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# Language Teaching: Learning from the Past

## 3. Grammar: The Art of Speaking Well?



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**HOLLT**.net  
History of Language Learning and Teaching

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## Cover image

This is the frontispiece of Martin Aedler's *High Dutch Minerva* (1680), the first German grammar for speakers of English. The shield reads 'des Adelen hohteutsche Sprachkonst für die Engliſhen' [the Nobleman's high-German language art for the English].

## About these materials

This project addresses the need for a historical perspective in language teacher training, using research in the History of Language Learning and Teaching (HoLLT) to inform language teaching practice and policy. Taking five key themes of immediate relevance to teaching practice today, the project responds to evidence that teachers benefit from the framework that HoLLT gives them to reflect on and critique their own and others' practice and policy. Our materials translate research into units tailored to the needs of practising teachers, making explicit links to their current and future roles. They are designed to be used without expert input, so that they can be widely used and embedded in training.

These materials incorporate an understanding of the history of language teachers' specialist discipline, equipping teachers to be more critically reflective in the classroom and thus more effective as teachers, as well as to be advocates for language learning and multilingualism.

Our project partners are the main language teacher associations and CPD centres in the UK. The training packages give teachers the toolkit they need to use an understanding of the past to make decisions about their current and future practice. The five themes all tackle topical concerns in language pedagogy, providing a historical perspective on each of the key themes:

1. Differentiation and diversity
2. What does it mean to teach culture?
3. Grammar: "The art of speaking well"?
4. Target language and (m)other tongue use
5. Making the case for languages: policy and advocacy

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## 1. How to use this handbook

These materials form part of a series of material for languages teachers about the History of Language Learning and Teaching (HoLLT). The series aims to encourage teachers and trainees to consider current topics in MFL through a historical perspective. Each of the five units comprises the following:

- An eight-minute video
- A participant booklet which includes historical examples and discussion topics
- A facilitator booklet which includes contextual information and guidance for discussions

We suggest that facilitators proceed in the following manner for a 2-hour training session:

- Familiarise yourself with the instructor booklet
- Begin the training session by watching the introductory video in its entirety
- Complete the 'Introductory Task' with the group
- Begin the main video and pause it at relevant points as indicated in the instructor booklet
- Guide participants to the relevant page in their booklet
- During and following each pair or group discussion, note any common threads that become apparent, guide the discussion with reference to the additional information included in the facilitator notes, and link contributions to current practice.

## 2. Aims

The theme of this unit is Grammar. The objectives are:

1. To develop an understanding of how the teaching of grammatical concepts and descriptive terms has developed over time
2. To examine different ways of talking about the rules of language in different settings
3. To consider the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to grammar in language teaching
4. To evaluate current notions of 'good practice' in grammar teaching within a context of longstanding debates

### 3. Historical background

For most of Western history of language teaching, 'grammar' was synonymous with Latin (and to a lesser extent with the study of Greek). The earliest texts used to teach Europeans grammar taught Latin grammar, and, what's more, they were *in* Latin. The most famous elementary grammar is Donatus' *ars grammatica*, (art of grammar), written in the fourth century and used for many centuries to introduce young boys to grammar. It was a list of definitions and descriptions of the individual parts of speech with examples. In the centuries that followed, pupils learned to recite it by rote, alongside learning word lists (glossaries) and dialogues (colloquies).

It wasn't until the 16<sup>th</sup> century that Europeans became interested in their own, vernacular languages and began to consider whether their grammar could be described and taught in the same way as Latin. From the Renaissance (14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century), vernacular languages rose in prominence, as objects of study in their own right, both as mother tongues and as foreign languages, and the belief that any self-respecting language should have a standard with codified rules took hold, linked to emerging patriotism and nation-state formation. The model of Latin grammar naturally served as the established template for the writing of the early vernacular grammars, shaping how languages like French, German, Spanish and the like were described and codified. But Latin grammars had tended to follow a pattern that suited Latin, but did not always match the forms of other languages. Grammatical explanations of modern languages were made to fit conventions established in Latin.

## 4. Definitions of Grammar



**Formulate your own definition of the word 'grammar' and compare these with dictionary definitions.**

## 4.1 Definitions of Grammar

**This introductory task is not part of the video.**

**Invite participants to formulate their own definition of the word ‘grammar’ and compare these with dictionary definitions.**

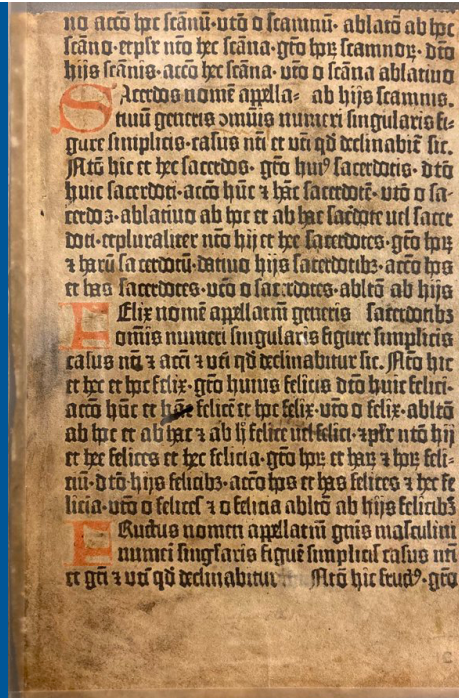
The classic definition of grammar is as “the art of speaking well” (sometimes “of speaking and writing well”). This emphasises the approach to ‘learning’ language, not just for communication but as an expression of logic, with potential for eloquence to have a particular effect on others (the art of rhetoric).

Look at how participants describe grammar in terms of a ‘structure’ or ‘set of rules’ etc. What metaphors do participants use?

## 5. The first grammars

### The first grammars

Grammar is the art of speaking well (“ars bene loquendi”), sometimes adding “et scribendi” (and of writing well)



Donatus: *Ars Minor*, 1459 printing

1. What do we do in language teaching that is not ‘grammar teaching’?
2. At various times in history, grammar has been a whole subject in its own right. In other settings, it has barely been taught explicitly at all, for example when the communicative approach was at its most extreme. What proportion of our teaching should be allocated to grammar?

## 5.1 The first grammars



Pause the video after “But grammar was not just about learning ... in law or in government.”

### 1. What do we do in language teaching that is *not* ‘grammar teaching’?

For example:

- Vocabulary lists
- Understanding meaning of written or audio text
- Learning about another culture

### 2. What proportion of our teaching should be allocated to grammar?

Suggest c. 5 mins for pair/group discussions then take responses and discuss a further c. 10 mins.

The image shows a page from Aelius Donatus’ *Ars Minor*, which presented the eight parts of speech. The *Ars Minor* was written in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and remained in use until the Middle Ages; it was copied and later printed and reprinted many hundreds of times.

## 6. The influence of Latin on the way grammar is defined

The influence of Latin on the way grammar is defined



Grammar schools (a term that dates from the 14<sup>th</sup> century) were so called because their main purpose was to teach Latin (i.e. grammar).

All languages obviously have a structure and can be described by using specialist terms (metalanguage) but, given that the word *grammar* stems from Greek, it therefore signals a tradition which has developed in the Western conception of language. This has led to a Western-centric view of grammatical description which probably persists today.

### Chinese grammar explained to Europeans

Adjectival stative verbs are adjectives that function as verbs. An adjective like 高 [gao] which means 'tall/high' needs no verb 'to be' (or equivalent) in the sentence '他高' [ta gao] which means 'he is big'. One can interpret 高 in this sentence as 'to be tall'. Because native speakers of European languages are used to categories such as 'verbs' and 'adjectives', this Chinese grammatical structure is explained to them in these terms, whereas to a Chinese person these adjectival stative verbs feel like a natural category.

**What are some of the problems one might encounter in using the descriptive framework of a Western Indo-European language to other languages?**



## 6.1 The influence of Latin on the way grammar is defined



Pause the video after “For most of the last two millennia ... synonymous with teaching Latin.”

People had always been learning each other’s languages when they needed to, but informally. From the medieval period onwards we have evidence of language learning using wordlists and then also model dialogues.

**What are some of the problems one might encounter in using the descriptive framework of a Western Indo-European language to other languages?**

All languages obviously have a structure and can be described by in grammatical terms (using what we call metalanguage, or the language for talking about language). However, the very fact that the word grammar stems from Greek signals a tradition which has developed to talk about first Greek, then Latin, and then other European languages. This has led to a Western-centric view of grammatical description which probably persists today.

## 7. The Classical model of teaching grammar in Greece and Rome: Parts of speech

### The Classical model of teaching grammar in Greece and Rome: Parts of speech



1. What do you think the eight parts of speech were in the classical taxonomy?
2. Why might Donatus's *Ars minor* begin by saying there are eight parts of speech?

## 7.1 The Classical model of teaching grammar in Greece and Rome: Parts of speech



Pause the video after “In Latin grammar, the same or very similar eight parts of speech were used.”

### 1. Ask participants to ‘guess’ what the eight parts of speech were in the classical taxonomy – before revealing them.

Noun, pronoun, verb, adverb, participle, conjunction, preposition, and interjection

From the end of the Roman period onwards for about a thousand years, the parts of speech were discussed in a fixed order, following either the order used by Donatus and most of his successors (noun, pronoun, verb, adverb, participle, conjunction, preposition, and interjection), or, more often in the later Middle Ages, the one adopted by Priscian from Greek grammar (noun, verb, pronoun, participle, preposition, adverb and conjunction).

Note that *adjective* is missing from this list. – it was treated as a sub-category of noun, because it behaved in a similar way, taking endings that marked gender, number and case.

### 2. Why might Donatus’s *Ars minor* begin by saying there are eight parts of speech?

So that when learning off by heart, you know you have to list off eight... etc.

## 8. Teaching grammar in the Roman Empire

Teaching  
grammar  
in the  
Roman  
Empire



Roman bronze  
statuette of a girl  
reading, 1<sup>st</sup>  
century

1. How does the ancient Roman approach to teaching grammar compare with your teaching?
2. Do you think it's important to start with individual letters and how they are pronounced in the target language before progressing on to words? Why or why not?
3. What is the relationship between the sequencing of grammar, vocabulary and cultural topics? For example, what knowledge do students need to acquire before the subjunctive can be taught?

## 8.1 Teaching grammar in the Roman Empire



Pause the video after “One fundamental distinction ... other qualities and actions qualify.”

Word categories, or parts of speech, seem to be obvious distinctions but are not always so clear-cut when we consider how other languages encode their world (e.g. Austronesian languages often have the same word functioning as noun, verb or adjective).

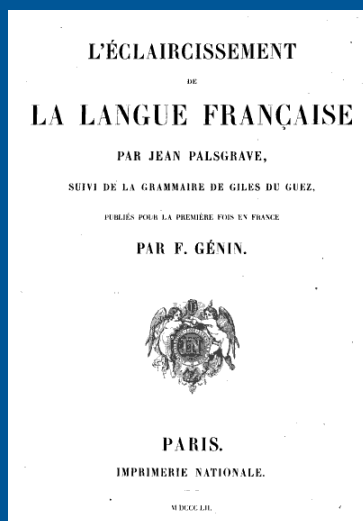
Elementary education in ancient Rome introduced the pupils to basic literacy training through copying out of the alphabet using an ABC primer called an ‘abecedarium’.

Education followed what seemed a logical progression from the smallest units of speech – letters, sounds and syllables – progressing on to larger units, words and sentences, then verses and continuous passages.

There was a lot of repetition at each stage. As well as learning rules pupils learnt word lists and dialogues (called ‘colloquies’).

## 9. Early grammars of European languages

### Early grammars of European languages



Princess Mary Tudor, who was taught by Palsgrave

Nebrija's grammar of (Castilian) Spanish, published in 1492, was the first printed grammar of a European vernacular (i.e. rather than a classical language).

1492 was a turning point in the rise of Castilian Spanish. Both the Reconquista, a series of military campaigns by Christian states to recapture Spanish and Portuguese territories from Muslim rule between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, and Columbus' 'discovery' of the Americas reinforced the drive to codify Spanish to help in the creation of an empire.

Grammars of Italian, French and German were published in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The first grammar book for French is generally considered to be John Palsgrave's *L'éclaircissement de la langue française* published in 1530. Palsgrave was an Englishman and a tutor to Henry VIII's sister Princess Mary and later to his (illegitimate) son Henry FitzRoy.

The first grammars of German were published in the 1580s, written in Latin so that any educated person could use them, whatever their first language. Heinrich Ludolf's *Grammatica Russica* was published in 1696. It was aimed at foreign learners of Russian, but it was the very first grammar of Russian in any language.

1. What developments might have driven the publication of the first grammars and the standardisation of European languages in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries?
2. What might have been the effects of these changes on the teaching of languages?

## 9.1 Early grammars of European languages



Pause the video after “Between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries ... the Royal Academies of France and Spain.”

### **1. What developments might have driven the publication of the first grammars and the standardisation of European languages in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries?**

- Movable type spread to Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> century
- Increasing nationalism in Western Europe led to the creation of nation states

### **2. What might have been the effects of these changes on the teaching of languages?**

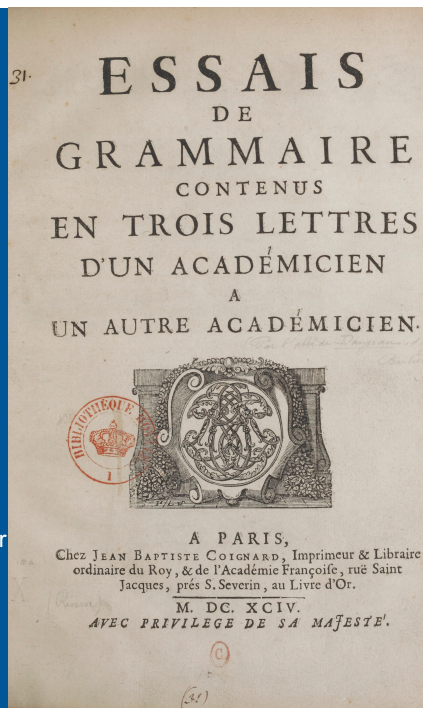
Link the discussion back to participants’ views of their own teaching practice.



## 10. Benchmarks of correctness

### Benchmarks of correctness

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*Académie Française*

Note the reference to the *Académie Française* in this 1694 grammar book

1. Teachers use textbooks and online materials. Given the recent diversification of published sources, is the range of choice confusing?
2. Which 'brands' can we depend on?
3. Are there any staples that enjoy longevity?

## 10.1 Benchmarks of correctness



Pause the video after “The writing of grammars ... patrolling the boundaries of “correct” never stops.”

References to the *Académie Française* and the Real Academia Española can be found on the front covers of grammar books from several centuries.

## 11. Prestige and languages

### Prestige and languages

Albertus (1573):

“Our language is not less copious and less happy in its compounding than Greek or Latin.”

Ölinger (1574):

“the German language almost always follows Latin syntax (with few exceptions).”

Some grammars were written to show that vernacular languages were just as good as Latin – showing that the language fitted the template of Latin grammar was a good way of ‘proving’ that.

### German verb conjugation through the centuries

It was a struggle for Germans to recognise patterns and how to group forms once they had recognised them. As Latin verbs are grouped into four classes (conjugations), German grammarians were expecting to find a similar system in German. Albertus (1573) stated that his account only “seems to explain this whole business moderately well” and he had “not yet sufficiently ascertained” how it could “be grasped by rules”.

**If you were trying to make French/Spanish/German fit the Latin pattern of four conjugations, what would you come up with?**

## 11.1 Prestige and languages



Pause the video after “Grammars for modern languages ... which most modern European languages do have.”

It is important to understand that grammarians at this time were still in the process of working out the rules and patterns with which we are now familiar.

## 12. In what order do we teach grammar?

In what order do we teach grammar?

participle  
infinitive  
noun  
verb  
preposition  
object  
adverb  
auxiliary  
tense  
pronoun  
conjunction  
article  
adjective  
subject

1. What are the key grammatical concepts we teach in French / Spanish / German / other languages?
2. In what order is it best to teach the tenses?
3. Which forms of the 'you' pronoun would you teach first? Why?
4. Which of these key grammatical concepts are most challenging for your learners? And why?

## 12.1 In what order do we teach grammar?



Pause the video after “Views on which language features ... anything about verbs, for example”

### Two examples from the 19<sup>th</sup> century

Walter Rippmann (teacher, editor and author of modern language textbooks), introduced the polite form of address *Sie* (formal ‘you’ in German) on p. 25 of his *First German Book* (1899), so relatively early. As Rippmann emphasised the importance of spoken language, pupils needed to use *Sie* to address the teacher throughout their lessons.

Otto Siepmann (also a teacher, editor and author of influential textbooks), in contrast, introduced *Sie* much later in his *Public School German Primer* (1896).

### 13. Rules first or examples first?

**Rules first  
or examples  
first?**



1. Do you think students should encounter rules or examples first?
2. What is the best way to teach rules?
3. How do you teach rules to learners of different ages and abilities?



## 13.1 Rules first or examples first?



Pause the video after “In early sixteenth century England ... the Grammarians’ War of 1519-1521.”

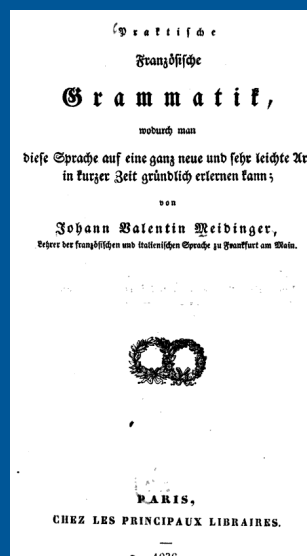
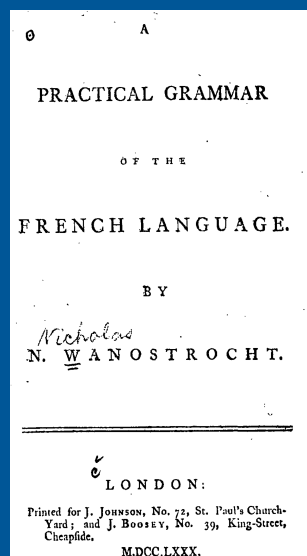
Both with regard to the classics and to the newly codified modern languages, the primary debate in language teaching through the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was between those who thought languages should be learnt by the teaching of rules and those who thought actual language ‘use’, based on authentic sources, should be the model for practice, through memorising dialogues and phrases, what we might today call ‘chunk’ learning.

The linguist Henry Sweet recommended in *The practical study of language* (1899) that “as soon as [the students] have met with three or four examples of a certain case or other inflection, the teacher calls their attention on the blackboard, and mak[es] them see what these words have in common, as far as is possible without using any technical or abstract terminology”.

## 14. 'Practical' grammars I

## 'Practical' grammars

N. Wanostrocht:  
*A Practical Grammar  
of the French  
Language*, 1780



J. V. Meidinger:  
*Practical French  
Grammar through  
which one may learn  
the language  
thoroughly in a new  
and easy manner*,  
1783

#### EXERCISES on the two AUXILIARY VERBS. GENERAL OBSERVATION.

Every verb must agree with its nominative case in person and number; but after collective nouns, such as *amas, foule, infinité, nombre, la plupart*, &c. followed by a genitive, the verb must agree with that genitive in number: ex.

*La plupart de ses amis l'ont abandonné,* Most of his friends have forsaken him.

In order to ease the learner, the different simple tenses are marked in the following exercises as far as the irregular verbs, when it is hoped every difficulty will be removed by practice and attention. The second person singular, being seldom or never used in conversation, has been omitted throughout the exercises on the verbs.

#### INDICATIVE MOOD.

PRES. I have a book. -- I am happy. -- He has a hat which is too big. -- We have no money. -- We are not ambitious. -- You have a sword. -- You are very proud. -- Those girls have modesty; they are virtuous. -- I had a friend. -- I was grateful. -- My sister had no work, she was lazy. -- We had a holiday, we were very glad of it. -- You had company, but you were not ready. -- Your brothers had learning, they were loved by every body. -- I had a fine horse, I was merry. -- My cousin had a little garden, he was ingenious. -- As soon as we had bread we

#### University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, 1858

These examinations tested pupils' metalinguistic knowledge of the grammatical forms and of the language used to describe them.

#### Higher tier German paper for Senior (under 18) candidates

"What cases are respectively governed by the following verbs: *reuen, ärgern, träumen, pflegen, zahlen, bezahlen, lehren*? And what by the following prepositions: *um, mit, nach, ohne, nebst, zu, in, auf, halben, wegen*?"

#### Lower tier French paper for Senior candidates

"*ne trouve rien*. When does *rien* not require *ne* before the verb?"

"*dans*. What distinction is made in the use of the prepositions *en* and *dans*?"

1. What does 'practical grammar' mean to you? What is 'practice'? Practising what exactly?

2. Do learners need to have the explicit metalinguistic knowledge? Is it worth testing? Is it actually better for learning?

## 14.1 ‘Practical’ grammars I



Pause the video after “From the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century ... Nicolas Wanothrocht in his *Practical Grammar of the French Language* in 1780.”

The 18<sup>th</sup> century saw a greater emphasis on the role of writing in language learning. There was also a growing belief among teachers that learners needed to practise the rules that they were presented with. The first grammar exercises emerged. This kind of “practical” grammar was especially used in teaching boys, who followed a more classical model of education, where grammar was central. For girls, conversation skills were an important social grace – though boys too were expected to be able to speak the language, as preparation for a Grand Tour of Europe.

Wanothrocht’s 1780 grammar of the French language was one of the most successful pedagogical grammars of its time, appearing in revised forms for almost a century. There was a huge increase in the production of school grammars from the 1780s onwards, as more schools offered languages. Many already conform to the basic template of what would later become known as the ‘grammar-translation’ method, typical of many language schoolbooks throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. That is, pupils learned grammar in great detail, and were expected to show their understanding by translating from English to the target language and in reverse.

## 15. 'Practical' grammars II

## 'Practical' grammars

(A) G.F.A. Wendeborn: *An Introduction to German Grammar*, 1797

## General Rules on the Feminine Gender

1. All the names, denominations, functions, titles and dignities of women, are of the feminine gender, as *Maria*, *Tochter*, daughter, *Wäscherin*, laundress, *Aebtissin*, abbess, &c.
2. Of the feminine gender, are the names
  - a. Of rivers, *die Elbe*, *die Tiber*, *die Donau* [...]
  - b. Of trees, *die Eiche*, oak, *die Zeder*, cedar [...]
  - c. Of flowers, *die Ranunkel*, the ranuncle [...] Exc. *Der Lavendel*, the lavender [...]
  - d. Of fruits, *die Aprikose*, the apricot [...] Exc. *Der Apfel*, the apple [...]
3. Those substantives, which are derived from adjectives or from verbs, by giving the latter the ending of *ung*, are feminine, as [...] *hoffen*, *die Hoffnung*, the hope.

(B) G.F.A. Wendeborn: *Exercises to Dr. Wendeborn's Introduction to German Grammar*, written by himself, 1797

## On gender:

To exercise a beginner, in this rather difficult part of the language, I shall follow closely the Grammar itself; [...] in which, what relates to the gender, is to be read over, before the trial is made.

## Exercise:

Polly is the daughter of the laundress, and the wench wishes to be married to become a wife. – The abbess has adopted the little girl, to make a nun of her. – The Thames is a finer river than the Euphrates; the Elb is navigable, but not the Jordan. [...] – The oak produces acorns, the cedar is common, in some parts of Asia and America.

## About the example shown above:

Wendeborn's grammar (A) presented grammatical rules and was published together with a book of exercises (B) which refer back to the grammar and provide opportunities for practice.

## Example (C) below:

Wanostrocht's grammar presented French verb forms followed by short English phrases to be translated using the preceding verbs.

*CRAINDR E*, TO FEAR, TO BE AFRAID.

## INFINITIVE MOOD.

Present. *Craindre*, to fear.  
 Part. act. *Craignant*, fearing.  
 Part. pass. *Craint*, feared.

## INDICATIVE MOOD.

## Present.

Sing. *Crains*, *crains*, *craint*, I fear, or am afraid.  
 Plur. *Craignons*, *craignez*, *craignent*.

## Imperfect.

Sing. *Craignois*, *craignois*, *craignoit*, I did fear, or  
 Plur. *Craignons*, *craigniez*, *craignoit*. was afraid.

## Preterite.

Sing. *Craignis*, *craignis*, *craignit*, I feared.  
 Plur. *Craignîmes*, *craignîtes*, *craignirent*.

## Future.

Sing. *Craindrai*, *craindras*, *craindra*, I shall or will  
 Plur. *Craindrons*, *craindrez*, *craindront*. fear.

## Conditional Present.

Sing. *Craindrois*, *craindrois*, *craindroit*, I should, &c.  
 Plur. *Craindrions*, *craindriez*, *craindroient*. fear.

## (C)

Do not fear to tell her what you think of it. – I will speak to her to oblige you, but I know she does not fear me. – Why do you not believe me? [...] Why do not you fry that fish? – The first time you come to see me, I will show you some flowers in my garden which will surprise you. – Silk-worms generally hatch at the beginning of the spring. [...]

N. Wanostrocht: *A grammar of the French language, with practical exercises*, 1800

## 15.1 ‘Practical’ grammars II



Pause the video after “Grammatical accuracy ... a serious subject in schools.”

Please note: The video shows several examples of how grammar was taught in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Section 15 in the handbook combines the examples from two slides in the video. Pause after this slide:

‘Practical’  
Grammars

( 335 )

*CRAINDRE, TO FEAR, TO BE AFRAID.*

**INFINITIVE MOOD.**  
 Present. *Craindre, to fear.*  
 Part. act. *Craignant, fearing.*  
 Part. pass. *Craint, feared.*

**INDICATIVE MOOD.**  
 Present.  
 Sing. *Craint, craints, craint, I fear, or am afraid.*  
 Plur. *Craignent, craignent, craignent.*

Imperfect.  
 Sing. *Craignois, craignois, craignois, I did fear, or*  
 Plur. *Craignoient, craignoient, craignoient, was afraid.*

Preterite.  
 Sing. *Craignis, craignis, craignis, I feared.*  
 Plur. *Craignirent, craignirent, craignirent.*

Future.  
 Sing. *Craindra, craindra, craindra, I shall or will*  
 Plur. *Craindront, craindront, craindront, fear.*

Conditional Present.  
 Sing. *Craindroit, craindroit, craindroit, I should, &c.*  
 Plur. *Craindraient, craindraient, craindraient.*

**IMPERATIVE MOOD.**  
 Sing. *Craints, craints, fear thou.*  
 Plur. *Craignez, craignez, craignez.*

**SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD.**  
 Present.  
 Sing. *Craigne, craigne, craigne, that I may fear.*  
 Plur. *Craignent, craignent, craignent.*

Imperfect.  
 Sing. *Craignisse, craignisse, craignisse, that I might*  
 Plur. *Craignissent, craignissent, craignissent.*

*CRAINRE,*

**EXERCISES UPON THE FOREGOING VERBS  
AND THEIR COMPOUNDS.**

Do not fear to tell her what you think of it. – I will speak to her to oblige you, but I know she does not fear me. – Why do you not believe me? [...] Why do not you fry that fish? – The first time you come to see me, I will show you some flowers in my garden which will surprise you. – Silk-worms generally hatch at the beginning of the spring. [...]

N. Wanostrucht: *A grammar of the French language, with practical exercises*, 1800

Wanostrucht’s book from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, which operates in a similar manner to Wendeborn’s, provides verb tables which include singular and plural forms in the indicative (present, imperfect, preterite, future, conditional present), imperative and subjunctive moods.

The verb tables are followed by English sentences for translation, intended to practise conjugation of those verbs.

## 16. The Grammar-Translation method

### The Grammar-Translation method

4 Translate into French:

A tower 300 feet high; a room 30 feet long by 20 feet broad; France is the oldest monarchy in Europe; the longer the day, the shorter the night; is it wine you are drinking? yes it is; was it a French book you were reading? yes it was.

University of  
Cambridge Local  
Examinations  
Syndicate  
Under-16  
French  
examination,  
1858

Translation into the target language was part of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate examinations set for school pupils:

#### Junior (under 16) Spanish examination, 1900

I entered the town on the first of June early in the morning and went straight to the home of my old friend the guardian of the principal church. All that day I remained within doors conversing with the inhabitants, who came in great numbers to see me. At sunset the sound of a trumpet announced the arrival of the prince.

#### O-Level French, 1951

While these things were happening in York, the great duke had finished his preparations. He had gathered together his huge army and his mighty fleet of ships. The wind blew from the coast of France, and he set sail for England.

Over the blue sea they came, the white-sailed vessels, crowded with armed knights, with bowmen and with spearmen. Such an army had seldom before been seen. Duke William's vessel was the gayest and proudest of them all. The sails were red, the deck and the masts were gaily painted. A golden boy was on the prow, leaning forward as if to catch the first glimpse of England. By day the proud banner, with the three golden lions of Normandy, fluttered in the breeze. By night a crescent of light shone from the masthead, so that all could see their lord's ship and follow where he led.

H.E. Marshall (adapted)

1. What might be wrong with the exercise shown in the video?
2. Why did teachers and grammarians at the time think the exercise was worth doing?
3. In your view, is a similar level of skill and knowledge expected of pupils today?

## 16.1 The Grammar-Translation method



Pause the video after “A typical exercise ... being practised.”

Areas for discussion include:

- What type of knowledge is examined here?
- Are learners expected to know the language itself or *about* the language?

The universities of Oxford and Cambridge introduced local school examinations in 1858 at Junior (under 16) and Senior (under 18) levels.



## 17. Inductive and deductive approaches

### A: Inductive approach

W. Ripman: *Dent's New First German Book*, 1917

### B: Deductive approach

J.V. Meidinger: *Grammaire allemande pratique*, 1836

**Erster Teil: 2, 3** 5

Die Knaben arbeiten auch nicht. Die Mädchen spielen.  
 Hier sind zwei Väter und zwei Mütter.  
 Gretchen und Liese, seid ihr Mädchen? Ja, wir sind Mädchen.  
 Auch Marie und Anna sind Mädchen.  
 [Öffne das Buch! Öffnet die Bücher! Schliesse das Buch! Schlieszt die Bücher!]

---

**der Plural**

<i>erste Person</i>	<i>zweite Person</i>	<i>dritte Person</i>
wir { sind arbeiten spielen tun	ihr { seid arbeitet spielt tut	sie { sind arbeiten spielen tun

Schreibt die Substantive in das Heft: I auf Seite 2, I U auf Seite 3, II auf Seite 4, III auf Seite 6, IV A auf Seite 7, IV B auf Seite 8, IV C auf Seite 9.

I		I U	
Sing. der Artikel	das Mädchen	der Vater	die Mutter
Plur. die Artikel	die Mädchen	die Väter	die Mütter

II

S. das Beispiel das Heft der Plural das Substantiv der Singular  
 P. die Beispiele die Hefte die Plurale die Substantive die Singulare

III		IV A		IV B	
Sing. das Buch	der Mann	das Verb	der Knabe		
Plur. die Bücher	die Männer	die Verben	die Knaben		

IV C

Sing. die Antwort	die Aufgabe	die Frage	die Frau
Plur. die Antworten	die Aufgaben	die Fragen	die Frauen
Sing. die Nummer	die Person	die Seite	
Plur. die Nummern	die Personen	die Seiten	

### Degrees of comparison

The comparative is formed by adding the suffix *-er* to the positive, and the superlative by adding *-ste*, while changing the vowels *a, o, u* to *ä, ö, ü*. For example:

Meidinger goes on to list adjectives whose vowels stay the same, as well as irregular forms (e.g. *gut* (good); *besser*; *am besten*).

My grapes are good, but yours are even better; and those over here are the best of all the grapes.

(Example translated from French)

1. Compare the grammar teaching examples shown above: what are the advantages and disadvantages of each?
2. In a language you teach, think of how you can take an inductive approach, using examples or a short text to guide students to formulate a rule.

## 17.1 Inductive and deductive approaches



Pause the video after “Some also advocated teaching grammar implicitly.”

Please note: examples are shown in a different format in the handbook to allow enlargement. Pause after the following slide:

**Inductive and deductive approaches**

W. Ripman:  
*Dent's New First German Book*,  
1917  
(inductive approach)

Erster Teil: 2, 3			
Die Knaben arbeiten auch nicht. Die Mädchen spielen. Hier sind zwei Väter und zwei Mütter. Gretchen und Liese, seid ihr Mädchen! Ja, wir sind Mädchen. Auch Marie und Anna sind Mädchen. (Öffnet das Buch! Öffnet die Bücher!) Schliesst das Buch! Schliesst die Bücher!			
erste Person	zweite Person	dritte Person	
sind	seid	sind	
arbeiten	arbeitet	arbeiten	
spielen	spielt	spielen	
ist	ist	ist	
Bedeutung der Substantive in der Heft: I auf Seite 2, II U auf Seite 3, III auf Seite 4, IV auf Seite 5, IV A auf Seite 6, IV B auf Seite 7, IV C auf Seite 8.			
I			
Sing. der Artikel	das Mädchen	der Vater	die Mutter
Plur. der Artikel	die Mädchen	die Väter	die Mütter
II			
A das Subjekt	das Heft	der Plural	das Buch
P. das Subjekt	die Hefte	die Plural	die Bücher
III			
Sing. der Mann	der Mann	der Vater	der Knabe
Plur. der Mann	die Männer	die Väter	die Knaben
IV A			
Sing. der Antwort	die Antwort	die Frage	die Frau
Plur. der Antwort	die Antworten	die Fragen	die Frauen
IV B			
Sing. der Antwort	die Antwort	die Frage	die Frau
Plur. der Antwort	die Antworten	die Fragen	die Frauen
IV C			
Sing. der Antwort	die Antwort	die Frage	die Frau
Plur. der Antwort	die Antworten	die Fragen	die Frauen

Pupils notice the sentences contain plural nouns

Explanation about plural verb forms

Examples for pupils to copy into their books

Please note: Example A in the handbook is the example shown in the video.

Check participants' understanding of inductive and deductive approaches to teaching grammar.

Both with regard to the classics and to the newly codified modern languages, the primary debate in language teaching through the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was between those who thought languages should be learnt by the teaching of rules and those who thought actual language 'use', based on authentic sources, should be the model for practice, through memorising dialogues and phrases, what we might call today 'chunk' learning.

The so-called *Grammar War* of 1519-1521 refers to a particularly fiery exchange between Latinists who favoured presenting rules first and those who believed that examples should be seen before the rules.

We can see that inductive approaches to teaching grammar had been advocated for a long time (since the so-called 'Grammar War' of 1519 to 1521) but teachers were slow to put them into practice in the classroom.

The inductive-deductive distinction is probably more helpfully thought of as a continuum, because most learners still need to have structured input to be 'guided' to inductive grammatical reasoning.

## 18. Form and function

A

I. no- mi- nal	1	Gendre - - - - -	46.
		Motion - - - - -	59.
		Diminution - - - - -	62.
	2	Degrees of Comparison - - - - -	63.
		Regular Formation of Cases in both Singular and Plural - - - - -	67.
		with some Examples thereof - - - - -	72.
	3	irregular Declension of the Nouns - - - - -	80.

**A:** M. Aedler: *High Dutch Minerva*, 1680

**B:** P. M. Smith: *Einfach toll!*, Oxford Publishing Limited, 1985

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B

### A Gruß Gott! Personal information 1

**Language use:** Exchanging greetings and saying goodbye. • Understanding requests for, and giving, your name, age and date of birth. • Cardinal and ordinal numbers, days, months and dates. • Saying where you live or where you are staying. • Stating that you cannot find your hotel etc. • Spelling aloud. • Filling in a form with personal details.

**Main language forms:** Grüß Gott! Guten Morgen/Tag/Abend! • Auf Wiedersehen! • Nos 1–20. • Nos 21–299. • Alphabet (a-be-tse etc). • Entschuldigen Sie bitte! • Ich kann [mein Hotel] nicht finden. • Wie bitte? • Bitte/danke schön • Wie heißt du?/Dein Name? • Ich heiße [Michael]. • Wie alt sind Sie? • Ich bin [17] Jahre alt. • Woher kommst du? • Ich komme aus [England]. • Wo wohnen Sie? • Ich wohne in [Preston]. • Wann hast du Geburtstag? Ich habe am [sechzehnten März] Geburtstag.

### B Immer geradeaus Finding the way

**Language use:** Politely asking for, and understanding, directions in a town. • Giving directions. • Asking for clarification or repetition, where necessary. • Understanding signs in a town.

**Main language forms:** Wo ist [der Dom]? • [Du nimmst] die [erste] Straße [links]. • Gehen Sie immer geradeaus. • [Der Zoo] ist da/dort drüben. • [Das Kino] ist auf der [linken] Seite. • [Der Zoo] liegt [der Post] gegenüber. • Gehen Sie [am Dom] vorbei. • Du gehst [links] um die Ecke. • Geh die Straße entlang/hinauf/hinunter. • Ich weiß es nicht. • Verstehen Sie? • Nein, das habe ich nicht verstanden. • Bitte langsamer.

### C Spaß mit Geld Money

**Language use:** Understanding and using the currencies of the four German-speaking countries. • Asking the price and calculating prices.

**Main language forms:** Was kostet das? Das kostet [50] Pfennig. Das macht [10] Mark.

The 19<sup>th</sup>-century British linguist Henry Sweet, who was influential in advocating language teaching reform in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, argued that teachers focus too much on grammatical *form* at the expense of explaining the *function*, i.e. what you can use the structures to express.

1. Contrast the contents page from Aedler's *High Dutch Minerva* (an early manual for learning German) with that from Smith 1985. Which one focuses on form and which one on function?

2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of these two different approaches? What aims do they presuppose?

3. How would you describe your own approach?

## 18.1 Form and function

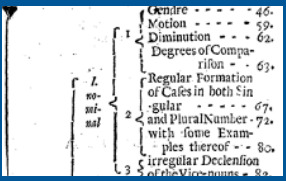


Pause the video after “In the 20<sup>th</sup> century ... verb-first clause structure.”


Please note: examples are shown in a different format in the handbook to allow enlargement). Pause after the following slide:

**Form and function**

Learning German:  
Two very different tables of content



M. Aedler: *High Dutch Minerva*, 1680



P. M. Smith: *Einfach toll*, 1985

Aedler's *High Dutch Minerva* was the first grammar of German for English-speakers.

## 19. How to teach: repetition



The image shows a traditional “horn book”. These were used between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries to teach the alphabet and reading. Children would chant the words repeatedly to memorise them.

As we have seen, repetition was widely used in teaching grammar, as in many other forms of education, partly as a legacy of a time when manuscript or texts were expensive and scarce – the only way for every pupil to have access to a key text was for them to memorize it. In earlier centuries, pupils learned to recite a grammar off by heart.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, repetition was widely used in education, partly as a legacy of pre-literate forms of learning, but also because of the religiosity of scholarly language (so like a prayer).

In 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, pupils did repetitive translation exercises to drill points of grammar. In the 1960s, the theory of behaviourism lent a new form of support to the belief in repetition – learners did pattern practice drills, in writing or in language labs – the theory was that this “overlearning” would lead to the knowledge of what form to use when becoming automatic, without relying on reasoning.

More recently still, teachers sometimes give learners a classroom rap to chant verb or case endings to help them remember them.

Memorization is still a strong feature of language learning in China and Japan today.

**There is still much debate about the role of repetition in learning. Some consider it to be of low cognitive value (see, for example, the position of remembering/repeating in Bloom’s Taxonomy). What do you think?**

## 19.1 How to teach: repetition



**This is additional material not included in the video.**

**There is still much debate about the role of repetition. Some consider it to be of low cognitive value. What do you think?**

Allow participants a pause for reflection on the use of repetition in language learning.

It might be useful to link to the practice of 'spaced learning' here. A pilot study by the Education Endowment Foundation has found that the use of repetition can influence students' long-term memory and retrieval.

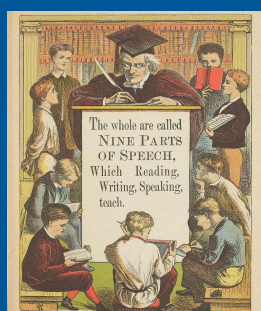
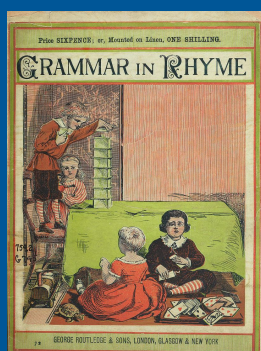
In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, repetition was widely used in education, partly as a legacy of pre-literate forms of learning, but also because of the religiosity of scholarly language (so like a prayer).



## 20. Mnemonics and wordplay

### Mnemonics and Wordplay

W. Crane:  
*Grammar in Rhyme*,  
1868



A rhyme for “neuters ending in -er all unlauted” begins:

*The **Dach** of a **Dorf** and the **Aas** of a **Rind**,  
The **Haupt** of a **Kalb** and the **Kleid** of a **Kind**,  
The **Nest** of a **Huhn** in a **Loch** with **Eier**,  
The Wörterbuch's **Blatt** and a **Scheit** for the fire  
[18 more lines in this vein]  
All in -ER their plurals make,  
And all unlauted vowels take.*

F. Storr: *German Declensions and Conjugations By Help of Reason and Rhyme*,  
1891

1. What are some of the visual representations you've seen or can invent to help learners remember grammatical points?
2. Do you know any mnemonic expressions, rhymes or visual devices for the languages you have learned?

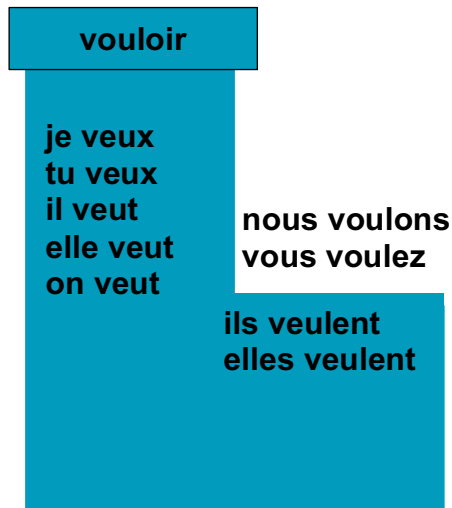
## 20.1 Mnemonics and wordplay



Pause the video after “While most grammar books ... longstanding tradition in teaching Latin.”

**Do you know any mnemonic expressions, rhymes or visual devices?**

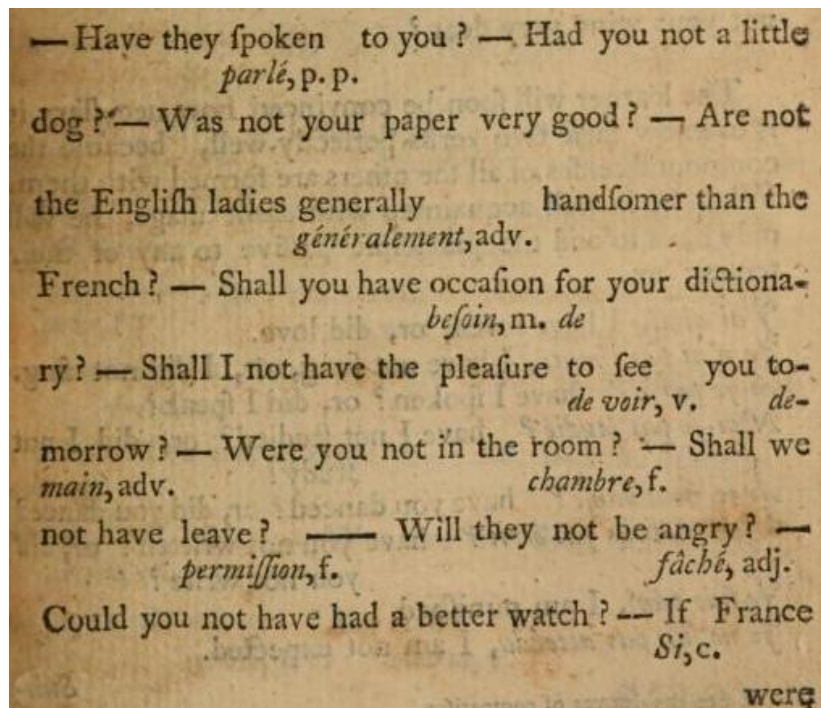
- E.g. ‘Mrs Vandertramp’ to remember which verbs to conjugate with *être* in the *passé composé*
- E.g. ‘mille villes et villages tranquilles’ to remember words that do not have a silent / when *i* is followed by double /
- ‘Boot verbs’ in French or Spanish to show radical changing verbs (see illustration below)





## 21. How to teach

An exercise to practise verbs:



N. Wanothrocht:  
A Grammar of the  
French Language with  
Practical Exercises,  
1789

1. What kind of student would the exercise from 1789 work for?
2. Would it work for your students?
3. What would the modern equivalent be?

## 21.1 How to teach



**This is additional material not included in the video.**

The basic models of grammar for modern languages continued to follow the classical (Latin) model, although increasingly adapted to take into account the specificities of different languages.

## 22. How to teach: age

These are recent examples of grammar exercises presented to learners of English as a foreign language at different ages. The learners faced with these exercises begin English lessons at the age of nine.

	<b>Relative clauses</b>
<b>11 years old</b>	<p>1. Find examples of relative clauses with <i>who</i>, <i>which</i> and <i>that</i> from [the example text] (e.g. So this is the house <i>which</i> belonged to Sherlock Holmes).</p> <p>2. When do you use <i>who</i>? When do you use <i>which</i>? When can you use <i>that</i>?</p> <p>(L. Mees and H. Michaelis: <i>Camden Town</i> 2, 2013)</p>
<b>13 years old</b>	<p>Use <i>who</i> or <i>which</i> to complete the text. Then explain when to use <i>who</i>, when <i>which</i>.</p> <p><i>Tyler is the New York teen ... visited his grandma in New Orleans. She's the person ... told him about the anti-segregation protests ... took place in the city in the 1960s. His grandma still remembers the people... led the protests.</i></p> <p>(J. Rademacher: access 4, 2016)</p>
<b>14-15 years old</b>	<p>Defining and non-defining relative clauses</p> <p>Read the following sentences and decide whether the relative clauses are defining or non-defining. Copy the sentences and add commas where necessary.</p> <p>1. Australian football / which is similar to rugby / is played in over 50 countries around the world.</p> <p>2. The only aboriginal athlete / who won a medal at the 2000 Sydney Olympics / was Cathy Freeman.</p> <p>3. Jervis Bay Territory / which is the smallest Australian territory / has less than 400 inhabitants.</p> <p>(J. Gough et al.: <i>Camden Town</i> 6, 2016)</p>

1. How would you describe the approaches and complexity of these exercises?
2. Are all learners able to master talking *about* grammar?
3. Which grammar topics can be taught to pupils of different ages?
4. How do we present grammatical concepts to different ages?

## 22.1 How to teach: age



**This is additional material not included in the video.**

This example is intended to give a (brief and limited) impression of what is expected of language learners outside of England.

One might argue that English is a special case for several reasons:

- English has a special status as *lingua franca*.
- English is used widely in the media, cultural sphere and daily life outside Anglo-American countries. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that young children would encounter much more than singular words and short phrases until they begin formal English lessons.

## 23. How to teach: ability

“Teaching grammar to moderate-ability classes is largely a waste of time [...] Their limited capacity for conceptual thought does not allow them to use what they have learned in order to understand or compose meaningful utterances in German.”

D. Richards 1976: ‘Teaching children of moderate ability’ in *German in the United Kingdom: Problems and Prospects, CILT Reports and Papers*)

1. Are there some pupils for whom explicit grammar teaching is not advisable?
2. Is grammar too difficult for some, or is it how we teach it?

## 23.1 How to teach: ability



**This is additional material not included in the video.**

### **1. Are there some pupils for whom explicit grammar teaching is not advisable?**

Do some pupils with specific special educational needs have different needs or abilities with regard to learning grammar?

### **2. Is grammar too difficult for some, or is it how we teach it?**

How do you approach grammar teaching with different sets (if used at your school)?

## 24. Non-standard language

### Spoken grammar

#### Le pongo aquí

[Confusion between direct and indirect object pronouns]

#### Me se ha caído

[Wrong position of indirect object pronoun when combined with reflexive 'se']

#### Si lo sabría, te lo diría

[Use of conditional tense instead of imperfect subjunctive]

### Non-standard language



"He should of seen it coming."

She don't give me none



1. How much do we still maintain the idea of 'correct grammar' as a system of rules that only some have access to?
2. Does this confer on grammar a certain prestige?
3. How does technology affect language use?
4. To what extent do we include discussions of correctness, register and prestige varieties in our classrooms?
5. What are some useful approaches to improving grammatical fluency?

## 24.1 Non-standard language



Pause the video after “That often means ... the range of variation in a language.”

### 1. How much do we still maintain the idea of ‘correct grammar’ as a system of rules that some have access to?

Invite participants to think of non-standard grammatical forms which are common in spoken language (English and other languages). These may be considered incorrect by careful users adhering to ‘grammar rules’.

Participants may be familiar with popular criticisms of ‘incorrect’ grammar such as the split infinitive, or the stray apostrophe.

### 2. Does this confer on grammar a certain prestige?

You may wish to reference the successful book *Eats, shoots and leaves* by Lynne Truss.

Open a discussion about participants’ tolerance for these types of errors in L1; the foreign language; written language; spoken language.

### 3. How does technology affect language use?

Selected authentic resources can demonstrate some of these types of non-standard use (in contrast to idealised examples usually found in published material).

### 4. To what extent do we include discussions of correctness, register and prestige varieties in our classrooms?

Discussions of these topics are part of the English curriculum. Is there scope to include them in modern language lessons, too? *Should* these be discussed? Why/why not?

### 5. What are some useful approaches to improving grammatical fluency?

E.g. learning collocations such as ‘at’ with ‘look’ in English or ‘de’ with ‘refuser’ in French.

- “**Si j’aurais su**” – Used instead of the standard ‘Si j’avais su’. This is the first part of a common ‘if’ clause: ‘If I’d have known...’ and the error consists of choosing the wrong tense.
- “**Croivent**” – Writing ‘ils croivent’ rather than the standard ‘ils croient’ – incorrect conjugation of the third person plural present tense of verb *croire* (‘to believe’).
- “**Ich gehe nicht zur Schule, weil es sind Ferien.**” – ‘Weil’ with V2 word order ; the verb goes last in ‘weil’ clauses.
- “**Wegen dem, was sie gesagt hat...**” – Wegen + dative; genitive should be used.
- “**Si lo sabría, te lo diría**” – Instead of “Si lo supiera, te lo diría” (If I knew it, I would tell you)
- “**Me se ha caído**” – Instead of “Se me ha caído” (I dropped it)
- “**Lo voy a decir una cosa**” – Instead of “Le voy a decir una cosa” (I am going to tell him something)
- “**Le pongo aquí**” – Instead of “Lo pongo aquí” (I’ll put it here)
- “**La dije...**” – Instead of “Le dije” (I told her)



## 25. Reflection on historical and current practices



**Working individually, note down some responses to the following questions and then discuss them with a partner.**

- 1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of inductive and deductive approaches to teaching grammar?**
- 2. Should function always be the primary consideration in language teaching or is there a place for a focus on form?**
- 3. Are grammar drills effective?**
- 4. What needs to be considered in decisions about sequencing of grammar teaching?**

## 25.1 Reflection on historical and current practices



Pause the video after “History shows us ... invented every day?”

These are some of the key themes with which teachers and researchers have been concerned over the past five centuries.

It is useful to link these themes to participants’ current teaching practice.

## 26. Key timeline

<b>3<sup>rd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC</b>	Alexandrine grammars: foundational Greek grammars, including <i>The Art of Grammar</i> , attributed to Dionysius Thrax. This text codified eight word classes (parts of speech) and laid the foundation for all subsequent grammars in the Western world.
<b>4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD</b>	Late Roman grammars that became the standard grammars through the Middle Ages, especially Donatus's <i>Ars Grammatica</i> and Priscian's <i>Institutiones Grammaticae</i>
<b>c.900</b>	Ælfric of Eynsham writes the first bilingual grammar: a Latin grammar using the students' first language (Old English)
<b>1492</b>	Nebrija's <i>Grammatica Castellana</i> , considered first grammar of a modern European language
<b>1506</b>	Johannes Reuchlin publishes the first European grammar of Hebrew
<b>1530</b>	Palsgrave's <i>L'esclaircissement de la langue francoyse</i> , the first printed grammar of the French language (although preceded by earlier manuscript texts, namely Barton's Anglo-Norman <i>Donait François</i> , c.1410)
<b>c.1540</b>	Lily's <i>Grammar</i> , authorised by Henry VIII as the sole Latin grammar to be used in English education, and remained the standard textbook for centuries
<b>1576</b>	Earliest manual to include English published as <i>Colloquia ou Dialogues avec un Dictionaire en six langues: Flamen, Anglois, Alleman, François, Espagnol, &amp; Italien</i> in Antwerp
<b>1660</b>	<i>Grammaire générale et raisonnée</i> , written at Port-Royal-des-Champs near Paris and so known as the Port-Royal Grammar. Influenced by Descartes and famous for the premise that grammar reflects innate mental processes and is therefore universal
<b>1664</b>	Publication of the first English grammar for German speakers: Telles' <i>Grammatica Anglica</i>
<b>1680</b>	Publication of the first German grammar for English speakers: Martin Aedler's <i>High Dutch Minerva</i>
<b>1715</b>	J. D. Longolius is the first to include personal pronouns as a grammatical class in <i>Einleitung zur gründtlicher Erkänntniß einer ieden, insonderheit aber der Teutschen Sprache</i>
<b>1750s</b>	'Practical grammars' and the birth of the 'exercise' as gap fills and sentence translations
<b>1780</b>	Nicholas Wanostrocht's <i>A practical grammar of the French language</i> , probably the first book to combine grammatical treatise and practical exercises in the same volume
<b>1804</b>	W. Render's <i>A complete analysis of the German language, or A philological and grammatical view of its construction, analogies, and various properties</i> is the first to break with the standard tradition of presenting forms and usage in separate sections

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## Appendix: Video transcripts

### Introductory video

This unit explores the role of grammar in language teaching and how grammar has been taught throughout history, from its origins in ancient Greece to the present day. For many, 'grammar' conjures up a negative image of learning technical rules and doing exercises to practise applying these rules. But grammar began as a much more central activity in the education of young citizens as an intellectual as well as pragmatic training in the use of language.

Although our definition of grammar and its role in education has narrowed enormously since those times, many of the decisions we make about how to approach grammar teaching have their roots in decisions made centuries ago, and we will consider some of these in this unit.

For instance, are the grammatical notions we teach and the examples we present based on *actual language use* or on a set of idealised rules? How important is it for language learners to be able to *describe* language as well as know how to use it? Does this help them actually communicate? And, if so, how specialised does this descriptive meta-language need to be? For example, do we say 'verb' or 'doing word'? Another big question of principle is whether rules are best taught first or whether learners can be led to formulate these through an inductive approach, as they process new language.

It is easy to malign previous approaches to teaching as wrong or misinformed, but most language teachers have historically wished to help their learners as much as we do today. Procedures which are often criticised now, such as the grammar-translation approach that prevailed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, can therefore be re-evaluated more sympathetically as positive developments that tried to rectify what were perceived as inefficient approaches that went before.

### Main video

The word 'grammar' has meant different things throughout different periods. It ultimately derives from the ancient Greek word *grámma* meaning 'a written letter, something that is etched out'.

There was, therefore, from the start, an association with 'literacy' or 'being lettered' in the very material sense of scratching out or scoring letters as signs onto wood, pottery or early forms of paper.

But grammar was not just about learning and applying rules in writing language. It was often defined as "the art of *speaking* well" because classical education was very focussed on rhetoric, which included speaking persuasively, in law or in government.

Grammar rules, as a form of symbolic knowledge, could take on a mystical nature in the medieval mind. In fact, the word *glamour* is a Scots derivation of grammar meaning 'magic' or 'enchantment' in this sense of occult learning. It's not just students today who find grammar a bit of a mystery!

From the Middle Ages onwards, 'Grammar' occupied a central position as one of the so-called seven Liberal Arts. Together with logic and rhetoric, it was one of the first three elementary subjects.

The earliest grammarians in Europe were grammarians of Greek. Their Greek grammar teaching system was transmitted to the Roman world. As in Greece, pupils in ancient Rome learnt letters first, then parts of speech. That tradition spread with the Roman empire.

For most of the last two millennia, certainly until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, teaching grammar in Europe was synonymous with teaching Latin.

Early Greek scholars identified eight different parts of speech. The labels and definitions of the eight word classes were fixed by the grammarians of Alexandria by the first century BC. In Latin grammar, the same or very similar eight parts of speech were used.

One fundamental distinction in grammar is between nouns and verbs (things and actions). This seems a common-sense distinction, but it can also be seen as a logical and philosophical statement that *things* are our primary concepts that other qualities and actions qualify.

The first published grammars of European languages, which began to appear in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, had a dual function: simultaneously describing and standardising national languages while also providing a model for teaching the language.

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the first grammars and then dictionaries of national languages were written, and the rules of the language became more standardised, sometimes backed by the authority of academies like the Royal Academies of France and Spain.

The writing of grammars and dictionaries marked the beginning of a new ideology that a national language is a fixed reality, with clear boundaries – educated people should know what is correct French, German, Spanish etc., and what is not. Of course, in reality, language is always changing, so patrolling the boundaries of "correct" never stops.

Early grammars were sometimes written by patriotic grammarians who were eager to prove that their national language was just as logical, rich and eloquent as any other language. Often the comparison was with Latin, though often also with French.

Grammars for modern languages were based on the grammatical framework developed for Latin, but this framework did not always provide a neat fit. For instance, the system of cases for Latin doesn't exist in all modern languages and Latin doesn't have the definite article which all modern European languages do.

Views on which language features should be prescribed, described or presented to learners have changed – for example newer verb forms instead of older ones (such as, in English, *strived* or *strove*), according to prevailing ideas about what language teaching is for. The order of teaching grammar has changed too. We no longer



normally teach all the grammar of nouns before teaching students anything about verbs, for example.

In early sixteenth century England, there was a particularly fiery exchange between Latin grammarians who favoured presenting rules first (known today as the deductive approach) and those who believed that learners should see examples before the rules are explained (more in line with the so-called inductive approach). So heated was the debate that it is known as the Grammarians' War of 1519-1521.

From the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, 'practical grammars' of European languages began to appear. They were practical in the sense that, for the first time, they didn't just set out the rules for pupils to learn, they gave learners exercises to practise applying them. One of the first people to combine a grammatical treatise and practical exercises in the same volume was Nicolas Wanstrocht in his *Practical Grammar of the French Language* in 1780.

Manuals for learning European languages often focused on conversational dialogues. In the new practical grammars developed by Wanstrocht and others, the aim was to practise grammar items in sequence through translation; the learning objective was not simply to achieve conversational fluency, but also to understand and apply grammatical structures accurately.

Grammatical accuracy meant understanding the rules. That was associated with clarity of thought and ability to reason, and, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, helped raise the status of languages as a serious subject in schools

A typical exercise in this sort of grammar primer asked students to translate from English into the target language, using the grammar item being practised.

The so-called Reform Movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was triggered as a reaction against the arid drilling of grammar translation exercises. Reformers re-emphasised the importance of speaking because they thought it was best to learn languages as living languages.

Some also advocated teaching grammar implicitly.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a growing focus on function in language learning rather than form. So grammar topics might be grouped by what function they fulfil – for example "how to ask questions" rather than "verb-first clause structure".

While most grammar books in the past were very text heavy by today's standards, there were also attempts to make language learning more fun – and effective – using pictures and rhymes, following a longstanding tradition in teaching Latin.

Throughout history, grammar teaching has focused on written language, and writing to a single correct standard. Only recently have some teachers emphasised that the 'rules' of written language are not the same as in spoken language, and so have tried to introduce students to the reality of the spoken language.

That often means showing learners more variation, including non-standard language, such as regional forms or colloquialisms that speakers regularly use but

might hesitate to write. Using authentic resources can help show the range of variation in a language.

History shows us that certain debates about how grammar should be taught, or whether it should be taught at all, come back around periodically. With roots that stretch thousands of years into the past, what is the role of grammar in an age where new forms of language are invented every day?