CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

On the writing of grammars there is no end. . . . There have been short grammars and complete grammars, practical grammars and philosophical grammars, new grammars and improved grammars, descriptive grammars and structural grammars, grammars without tears and grammars for heretics, logical grammars and grammars on historical principles, and even Grammar on English Grammars.

Robert L. Allen (1972, p. xiii)

THE PREMISE OF THIS BOOK

The premise of *English Grammar Instruction That Works! Developing Language Skills for all Learners* is that there is an important place for grammar (defined later) in students' lives and learning. Grammar is integral to language and provides us with the ability to speak, read, write, appreciate humor, express emotions, and have a shared backdrop with others that provides closeness and understanding. Students with a strong knowledge of language, including grammar, enjoy expanded learning opportunities in all disciplines, including a better understanding of themselves. They develop insights about thinking and bringing thought to vocal and written expression. They are better equipped to say what they mean and understand what others mean. Since there is virtually no end to the amount of language that we can learn, students of language develop a passion for all learning and never get a signal that says "Hard drive full!"

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY GRAMMAR?

School grammar books have traditionally taught that grammar is to learn the "correct rules" of a language, mostly for writing. They include topics such as usage, sentence structure, punctuation, parts of speech, and possibly other features that are related to school purposes such as improved reading comprehension and development of presentation skills (Crystal, 2006a).

Many teachers, however, have had more questions about this subject than answers. They appropriately ask, "Does this concept of grammar as *correct usage* help my students improve their writing, reading, or speaking?" "Does it relate in any way to other subjects—social studies, mathematics, science?" Many teachers ask or ponder, "Why can't so many of my students remember to use a capital letter at the beginning of a sentence?" "Why can't they remember what a *complete* sentence is?" "They know what adjectives are, but why do I constantly have to remind them to use them?"

Then come the more challenging questions: "How do I get my students to make their verbs *agree?*" "How can I get my ELL students to understand plurals or prepositions or verb conjugations?" "How can I get *them* to stop using double negatives?" So before we can proceed to make sense of this subject and what we need to teach, we start with some definitions and concepts, because we need to have a common understanding of key terms. To get us started, we provide two definitions: One is adapted from *Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* (2000), and the other is from *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (McArthur, 1992).

The definition of *grammar* from *Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* (2000) is

1. the study of the way the sentences of a language are constructed, including morphology and syntax.
2. a set of rules accounting for these constructions.
3. a body of rules, whose output is all of the sentences that are permissible in a given language, while excluding all those that are not permissible

The definition of *grammar* from *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (McArthur, 1992) is

> The systematic study and description of a language . . . in terms of either syntax and morphology . . . with aspects of phonology, orthography, semantics, pragmatics, and word-formation . . . . (p. 446)

Probably neither of these definitions will help classroom teachers. Does the five-year-old fluent speaker of English need to study sentence rules? What do native speakers need to *study* about sentence construction if they already construct standard English sentences fluently without direct instruction? On the other hand, you might ask: "What about children who speak a 'nonstandard dialect,' of English fluently. Which sentence constructions should they study? Their own? The teachers? Both?"

We also have students who speak a language other than English, with varying degrees of fluency and ability. Which sentence constructions should these students start with? Should they study their own and compare them to English or just begin with English? If we add the second definition from *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (McArthur, 1992), we are broadening the base of what grammar is, but now we need to know what we should teach and with what purposes or objectives?

At one time the answer to teaching grammar was not this complicated. Every student had a grammar book, and the word *grammar* meant parts of speech, verb tenses, subject and predicate, transitive and intransitive, subjunctive and "nonsubjunctive," and *lots* of underlining such things as direct object, indirect object, predicate adjective, predicate noun, and so forth. In fact, some students (including these authors) did so much underlining that there was no time for writing.

We begin with the view that grammar is the glue that holds language together. Without grammar we have just words—phonology or meaningful sounds—which are what many first year foreign language students have and very little else. All of you reading this book are likely to know words in a foreign language (Spanish, French, Italian, Chinese, or whatever language you have had some contact with). But try to say something fluently in another language, and many of you will find yourselves inarticulate because you lack the grammar. Even more difficult is to understand the other speaker's reply, known as pragmatics, and reply back. Then try to carry on a conversation for 10 minutes.

Grammar glues our language together in a way that makes sense to the speaker and listener when words are placed in the "right order" of a specific language. This is where nature works its magic because that assemblage of order begins very early in a child's life. And the longer the delay, for whatever reason, the greater the difficulty in "fluent assemblage." Every English-speaking child with uninterrupted development knows to say "the red hat," while in France, the same-age child says with perfect confidence, "le chapeau rouge." And bit by bit, then with great rapidity, the assemblage continues and the native speaker knows his or her own native language fluently by age five or six and sometimes younger. Yet no young child can recite or explain the rules. According to Chomsky (1957, 1965), Pinker (1994, 1999), and others, learning a language is innate and is universally learned when the child is very young.

THE HISTORY OF TEACHING GRAMMAR IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

If language is innate and developmental, what is the grammar that schools want to teach and toward what end? The answer to this question lies in history, especially in the history of education, and for the purposes of this book, in the education of students in the United States. Among the earliest grammar books in the United States were those written shortly after the American Revolution by Lindley Murray (an American Loyalist), followed by Noah Webster. Their aims, like others who would follow, were to introduce foreigners to English and teach students their own language, as if a native speaker is not speaking his or her own language! Most important was preparing students to read Latin and apply its rules to English. All of these early grammarians viewed Greek and Latin as languages to be emulated and "saw [in English] a barbarous mass of material that seemed to lack all grammatical order" (McArthur, 1992, p. 448). This point of view was to influence subsequent grammarians well into the 20th (or 21st) century who continued to describe English as if it were Latin with terms such as declensions, case, subjunctive, participle, and so forth. From this heritage, English would remain in the shadow of Greek and Latin, even as English progressed to be a global language, while Greek (ancient and classical) and Latin became, in essence, a backdrop to English (Crystal, 2006a).

In addition to the aim of "Latinizing English," the writers of what would become "school grammar" began to see the study of grammar as "uplifting." Children of the poor and the uneducated, whose language was "substandard," meaning not like the language of people of affluence and power, would "morally benefit from parsing sentences" (McArthur, 1992, p. 449). For African American children (Delpit, 1998), the relation to grammar took on racist overtones. "Black Language" has been characterized as a kind of "broken English reflecting the supposed simplicity and lack of education of its users" (Delpit, 1998, p. 58). So the school grammar books focused even more on "prescriptive grammar," meaning how we *should* speak rather than on the study of how language develops, changes, and *is spoken.* Instruction in "correct English" became the norm of the school grammar books with emphasis on "having students memorize and recite definitions and rules" (e.g., a noun is a person, place, or thing; the subject is what the sentence is about, etc.). Tests in grammar have asked students to choose the "correct" answer, with no recognition that students who have learned a different form in their own community can only judge "correct" against what they have heard and know. One of the authors, Evelyn, remembers a grammar test in about sixth grade which asked the following: "Which is correct? I daren't open the box or I dasn't open the box." How ridiculous, Evelyn thought: "Who on Earth would use the word 'dasn't,' especially in the Bronx. It certainly wasn't a word my Eastern European immigrant mother would have used. On the other hand, she wouldn't have used 'daren't' either, but at least I had heard it someplace in New York."

Perhaps you're thinking by now, "But aren't there standards of good English or correct English? Don't we use the term, even in America, the 'Queen's English'? Doesn't the form of the language one speaks 'keep them in their place,' as Henry Higgins says in *Pygmalion* or *My Fair Lady?* And won't teaching [prescriptive] grammar in school solve 'their' language problems or deficits? Aren't there advantages to knowing and applying the rules of *standard* English?"

As we already know, however, school or prescriptive grammar hasn't done the job of "fixing" students' language. According, again, to the prestigious *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (McArthur, 1992), "the grammarian's attitude toward language, combined with the mechanical instruction required by the texts, made the subject feared and despised by teachers and students alike" (p. 449). This statement may not be totally accurate because many teachers and some students were "good" at this subject, and being good at something makes it much more palatable or possibly pleasant.

However, we can make *grammar work and serve high literary purposes* when we teach students the following:

- The history of the English language with suggestions for further study for those who are interested.
- Different ways to describe language, known as metalanguage—the linguistic or symbolic system used to discuss, describe, or analyze a language.
- How we learn our (first) language and how we can expand on that learning.
- The different ways we use language—in speaking, in writing, in humor, in thinking.
- When and how to say or write what to whom, known as the conventions of language, both spoken and written.
- To explore second language learning, cyber language, other languages, and whatever is interesting about language.

CURRENT STANDARDS RELATED TO TEACHING GRAMMAR

The Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar, as part of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), has made the following statement related to the teaching of English grammar:

> Grammar is important because it is the language that makes it possible for us to talk about language. Grammar names the types of words and word groups that make up sentences not only in English, but in any language. . . . People associate grammar with errors and correctness. But knowing about grammar also helps us understand what makes sentences and paragraphs clear and interesting and precise . . . And knowing about grammar means finding out that all languages and dialects follow grammatical patterns. (NCTE, n.d.)

Included in the NCTE/IRA (International Reading Association) Standards for the English Language Arts, 4 of the 12 standards refer to students' understanding of language and sentence structure:

- Standard 3 refers to sentence structure as an important aspect of comprehending and appreciating texts.
- Standard 4 maintains that students need to know how to adjust their spoken and written language for different purposes, which requires an understanding of the conventions and style of language.
- Standard 6 states that students should "apply knowledge of language structure and language conventions" to create and critique both print and nonprint texts. (NCTE/IRA, 1998)
- Standard 9 calls for students to "develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles." (NCTE/IRA, 1998)

Every state education department has standards on language generally divided into reading and writing. Most states include expectations of using appropriate grammar. As stated, this book emphasizes the importance of knowing language and knowing *about* language, not only to meet the standards, but to raise the standards. State tests often assess student use of grammar, and students who achieve high scores on the SAT are likely to know a great deal about language.

The chapters that follow cover what we believe are the major areas that teachers need to know to make the teaching of grammar effective, exciting, and capable of providing students with deep, meaningful knowledge about language, literacy, and culture.

We believe that teachers need to know the history of the English language. First, the history itself is fascinating and informative. Today, English is a global language spoken all over the world by both people for whom it is their first language and by millions of people who have made it their second language. The history of the English language tells us why our nouns and verbs have their present forms, from what languages our words come, why we have so many variations in our spelling and sound-symbol systems, and why English is so widely spoken.

Teachers also need to be familiar with the terminology related to language such as grammar, dialects, sentence structure, word formation (morphology), among other terms. This information helps us understand the diversity of language and within language. While we may all speak English, we immediately recognize differences in accent, idioms, fluency, and more. Knowledge of metalanguage terms allows for accuracy of teaching and opportunities for sharing this information with students at the deepest possible levels.

Teachers also need to know how children learn language from birth through the school years. This knowledge is essential to guide students in reading, writing, and speaking beyond the "basics" so that by the end of high school, students know how to adjust their language for different purposes. Knowing how children learn language is particularly important in helping the multitudes of students who enter school with a language other than English and must quickly make the transition to a "second" language while simultaneously learning academic material.

In addition, there is the area of curriculum and methodology. How can we best teach what students need to know? What should students learn and how should they learn it? We have included ideas and strategies for learning more about the lexicon or the words—vocabulary, phonology, morphology, and spelling—and how the lexicon is inseparable from "grammar." Words make up sentences, so students need to enlarge their sentence repertoire to say more and possibly "say it better" or with greater variety and preciseness of meaning. Working with sentences will include terms such as syntax and semantics, among others. Students need to have and use a range of "linguistic registers." Linguistic registers include the language we use in conversations with family and friends, interviews, presentations both informal and formal, and writing to diverse audiences. Associated with linguistic registers is the important concept of sociolinguistics, the study of the social uses and social implications of language.

Teachers and students who become familiar with these terms have the benefit and joy of understanding the *culture* of language and the role that language plays in every human's life. Language is one of the great distinguishing characteristics of humans. The purpose of this book is to have your students communicate in ways that are practical, precise, delightful, creative, brilliant, humorous, and deep. The emphasis of this book is that learning about language is about becoming wise about language.