

## Afterword

### Reflecting on Interaction and English Grammar

Now that you have finished this look at how interaction affects English grammar, what are the new insights that you have about how English works? Here are five closely related areas for you to reflect on based on the principles that we have explored.

**Interaction in a social setting affects how grammatical rules apply.** This means that English language learners need to know a variety of Englishes rather than just the one version that is commonly presented in grammar books. As a result, a descriptive approach to grammar focuses on how people actually use English in various settings for various purposes rather than prescriptively telling English language users that there is only one preferred way that English works. Misunderstandings can result when English language learners do not realize that the same point of grammar may have different communicative purposes as the social context changes. One example to reflect on is how yes-no questions are used in conversation. *Could you first finish your work?* might be an inquiry that could be answered with a simple *Yes, I could*, it might be a prodding for further discussion in conversation, or it might even be a polite command to finish one activity before starting another.

**The rules of interpersonal and academic English differ.** Native speakers of English are often misled by the spoken fluency of English language learners. We think that if children or young adults speak well, they should do well in school. Yet in the same way that different social settings affect how grammar rules work, different academic contexts do the same. The most obvious difference between interpersonal and academic English is in the typical mode of delivery. Interpersonal English tends to

have a spoken basis whereas academic English tends to have a written one. As a result of these two delivery systems, one characterized by minimal and the other by careful editing, these two versions of English have developed different ways of managing the flow of information. In the spoken language, sentences are shorter and stress and intonation play important roles for indicating to the listener where the focus information is. Pronouns are more common than nouns so that the focus information expressed by the nouns is more apparent. In the written language, sentences are more carefully crafted and are lengthened through coordination, subordination and relativization. The writer uses various grammatical devices to move background information around in the sentence so that the focus information is towards the end of the sentence where English readers expect it to be. Even questions are used differently. Most commonly in the spoken language they serve as a means of encouraging participation. In the written language they are less frequent and are more commonly used to introduce topics that the writer rather than the reader will develop.

The vocabulary of interpersonal and academic English comes from different word stocks. Academic vocabulary tends to be multisyllabic and carefully derived from Latin and Greek sources. New words can usually be deciphered by looking at the meaning of the different parts of the word. Interpersonal vocabulary tends to be short and of Germanic origin with new words created by compounding or by adding a new meaning to an existing word by some sort of metaphorical extension. Thus new words may be difficult to decipher without understanding the underlying metaphor. This is especially true with the phrasal verbs that are so common in conversation but are seldom seen in

academic textbooks. Even the negative takes a different form in interpersonal and academic English.

In addition, whereas academic English tends to focus on presenting facts in a clear, concise and reasoned manner, interpersonal English adds the element of preserving social relationships. Thus politeness comes into play. Therefore modals play a more important role in interpersonal English when making statements, giving advice, making requests, and giving commands.

**Some grammatical points are difficult for English language learners if they only have the spoken context.** Obviously, aspects of the English language that characterize academic language, such as Latinate and Greek vocabulary, lexical negation, subordination and relativization are more easily learned in an academic context since they are less frequently encountered in interpersonal language. However, some high frequency items of grammar, such as negation and definite and indefinite articles, are difficult to learn if they are encountered only through informal conversation because they are unstressed and tend to disappear or be less distinctive except in careful speech. Even the format of questions can cause problems because they are frequently elliptical. The solution is to make sure that English language learners are reading and are being read to from the beginning since these forms are more apparent in the written form. As we found out through our grammar detectives and awareness activities, different types of reading reinforce different kinds of English. If we are trying to reinforce what we are teaching about conversational English, the grammar and vocabulary of cartoons, advertisements, and fiction more closely match interpersonal English. If, however, our interest is in reinforcing academic English, the language of

journalism is a closer match. All of these are available wherever we are in the world through the Internet.

**Grammatical terminology can be misleading in understanding how grammar works.** English grammar instruction can be confusing when we use traditional grammatical terminology. For example, when talking about parts of speech, rather than saying that a verb is an action or that a noun is a person place or thing, it is best to use the three criteria of meaning, endings, and frames in specifying how a word is functioning in a sentence since what looks like an action can also be a noun (*running* as in *Running is such fun.*) and what looks like a noun can also be a verb (*school* as in *We school our children at home.*)

The fact that the same grammatical terminology is used to describe languages around the world masks the fact that English does not necessarily work the same way that other languages do. For example, the traditional names of the tenses are misleading. The present tense doesn't necessarily mean present time and present perfect refers to a past time. We don't have just one way of indicating future actions. Sometimes it isn't time that determines which tense to use but whether or not something is true or not. As a result, memorizing a simple verb chart that lists the present, past, and future tense forms of a verb is not very useful when it come to communicating in English. Similarly, defining an adjective as a word that describes a noun can mislead a teacher or textbook writer into promoting the use of adjectives in descriptive writing when studies show that authors use verbs in their various forms as nouns, verbs and adjectives to create pictures in the mind.

### **Being a native speaker is not enough for helping English language**

**learners.** In the same way the people who are raised in a location where everyone is bilingual may not realize when they are switching from one language to the other, educated native speakers of English are bilingual in the various versions of interpersonal and academic English and may not be aware that they are switching from one version of English to another as the context changes. In addition, native speakers might remember the grammar that they studied in school, but they aren't aware that school grammar focuses on how English is used in formal academic contexts rather than on how English is used in a wide range of activities.

In our grammar detectives and awareness activities we saw that advertisers, poets, authors, and other skilled writers use grammar for special effects. This might include manipulating the sentence length, word choice, or word placement. When English teachers are more aware of how these language professionals use language, they are better able to choose language samples from the material available to them around the world that will reinforce what students are learning in the classroom. This helps English language learners gain confidence and be more effective when they interact with the English speaking world either through listening and speaking or reading and writing. This textbook was written with the goal of making you more than a native speaker as you help English language learners reach their goal.