Interesting Intermediate Students in Grammar

Abstract:

Most students find grammar difficult to understand and grammar exercises
boring to do. This talk discusses some specific problems that grammar poses
for students, and suggests more user-friendly forms of presentation for
grammatical statements and more stimulating types of exercise, based
on ideas used in the Collins COBUILD Student's Grammar.

COBUILD

Cobuild is a research project that was set up 10 years ago by Birmingham
University and Collins the Publishers (now HarperCollins). Cobuild's main aims
were to collect a large corpus of modern English, feed it into a computer, and
use the computer to help us to begin a fresh analysis of the language. By 1986,
our corpus had grown to 20 million words. That corpus has been the basis for all
our publications to date.

As some of you will have heard, we have just begun the process of building
a new Corpus, the Bank of English, which will be over 200 million words, so
future Cobuild publications should have the benefit of substantially more
information about many more words.

The first Cobuild Dictionary was published in 1987, and we have since
published four more dictionaries, workbooks to encourage dictionary skills,
and an account of our ideas and methods in a book entitled Looking Up.
We have also published The Cobuild English Course by Dave and Jane Willis,
and Dave Willis's book on Lexical Syllabus.

Last year we published the first Cobuild Grammar. This year, we are introducing
the Student's Grammar.

COBUILD AND GRAMMAR

Cobuild's early investigations of grammar were recorded in the first
Dictionary. Among our discoveries was the importance in English of delexical
and ergative verbs. Three more years of research were conducted before the
Cobuild Grammar was published. That described the main structures of English
and the functions expressed by those structures.

At Cobuild, we can determine the relative importance of a word or structure
with considerable authority, because the computer can provide us with
statistics about their frequency. The computer also provides us with an
abundance of example sentences, so we have no need to invent them.
And very importantly, the computer can find all the words that occur in a
particular structure, and enables us to generate accurate lists.

In the Cobuild Student's Grammar, we have tried to go a step further in
user-friendliness, and group items in lists under semantic headings wherever
possible.

COLLINS COBUILD STUDENT'S GRAMMAR (CCSG)

Why do students find grammar difficult to understand?

Intermediate students may not have a sound grasp of the grammar of their
own language. Teachers may have problems because of the variable ability of
students in their class.

The organization of material in Intermediate grammars often lacks a coherent
or logical structure.

There may be problems of terminology - especially if students don't know the
grammar of their L1.

Grammars often contain complicated explanations, partial information,
or even wrong information.

Grammar is often explained at the lexical level, but grammar is
by definition about groups or classes of words that behave similarly
(e.g. in Murphy "chance & opportunity + of + -ing / to-infinitive": why are only those
two words selected?)

CCSG addresses these problems in several ways:

The CONTENTS LIST is deliberately designed to fit on one two-page spread.
Each Unit also occupies a two-page spread, with the information on the left-hand page,
and the exercises on the right-hand page.

Students may refer to the units in any order, but whenever they consult
the contents list, they will see how a particular topic fits into the overall
grammar. The order of units is carefully designed. It is not just an arbitrary
sequence of topics, but follows a logical and coherent structure.

CCSG has three PRELIMINARY UNITS, introducing and explaining the main
concepts: clause and sentence structure, the noun group, and the verb group.

The rest of the units are grouped under FOUR MAJOR HEADINGS, based on word
classes and important grammatical functions:

noun group - nouns, pronouns, determiners, adjectives, comparison, possession,
        adding to the noun group

adverbials - adverbials, prepositions

verb group - tenses, mood, modals, transitivity, verb complementation, passive,
        reporting

sentence structure - (subordinate clauses) time, conditional, purpose, reason,
        result, contrast, manner, relative; focus, and cohesion

Each unit has a summary of "Main points" at the top of the left-hand page

When students want to find a more detailed point of grammar, but are
not sure which unit deals with it, they can use the comprehensive INDEX

and find items such as:

nouns followed by `for'
nouns followed by `to'
reporting verbs followed by `that'-clauses

We tried hard to use as few TECHNICAL TERMS as possible: e.g. instead of ditransitive, we use "verbs with two objects", and instead of delexical, "common verbs with nouns for actions".

But some terms were difficult to simplify or became very verbose: e.g.

ergative = transitive verbs whose objects can also be the subjects of the same verb used intransitively

determiners – without this term, we would be forced to employ clumsy lists in headings and statements, such as `the/this/that/these/those/my/your/his etc' (Murphy 82c) or            `it/us/you/them' (Murphy 82d)

If students do not understand any of the terms, there is a full GLOSSARY, with explanations in simple terms and with examples.

Let us now look in more detail at the main procedures involved in producing the Collins Cobuild Student's Grammar, and the features that resulted in the product.

THE SELECTION OF INFORMATION

Should the grammar be comprehensive or selective? For example, Hill omits Reported Speech. Teachers know their intermediate students' main problems: e.g. determiners, verb tenses. But if we use problems as the sole criteria for inclusion, we end up with precisely with an unconnected sequence of topics - which teachers criticised.

Many grammar books are also unbalanced (e.g. 9 units on the present perfect!). To what extent are these problems the result of the materials themselves or the method of their selection? Our selection was based on teacher informants, our own grammar research, the larger Collins Cobuild English Grammar (1990), and of course the Cobuild Dictionary (1987), in which we had recorded (by analysing our 20-million-word corpus) the grammar of the most frequent 30,000 headwords in English.

THE ORGANIZATION OF INFORMATION

Dictionaries focus on the description of lexis. the main system of organisation is therefore predetermined and simple to implement: the order of the letters in the English alphabet. The only requirement for users (albeit an important issue for learners of English whose L1 uses a different alphabet or writing system) to find a word is that they need to know how to spell it.

For Grammars, there is no obvious conventional sequence for the description of structures. Alphabetical order is of no relevance. However, we still need to find a systematic way of presenting structures, a sensible way of arranging the materials, a logical structure that will be easy to navigate, all of which will of course reflect and demonstrate the underlying model of grammar being used.

Are teachers' intuitions and experience a good basis for organizing a grammar? Do all students necessarily encounter the same problems in the same sequence? As mentioned earlier, intermediate students may not know much about the grammar

of their L1, and teachers may find a large range of ability within the students
in their classes. Which terms can we use that will make sense to the largest number
of students and teachers? Which terms can we expect them to know already, and which
terms can we introduce to them without unduly challenging them or confusing them?

THE LEVEL OF INFORMATION

The problem of describing grammar from a lexical standpoint, as mentioned earlier,
is that we will never manage to arrive at the appropriate level of generalization
required in a grammar, e.g. the Murphy unit on "at/in/on for place" never mentions
other important words such as point, line, surface, or container; the unit on "reported speech" refers only to "say" and
"tell", whereas there are many other verbs used to introduce reported speech
- which are used with the "say" patterns and which with the "tell" structures?

THE ACCURACY OF INFORMATION

Not only does the grammatical information have to be presented at the appropriate
level of detail, but of course it has to be accurate. This is why we rely on information
from our corpus. The 20-million-word corpus contains the consistent and typical grammatical
usage of a wide range of writers and speakers, in a variety of authentic communicative
discourse contexts. By analysing the corpus with the aid of computers, we can get a reliable
and statistically accurate overview of the grammatical features of the language in use.

THE PRESENTATION OF INFORMATION

We have tried always to make grammatical statements in language that is as simple
as possible. Just because the grammatical feature is complicated does not mean that
the explanation has to be. Whenever we have given lists of words that follow a
particular pattern, we have grouped the items semantically where possible, because
this is above all a grammar of meanings.
Wherever teachers have alerted us to frequently encountered problems in their students'
work, we have added "warnings" to help the students to avoid some common errors.

THE EXERCISES

There are 325 exercises on the right-hand pages of each unit, representing an average
of over 3 exercises per unit. In addition, there is a Bank of Exercises at the end
of the book, with 86 further exercises.

These exercises represent a wide range of exercise types, including:

"rewrite" exercises - these help students to understand the semantic differences
caused by selecting different structures

"compose" exercises - the elements of the structure are given, but in a jumbled
order. Students therefore have to understand the compositional features of English
sentences in order to put the elements into the most suitable sequence.

"identify order" exercises - these are intended to enable students to understand at
a metalinguistic level some of the choices they made linguistically in the "compose"
exercises.

"transform" exercises - by practising routine transformations, such as turning negative
statements into questions, students will be able to re-use frequently encountered words,

chunks of language, and expressions encountered in one common sentence pattern, in another often required pattern.

SUMMARY and CONCLUSION

As stated on the Bookmark which you have all been given to celebrate the launch of the Collins Cobuild Student's Grammar, we are offering you:

an "Authoritative new grammar" - because it is based on the analysis of hundreds and thousands of examples in our corpus

incorporating "Reference and practice in one volume" - this grammar can be used both to inform students of the main features of English grammar, and to give them practice in using these features in communicative activities

in a form that is "Clear and easy to use" - information is always on the left-hand-page and exercises on the right-hand-page in each unit; the units are listed in the Contents, there is also an Index to individual grammatical features

Containing "Simple explanations of key grammar points" - main points are highlighted in a box on the left-hand page

Including "Thousands of real English examples" - real because they are taken directly from the corpus

With "Helpful lists of common words" - these unique wordlists area a rich source of information for students and teachers, and can be used to refresh the exercises every time the teacher uses them

And "Extensive practice material / Bank of further exercises" - over 400 exercises in total, on the right-hand pages of the units and in the Bank of Exercises at the end of the book

Containing a "Glossary of grammatical terms" - in case students or teachers are unsure about exactly how a grammatical term is used in this particular grammar book, or in a few cases, where we are introducing useful terms that the users may be unfamiliar with

incorporating "Illustrations" - cartoons and line drawings add humour and situational contexts that will stimulate students, and which can be further exploited in classroom discussions, role plays, or creative writing activities

Featuring an "Answer key" - whether the exercises are used in class or set as homework, students and teachers can check the suggested answers to the exercises

The Introduction in the first few pages of the Collins Cobuild Student's Grammar gives informative insights into the motivation behind this book, the principles, policies, and grammatical model on which it is based, and the reasons why we think that the topics presented and the manner of presentation will be useful to students and teachers, and the features included will help intermediate students to benefit from the range of structural patterning available to them in the English language.