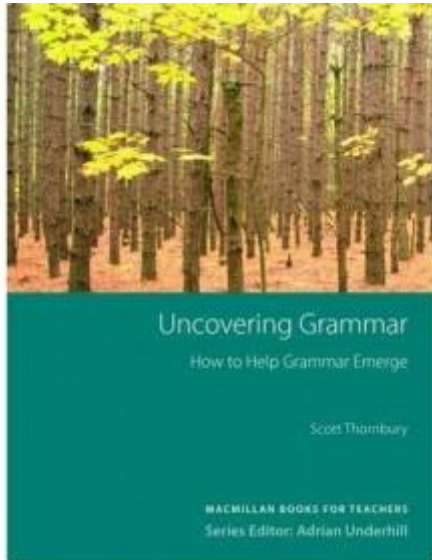
English could be rather off-putting to well trained teachers of English as a foreign/second language or even for native speakers of English.

Ideally, grammar language used in classroom, in my very personal view, should have the crystal clear language found in Murphy's pioneering grammar books. I wish I had his simple eloquence when it comes to packing language into engaging and meaningful grammar lessons.
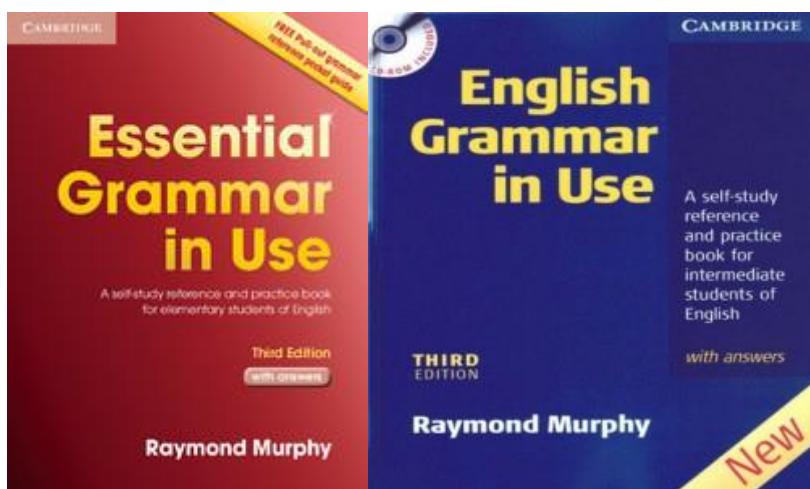
Suggested readings

If the grammar teaching debate is of any interest to you, you might want to take a look at the following books:

Uncovering Grammar

How to Help Grammar Emerge

Scott Thornbury

MACMILLAN BOOKS FOR TEACHERS
Series Editor: Adrian Underhill

CAMBRIDGE

Grammar for
English Language Teachers

With exercises and a key
Second edition

Martin Parrott

THE
GRAMMAR
BOOK

An ESL / EFL
Teacher's Course
SECOND EDITION

MARIANNE CELCE-MURCIA
DIANE LARSEN-FREEMAN

THIRD EDITION

Rediscover
Grammar

PEARSON
Longman

David Crystal

Grammar for Classroom Use

***

Publicado originalmente em http://blogdisal.com.br/grammar-a-taboo-word/