How to teach English Grammar

I learnt English as a foreign language. That is to say, I had to learn English grammar inside and out, all the tenses, all the irregular verbs, clauses and gerunds. It was rather easy to me, since this was in high school, and I had already then an excellent grasp of French grammar.

After I settled in Arizona and met schoolchildren, I was surprised to find them very inadequate in grammar. Why? Did they not all speak English fluently? It was not until I got hold of their textbooks and met their teachers that I understood the root of the problem.

English grammar is quite easy, compared to French or German grammar. So most textbooks skip the detailed and careful charting found in the other European languages. Let’s take for example, the definition of a helping verb. I have yet to see a textbook that doesn’t simply list all possible helping verbs and expect children to memorize the list: have, has, had, am, are, is, been, shall, will, should, etc etc. Now, if this were a French grammar book, it would have stated, “all forms of the verb to have, all forms of the verb to be” and this would have covered the first seven. Then the “conditional and future helpers,” and that would cover should, would, could, shall, will. In other words, simple categorization could save a lot of memorization.

The lack of scientific charting and categorizing leads to total confusion. I have yet to meet a student who knows the difference between “his” as in “his book”, and “his” as in “the book is his”. These are both called “possessive pronouns” in English grammar. However, in French the corresponding words are called “possessive adjective” (his book), and “possessive pronoun” (the book is his).

The words used in describing grammatical terms are even more confusing. I had a hard time understanding what a “part of speech” was, when I first met the term in my son’s textbook. The French call these terms the “nature of a word”. Much more descriptive and understandable. Am I being picky and fussy? Not at all. Consider the consequences of not understanding the nature versus the function of a word. When I teach students to analyze a word, and ask, “What is the function of this noun?” I have again and again students answer, “it’s an adjective!” which is another nature. It’s as if he was saying: “A fruit is an animal.” The correct answer should be “a subject”, or “an indirect object complement”, and so on. Which would be equivalent to saying, “This fruit is good in providing Vitamin C.”

Finally, to teach grammar, teachers use repetitive worksheets, which have only one function, that of deadening your higher cognitive functions. Then, at exam time, they wonder why students seem to have learned absolutely nothing! A much better way to teach grammar is to keep students thinking, through grammatical analysis. For example, let’s take the previous sentence, and underline the word “way”. Then the student “analyzes” this word by stating its nature, gender and number, then its function. The answer would be as follows. Way: common noun, neutral, singular, subject of the verb “is”. I found that I could never teach analysis directly without causing my students, including high schoolers, to fall into total despair, due to their extremely weak knowledge of basic grammar. In France, children do this in Grade 4. I had to break it down into stages. First, I would underline words in a paragraph – usually taken right out of a 19th century classic—and ask only for their nature. Only when they got these right 80 percent of the time, would I move on to teaching about functions. Even then, I found I had to make templates of little rectangles, otherwise, students today being unable to think coherently for themselves, would keep asking, “so what do I write after singular?”

I have created and compiled a number of charts and taught my students new grammatical nomenclature, of course without the knowledge of Official Grammarians. And some of them actually perform now decently well on grammatical analyses. As a result, they can read, understand and enjoy many classics, and write very articulately.