

Teaching English in Ghanaian Schools: Where is the Grammar?

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ABSTRACT This paper argues that the grammar of English as a second language should be taught in English second language classrooms so that some complex grammatical issues such as students' poor knowledge about word classes, subject-verb agreement – concord, mechanics of writing, confusion with the use of the relative clause, challenges with modifiers, etc. which persistently inundate students' essays can be ameliorated. Textual analysis approach is used to analyse grammatical structures from selected Ghanaian newspapers - *Daily Graphic* and *The Daily Guide*, students' manuscripts and other sources to arrive at the findings, which support the need for the teaching of English grammar in Ghanaian schools. In addition, the paper seeks to argue that until the challenges as mentioned above are dealt with in English grammar as a second language, both students and teachers, especially in Ghanaian schools, cannot be comfortable with the use of the language. As a recommendation, the paper suggests that experienced teachers of English should be employed by school authorities to teach the subject at all levels of education. In addition, the paper recommends that English second language curriculum planners should make adequate provision for good textbooks for students and teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Although English is an official language in Ghana, its teaching and learning often pose some challenges to both teachers and students in schools, colleges and even universities. Studies have however revealed that the challenges posed by the use of English as second language in Ghana is as a result of how the language is taught and learned at all levels of education in the country. For example, studies have revealed that some teachers of English as a second language do not have the requisite training or qualification before teaching the subject in some schools, colleges and even universities in Ghana (Afful 2007). For this reason, certain aspects of the English second language, such as grammar, is often relegated in the English second language classroom. Indeed, our experiences over the years as teachers and lecturers of English second language have revealed that some teachers of English second language often shirk the responsibility of teaching English grammar, which is the core of the language. It is in an attempt to salvage some of these challenges pertaining to the teaching and learning of the grammar of English second language that we intend to advance arguments in this paper for English Second Language teachers to seriously intensify, the teaching and learning of grammar of English

second language, especially in Ghanaian schools and elsewhere.

Statement of the Problem

A group of students who were interviewed at the University of Cape Town, (UCT) South Africa in 1995 as to what they thought about the teaching and learning of English grammar as a second language said, '... Good academic work is characterized by good style of grammar especially in arts and sciences...' (Angelil-Carter 1998:53). Indeed, their response underscores the important role of English grammar in academia. Notwithstanding the challenges the teaching of English grammar as a second language poses to both teachers and students in schools, colleges and even universities, not much effort has been made by teachers and students to curtail the recurrence of some of these problems. Ironically, some schools of thought have argued that English grammar as first, second or even third language should not be taught in English second language classrooms because its teaching does not help students, but rather confuse them since there are many rules to be learnt by students. In particular, Krashen (1982) and Prabhu (1987) are of the view that students become naturally good speakers of a target language – English Language, on their own than when they are taught by somebody or when it is learned from somebody. In contrast to the views ex-

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pressed by Krashen and Prabhu, Bock in Angeli-Carter (1998: 53) has emphasised the need to teach grammar – English grammar. She is of the view that the teaching of English grammar in English second language classrooms can afford students the opportunity to ‘...communicate additional meanings about ‘time (tense), plurality, possibility...’. It is in line with the views shared by Bock, in Angeli-Carter (1998), Sharwood (1988), Ellis (1997) and others concerning the teaching of English grammar that we intend to advance reasons in this paper in support of the need to teach English grammar in English second language classrooms.

Purpose of this Paper

The main purpose of this paper is to advance reasons for the continuous teaching of English grammar in Ghanaian schools. In addition, the paper intends to offer some recommendations which pertain to the teaching of English grammar in Ghana, for we believe that there are complex issues which continue to pose challenges to both teachers and students with regards to speaking and writing of English grammar. Indeed, Bock, in Angeli-Cater (1998) has argued that because students are from different cultural areas with ‘English as a first or second (or third or fourth) language, the range of fluency in English poses difficulties for both students and lecturers...’ (p. 53).

Research Question

The paper seeks to find answers to the following question:

(i) Why should English grammar be taught in Ghanaian schools?

METHODOLOGY

A textual analysis method was employed in this paper to analyse the various samples of grammatical structures or sentences which were used as data for this research work. Klein (1996:228) describes textual analysis as that which involves the ‘identification, examination and evaluation of various techniques and tools used by the creator of a text’. In addition, Fairclough is of the view that textual analysis should take into consideration ‘text structure and vocabulary’ (Fairclough 1992: 36). Although this

paper is not concerned with analysis of vocabulary, it deals with the analysis of grammatical structures – sentences. Random sampling method (Alhasan 2006) was used to select the analysed sentences from books, sermons, the Ghanaian Daily graphic, the Daily Guide, students’ manuscripts and utterances of some people. These structures were analysed and arrived at the problems associated with them. It is based on the grammatical analysis that the following arguments have been advanced to show the need for continuous teaching of grammar in Ghanaian schools.

ANALYSIS

Although there are many areas which need to be considered in English second language classrooms, this paper focuses on issues concerning the use of the noun and its categories, issues on mechanics of writing, issues about wrong use of grammatical concord with verbs, tense and number, issues concerning the use of the conditional clause, the confusion arising in meaning in the use of the relative clause, the challenge with misplaced and dangling modification and wrong use of prepositions.

1. Problems or Errors Resulting From Students’ Inability to Recognise Categories of Nouns and Use Them Correctly

If we consider the situation where students find it difficult to identify the various categories of the noun in English grammar in order to write or use them correctly in their essays, theses and day-to-day transactions, then we cannot rule out the teaching of English grammar in English second language classrooms. For example, the following are some grammatical errors committed by some students of a Ghanaian university as a result of their paucity of knowledge on the noun.

(i) *My uncle is a staff of Ghana Telecom University College.* (ii) *We have many Engineering equipments in our new laboratory.* (iii) *What criteria was/is/has been used to select the competitors for Miss Ghana 2010?* It is pertinent to mention that these grammatical errors arise because students tend to forget that the noun ‘staff’ is a collective noun and it is already plural; therefore, does not need the indefinite article ‘a’ to show singularity when it is used. In

the same stratum, the noun 'equipments' is wrongly used because it is a noun which does not need 's' to indicate plurality. In example (iii), again, students do not know that 'criteria' is the plural form of the noun 'criterion'; as a result, they chose the verbs 'was/is/has been' which are singular verbs instead of the plural verbs 'are/were/have been'. Indeed, there is nothing like 'a staff' and 'equipments' in English grammar since 'staff' and 'equipment' are already plurals. We can however, say/write: *My uncle is a member of Ghana Telecom University College staff*. These, and many other such challenges with regard to the teaching of the noun in English grammar, can be dealt with when English grammar is taught in English second language classrooms.

2. Challenges Arising From Wrong Use of the Different Types of Verbs and Tense

The teaching of grammar in English second language classrooms would enhance our students' understanding of the verb system, and by so doing, they would be able to use verbs effectively in both written and verbal communications. Take the case where the use of the regular verbs often poses a challenge to some students of English second language, especially in written communication. In English second language classrooms, especially in Ghana, it is not uncommon for students to write the participle (present/past) and the simple past forms of the regular verbs: *occur, equip, transfer, refer*, etc. as: 'occured', 'equiped', 'transfered' 'referred', etc. instead of: 'occurred', 'equipped', 'transferred' and 'referred'. The problem is that students often forget that the root forms of such regular verbs often double their last consonants to arrive at their present and past perfect or simple past forms when they are used with the auxiliary verbs (has/have/had). Equally, the issue about the transitive and intransitive verbs should be the focus of English grammar teaching in English second language classrooms. The knowledge of the transitive verb for example, would help students to avoid utterances such as: (i) Thomas killed. (ii) Don't mention, and (iii) I am/We are enjoying, etc. This is because they would be aware that the verbs "killed", "mention" and "are enjoying" are transitive verbs which require objects as in: (i) Thomas killed a mouse, goat, and an antelope. (ii) Don't men-

tion it (as a response to someone who has expressed appreciation for a service the speaker has rendered to the one.) and (iii) I am/We are enjoying ourselves here/there. All these problems and many more, which often characterise both verbal and written communications of students, who speak and write English as a second language, can be minimised when English grammar as a second language is taught in schools and colleges.

3. Challenges with Mechanics of Writing

Another reason for teaching English grammar in English second language classrooms is to minimise the challenge with mechanics of writing – the use of the full stop, the comma, the colon, the semi-colon, et cetera. No doubt, this often poses a great challenge to students in written communication, and this challenge can be ameliorated when English grammar is effectively taught in English second language classrooms. For example, in the English second language classrooms, there are many students who do not know that anytime a subordinate adverbial clause or a phrase begins a sentence or paragraph, the comma must be used to mark it off from the main clause, as in: (i) *After the Judge had pronounced the verdict in the murder case*, the accused screamed and collapsed. (ii) *When I was listening to the radio*, the lights went out. (iii) *By contrast*, it is not good for a child to start reading erotic stories. It is important to indicate that the italicised portions in the first two sentences are subordinate adverbial clauses, while the one in example (iii) is an adverbial phrase each of which is expected to be followed by a comma in order to avoid being penalised for wrong mechanics.

4. Confusion Arising From Wrong Use of Grammatical Concord

Long (2007: 606) has argued, 'For a sentence to make sense, subjects and verbs have to agree with each other....' In particular, she is of the view that the issue about subject-verb agreement is a relevant grammatical skill which every student must strive to acquire. However, students who speak and write English as a second language, often face challenges in this regard. With the teaching of English grammar in English second language classrooms, students

would be conversant with the rules of grammatical concord. To many people, whenever grammatical concord is mentioned, they narrow their thoughts to the agreement which exists between a subject and a verb, and fail to realise the fact that the issue about grammatical concord goes beyond a mere subject-verb agreement in English grammar. For example, grammatical concord can be seen in the clause structure to the extent that many grammarians argue that whenever the verb in the main clause of a complex sentence is in its past form, then the verb in the subordinate clause of that sentence must also be in its past form to agree with it. For example: I *saw* the Queen last year when I *went* to London or When I *went* to London last year, I *saw* the Queen.

However, we must point out that there are exceptions to this rule, and this is what should be the focus of the English teachers in English second language classrooms. For example, when in an attempt to remind a friend that you called yesterday or the previous day and you say: *I was the one who called yesterday*, just because you want to adhere to the rule of concord as stated earlier, you would realise that the verb 'was' in the main clause, although agrees with the verb 'called' in the subordinate clause, it gives a different semantic interpretation of the utterance – you are no longer the one who is calling now or you are dead (perhaps?). You should therefore say: *I am the one who called yesterday/the previous day*. It is therefore imperative to indicate that complex issues such as this can be explained when English grammar is effectively taught in English second language classrooms.

Notwithstanding the said argument, there is no doubt that grammatical concord can be between a subject and a verb. In this case, the teacher of English second language has to teach students to recognize the fact that a singular subject requires a singular verb and vice versa. The teacher can therefore drill students on exercises as follows: (i) *the thief has left the scene of crime*. (ii) *She is in Cape Town for a conference*. (iii) *I have a book*. In the three examples given, the subjects of the sentences are, **the thief**, **I** and **she** which are singular; therefore, by rule, require singular verbs – **has left**, **is** and **have** respectively. Whereas on a plural subject-verb agreement, we can have examples such as: (i) Lecturers **mark** students' assignments.

(ii) Students **do** assignments, and (iii) We **have** many assignments to do today.

In addition, English grammar should be taught in English second language classrooms so that students would be aware of other complex issues in grammatical concord such as the rule of proximity and notional concord. For example, on the rule of proximity, students would realise that if the antecedent (a noun/pronoun/noun phrase which precedes a relative pronoun) of a relative clause is singular, a singular verb is chosen and vice-versa. Through the teaching of the rule of proximity in grammatical concord, students would realise that constructions such as: (i) Collins is **the man** who often **teaches** us English grammar (ii) Thomson is one of **the men** who often **come** to our house, and (iii) Joan and Yvonne are **the women** who often **fight** us, would no longer pose problems to them because they would understand that the selection of the verbs, 'teaches', 'come' and 'fight' respectively, become necessary as a result of the nature of the antecedents, 'the man', 'the men' and 'the women' in the above sentences. Consequently, when English grammar as a second language is effectively taught in schools and colleges, students would be aware of the exceptional rule in grammatical concord. This rule says that whenever the modifier *only* is used in a sentence before a noun phrase, followed by a relative pronoun – *who*, *which* and *that*, a singular verb should be selected. We can therefore have examples such as: (i) Abdulai is the **only** one of the men who often **protects** (but not **protect**) our constitution. However, we can say or write: (i) Abdulai and Razak are the **only** men who often **abandon** (but not **abandons**) their wives.

Equally, in an English second language classroom, the teacher should assist students understand notional concord. In this case, students can identify the fact that sentences such as: (i) The committee *have rejected my proposal* and (ii) *The committee has rejected my proposal*, are acceptable because of the perception the speaker might attach to each sentence. In the first one for example, the speaker is concerned with the individual members of a committee, while in the second instance, the speaker is concerned with the committee as a unit or an entity. Indeed, it is important for teachers of English second language to emphasise for their students that under the notional concord, whenever collective nouns such as *team*, *class*, *family*, *jury*, etc. occur as subjects of verbs in sentences, they can accept both singular and plural

verbs, depending on the notion which the speaker might attach to such sentences or utterances. Teachers of English grammar as a second language should therefore have to highlight to students the culture of being consistent with the use of the notional concord in their essays, semesters' writing assignments and theses.

Again, on grammatical concord, the teaching of English grammar would offer an opportunity for students to realise that when modifying words and phrases such as: *in addition, including, together, together with, as well as*, etc. are used to refer to two or more nouns or pronouns, such nouns or pronouns are considered as single units; therefore, accept singular verbs. In English second language classroom, teachers would have to explain to students that in such situations, it is advisable to do away with the modifying phrases and choose the form of the verb which agrees with the first noun. In this case, students can afford to say or write: (i) The Minister of Information, including his wife is/was (but not **are/were**) at the inauguration ceremony and (ii) The Information Technology Students, as well as their lecturer have (but not **has**) gone on an educational tour to the Akosombo Dam.

Finally on subject-verb agreement, when English grammar as a second language is taught in English second language classrooms, students would realise that whenever a subject of a sentence is a third person singular pronoun (He/She), and the impersonal pronoun **It**, all verbs used to mark a present event and habit, with the exception of the auxiliaries and modal auxiliaries, should inflect 's'. They can therefore say and write sentences such as: (i) **He** smokes cigarettes. (ii) **She** drinks beer, and (iii) The **wind** howls /**It** howls.

5. Challenges Arising From Wrong Tense Use in English Grammar

There are many students who cannot correctly use tense and its aspects in English Language. In fact, our experiences as teachers and lecturers of English for several years has exposed us to students' problems with the use of tense and its aspects in English. It is not uncommon, for example, to hear or read expressions such as: (i) *I have not eaten supper yesterday.* (ii) *When I was a child, I don't go to school late.* (iii) *After I gave her the book, she*

left and (iv) *After I told my uncle what happened, he agreed to accompany me to the police station.*, instead of (i) *I did not eat my supper/dinner yesterday.* (ii) *When I was a child, I didn't go to school late* or *When I was a child, I never arrived late in school.* (iii) *After I had given her the money, she left,* and (iv) *After I told my uncle what had happened, he agreed to accompany me to the police station.* Indeed, these kinds of sub-standard English expressions, which are prevalent among students who speak English as a second language, can be minimised when English grammar is taught in English second language classrooms.

6. Challenges Arising From Wrong Use of the Conditional Clause

Further, with the effective teaching of English grammar in English second language classrooms, the challenge which is often associated with the use of the conditional clause in both verbal and written communications could be minimised. For instance, it is sad to hear some students who speak English as second language say or write: (i) *If I know you will not be in the house, I would not have come here.* (ii) *If I saw a murderer, I will escape from him* and (iii) *If I knew you will not be at lectures, I would not have come,* instead of: (i) *If I knew you would not be in the house, I would not come here.* (ii) *If I saw a murderer, I would escape from him* and (iii) *If I had known you would not be at lectures, I would not have come.*

At this point, it is important to indicate that since the use of the conditional clause continues to pose challenge to students, teachers of English grammar as second language should exercise patience, and scaffold students before they (students) are exposed to this type of structure in the English grammar. We have used the word 'scaffold' at this stage to illustrate the teaching and learning strategy of Vygotsky (1978), who is of the view that students are able to grasp a concept better during teaching and learning process when they are offered ample examples by the teacher on a particular concept before they are allowed to work on their own in order to consolidate what they have been taught by the teacher. Indeed, Vygotsky's idea on scaffolding of students has been further supported by Demetrius Andreas et al. who have argued that scaffolding of students during teaching and

learning process is very important and helpful in that it involves students and the teacher who has a superior skill than students, use it to assist the students as they work together at solving a task. They again posit that when students are scaffolded, they can perform better than when they are left to perform the task alone (Demetrious Andreas et al. 1992).

7. The Confusion in Meaning with Using the Relative Clause

When English grammar is taught effectively in English second language classroom, challenges with the use of the relative clause, especially in written communication can be minimised. Often, some students cannot distinguish between the defining, the non-defining and the sentential relative clauses. As a result, they can write, for example: (a) Barack Obama who is the president of the United States of America is handsome and (b) Jacob Zuma who is the current South African President is hardworking, instead of using the non-defining clause to describe these personalities such as: (a) Barack Obama, who is the president of the United States of America, is handsome and (b) Jacob Zuma, who is the current South African President, is hardworking. The important point to emphasise for students as teachers of English second language is that when the comma is not used to mark off the antecedents 'Barack Obama' and 'Jacob Zuma' from their main clauses, the meaning which such sentences convey is that there are other "Barack Obamas" and "Jacob Zumas", who are current presidents of the United States of America and South Africa respectively, which is not true.

On the sentential relative clause, students would be informed that the sentential relative clause does not refer to any antecedent as the defining and non-defining ones do; instead, it refers to an implied idea or the entire sentence. Again, the English second language teachers should guide their students to understand the fact that the sentential relative clause can only be introduced by the relative pronoun **which**, and the comma is often used to mark it off from the other parts of the sentence in order to avoid confusion or ambiguity. Consider the following examples to ascertain the truth of this claim: (a) Some teachers of English fail to teach their students the grammar of English, **which is very**

pathetic, and (b) Some students cannot read and understand examination questions, **which is disheartening**. We can observe from both examples that each italicised relative clause does not refer to any antecedent in the sentence, rather each refers to an implied idea in the sentence or the entire sentence.

8. The Challenge with Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

The problem of misused/misplaced or dangling modification which often characterise students' end of semesters' or terms' scripts and theses can be minimised when English grammar is taught in English second language classrooms. Sakyi-Baidoo (2003: 503) has identified modifiers as '... any word or group of words used to describe a noun'. Indeed, the use of modifiers, especially the relative pronouns/clauses and prepositional phrases which often act as adjectival phrases in both verbal and written communications, is to give our readers and listeners a clear information about the nouns, pronouns and noun phrases that they modify. However, students often use modifiers which do not relate to the words they are supposed to modify. Sakyi-Baidoo (2003) has mentioned that 'when there is poor relationship between the modifiers and the items they modify or are attributed to, such modifiers are referred to as misused modifiers' and we are of the view that when English grammar is effectively taught in English second language classrooms, the challenge of wrong modification can be controlled. For example, through the teaching of English grammar, students would realise that sentences such as: (a) "What is important is the readiness of GIMPA to accredit persons with Masters or Doctorate degrees *who are keen to teach on their courses in the regional capitals* and take them through an orientation" (Akosa 2010:19). (b) "I have been blessed by many people in my life *who have helped me with life's important questions*" (Ohene-Effah 2009:17). (c) "Further investigations revealed that the ransom money was deposited in front of Emanuel Asante's house *who is a best friend of the accused person*" (Tenyah 2010: 4) are grammatically unacceptable.

Indeed, one can see that each italicised modifying expression is far away from its antecedent; therefore, has created some ambiguity in

each sentence. For example, in sentence 'a', the italicised relative clause should have modified the noun 'persons', but now it appears as if it is the 'Masters or Doctorate degrees' which is to be accredited to enable it teach on GIMPA's courses in the regional capitals. We can therefore re-write the sentence correctly as: 'What is important is the readiness of GIMPA to accredit persons *who have Masters or Doctorate degrees and are keen to teach on their courses in the regional capitals* and take them through an orientation'. In sentence 'b', the italicised modifying clause should have been placed immediately after the noun 'people' but it is placed after the noun 'life', which is ambiguous.

Indeed, it is pertinent to indicate that when English grammar as a second language is taught in English second language classrooms, teachers of English would have to emphasise the point that the relative pronoun 'who' which introduces a relative clause in a complex sentence, can only modify human antecedents but not non-human ones. Looking at sentence 'c', one can see that it is the same challenge of wrong modification of the relative pronoun 'who' which should have been placed after the human antecedent 'Emmanuel Asante' for the sentence to read: 'Further investigations revealed that the ransom money was deposited in front of the house of Emanuel Asante *who is a best friend of the accused person*'.

On dangling modifiers, Ebest et al. (2004: 24) have posited, 'Phrases that do not clearly and logically refer to a noun or pronoun are called dangling modifiers, and they normally appear at the beginning of a sentence'. The following examples of dangling modifiers appeared in the examination scripts of English second language students' in Ghana. (i) *To pass English Language paper with excellent grades, studies must be taken seriously* and (ii) *when watching the television, the lights went out*. As one can see, there are some ambiguities in both expressions because one cannot tell in example (i) for instance, 'who should take studies seriously in order to pass the English Language paper with excellent grades. In the same vein, one cannot tell 'who was watching the television before the lights went out'. Indeed, both expressions are not sentences because they lack subject or headwords. Each sentence can therefore be re-written correctly as follows: (i) To pass the English Language paper with excellent

grades, students must take studies seriously or studies must be taken seriously by students in order to pass the English Language paper with excellent grades and (ii) when or while I was watching the television, the lights went out. My dear reader, don't you think when English grammar is taught in English second language classrooms, some of these challenges concerning the misplaced and dangling modifications can be controlled?

9. The Challenge with the Use of Prepositions

Finally, the challenge with wrong use of prepositions in both written and verbal communications can be improved if students are taught English grammar in English second language classrooms. Prepositions are words which are used to 'show a relationship or connection between a noun or pronoun and other words in a sentence' (Quagie 2010: 89). In English grammar, a particular preposition has to collocate with a particular word, or else the speaker's intended meaning can be impaired. Sometimes, the misuse of prepositions can result in verbosity and even ambiguity in communication. For example, the words 'prefer' and 'superior' have to collocate with the preposition 'to' but (not **than**) as most students say and write. In addition, it is also ungrammatical for anybody to say: abreast **with** instead of (abreast **of**). In the same stratum, with the continuous teaching of English grammar in schools and colleges, students would get to know that certain verbs in English grammar do not accept prepositions. Each of the following sentences extracted from my students' essay assignment contains wrong use of the prepositions 'on' and 'of': (i) The lecturer has emphasised/stress **on** the need for students to study hard, and (ii) Chocolate comprises **of** sugar, water and other delicious ingredients. These and many such explanations concerning the use of prepositions can be better understood when English grammar is efficiently taught in schools and colleges.

FINDINGS

Research Question: Why should English Grammar Be Taught in Ghanaian Schools?

From the discussions and analyses of the various grammatical structures from the data,

it has been revealed that the mistakes identified in the various grammatical sentences are caused by the speakers' paucity of knowledge in the use of the various concepts – nouns, prepositions, modifiers, mechanics of writing, the conditional clause, the relative clause and others. This answers the question why English grammar as a second language should be taught in English second language classrooms, in order to minimise the challenges posed to students by some of these structures.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion, it is obvious that as a result of the challenges which students face when it comes to the use of nouns and its categories, the mechanics of writing, challenges with grammatical concord, wrong use of tense, the use of the conditional clause, wrong use of verbs, the confusion in meaning with the use of the relative clause, misplaced and dangling modifiers and use of prepositions, the teaching of English grammar as a second language in English second language classrooms should be intensified.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the paper, it is recommended that English grammar be properly taught in Ghanaian schools in order to ameliorate the challenges which confront both students and teachers in the language. In addition, only teachers with expert knowledge and experience in the field of English grammar teaching should be employed to teach the subject. Furthermore, English as second language curriculum planners should make available to both teachers and students, useful English grammar teaching textbooks such as: *English Grammar in Use* (2006) by Raymond Murphy, *Grammar Pedagogy in Second and Foreign Language Teaching* (1992) by Celce-Murcia and *Understanding and Using English Grammar* (1989) by Betty Schramm Azar. Of course, there are so many good grammar books in the market so those mentioned here are just but a few to consider.

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