

# Building Language Awareness in an EFL Classroom

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## Abstract:

In an EFL classroom, teachers are encouraged to help students establish fundamental language awareness when acquiring a second language. It is important to first have a common knowledge of the history, development, and present situation of the two main approaches (prescriptive and descriptive grammar) in grammar analysis. Based on this, EFL teachers are asked to make a balance between these two approaches when they are confronted with students of different learning needs, styles, strategies, or abilities.

## Keywords:

Prescriptive English grammar  
Descriptive English grammar  
EFL teaching

**Online publication:** September 6, 2024

## 1. Introduction

Prescriptive and descriptive approaches are treated as the main approaches in grammar analysis. The distinction between them is often explained by saying that the goal of prescriptivists is to identify so-called correctness and incorrectness of language usage while a descriptivist is more interested in describing how language is actually used, not in seeking to impose judgments, or rules of language usage<sup>[1]</sup>. This paper aims to establish a systematic understanding of these two approaches and find a proper way to balance the relationship between these approaches when an EFL teacher is trying to help students acquire a second language.

## 2. Prescriptive English grammar

### 2.1. History and development

The prescriptive approach is a long-established way

of grammar analysis, which can firstly be traced back to ancient Greece in the 5th century BC. Based on the early Latin or Greek grammar, the grammarians tried to lay down rules for correct language usage and condemn some particular usage choices. Prescriptive linguistics played a leading role among all the theories for centuries and experienced its flourishing time, especially in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. With the emergence of capitalism, more people who were from the middle class wanted to speak the dialect of the “upper” classes<sup>[2]</sup>. The demand from many non-English speakers who wanted to understand the significant works of English also led to the publication of prescriptive grammar<sup>[3]</sup>. The first major effort to impose rules on English grammar seems to be Johnson’s Dictionary. However, his work was criticized by John Wallis, another major grammarian of that time, for his attempt to impose Latin’s structure too rigidly on English<sup>[3]</sup>.

In 1762, Bishop Robert Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar with Critical Notes* was published, which marked the new beginning of English grammar. Influenced by Latin grammar, Lowth decided many new rules for English. For instance, he prescribed the rule of "two negatives make a positive" <sup>[2]</sup>. Inspired by him, Murray wrote the book *English Grammar*, which was widely used for many years. The popularity of these books had a great influence both on school practice as well as literature.

## 2.2. The present context

Although prescriptive grammar is no longer the dominant approach nowadays, it shows its influence in many ways. As Lyons suggests, prescriptive English grammar has "obvious administrative and education advantages" in standardizing the major dialect of a country or a region <sup>[4]</sup>. Therefore, it is common to see that many prescriptive English grammars are still taught and applied in schools <sup>[5]</sup>. The rules like "Use many for countable nouns" or "Use much for uncountable nouns" tell the students exactly how to use language. People must say "We don't have much tea" and "We don't have many cups of tea" according to that rule. Apart from schools, it can be seen that many books stick to the principles of prescriptive English grammar. Many people want to know the most acceptable forms of language learning, so they need such kinds of grammar books <sup>[6]</sup>. According to Fromkin and Rodman, a literary organization called the Union Society of Lake Superior State College even pays attention to the use of the English language. It publicizes an annual "dishonor list" which consists of the words or phrases that are not approvable by them. However, language is dynamic and changing all the time, so it would be better for prescriptivists to consider the language phenomenon rather than the language itself.

## 3. Descriptive English grammar

### 3.1. History and development

The neo-grammarians school (1870–1900) turned its attention to the living language and treated linguistics as "a science-based on detailed observation of language and accurate formulation of observed processes" <sup>[7]</sup>. The rules of English grammar were attacked because they were

formulated largely by authorities <sup>[3]</sup>. More grammarians began to show their concerns about the language itself. In 1911, Boas published the *Handbook of American Indian Language*, which descriptively recorded the language. This book is often regarded as the starting point of the descriptive linguistics school. Bloomfield's book *Language* also has an influential meaning in the forming of descriptive linguistics school as well as descriptive English grammar.

In contrast to the prescriptive approach, descriptive English grammar concentrates on the description of language phenomena. For instance, the explanation for the use of adverbs can be "Just as adjectives are less central than nouns and verbs, so adverbs are less central than the other three open classes. In fact, they are a very diverse group and this can make them difficult both to define and to identify" <sup>[8]</sup>. Instead of imposing the rules of adverbs, it elaborates the use by describing how they are used.

### 3.2. The present context

Descriptive English grammar is used as the dominant approach in grammar analysis. For many linguists, the studies of grammar refer to the studies of Noam Chomsky's linguistic competence: the unconscious knowledge of language rules possessed implicitly by people <sup>[1]</sup>. Therefore, the goal of descriptive English grammar is to interpret the rules explicitly. Influenced by this principle, many grammar books are written based on the descriptive approach. Moreover, it is recommended as guidelines for English grammar teaching though not many teachers apply it in the teaching practice.

## 4. Taking different approaches for different pedagogical purposes

Traditionally, there is an argument of the pure attitudes towards the approaches of language grammar. Prescriptivists are condemned to be wrong because they seek language "perfection" and ignore the natural changing process of language. Linguists of descriptivism are also attacked for "corrupting" the language <sup>[1]</sup>. However, it should be admitted that each of the two approaches has its advantages or drawbacks <sup>[9]</sup>.

As for prescriptive English grammar, it is necessary

to have a set of standard linguistic rules if one wants to learn English effectively. Especially for the person who is learning an additional language, it would be difficult to learn it without instruction. Prescriptive English grammar also has its advantages in teaching practice since it is much easier for teachers to teach the grammar and test the actual intake of students. However, this approach is often criticized because linguists or grammarians are seen to be the only authorities who own the power to correct language. Furthermore, many prescriptivists seem to have limited knowledge of the language history and the language itself <sup>[2]</sup>. If the language teachers apply this approach in teaching, the students can only be benefited for a short time. The limited knowledge of language nature might result in other difficulties of language learning in the future. For instance, Chinese children who learn English might have problems in mastering the knowledge of tense because they never encounter this language phenomenon in Chinese. If they learn this grammar by memorizing the rules, they probably cannot truly comprehend it and apply it to use.

Descriptive English grammar shows its usefulness in helping students' comprehension of the knowledge <sup>[10]</sup>. If the students learn grammar based on the observation of certain language phenomena, he or she can apply the knowledge into practice. For instance, the students may notice that the native speakers would add an "s" to form the plural of a noun by observing the expressions of "a room" and "two rooms." This kind of observation may help the students raise their awareness of the language itself and therefore illustrates its benefits in forming learning strategies. As for the drawback, it takes longer time for non-native speakers to learn English based on

observation because they live in a different context and lack exposure to the language they are trying to acquire.

To conclude, both approaches can benefit learners to some extent. The prescriptive approach exhibits its effectiveness in the early stage of language learning. By taking this approach in English language teaching, the EFL teachers might find it useful in practice such as introducing sentence patterns or explaining grammatical knowledge <sup>[11]</sup>. This is particularly significant when they are trying to improve students' linguistic knowledge in the fields related to vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation <sup>[12]</sup>. It is evident that by repeating grammar drills, students would become more familiar with the basic grammatical rules <sup>[13]</sup>. However, if the teachers want to improve the language consciousness and abilities of the students, it would be better for them to adopt the descriptive way of language teaching <sup>[14]</sup>. By asking students to observe and compare different languages, the teachers can not only provide extra exposure to the target language but also fulfill communicative ends in real teaching practice. This approach would intentionally instruct the language teachers to use different teaching techniques to enhance the students' participation and the interaction between teachers and students, which facilitates the students' overall English proficiency in the long run. To continue the professional development in teaching, good teachers are encouraged to draw on experiences and insights about the teaching and learning process, the roles of teachers and students as well as language in use <sup>[12]</sup>. It would be extremely useful for each teacher to do some research on ELT principles and practice, and then establish a framework of teaching to help students understand the language system and develop their language skills.

### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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