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Elizabeth Manning Murphy

JP, BA(Hons), FCES, FSBT(UK), AFAIM, DE

is a trained linguist, a consultant in communication skills, an editor and a trainer in effective writing. She was appointed 'Distinguished Editor' (DE) by the Institute of Professional Editors (IPEd) in Australia. She holds a teaching certificate from the Commercial Education Society of Australia, was a member of the CESA committee for many years, including five years as President. She is based in Canberra, Australia, but works worldwide with clients in the UK, the USA, South Africa and Japan, as well as Australia. She worked for many years as a teacher in the Australian technical and further education arena, and in commercial colleges in the UK, and as a management consultant in Australia and Fiji. She has taught at the Australian National University, the University of Canberra and the Australian Catholic University (Signadou campus, Canberra). She is the author of a number of books, the most recent being Working words, and including Effective writing: plain English at work and The job-hunter's guide; and she edited The Australian secretary and co-authored Letter writing simplified. She has also written radio drama scripts that have been broadcast by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and commercial radio. She is the Immediate Past President of the Canberra Society of Editors and has had her own editing business in Canberra since 1979. Her current interests include academic editing and the encouragement of excellence in editing, and in travelling as often as possible to the UK to visit family and friends.

Why Teach Grammar?

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For more than thirty years, debate has raged about the teaching of English grammar in schools. There are those who deplored it, saying 'Children should be allowed to express themselves' and those who supported it, saying that an understanding of grammar was foundational to good expression in English at all levels. There are those who believe in an 'innateness' theory of grammar knowledge, rather like Chomsky's 'innateness' theory of language acquisition. There are those who learn English grammar as a result of learning the grammar of another language and realising that there must be patterns in their own language, just as there are in the foreign language. There are those who, while speaking another language themselves, refuse to expose

their children to it because, they say, 'it's a hard language and nobody much speaks it anyway'. There are prescriptive grammarians and there are descriptive linguists. I fall into the last category.

I went to school at a time when English grammar was taught for its own sake – we studied parsing and analysis; we learned about the structure of sentences and how to put them together in paragraphs; we read books and noticed the way they were written as well as the story they were telling; we wrote essays that were good preparation for the essays and theses we would have to write at university. We used, and still use, the subjunctive mood; we know the difference between 'will' and 'shall'; we know which preposition goes with which word to make sense – 'responsible to a boss', 'responsible for a task'.

In the last thirty or so years, English grammar has not been taught in many state schools in Australia, and I understand the same situation exists in the United Kingdom and in South Africa, and probably in other parts of the English-speaking world too. In Australia, it is being taught again, but the teachers are from that cohort that was denied an English grammar foundation at school, so they don't have the wisdom or experience of a lifetime of being immersed in English grammar and are perhaps one page ahead of their students in class.

To add to the lack of grammar teaching, technology has played its part – we have computers, i-pads, netbooks, mobile phones – all capable of being used for sending short text messages. We have the social media including Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, where brevity is paramount. Twitter has traditionally limited 'tweets' to 140 characters, and mobile phones get upset and want to send a message as two messages if it's long. So we have learned to write 'txt msgs' in a very abbreviated form:

'pls cm 2 my hse 4 mtg sun 23 dec bring plate C U em'

There is still recognisable English grammar there, but the sad thing is that this abbreviated form of writing is becoming common in emails, longer Word documents such as reports and so on. It has its place for very quick, short messages to friends, but not for material which is destined to stay on the office files for years:

'Mgr Jim Brown opened mtg @ 6pm and asked the Sec 4 apologies'

This kind of language is being used by many people in business – not just teenagers. The people who fell through the cracks and missed out

on learning English grammar at school are now in their 40s and 50s and in middle management, or running businesses of their own from home, and struggling to write a complete sentence. Many of them find that they have to check the writing of staff under their control, and they often haven't any idea how to do that.

Many of these people come to me for help, and I try to fill in the gaps in their knowledge of English grammar, introduce them to Track Changes, and help them to write meaningful corrections for their staff.

As an editor, I have a lot to do with clients whose native language is not English, and this throws up another whole batch of problems for people in Australia from other countries who want to write and submit a thesis for a PhD perhaps. Unless I were familiar with the structures of a number of languages, through my linguistics studies, I would not be able to help these people to get tenses right, prepositions chosen correctly, 'only' in the right place, articles a, an and the appearing at all, plurals shown the English grammar way, and sentences non-ambiguous, to name just a few of the problem areas.

Why teach grammar? In Australia we speak English, and English grammar is the code we all share. If we use acceptable English grammar, we will write material that our target audience will understand. While I am not a prescriptivist, preferring to say that I go along with 'conventions' rather than 'rules' most of the time, and taking on board the changes in usage that are normal for a living language over time, there are some aspects of English grammar that should be taught in schools and developed in higher education and in training programs in workplaces. It doesn't always come easily to people to write well – they need a little help. It is good to see that part of the Commercial Education Society of Australia's pursuit of excellence still includes examinations in business English and communication skills. Long may that continue.

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