The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher’s Course (2nd edition)

Marianne Celce-Murcia and Diane Larsen-Freeman (1999)
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The second edition of Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman’s amazing tome, The Grammar Book, matter is expanded, the prose is tighter, the examples are fresh, and the new organization improves on an already first-rate ESL/EFL teacher’s resource.

The subtitle for The Grammar Book is “An ESL/EFL Teacher’s Course.” It was originally designed to train new teachers in the grammar points that we all must be able to teach effectively. The examples, explanations, and exercises that teachers can use to overcome the negative associations which grammar has for so many, so that “some actually come away from the experience believing,” the authors say, “as we do, that learning grammar is fun!” (p. 10). The fun comes from the intellectual challenge of figuring out the rules of grammar; this is not a simplistic text giving clever one-liners and maxims to use in class. Instead, teachers are taught how to “use the structures of English accurately, meaningfully,
Consistent with the first edition, the 1999 edition is well organized, with careful examples, a refreshing discussion of different scholars’ theories on how and why English operates the way it does, contextualize the grammar points, to show how grammar operates on the sentential and on the discourse level, grammar and communication interface” (p. 4). Each grammar point is addressed in terms of its form, meaning, and use—a pattern of presentation which Larsen-Freeman uses in her Grammar Dimensions series (also from Heinle and Heinle). This consistent treatment of each grammar point assists the teacher in understanding the explanations and in preparing for instruction.

Although not originally intended as a reference, the second edition of The Grammar Book was prepared with that purpose in mind, since the authors found out that many teachers were using their text as a reference grammar (p. 757). The teaching suggestions and bibliography at the end of each chapter make this book a valuable tool for teachers in the field as well as for students, and the indices help make this book useful for independent study. The appendix gives suggested answers to the exercises, and the indices include a listing of the numerous scholars referred to in the text, the languages and language groups referred to in contrastive examples, as well as the words, phrases, and topics dealt with in explanations. This second edition is an even better resource than the first, with more information and more careful ordering of that information.

New chapters expand the coverage and allow for the better organization. The new chapter 2 introduces students to the metalinguistic terminology used in discussing grammar, defining terms like “adverb,” “aspect,” and “register,” so that new teachers can more easily follow the subsequent discussion. Having a separate chapter explaining the differences in terms such as tense, aspect, and time, for example, means that less time needs to be spent on that basic information when the authors come to those general topics.

Several of the 1983 edition’s chapters were expanded for 1999. A stronger emphasis on the connection between discourse and grammar led to the new chapter 9, “The Tense-Aspect-Modality System in Discourse,” and to a good treatment of adverbials in the new chapter 25. What had been a single chapter on the tense and aspect system has become two chapters, one on tense and aspect and the other on discourse factors. As the authors say, “certain tenses, aspect, and modality combinations tend to occur together in discourse whereas others do not” (p. 161). This separation allows the authors to treat their subjects with greater focus, and helps the chapter on tense and aspect; for example, all simple aspects are now dealt with together.

Throughout the new edition, the treatment of different subjects has been reexamined and often redone. The previous edition’s coverage of infinitives, gerunds, and participles has been reorganized to allow for the expanded chapter on adverbials. The old chapter on pronouns and possessive forms has also been renovated, appearing as the enlarged chapter 16, “Reference and Possession.” The chapters on phrase structure rules have gone through extensive revision to allow for a smoother introduction of the rules, making the organization of the rules determine the examples given, as opposed to the previous edition when the examples governed the order of introduction for the phrase structure rules. Now, the first ten rules on sentences, adverbials, and noun phrases are introduced together, with rules on predicates following in the next chapter.

This is an immense book. There are thirty-six chapters, one less than in the 1983 edition, but there are: [-2-]
The Grammar Book is an impressive achievement: it combines an excellent treatment of the structure of English with pedagogical suggestions, and in the process it leads aspiring teachers into the intellectual challenge of...
ESL/EFL instructors. If we cannot figure out the rules of English, how can we hope to effectively assist our students, either implicitly or explicitly, in understanding and mastery? The second edition builds on the strengths of the first, incorporating the examples, diverse scholarly frameworks, and teaching suggestions that have made this a must-have text. The expanded coverage in the second edition makes it easy to give up my trusty old white “Grammar Bible” in favor of the sleek new one.

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