

# Chapter 3



## Innate Grammar vs. School Grammar

### 3.0 INTRODUCTION

The repeated assaults of structural and generative linguists on the failings of traditional and prescriptive grammars have led many in the education community to doubt the usefulness of grammar instruction in school. So, from the second half of the 20th Century until now, there has been a “lost generation” of English as a Second/Foreign Language, and Language Arts teachers. These language professionals have very little knowledge of grammar. Disterheft (2003:22–3) laments this situation as follows:

*For over fifty years, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has discouraged teaching grammar overtly in primary and secondary schools because most research shows that teaching parts of speech and basic sentence structure does not improve students’ writing. And so, the reasoning goes, why teach a topic if it does not directly improve writing? The fallacious logic underpinning this attitude becomes obvious if we apply it to other fields. Should we refrain from teaching art, geography, mathematics, and so on if they don’t likewise directly improving writing skills? . . . Most state departments of education require very little knowledge of English language and linguistics in order to teach English skills at the primary and secondary levels. . . . No teacher would ever be certified to teach subject areas [science and mathematics] at any level with only two college-level courses as background. In fact, most states require that a teacher have a major or minor in a subject in order to teach it. In order to teach mathematics or science, even at an elementary level, the teacher must have a knowledge of underlying theory that far exceeds the level of instruction. Yet as far as grammar goes, some English teachers’ knowledge of*

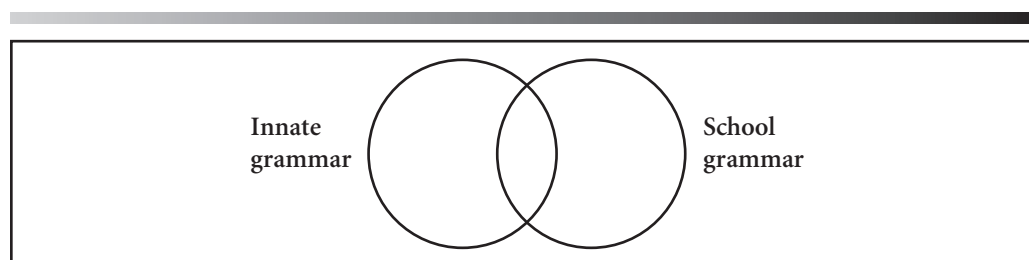
*the topic comes directly from the textbook they use in their classroom. It's no wonder that teachers avoid grammar and that knowledge of it has, for the most part, fallen into such a state of disrepair."*

However, Kolln and Funk (2006:xv) are optimistic because they see a new trend gradually emerging. In the preface of their book, they write this: "We're happy that our profession's attitude towards the study of grammar has also changed since 1982, a time when the study of grammar in language arts classrooms throughout the country was marginalized at best, if not completely absent." Some educators are slowly coming to the realization that banishing grammar instruction from the curriculum was a mistake. It is good news that grammar is resurfacing; but we, in the language profession, should do everything not to squander this opportunity. We should, for instance, avoid the mistakes of the past when grammar instruction was no more than the robotic memorization of parts of speech. That approach was woefully inadequate because it failed to translate grammar instruction into academic gains. The approach to grammar instruction advocated in this book will raise teachers' grammatical awareness and show them how grammar can be used to improve students' writing and analytical skills. However, before getting there, we must first review the different types of "grammars" often encountered in the linguistic literature. We must also clarify the long-standing misunderstanding between linguists and educators.

### ***3.1 Misunderstanding between Linguists and Educators***

Contemporary linguistics burst on the scene with an agenda and a methodology that were radically different from previous studies of language. The death threats on Native American languages led American linguists to design a "scientific" methodology to codify these languages. Contrary to previous language studies that relied on written sources, structural linguistics depended entirely on spoken language. Bloomfield (1933:21), the leading linguist of his time, was openly hostile to analysis based on written text. He went so far as to state that "writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks."

The convincing scientific arguments marshaled by linguists to defend their position against language studies based on written texts led educators to conclude erroneously that grammar instruction was unnecessary. This was a misguided conclusion that stemmed from a misunderstanding of the claims of theoretical linguistics. Saying that speakers of a language are verbally competent in their native language is quite different from saying that they can use it competently in academics. Oral language is innate and subconscious, but the language needed to succeed academically must be learned consciously. This is where the crux of the misunderstanding lies. Educators were looking to linguists for ways to teach grammar meaningfully, not realizing that linguists did not have classroom applications in mind in their theorizing about the nature of innate grammar. The misunderstanding between the two groups can be summarized by the diagram below:



**Table 1** *Relationship between Innate Grammar and School Grammar*

The overlapping area is not very significant. This shows that theoretical linguistics itself cannot be part of the solution. What educators need is applied linguistics. Pinker (1999:52) recounts a story worth repeating here to highlight the difference between theoretical and applied linguistics. There was a family in California whose child suffered from a linguistic impairment. They read about Chomsky's work in a popular science magazine. They called him at his MIT office and suggested that their daughter's condition might be of interest to him. Here is Pinker's comment about Chomsky's reaction: "Chomsky is a paper-and-pencil theoretician who wouldn't know Jabba the Hutt from the Cookie Monster, so he suggested that the parents bring their child to the laboratory of the psycholinguist Ursula Bellugi in La Jolla." This incident illustrates the situation between educators and linguists. Educators know that the traditional way of teaching grammar is not working. They hear about linguistics. They are crying out for help. But theoretical linguistics can't help because its theoretical claims are not directly applicable to education. Contemporary linguistics needs to be specially packaged for the classroom. Unfortunately, according to Gee (2003:647) this has yet to be done. He notes that "linguistics has had much less impact on education, and teachers know much less about language and linguistics, than the current state of our knowledge about language in education, or the current dilemmas of our schools, would seem to merit." The focus of this book is to repackage the findings of theoretical syntax for classroom use by teachers and their students.

### 3.2 *Applied Linguistics and School Grammar*

Applied linguistics repackages the claims of theoretical linguistics for use in everyday life. Education-minded linguists have coined the acronym CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) to refer to the type of English competence needed for academic success. This linguistic knowledge is often contrasted with BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills), (Marshall 2002:194–6). According to them, the best approach to achieving competence in CALP is through pedagogical grammar (also known as teaching grammar). **Pedagogical grammar** is an eclectic method of teaching grammar whose various components can be summarized by the following equation:

|  |
|--|
| <b>Pedagogical Grammar = Traditional Grammar + Prescriptive Grammar + Sociolinguistics + Descriptive Grammar</b> |
|--|

**Table 2** *The Components of Pedagogical Grammar*

Pedagogical grammar can be defined in two ways. On the one hand, it is the conscious grammatical knowledge that the teacher needs to teach grammar. On the other, it is the conscious grammatical knowledge that the learner needs to know to succeed academically. Our focus in this book is the grammatical awareness of the teacher. It is believed that if teachers are competent in contemporary understanding of grammar, they will be able to use their knowledge meaningfully to meet their students' academic needs. Consequently, we will concentrate on the first definition of pedagogical grammar.

### 3.3 *The Contribution of Traditional Grammar to Pedagogical Grammar*

The main contribution that traditional grammar brings to pedagogical grammar is in the area of the **metalanguage**. Metalanguage is the language used to talk about language.

Linguists use different terms to refer to elements in a sentence. Consider the labels that are applied to the words in (1):

- (1) *Linguists speculate about the nature of innate grammar.*

The words <linguists>, <nature>, and <grammar> are classified by traditional linguists as nouns. The word <speculate> is a verb. The words <about> and <of> are known as prepositions. The word <the> is an article. Additionally, <linguists> is known as the subject of the sentence while <the nature of innate grammar> is the complement of the preposition <about>. The word <innate> functions as an attributive adjective. The word <speculate> is called a main verb.<sup>1</sup> These metalinguistic terms were inherited from traditional grammar but they are still in use. Wasow (2003:300) reminds us that “the traditional categories of noun, verb, etc. (inherited from the grammatical studies of ancient Greece) are still quite generally employed, supplemented by a number of other categories, some of them idiosyncratic to particular theories.” Language Arts teachers and English teachers cannot understand modern linguistics if they do not have a firm grasp of the traditional metalinguistic **jargon**. Jargon is a sociolinguistic term which describes the terms and expressions specific to a profession. It would be absurd to belong to a profession and not know its jargon. It is unthinkable for a chemist not to know the technical terms of chemistry. It would be intolerable for a medical doctor not to know the jargon of medicine. It would also be unthinkable for a computer scientist not to know the appropriate terms for computer science. Similarly, language teachers should master the grammatical terminology that has been in use for more than two thousand years. There is simply no excuse for not knowing the jargon used in the language profession!

### ***3.4 The Contribution of Prescriptive Grammar to Pedagogical Grammar***

Prescriptive grammar is the kind of grammar that seeks to tell native speakers how they should speak or write their own language. It prescribes rules of correct usage. Discussions of prescriptive grammar in English never fail to mention Bishop Robert Lowth. He is the one who single-handedly forbade the use of double negatives in English. Commentators usually explain the rise of prescriptive grammar in European languages by the influence of humanism, the fear of language decay, and the appeal to logic.

Humanism, 15th to 17th Century, has been defined as an intellectual era characterized by an unmatched love for classical literature. The works of Greek and Latin authors were studied for their great rhetorical value. When European writers began writing in their own languages, they too, for the most part, used the same lofty language and elevated grammar that they had studied in classical literature.

The 18th Century was nicknamed the “Age of Reason.” It was a time when logical explanations were given to natural and supernatural phenomena. This tendency to rationalize everything was also applied to language. Bishop Lowth’s prohibition of double negation was based on mathematical logic. Disterheft (2003:31) explains Bishop Lowth’s reasoning as follows: “two negatives in English destroy one another, or are equivalent of an affirmative.”

The eighteenth century was strongly influenced by historical linguistics. After Sir William Jones’ discovery that Sanskrit was related to Greek and other European languages, there was a real interest in finding the pristine, unadulterated “language”. It was wrongly believed that the proto-language was purer and nobler. An offshoot of this idea was the

<sup>1</sup> These terms are used here only for the purpose of illustration. They will be defined in subsequent chapters.

belief that linguistic change inevitably resulted in language decay. For this reason, they thought that the language used by previous generations, especially the aspect of language used by classical writers, was the best. In the England of the eighteenth century, the King James Version of the Bible of 1611 came to be regarded as a masterpiece of literary genius because it preserved the old ways of speaking and writing.

Contrary to what one might think, there are not many things wrong with prescriptive grammar. There are only two problems that I see with prescriptive grammar. Firstly, its proponents were/are unable to distinguish clearly between the demands of **Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)** and the demands of **Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)**. Instead, prescriptive grammarians continue to legislate indiscriminately irrespective of the mode of communication used. Secondly, prescriptivists state the rules of grammar so rigidly that they do not take into account changes in linguistic habits. Fortunately, the grip of prescriptive linguistics on grammatical anathemas such as the prohibition of split infinitives and preposition stranding is being loosened slowly. Now, it is not unusual to read sentences such as the following in print:

- (2) *“The big guns” said they couldn’t, claiming they had agreed to never again work in insurance outside the big firm.*

This sentence is taken from a book. Here we see a split infinitive in use. The infinitive marker <to> is separated from the verb <work> by <never again>.

- (3) *“When he met somebody he was interested in, he studied him in the most profound way.”*

The second sentence illustrates preposition stranding. Here the preposition <in> has been stranded from its noun <somebody>. This sentence comes from the same book but by a different author.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.5 The Contribution of Sociolinguistics to Pedagogical Grammar

Prescriptive grammar is as much a sociolinguistic concept as it is a type of grammar. Its advent created a sociolinguistic divide between language users all over Europe. Those who wrote and spoke according to the stipulations of prescriptive grammar were highly esteemed whereas those who did not were frowned upon. Fromkin et al. (2003:15) observe that “in the renaissance, a new middle class emerged who wanted their children to speak the dialect of the upper classes. This desire led to the publication of many prescriptive grammars.” The effects of prescriptive grammar are still felt today. For this reason grammar teachers cannot and should not ignore its verdicts and the consequences attached to flouting its rules. Insights into the place of prescriptive grammar in education can be gained if we analyze it from the viewpoint of the Game Theory.

#### 3.5.1 The Game Theory and Pedagogical Grammar

**The Game Theory** is a mathematical and statistical method that has been applied to economic forecasting and gambling behavior. It has also been applied in political science for conflict resolutions. It was first applied to sociolinguistics by Laitin in 1992 in his book, *“Language Repertoire and State Construction in Africa.”* In it, he sees language as a capital, an asset, and a portfolio, not just a medium of communication. Thus, in a multidialectal language environment, for all the citizenry to be socio-economically mobile, they

<sup>2</sup> These examples are from Marion, Ed. 2000. The first quote is from an essay by Ed Marion and the second by Donald Honig.



must be competent in at least two different dialects: their own sociolect (BICS) and the standard dialect (CALP). A **sociolect** is defined as the spoken dialect that a subgroup in society uses for their daily communication. The **standard dialect**, on the other hand, is the written or spoken language used in formal or official settings. Citizens whose language repertoire consists only of their sociolect have less chance for socio-economic mobility. This is particularly true if their sociolect is relatively distant from the standard academic dialect. The Game Theory proposes the following formula to represent the ideal linguistic portfolio:

$$\text{Language Repertoire} = \left\{ \begin{array}{l} 1 + 1 = 2 \\ 1 + 0 = 1 \end{array} \right\}$$

**Table 3** *Ideal Linguistic Portfolio in Multidialectal Society*

It is a sociolinguistic truism that dialects exist in any language. It is also a truism that in any given society, some dialects have more prestige than others. The more socially prestigious dialect is often considered the standard dialect of education. No amount of complaining is likely to change this situation. Game theoretic linguists liken this sociolinguistic condition to the human condition. Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all human beings are equal before the law. However, all human beings do not have the same prestige in life. Similarly, even before the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights of Barcelona in 1996,<sup>3</sup> structural linguists had declared that all languages and dialects were equal. However, all languages and dialects do not have the same prestige. This candid and commonsensical assessment of the role of language in society should urge schools to do everything within their power to teach the standard dialect in order to assure that their students obtain the ideal linguistic portfolio diagrammed above.

### 3.5.2 A Game Theoretical Approach to Prescriptive Grammar

Prescriptive grammar is a set of linguistic dos and don'ts passed down from generation to generation. Professional linguists often ridicule the pronouncements of prescriptive grammar. However, in bashing it we do a disservice to schools because we all know full well that academic writing expects conformity to Standard English. So long as prescriptive grammar does not intrude on people's sociolect, there is no reason to worry about it. Aspects of prescriptive grammar have their place in the school curriculum. Sociolinguists distinguish between a **sociolinguistic indicator** and a **sociolinguistic marker**. An indicator is a sociolinguistic variable that provides nonjudgmental information about the speaker. A marker, on the other hand, brings up all kinds of negative evaluations of the speaker. The teacher should see to it that students avoid grammatical items that are considered sociolinguistic markers by members of the academic community, just as they see to it that their students avoid gender-specific language.

### 3.5.3 Pedagogical Grammar, Bidialectalism, and Diglossia

From a Game Theoretical view, pedagogical grammar should aim at bidialectal competency for all students. **Bidialectalism** is defined simply as the ability to use and understand

<sup>3</sup> For more information about the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, visit the following website: [www.uji.es/serveis/slt/triam/triam15.html](http://www.uji.es/serveis/slt/triam/triam15.html).

two or more dialects of the same language. For the proponents of the Game Theory, academic success and sociolinguistic mobility depend to a large extent on one's ability to acquire the standard dialect in addition to the dialect of the language that one has acquired innately.

Dialects that are markedly different from the Standard English used in academic circles are considered to be near-**diglossia**. According to Ferguson's original definition, a diglossic situation exists when the written version or the formal dialect of the language is so far removed from the spoken dialect that mutual intelligibility between the two is significantly impaired. Such a situation exists in the Arabic world, in Germany, in Haiti, and in Switzerland.<sup>4</sup> It is said that dialects of German are so different from each other that a Swiss German might have difficulties understanding the speech of a person from Germany, and vice versa. Though the term "diglossia" has not been used in reference to English in the United States, Wardhaugh (2002:94) raises this possibility. For all practical purposes, academic English stands in a diglossic relationship with many dialects of American English.

A typical American classroom is a conglomerate of different dialects, some of which are closer to the standard dialect than others. Teachers should be familiar enough with the sociolects of their students so as to compare and contrast their home dialects with the demands of the standard academic dialect. The grammatical tools that are necessary for this analysis will be discussed throughout this book. From this perspective, school grammar is no more or no less than dialectal adjustment. Baker (1989:25) explains the proper role of school grammar as follows: "To a large extent, then, school grammars for native English speakers have the aim of improving their speech and writing by eliminating<sup>5</sup> or modifying any rules that differ from those found in the prestigious 'standard' dialect or that differ from the small collection of rules borrowed from Latin several centuries ago."

### ***3.6 The Contribution of Descriptive Grammar to Pedagogical Grammar***

The last piece in the equation proposed in 3.2 is descriptive grammar. Descriptive grammar is an umbrella term to describe both **context-free grammar** and **functional grammar**. Wasow (2003:300–2) defines a context-free grammar as a formal grammar that uses universal phrase structure rules and other formal mechanisms to generate sentences. Generative Transformation Grammar is a context-free grammar. This approach to grammar is particularly useful in helping students to become better writers. By teaching students how transformations manipulate sentence structure and meaning, they can use this knowledge to improve their writing skills. Syntactic transformations distinguish between ordinary writers and excellent writers. Knowing how to move an element from its location in the deep structure to a different location in the surface structure, and knowing the rules that go along with such an operation can give tremendous power to an argument, as can be seen by the two sentences below:

- (4) *We hope fondly—we pray fervently—that this mighty scourge of war pass away speedily.*
- (5) *Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war speedily pass away.*

<sup>4</sup> If we use Fishman's definition, diglossia exists in all previously colonized countries. But we are using diglossia here as originally intended by Ferguson.

<sup>5</sup> The focus of a linguistically well-adjusted teacher is not to eliminate the student's dialect. The objective is simply to help the student learn a new dialect of English so that he/she can be fully bi-dialectal.

The impact of the two sentences is not the same. The first is ordinary, the second is more poignant. The difference between the two statements lies only in the fact that (4) follows the canonical SVO sentence pattern, whereas (5) uses movement rules, a subject-auxiliary inversion rule, and Do-support to achieve a stronger stylistic effect.

Knowledge of **functional grammar** is also needed for teaching grammar meaningfully. This is an approach to grammar in which both formal and functional analyses matter. Formal grammars de-emphasize the meaning/function of linguistic elements in the sentence, but functional grammars take both form and function into account. “In functional linguistic analysis,” argues Valin (2003:324), “forms are analyzed with respect to the communicative functions they serve, and functions are investigated with respect to formal devices that are used to accomplish them. Both forms and functions are analyzed, not just functions. The interplay between form and function in language is very complex and is the prime focus of functional linguistics.” Functional grammar will be used to explain why the same lexical item may be analyzed differently depending on its function in the sentence. For example, the word <best> is used in the three sentences below. It is the same lexical item, but its grammatical function changes in each sentence:

- (6) *Children are encouraged to do their best at school.*
- (7) *Computers work best when they are defragmented.*
- (8) *Deanna’s best friend is her cat.*

The behavior of <best> in these three sentences underscores the need for pedagogical grammar to include functional grammar. In (6) <best> is a noun. In (7), it functions as an adverb. However, in (8) <best> is an adjective. All this may be confusing now. But, it will make sense after Chapters 6, 9, and 10.

### ***3.7 New Perspective on the Teaching of Grammar***

There is sufficient evidence that the traditional approach of teaching grammar which consisted mostly in teaching metalinguistic skills is no longer adequate. Over the past few decades, a consensus has emerged that grammar must be taught differently. The ingredients of the new school grammar were discussed in the previous sections. The remaining sections are devoted to the investigation of how *Traditional Grammar + Prescriptive Grammar + Sociolinguistics + Descriptive Grammar* can be used in the classroom to improve students’ reading and writing skills. Voices have risen here and there to show the way. In a recent article, the *English Journal* asked the following question to teachers: “What is Your Most Compelling Reason for Teaching Grammar?”<sup>6</sup> Here is a sampling of the reasons given. The aggregate of the responses corresponds to the approach advocated in this book:

1. “I teach grammar for two reasons. The first is that grammar instruction gives students a metalanguage, language about language. Having this, students can learn a great deal more about how to communicate clearly than they can without it. The second reason is that students are interested in language—its changes and variations—and they feel gratified to learn how it works and what it can do . . . The English language despite its complexity and flexibility, is simple when we understand it through patterns: With just a handful of sentence patterns, with expandable and shrinkable noun phrases and verb phrases, we can accomplish the most extraordinary of human capabilities: communicate” (Amy Benjamin 2006:19).

<sup>6</sup> From *English Journal*, Volume 95, No. 5, May 2006. Copyright © 2006 National Council of Teachers of English. Reprinted with permission.



2. “I believe it is the responsibility of English teachers to give students every opportunity to learn the vocabulary, the language of literacy. In every other class in their schedule, they learn that discipline’s special vocabulary: the language of mathematics, of history, of biology, of soccer. . . . By the time they graduate from high school, students have the right to a fully developed vocabulary of literacy, along with an understanding of the social and political power of language. Learning grammar means bringing to conscious level the language expertise students know subconsciously, the miraculous system that was almost fully developed when they started kindergarten” (Martha Kolln 2006:19).
3. “I teach grammar to ensure that all my students, not only those with English teachers for mothers and pedants for fathers, will graduate knowing how to write without grammatical error. Wonderful ideas aren’t enough; students need to be able to present their ideas with clarity and precision. Correctness matters. . . . Grammatical correctness is like apparel. Before writers are judged for the content of their work, they are judged for their grammar. I want my students to have an influence on society. That is why I teach grammar. In my classroom, I do not dedicate weeks of concentrated study of grammar. Rather, I take five minutes daily to present sentences that feature grammatical errors. My tenth graders and I make the corrections, reminding ourselves of the rules that explain the corrections: parallel structure, subject-verb agreement, unclear pronoun references, split infinitives, and so forth. These short, focused grammar lessons reinforce what students know but have forgotten and fill in gaps in prior instruction” (Carol Jago 2006:19–20).
4. “So often grammar is taught from the perspective of deficit. Students, particularly those who speak a dialect, are considered wrong, and so there is a strong temptation to drill students in the rules of correctness in the hopes of transforming them. But the promise of upward mobility is not a compelling reason to teach grammar. It is, in fact, disrespectful. We should teach grammar to help students gain flexibility in their use of language. Just as we wear different clothing for different occasions, we ‘wear’ language to suit a particular audience and purpose. . . . Grammar becomes a highly compelling subject for students when they can use their own language and play with it, recast it in the other modes for other audiences than their immediate peers and family. . . . What happens when a phrase moves from one part of the sentence to another? How is meaning affected when we add direct address? What happens when we code-switch? How would we code-switch any given phrase? We teach grammar, then, not as a means of taming wayward students, but as a means of developing linguistic flexibility and power” (Nancy Patterson 2006:19–20).
5. “No English teacher needs a reason to teach reading or writing or literature or vocabulary. These activities are axiomatic to our function; they define our task. But how can we discuss with students their reading or their writing or literature without providing them the conventional vocabulary for doing so: noun, verb, adjective . . . sentence. . . . Active, passive. . . . Past, present, future. . . . How can we fulfill our function and perform our task without providing students a grammar? We cannot; our profession compels us—by definition” (James Penha 2006:20).
6. “When should we teach grammar? If what is meant by ‘teaching grammar’ is labeling parts of speech, diagramming sentences, underlining subjects, and double-underlining predicates, we’d say as loudly as often as we could: “Never!” . . . When should we teach grammar? We should teach grammar when

it's needed to help kids do something that matters, and then we should teach it in a way that maximizes the utility of what we are teaching and minimizes the amount of time spent on memorizing terms or filling in blanks. . . . It may be that some terms will be useful in that effort, but you don't have to identify an introductory adverbial clause or recognize a subordinating conjunction to write with power and grace" (Jeffery D. Wilhelm 2006:20).

7. When I read the question 'What is your most compelling reason for teaching grammar?' my first thoughts were, 'But I don't. I don't teach grammar. Well, I don't teach grammar as a separate subject. . . . Instead of teaching grammar in isolation, I teach—and advocate teaching—selected aspects of grammar that can help writers add variety to sentence structures, . . . and can empower writers to use accepted mainstream conventions in such matters as subject-verb agreement, pronoun reference, and punctuation" (Constance Weaver 2006:19).
8. "I teach grammar to help teachers discover how much students already know. No longer do teachers see students as struggling, making errors, leaving off endings. . . . In this context, I offer teachers research-based techniques for teaching Standard English: contrastive analysis and code-switching. Students compare and contrast the grammar of home speech to the grammar of school for the purpose of adding Standard English to their linguistic repertoires. Students then can code-switch to choose the language style to fit the setting" (Rebecca S. Wheeler 2006:21).

It is obvious from the preceding responses that teachers are in search for an approach to school grammar that purposefully improves reading and writing skills. The Pedagogical Grammar approach as schematized in Table 2 of section 3.2, meets these needs because it has all the necessary ingredients.

### 3.7.1 Speaking vs. Writing

Contemporary linguists take for granted that elementary school-aged children have innate competency in Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills. Consequently, schools should focus their resources on developing Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency skills. The new approach to teaching grammar is better suited for this task. Teachers who use the new approach can teach grammar from a bidialectal perspective as outlined in 3.5 through 3.5.3. The Game Theory can assist in developing the grammatical skills that students need to succeed academically. Unlike oral proficiency that emerges naturally, writing abilities are hard to nurture because, as noted by Pinker (1994:401), the language used for writing is somewhat different from the language used for speaking:

*Expository writing requires language to express far more complex trains of thought than it was biologically designed to do. Inconsistencies caused by limitations of short-term memory and planning, unnoticed in conversation, are not as tolerable when preserved on a page that is to be perused more leisurely. . . . Overcoming one's natural egocentrism and trying to anticipate the knowledge state of a generic reader at every stage of the exposition is one of the most important tasks in writing well. All this makes writing a difficult craft that must be mastered through practice, instruction, feedback, and—probably most important—intensive exposure to good examples.*

The new perspectives on teaching grammar seek to develop the following subskills in students:

1. awareness of prescriptive rules
2. proficiency with sentence-level phenomena

3. proficiency with inter-sentential cohesion
4. proficiency with different registers

These are not the only subskills needed to write successfully. However, they are the most basic ones that proficient writers weave seamlessly together in creating their texts. Grammatical instruction that correlates highly with writing proficiency is extremely challenging, as noted by Adger et al. (2007:113):

*Teaching students to write is seen as one of the most important functions of schools. But teaching writing is hard work. Students bring a range of language skills to this task. For speakers of vernacular dialects, there are special factors for teachers to consider in writing instruction largely because of the contrasts between the language of speaking and the language of writing are greater for them than for speakers of standard varieties.*

### 3.7.2 Awareness of Prescriptive Rules

Proficiency in Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency calls for an awareness of different types of rules in writing. Williams (2007:15) distinguishes between three such rules which he labels “Real Rules,” “Social Rules,” and “Invented Rules”. For him, “Real Rules” are “what make[s] English: articles must precede nouns: *the book*, not *book the*. Speakers born into English don’t think about these rules at all when they write, and violate them only when they are tired or distracted.” Since “Real Rules” are innate, no grammar teacher needs to worry about “Real Rules” because students do not violate them. They are part of students’ internal grammar. These rules are exactly the same for spoken and written English. Children born into English-speaking families know these rules even before they enter kindergarten. Pedagogical Grammar does not address “Real Rules.”

The remaining rules are “Social Rules” and “Invented Rules.” Available data indicate that even college students struggle with these rules in their writings. In his article, *The Seven Deadly Sins of Student Writers*, Yagoda (2006:B13) attributes poor writing skills to the lack of proficiency in these two types of rules.

Yagoda begins his article by categorizing college students’ mistakes into two groups. The first deals with style and the second with “usages that do not follow the accepted rules of standard English.” The latter classification corresponds to Williams’ “Social Rules” which he defines as rules that “distinguish Standard English from nonstandard: *He doesn’t have any money* versus *He don’t have no money*. Schooled writers observe these rules as naturally as they observe “Real Rules” and think about them only when they notice others violating them.” Table 4 (see page 64) lists some common “Social Rules.”

Williams makes it clear that “Social Rules” must be adhered to in academic writing. This is not the case for “Invented Rules” which he defines as a handful of rules invented by some grammarians that “they think we *should* observe. These are the rules that the grammar police enforce and that too many educated writers obsess over. Most date from the last half of the eighteenth century.” Descriptive linguists have attacked all prescriptive rules but their most virulent attacks have been reserved for “Invented Rules.” Pinker (1994:374) refers to them as “silly” and “dumb” rules. Table 5 (see page 64) includes some of the most common “Invented Rules.”

| No. | Categorizations   | Illustrations <sup>7</sup>                   |
|-----|---|--|
| 1.  | Letter Metathesis   | aks a question                               |
| 2.  | <-g> deletion   | workin'                                      |
| 3.  | 1st Person BE Contraction   | I ain't                                      |
| 4.  | Double Negation   | I can't get no satisfaction                  |
| 5.  | Failure of Subject-Verb Agreement in the Present Tense with 3rd Person Singular Subject | he don't                                     |
| 6.  | Mistaking a Pronoun for a Determiner  | them boys                                    |
| 7.  | Failure of Subject-Verb Agreement in the Past Tense with 1st Person Plural Subject      | we was                                       |
| 8.  | Use of an accusative case instead of a nominative case                                  | <i>Me</i> and Jennifer are going to the mall |

**Table 4** *Social Rules*

| No. | Categorizations  | Examples  |
|-----|--|---|
| 1.  | Passive Avoidance  | The bill <i>was voted down</i>  |
| 2.  | Back-formation   | Let me <i>caveat</i> that ...   |
| 3.  | Hopefully Fronting   | <i>Hopefully</i> , it won't rain.   |
| 4.  | Split Infinitive   | To <i>boldly</i> go where no man has gone before.                                   |
| 5.  | Preposition Stranding  | Who did you agree <i>with</i> ?   |
| 6.  | Violation of Number Agreement with Indefinite pronouns   | "Everyone should return to <i>their</i> seats."                                     |
| 7.  | Case Agreement with "who" and "whom"   | <i>Who</i> do you trust?  |
| 8.  | Case Agreement with "I" and "me"   | Mary is taller than <i>me</i> .   |
| 9.  | Avoidance of Sentence Initial "and" or "but."  | <i>But</i> I did not see any merit in his argument.                                 |
| 10. | Avoidance of Sentence Initial "because," and "since"   | <i>Because</i> I'm your mother.   |
| 11. | Avoidance of "which" as a relative pronoun   | The action <i>which</i> Congress has taken resulted in hardship.                    |
| 12. | Singular Agreement with "any" and "none"   | <i>None</i> of the reasons <i>is</i> sufficient to end that project.                |
| 13. | Never use <i>like</i> for <i>as</i> or <i>as if</i> .  | These operations failed <i>like</i> the earlier ones.                               |
| 14. | Don't use <i>hopefully</i> to mean " <i>I hope</i> ."  | <i>Hopefully</i> , it will not rain.  |
| 15. | Don't use <i>finalize</i> to mean " <i>finish</i> " or " <i>complete</i> "   | Let us <i>finalize</i> this paper before the deadline.                              |
| 16. | Don't use <i>impact</i> as a verb  | The survey <i>impacted</i> our strategy.  |
| 17. | Don't modify absolute words such as " <i>perfect</i> ," " <i>unique</i> ," " <i>final</i> ," or " <i>complete</i> " with " <i>very</i> ," " <i>more</i> ," " <i>quite</i> ," | The people of the United States, in order to form a more <i>perfect</i> union . . . |

**Table 5** *Invented Rules*

<sup>7</sup> Most of the Illustrative examples in Tables 4 and 5 are taken from Pinker (1994:370–403) and Williams (2007:16–30).

No matter how silly these rules may seem to linguists, prescriptive teachers still adhere to them. Pinker (1994:374) does not hide his opposition to prescriptive rules. But he concedes that writers must submit to the dictums of these silly rules for the following reasons:

*Once introduced, a prescriptive rule is very hard to eradicate, no matter how ridiculous. Inside the educational and writing establishments, the rules survive by the same dynamic that perpetuate ritual genital mutilation and college fraternity hazing: I had to go through it and am none the worse, so why should you have it any easier. Anyone daring to overturn a rule by example must always worry that readers will think he or she is ignorant of the rule, rather than challenging it . . . Perhaps most importantly, since prescriptive rules are so psychologically unnatural that only those with access to the right schooling can abide by them, they serve as shibboleths, differentiating the elite from the rabble.*

Williams (2007:16) advises writers to observe rules thoughtfully. He never advocates mindless obedience, nor does he encourage brazen disrespect. He even cautions against selective observance. He proposes a middle-of-the road approach which he offers in a form of an advice, “If you want to avoid being accused of ‘lacking standards,’ but refuse to submit to whatever ‘rule’ someone can dredge up from ninth-grade English, you have to know more about these invented rules than the rule-mongers do.” This piece of advice is unlikely to be heeded because, unless a whole catalog of prescriptive rules is put in front of students, it is unlikely that they will know all these rules. The best course of action would consist in helping students match their register with the type of writing assignment.

### 3.8 Register and Writing

The term “register” is a sociolinguistic concept used to describe different levels of speech that a person may use depending on the context of communication. It is often used synonymously with “style.” Numerous attempts have been made to classify registers but, to date there is no classificatory consensus. The following levels are the most recurrent. Fromkin et al. (2007:437–8) divide registers broadly into two main categories: **formal** and **informal** registers. The formal register has been divided further into three distinct but overlapping styles. The same goes for the informal register.

#### 3.8.1 Formality Continuum

The classification of formal registers into **ceremonial register**, **formal register**, and **academic register** is based on insights derived from ethnography of communication. There is a noticeable difference in formality between Resolution 1368 passed by the United Nations’ Security Council in the aftermath of September 11th, 2001, and any State of the Union Address. Both texts are formal but the United Nations’ resolutions, or resolutions passed by the US Congress are far more formal than any State of the Union speech. Resolution 1368, condemning international terrorism, consists of a single sentence of 240 words. Furthermore, the resolution concludes with the formulaic fragment “[*the Security Council*] decides to remain seized of the matter.” Such a concluding phrase is found only in highly ceremonial speeches. There is also a noticeable difference in formality between a State of the Union address and an article that appears in a refereed journal. These examples underscore the need to establish a hierarchy of formality. The most formal of all formal registers would be the ceremonial register, and the least formal along this continuum would be the article in a refereed journal. These three registers in the formality continuum correspond to Burch’s (2003:81) definition of formal style. She defines such a style as one “designed to inform and to maintain a distance between the



writer/speaker and the reader/hearer. . . . It refrains from using ellipsis and doesn't even stoop to contractions. Its sentences tend to be long and complex. It is usually characterized by third person and frequently by words of many syllables derived from Latin." Clouse (2007:137) concurs with this evaluation of formal registers. She adds that this formal register "requires strict adherence to all the rules of grammar [emphasis added]. It includes technical language and long sentences and avoids personal pronouns *I* and *you*, and contractions such as *don't* and *aren't*. The tone is impersonal, humorless, and unemotional."

Articles that appear in a refereed journal are generally written in a register that Faigley (2007:290) has labeled "**academic register.**" His use of this term is synonymous with what Clouse (2007:137) has referred to as "popular" register. The latter is defined as "the level of diction common in many magazines, newspapers, and books. If you are using popular diction, you need to adhere to grammar rules, but you can usually use contractions and *I* and *you*. You can express emotion and humor. Your tone will usually be relaxed, and you can let your personality show through. A popular level of diction is suitable for most college essays written in your English class." In her article *From Usage to Grammar: The Mind's Response to Repetition* that appeared in *Language*, Bybee uses "*I*" to refer to herself.<sup>8</sup> She also uses various contractions. Clearly, her style is academic without being overbearingly formal.

The distinction between various levels of formal register is important in this new approach to teaching grammar. Students should calibrate their writing style to fit the writing assignments. It also helps in determining which of the prescriptive rules to adhere to and which ones to flout. It will be argued in Chapter 15 that "Invented Rules" pronouncements against passive constructions, split infinitives, case agreement, and the like can be ignored in academic writing.

### 3.8.2 Informality Continuum

For students to be competent in the academic register, they must not only pay attention to formal register but also differentiate between different layers of informal register. The purpose of such an exercise is to know what to avoid when writing for school or for publication. Fromkin et al (2007:438) define informal style as a register in which "the rules of contraction are used more often, the syntactic rules of negation and agreement may be altered, and many words are used that do not occur in formal style. . . . Informal talk is not anarchy and even informal registers are rule-governed, but the rules of deletion, contraction, and word choice are different from those of formal language." Clouse (2007:137) goes one step further and states that informal diction is not acceptable for college papers . . . but it is often suitable for friendly letters, e-mails, and personal journals."

The style of discourse that Fromkin et al. and Clouse label "informal register" has been referred to by others as **colloquial register**. Burch (2003:80–81) calls it **casual register**. Burch singles out the omission of the subordinating conjunction "that" as a sign of a colloquial register. Another form of informal register is called **intimate style**. Even though there may be no syntactic differences between colloquial register and intimate register, the two can be distinguished by the choice of lexical items. Words such as "*honey, sweetheart, mom, dad,*" and nicknames belong to the intimate style and are usually not appropriate in academic writing. When I was working on this chapter, a colleague barged into my office with a book review written by one of his college students. The student wrote

<sup>8</sup> *Language*, Volume 82, Number 4, 2006.

the following conclusion: “*This is a fascinating little book. It was so good that I could not put it down. I nearly peed in my pants because I wanted to get to the end before going to the bathroom.*” This last sentence is sociolinguistically not appropriate for a book review!

Further down on the continuum of informality, one finds a style called **slang**. This register develops around some lexical items whose meanings are known only by the insiders of a subculture. This register is common among gang members, groups belonging to various subcultures within the larger community. Slang terms are transient and only a small fraction of them make it into the mainstream vocabulary. Pinker (1994:400) notes that the following words started as slang but are now accepted as mainstream words: “*clever, fun, sham, banter, mob, stingy, bully, junkie, jazz.*” He explains the life cycle of slang as follows “most slang lexicons are preciously guarded by their subcultures as membership badges. . . . When the most passé terms get cast off and handed down to the mainstream, they often fill expressive gaps in the language beautifully.” Unless one is quoting a slang term, vocabulary items associated with slang register are not usually accepted in academic writing.

### 3.8.3 Focus on Academic Register

Native speakers, regardless of their level of education, control a fair amount of informal, casual, intimate, and slang registers. These registers are acquired effortlessly in the process of acquiring their first language. However, this is not the case for the various shades of formal register. The latter is acquired only after a long time of apprenticeship and tutoring. Furthermore, there is generally a high correlation between one’s mastery of formal registers and one’s level of formal education. This point is underscored by Fromkin et al. (2007:438) as follows: “Most speakers of a language speak one way with friends, another on a job interview or presenting a report in class, another talking to small children, another with their parents, and so on.” Proficiency with different registers is a necessary condition for successful writing, because, as noted by Wardhaugh (2006:52) “each register helps you to express your identity at a specific time or place, i.e., how you seek to present yourself to others.” The register one uses to write sends multiple messages to the reader. As noted by Jago earlier, “Before writers are judged for the content of their work, they are judged for their grammar.” It is therefore very important that grammatical accuracy match the level of register used.

The purpose of writing in academia is to convince the reader of one’s knowledge about a particular subject, viewpoint, analysis, or finding. Consequently, every effort should be made to ensure that the strength of the argument is not diminished by a mismatch between the level register and adherence to proper grammatical rules. Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz (2007:383) give the following piece of advice to novice writers: “What level of formality is most appropriate? In the United States, a fairly informal style is often acceptable, even appreciated. Many cultures, however, tend to value formality. If you’re in doubt, therefore, it’s probably wise to err on the side of formality, especially in communicating with elders or with those in authority.”

Academic writing can be seen as “communicating with those in authority.” Consequently, the appropriate academic register should be used. The academic world is currently very fragmented. Therefore, there is no consensus about what constitutes an appropriate academic register. The best possible model one can follow is to conform to the style acceptable to the leading journals in one’s academic field. For linguists, the style used in *Language*, the Journal of the Linguistic Society of America, should be seen as the norm.

Many in the humanities follow the guidelines of the MLA, while those the social sciences adhere to the recommendations of the APA. Irrespective of one's area of specialization, writers are advised not to stray too far from standard grammar:

*So what should be done about usage? Unlike some academics in the 1960s, I am not saying that instruction in standard English grammar and composition are tools to perpetuate an oppressive white patriarchal capitalist status quo and that The People should be liberated to write however they please. . . . It is just common sense that people should be given every encouragement and opportunity to learn the dialect that has become the standard in their society and to employ it in many formal settings, Pinker (1994:399, 400).*

### **3.9 Research Findings on Grammar and Writing**

The leitmotiv of those who are lukewarm or opposed to the teaching of grammar in school is that the teaching of grammar does not improve students' writing ability. This was alluded to in the lengthy quote at the beginning of this chapter. This finding is so counter-intuitive that its premises have to be vigorously challenged. The test items that led to this conclusion have to be re-examined. The grammatical elements on which students are tested have to be re-evaluated. The grammatical approach used prior to testing must be made known for better scrutiny. Such pronouncements are met with skepticism by many practicing linguists. Unfortunately, this finding has been embraced by the advocates of "progressive education," and now, the whole debate has been turned into a cultural or political war. Gee (2003:649) reports that forty Massachusetts linguists signed a petition against "the state's new whole language-inspired English standards in July 1996." The consensus among linguists is that the findings of contemporary linguistics about first language acquisition cannot inform educational practice. Conversational language is different from academic language. The former is innate, while the latter is not. Therefore, it is not fitting to apply the findings of the former to the latter without discernment. The best approach for teaching grammar that can benefit writing would be one that raises students' and teachers' levels of grammatical awareness. This is the view taken in this book. By helping students discover the various patterns of sentence formation and the operations that move, delete, add, or substitute one lexical category for another, they become critically aware of the requirements of academic English. Once teachers are grammatically informed, they will use their creative genius to help improve their students' proficiency in academic English. Teachers are creative with language, and the new approach to teaching grammar discussed in this chapter can unleash their creativity in the classroom.

### **3.10 Conclusion**

Teachers need to know pedagogical grammar to help their students succeed academically. This knowledge should be broad enough to include aspects of traditional grammar, prescriptive grammar, sociolinguistics, and descriptive grammar. The combination of all these perspectives on grammar will provide the teacher with the necessary background knowledge to teach writing more efficiently. Fifty years of booting grammar out of school has led to disastrous results. Linguistics is partly to blame because it downgraded prescriptive grammar without providing teachers with a suitable alternative. Now, a formula such as the one proposed in Table 2 gives teachers a broader view of grammar and a new approach of teaching grammar that is compatible with the academic register.

# Key Terms to Know

These are the key terms that you should be able to use and define after reading this chapter:

1. academic register: 3.8.1, 3.8.2, 3.8.3, 3.10
2. BICS: 3.2, 3.4, 3.5.1
3. bidialectalism: 3.5.3
4. CALP: 3.2, 3.4, 3.5.1
5. casual register: 3.8.2
6. ceremonial register: 3.8.1
7. colloquial register: 3.8.2
8. context-free grammar: 3.6
9. descriptive grammar: 3.2, 3.6, 3.7, 3.10
10. diglossia: 3.5.3
11. formal register: 3.8., 3.8.1
12. formality continuum: 3.8.1
13. functional grammar: 3.6
14. informal register: 3.8.1
15. informality continuum: 3.8.2
16. innate grammar: 3.1, 3.3
17. intimate register: 3.8.2
18. Jargon: 3.3
19. metalanguage: 3.3, 3.7
20. pedagogical grammar: 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.5.1, 3.5.3, 3.6, 3.7, 3.7.2, 3.10
21. prescriptive grammar: 3.0, 3.2, 3.4, 3.5, 3.5.2, 3.7, 3.10
22. register: 3.7.1, 3.8
23. school grammar: 3.1, 3.2, 3.5.3, 3.7
24. sociolect: 3.5.1, 3.5.2, 3.5.3
25. sociolinguistic index: 3.5.2
26. sociolinguistic marker: 3.5.2
27. standard dialect: 3.5.1, 3.5.3
28. traditional grammar: 3.0, 3.2, 3.3, 3.7, 3.10

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## EXERCISE 1—PRESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR<sup>9</sup>

Prescriptive grammarians frown upon aspects of the sentences below. For each sentence, decide if it is sociolinguistically an **indicator**, a **marker**, or a **stereotype**. Wardhaugh (2006:145) define these three terms as follows: “An indicator is a linguistic variable to which little or no social import is attached. Only a linguistically trained observer is aware of indicators. . . . On the other hand, a marker does carry with it social significance. In fact, markers may be potent carriers of social information. People are aware of markers, and the distribution of markers is clearly related to social groupings and to styles of speaking. . . . A stereotype is a popular, and therefore, conscious characterization of speech of a particular group.” Decide what rule of prescriptive grammar has been violated. Rephrase each sentence according to the demands of academic English.

1. Who did you go to the movie with?
2. The person who you were talking to was my chemistry teacher.
3. I don't want to play no more.
4. You should have heard the language that them boys were using!
5. I should have test drove this car before buying it.
6. Let me tell you! You was wrong! Wrong as wrong can be!
7. We hope to truly eliminate the estate tax forever.

<sup>9</sup>These are actual sentences produced by native speakers. None of them was made up.

8. Becoming increasingly cloudy, the temperature today will be in the teens.
  
9. I was exhausted, completely pooped! I lied the baby down in his crib and went right back to sleep.
  
10. One day, we were at the mall. I thought I had brought my purse. I looked everywhere. Purse, where are you? So, in the end my sister had to borrow me some money to buy a dress.
  
11. In a war, there's a lot of casualties. That's the nature of war!
  
12. Can you itch my back for me, please?
  
13. The Vikings won the Green Bay Packers.
  
14. You should have went to see the game. It was lots of fun!
  
15. My sisters are taller than me.
  
16. Mary and me attended the same college.

## EXERCISE 2: GRAMMATICAL ANALYSIS

Use **two** descriptors, a functional descriptor and a formal descriptor, to analyze and categorize the highlighted words in the sentences below. Refer to section 1.15 if necessary to do this assignment.

1. The **shower** was **awesome**.  
Functional descriptor for “*shower*”:  
Formal descriptor for “*shower*”:  
Functional descriptor for “*awesome*”:  
Formal descriptor for “*awesome*”:
2. They **can fish** here. [This sentence is lexically and syntactically ambiguous!]  
Functional descriptor for “*can*<sup>1</sup>”:  
Formal descriptor for “*can*<sup>1</sup>”:  
Functional descriptor for “*fish*<sup>1</sup>”:  
Formal descriptor for “*fish*<sup>1</sup>”:
3. They **can fish** here. [This sentence is lexically and syntactically ambiguous!]  
Functional descriptor for “*can*<sup>2</sup>”:  
Formal descriptor for “*can*<sup>2</sup>”:  
Functional descriptor for “*fish*<sup>2</sup>”:  
Formal descriptor for “*fish*<sup>2</sup>”:
4. **They** can fish **here**.  
Functional descriptor for “*they*”:  
Formal descriptor for “*they*”:  
Functional descriptor for “*here*”:  
Formal descriptor for “*here*”:
5. Dick finally **decided** on the **boat**. [This sentence is lexically and syntactically ambiguous!]  
Functional descriptor for “*decide*”:  
Formal descriptor for “*decide*”:  
Functional descriptor for “*boat*”:  
Formal descriptor for “*boat*”:
6. Dick finally **decided on** the **boat**. [This sentence is lexically and syntactically ambiguous!]  
Functional descriptor for “*decide on*”:  
Formal descriptor for “*decide on*”:  
Functional descriptor for “*boat*”:  
Formal descriptor for “*boat*”:

7. Dick **finally** decided on **the** boat.  
Functional descriptor for “*finally*”:  
Formal descriptor for “*finally*”:  
Functional descriptor for “*the*”:  
Formal descriptor for “*the*”:
8. Squad helps dog **bite victims**. [This sentence is lexically and syntactically ambiguous!]  
Functional descriptor for “*bite*<sup>1</sup>”:  
Formal descriptor for “*bite*<sup>1</sup>”:  
Functional descriptor for “*victims*”:  
Formal descriptor for “*victims*”:
9. Squad helps dog **bite victims**. [This sentence is lexically and syntactically ambiguous!]  
Functional descriptor for “*bite*<sup>2</sup>”:  
Formal descriptor for “*bite*<sup>2</sup>”:  
Functional descriptor for “*victims*”:  
Formal descriptor for “*victims*”:

### EXERCISE 3: GRAMMAR AND WRITING

Some studies (see 3.9) purport to show that knowing grammar explicitly does not translate into better writing skills. Disterheft (2003:22–3 in 3.0) calls this a fallacy. How do sections 3.7.1 through 3.9 argue that knowing grammar explicitly is relevant to improving students’ writing skills? Highlight some specific points.