

R E V I E W S

Teaching Grammar

From rules to reasons

DANNY NORRINGTON-DAVIES

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REVIEWED BY DAVID CURTIN

This is a book about teaching grammar. Before your eyes glaze over, bear with me.

Danny Norrington-Davies has produced a work that rightfully sits alongside the best of the 'how to' volumes on teaching grammar and provides a creative alternative to traditional methods of grammar presentation in the English language classroom. Whilst on first reading the book's innovative approach might not appear to be especially novel, my experience of actually using the techniques that Norrington-Davies espouses has shown that his ideas are, at the very least, worthwhile and, at the very best, revelatory.

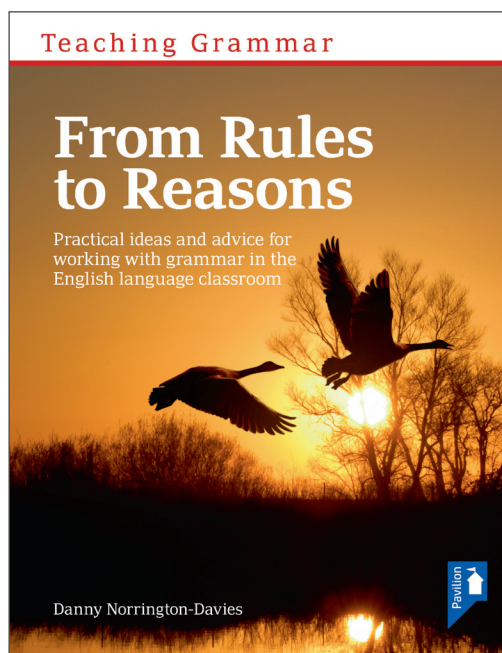
The book is in three sections. The first provides a very readable background as to why grammar should be taught at all, a history of grammar rules, and the arguments in favour of teachers focusing on the reasons why English speakers choose to use a particular grammar form rather than on the rules which make language grammatically correct. Next, Norrington-Davies provides 18 ready-to-go lessons for a range of levels and sound advice on creating your own resources. Finally, the book wraps up with a kind of FAQ section on issues that readers and practitioners might be wondering about, such as whether a particular technique can be used with coursebooks and how it might be applied to exam courses.

At the heart of Norrington-Davies' approach is the notion that the teaching of

grammar rules via explicit presentation and practice (deduction), is less effective than having the students work the rules out for themselves from a text (induction). So far, so good. But Norrington-Davies goes one step further. He argues that the traditional approach to grammar taken by most coursebooks encourages students to become bogged down in grammatical form and to neglect genuine communication – decontextualised, sentence-level practice tends to limit real progress. By way of example, Norrington-Davies points out that some areas, such as modality and the use of articles, are virtually impossible to master through the application of learned rules. It is better for students to be exposed to authentic texts, so that they can explore these structures in context.

To illustrate his thesis, Norrington-Davies provides several useful examples. Most English teachers would be familiar with the rule for use of the passive voice: ‘We use the passive voice when the doer of the action is not known or not important’ (p. 54). However, this rule is rather vague as it does not tell the student precisely when the doer is unimportant. How are they to know the level of importance of a doer? It’s at this point that Norrington-Davies’ innovation kicks in. Rather than having students work out when we use the passive, the teacher should ask them to answer the question, ‘Why did the writer choose to use the passive here?’ In this way, the teacher explores principles of general use, instead of didactic rules divorced from context. Students then give an explicit, written answer to the question, based on their understanding of the text.

Norrington-Davies helpfully provides several real examples of such answers (complete with student errors). For example, in response to a text illustrating the passive voice, Norrington-Davies’ students wrote: ‘Because first he introduce the man then he wants to keep focus on the man’ and ‘First he talks about the smuggler. Then he is using the passive so you see it’s still about the smuggler’ (p. 59). What these demonstrate is that students have engaged with the text in a meaningful way and determined for themselves why the writer decided to employ a particular structure. In turn, as



writers and speakers themselves, they must deliberately make similar decisions.

Norrington-Davies then argues that the most effective practice exercises are 'replication' or 'transposition' tasks. In the former, the students might reconstruct a section of the text from memory, or recreate the text from a different person's perspective. In the latter, the students transform the text into a different style or format. For example, a newspaper article might be turned into a police interview. This provides an opportunity for the students to discover the reasons why writers/speakers choose to use different forms in different social and rhetorical contexts.

This may all sound like a logical and incremental improvement in the teaching of grammar. However, my experience of using the material in the classroom at an upper intermediate level (CEFR B2/IELTS 6.0-6.5) suggests it is more than that. There is a real challenge in having students explicitly articulate the reasons why a writer or speaker chose to do something in a particular way, and equally why they chose not to do it in a particular way. The pay-off is that students begin to realise that the decision as to which grammatical form to use is theirs, not necessarily the rule book's, and that this decision is based on the meaning they, as a writer or speaker, wish to convey. This realisation is an extremely valuable leap; it puts the writer and their intentions, rather than the rules, in control of the text.

For me, this approach is particularly useful at intermediate levels of proficiency (CEFR B1/IELTS 5.0) and above as beginner and elementary level students may have trouble formulating reasons in English. As the author points out, however, at low levels in a monolingual classroom, the reasons could be formulated in the students' L1.

Whilst Norrington-Davies' work can, and should, be embraced in all TESOL contexts, I wonder if it is in the exam preparation and English for Academic Purposes classroom that it will find its true home. Surely it is here, where students are interacting with authentic texts and required to produce significant pieces of writing and speech in a variety of styles, that they should understand why, not just how, certain grammar forms are used.

To conclude, *Teaching Grammar: From Rules to Reasons*: thoroughly recommended reading; highly recommended doing.

David Curtin is a teacher at Navitas, Sydney. He prefers to teach exam courses, such as Cambridge and IELTS preparation, and is intrigued by the conflict between accuracy and meaning.

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