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**SKLADNJA
ANGLEŠKEGA
JEZIKA**

SENTENCE
STRUCTURE

*Exploring
English Syntax
in Context*

Univerza v *Ljubljani*
Pedagoška fakulteta



SKLADNJA ANGLEŠKEGA JEZIKA

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To the Student

Not many students of English as a foreign/second language (L2) would say that studying grammar is something they like or even enjoy. However, the fact is that grammar is not only important to English language teachers but it is necessary for any written or spoken communication. The more you practise expressing your thoughts and ideas the better your grammar becomes and, as such, it should not be the goal itself but the means to achieve that goal.

Grammar is based on general, situational, and everyday contextual speech patterns. Written context plays a part in this. When learning a mother tongue, we take in large chunks of words and phrases. We are then capable of breaking them down and reconstructing them into other phrases, expressions and sentences. How else can we explain how it is possible to learn an L1 without classroom instruction? However, some of the principles of L1 learning should be applied to L2 learning, and in that case, grammar should be contextualized. It should be placed in the context of "language that rings true". Language should be 'situationally evocative', meaning that grammar becomes lexis as the event becomes more probable.

Grammar is perhaps the most important systematic framework in language analysis because it allows you to examine the component parts of language and see how they work. This involves taking the whole framework to pieces, just like the mechanic taking an engine apart to see if the carburettor is faulty, or the musician listening to the keyboard section in a piece of music to see if it can be improved. In the same way, you as a foreign language teacher need to understand how words interact with each other. These ways are countless, so you have to be prepared for anything and apply grammatical approaches logically.

Grammar may be broken down into several subcategories, such as morphology, syntax, phonology, semantics, pragmatics, etc. This book focuses on syntax. The term syntax comes from the Latin word *syntaxis* meaning things arranged in order. This is the fundamental basis for the importance of syntax study in linguistics. Out of all the billions of words in a language, there have to be rules about order or no-one will be able to make a sense of it.

E.g.: If a boy said, '*Big, small Mac fries Coke and medium, please*' to a shop assistant in a McDonalds restaurant the latter would be completely perplexed and would be unable to serve the boy food and drink he requested.

It is pointless having all the correct words but in the wrong order, because the person you are speaking to is expecting the syntactic rules of the language to be followed. You will use these rules automatically as a native speaker. Now, as a L2 speaker of English, you need to stop and study what you have always done naturally in your L1. **Syntax** is the study of how different words combine with each other in a sentence structure. In both speaking and writing, there are set ways to put words in order. Even if people are unconsciously aware of these 'rules', they become confused when things sound wrong. For example, if we want to describe a house by writing about its size and colour, we would generally describe its size

first (big) and then describe its colour (red) - *the big, red house*. If we change the word order to *the red, big house*, it sounds odd. In good syntax, adjectives go in front of nouns as in *black cat*, rather than the other way around.

English syntax can be particularly puzzling for non-native speakers. This is because other languages do not always follow the same rules as English. In Slovene language many syntactic rules do not compare with those in English.

Sometimes writers, especially poets, invert the usual syntax to achieve a particular effect. This area is usually considered difficult by native students and even more for non-native ones. Let us consider a small number of sentences, and the effects that the writers have achieved with their construction.

Here are the first four sentences from *The BFG* (Big Friendly Giant) by Roald Dahl:

Sophie couldn't sleep. A brilliant moonbeam was slanting through a gap in the curtains. It was shining right on to her pillow. The other children in the dormitory had been asleep for hours.

Identify the subjects and the verbs in each of the four sentences. What you should have is this:

S: Sophie, a brilliant moonbeam, it, the other children in the dormitory ⇒ four subjects in four sentences;

V: couldn't sleep, was slanting, was shining, had been (asleep) ⇒ four verbs in four sentences.

In each sentence there is only one subject and one verb. Let's try to relate that to what we know about purpose and audience. *The BFG* is a novel. The targeted audience is young people, which sounds vague, but their age will depend on whether they are listening or reading it themselves. This is the start of the novel, so Roald Dahl wants to grab the reader's attention. These simple sentences, therefore, achieve certain goals. Dahl does not want to scare off the young reader with complexity. He has created a sense that Sophie is restless. The reader is now waiting for something to happen to Sophie.

Another vital characteristic of English language is its dialects, accents, and standard forms. When, for example, a Scottish person tells you her car '*needs washed*' or asks you '*What like is your house?*' she is not making a grammatical mistake or when an East Anglian tells you he '*runned all the way home*', he is, similarly, not incorrect. Both speakers are using grammatical forms which exist in their dialect, and the roots of these dialects can be traced back over more than a thousand years. Just as English accents have a prestige form in RP (Received Pronunciation), so there is a prestige dialect known as Standard English. This form is mostly used by the educated middle classes, though there are regional variations. At the same time, it is the basis of written English in its use of grammar and vocabulary. We should be aware, as language teachers, of the role played by language context. This is about how the words used relate to the development and change in language, and where the words are used according to the audience and the situation. The language context includes the use of non-standard English, changes in the meaning of words over time, the use of archaic words and phrases such as 'thy' and 'art' after they have passed out of normal use, changes in syntax

over time, changes in orthography over time, the changing use of verse and prose in drama, and many more.

How to teach grammar/syntax

In this course book, the main focus is not on learning by heart those grammatical rules written in thousands of grammar books all over the globe. Instead of defining, exemplifying, and drilling grammatical concepts this book sets out to show students how to identify and use grammatical concepts to explore a living language. The genres that Primary School Teachers will need to understand and apply have been given the greatest emphasis and focus regarding sample sentences, as well as in the set tasks. This publication does not want to give the impression that what is included here is the only way to learn and teach English syntax. The author of this book would not like to claim that the approach used here is necessarily the best possible one. The motto of the book is to make students focus on learning how to analyze real texts - from children's stories, newspapers, novels, on-line children magazines, their own writing, etc., -- so that they can understand how language works, and improve their own ability to read and write.

It has to be noted, however, that there are many frequently occurring and widely agreed upon grammatical constructions and it would be absurd to start the first lesson in English syntax by simply giving the students a text and saying "Find the prepositional phrases." It is important, therefore, that the students know what the teacher/chapter in the book is talking about. The approach in this book is to give the students a certain definition which does not have to be extremely accurate, but has to include grammatically correct examples. Then the students may start drilling but the drills should consist of randomly chosen passages from texts, not from isolated sentences in exercises from a grammar textbook.

Imagine yourself teaching prepositional phrases to a class of language students. The fact is that prepositional phrases are already in these students' heads. They use them all the time. All this course book is trying to achieve is to make a connection between what is in their heads and the term "prepositional phrase." All students really need practice in order to make that connection. When beginning, teachers also want all the students doing the same drill, i.e., analyzing the same passage. Prepositional phrases are already part of the grammar in their heads, so it does not take a great deal of drilling before most students will be able to identify most prepositional phrases in any text. At this point, students can begin to choose their own texts to analyze, including samples of their own writing, and checking their work in small groups. Such an approach to learning syntactic structures and the way language functions should make students increasingly aware of analytical ability, and their own increased comprehension.

The validity of a grammatical definition does not reside in grammar books. Instead, it rests on two things: 1) Does it make sense to the user? 2) Can the user use the concept to get that same sense into the heads of other people? Although the first point is very important, the second may be more so.

This book also tries to shift the focus of instruction from learning the terms to using the terms and concepts to analyze and discuss texts. The purpose of the tasks is to prepare

students for extending what they have learned to the analysis (and preferably manipulation) of their own writing and of published texts that the students choose for analysis.

The author hopes that the readers will find this book useful and motivating.