

◆◆◆ INTRODUCTION

Like most new teachers, I was extremely nervous when I first started teaching. In fact, in my first few years of teaching, I used to plan each of my ESL classes in excessive detail. Planning as much of the class as possible meant that there was less chance for something to go wrong, and if nothing could go wrong, then I did not need to be so nervous.

No matter how much I planned, however, students would sometimes ask me the most unanticipated questions. In my early years, I did not know how to answer many of these unexpected questions. Standing there at the board with an I-have-no-idea look on my face caused me a great deal of distress. As an eager new educator, I really wished I could handle these questions better. Sadly, I believed I was losing credibility with my students because I was a very young teacher who found himself saying “I don’t know” far too often.

In teaching a lesson one day on *was* and *were*, I wrote this example sentence on the board: *George Washington _____ born on February 22, 1732.* My goal for this class was to get the students to talk about why we use *was* here instead of *were*, and I also wanted them to verbalize why *was* is a better choice than *is*.

I thought the lesson was very successful. The students talked about why *was* is better than *were*, and they discussed why *was* is better than *is*. My students really seemed to understand the material. To close the lesson, I then did what all good teachers do. I asked the class if they had any questions. Sure enough, a hand went up. I was of course anticipating a question about *was* or *were*. If not that, then maybe it would be a question about the pronunciation of *Washington*. But, those were not topics for this student’s question that day.

“Teacher,” the student began. “Why do you say *on February*? I thought *in February* is correct.”

Imagine my surprise. I was anticipating a *was-were* question based on the lesson, not one about prepositions. I knew how to answer a question about *was* because I had planned that lesson in great detail, but I most definitely did not know why we use *in* instead of *on*. I tried to come up with some sort of explanation on the spot, but I

really didn't know the reason why we use *in* or *on* with certain time words. (See Questions 35 and 36 in this book for the explanation.)

To be certain, it is OK for a teacher not to know the answer to every student question, and it is OK to say to a student, "I don't know the answer to that question, but I'll find out and let you know tomorrow." However, to maintain your credibility with students, it is not OK to say "I don't know" very often, and it is not OK to say "I don't know" when the questions are about basic ESL issues such as verb tenses (Questions 66, 67, 71, 72), the difference between *a* and *the* (Question 7), and the three ways we pronounce *-ed* (Questions 48, 49, 50). As a trained professional, you need to know these basic ESL grammar issues.

In my first few years of teaching, I tried hard to handle these unexpected grammar questions better. To reach this goal, my strategy was to arrive at school extra early to talk to the much more experienced teachers in the teachers' lounge. Those teachers seemed to know everything.

I would ask, "Why does my book have a chapter called *if*?" or "Why don't we say **homeworks* or **informations*?" or "The affirmative is *I went*, so why isn't the negative **I didn't went*?" I don't think I ever asked a question that someone in that room could not answer immediately. I was—and remain years later—envious and in awe of the amazing information my colleagues had in their heads and could explain to me in detail, seemingly without much effort. They were the ESL teachers that I wanted to be.

At a K–12 teacher conference some two decades later, I was doing a workshop on recognizing and explaining ESL errors. The last error we discussed that day was why ESL learners tend to pronounce every *-ed* past tense ending as a separate syllable, such as **miss-ed* for *missed* and **clean-ed* for *cleaned*. After the workshop, a teacher approached me and said, "You know, I've heard my students say these errors, and now I understand why they do this. Is this kind of information written down anywhere?"

That teacher's comment was the catalyst that inspired me to write *Keys to Teaching Grammar to English Language Learners* and this book of ESL student questions about grammar. I've written

NOTE: In ESL grammar and linguistics books, an asterisk (*) is placed before examples that are not grammatical in English and typically not made by native speakers.

these books for teachers who, like me many years ago, want to know as much about English as a second language as they possibly can so they will be able to help their students more.

To remedy this situation, I have collected questions from ESL teachers all over the world. In this book, I offer the answers to some of the more common questions that are hard to answer. While this information may seem overwhelming in terms of volume, I assure you there is some very good news: The same questions tend to come up in class over and over. After you've taught for just a few years, you will even come to know that a Spanish speaker will ask you about *be* vs. *have* (Question 83), a Chinese speaker may use *even though* and *but* in the same sentence (Question 25), and an Arabic speaker will overuse the definite article *the* (Question 8).

I wish I had had this kind of resource when I was first teaching. Perhaps I wouldn't have been so nervous in those early years and therefore would have been a more effective teacher earlier in my career.

After reading the material in this book, you will start to recognize your learners' errors much more easily. I hope you find this book useful. As you read the 100 questions and answers, you may wish for more information or you may have other questions that should appear in a future book. In those cases, please write me at mygrammarquestion@gmail.com. I look forward to hearing from you.

Organization of This Book

This book is a collection of 100 questions submitted by ESL teachers—both novice and experienced as well as native speakers and non-native speakers—from many different countries around the world. The questions are real questions students have asked about English.

The questions have been organized into 12 chapters on topics that teachers and students can relate to very well: *Adjectives, Articles, Clauses, Connectors, Gerunds and Infinitives, Prepositions, Pronouns, Pronunciation, Subject-Verb Agreement, Suffixes, Verbs, and Vocabulary Meets Grammar*. The number of questions in each chapter ranges from 3 to 18 and is based on the types of questions that teachers submitted.

Each chapter begins with a short overview of the chapter's topic. Sometimes key grammar terminology tied to that area of grammar is introduced. Each overview ends with a chart explaining three common errors commonly made by English learners attempting to use that grammatical feature.

x ♦ Introduction

For each of the 100 questions, the question is presented in a box. An answer then follows that contains information that could inform teachers' instruction. The answer often contains charts that depict the grammar patterns more clearly. If a grammar item tends to be problematic for certain language groups, that connection is also mentioned.

To make it easier to locate information that teachers need about students' English language difficulties, this book also includes: a review of the parts of speech, a glossary of important grammar terminology (glossed terms are boldfaced in the text), and a detailed index (by question number, not page number). For example, if a student asks whether to say *I am boring* or *I am bored*, you may not know that that is a question about adjectives, but you could look in the index and find this topic referenced by entries for *-ing/-ed*, adjectives, and past participle.

Audience

The contents of this book are valuable to a variety of teachers:

- ♦ K–12 teachers: Whether you are a 2nd grade science teacher or a 9th grade history teacher, this book will help you become familiar with ESL errors. It will also help you understand why they are made and how you could offer corrections.
- ♦ Grammar teachers: If you teach a grammar course in an intensive English program or a college course, this book will help you gain extra information about some of the types of questions your students are likely to ask you in class. You might recognize the titles of the 12 chapters in this book as also being part of the table of contents of whatever grammar textbook you are using in your grammar course.
- ♦ Writing instructors: If you teach composition at the high school or college level, the information in many of these questions will help you understand why your ESL writers make certain errors in their writing. In particular, frequent errors with articles, clauses, connectors, gerunds and infinitives, suffixes, or verbs can skew a reader's perception of the quality of an ESL student's written work, so writing instructors need to recognize these as typical ESL errors and consider ways to help their ESL writers reduce them.

- ♦ Adult ESL teachers: Adult ESL learners are working hard to improve their overall English proficiency. Because many of them take only a few hours of classes per week, one objective of these classes is to help these learners recognize the gap between correct English production and their own emergent English. For example, an adult who says **in Monday* when conversing with native-speaking work colleagues will receive no correction because native speakers who are interested in having a conversation do not usually correct that person's English mistakes. In fact, in this example of **in Monday*, a native speaker would probably understand what was meant and not even notice the error. Teachers of adult ESL classes need to be aware of what some of their students' most common errors are so they can help them improve their English.
- ♦ English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers: In many EFL settings around the world, English-speaking teachers with little to no English language training are hired to teach English conversation. Sometimes new EFL conversation teachers think they do not need to know about ESL grammar because the class is conversation, but they quickly find that their learners make a lot of errors that need teacher intervention. Students will want to know why the lesson about a recipe for making cookies used *how many* for *cups* but *how much* for *flour* (Question 85). The questions and answers in this book can help these teachers understand their learners' difficulties in English more quickly and be prepared to provide explanations, as well as teach ESL lessons better.

This book can also be a valuable resource in a variety of different situations:

1. in-service professional development (P.D.) workshops for any type of teacher training, ranging from intensive English programs to K–12 districts
2. an EFL conversation teacher—native or non-native speaker—who may not be fully aware of the structures used in English as a foreign language
3. training for college or university writing center tutors who interact with non-native writers' papers
4. any education course that trains future K–12 teachers

xii ♦ Introduction

5. a TEFL course (undergraduate or graduate)
6. a Methods course in a TESOL program
7. a Practicum course
8. a grammar or structure course in a TESOL program
9. a course on second language writing
10. a course on second language speaking

The Questions Our English Language Learners Have about English

Many of the questions that our students ask us are the result of differences between how English expresses an idea and how another native language expresses the same idea. This native language interference can cause problems. In English, you *are hungry*, but in Spanish, you *have hunger* (Question 83). In English, I am married *to* Susan, but in French, I am married *with* Susan (Question 37). In English, *I have flown* an airplane, but in Japanese, **as for me, there is experience of flying airplane* (Question 72). In English, *Mr. Smith is a teacher*; in Arabic, **the Mr. Smith teacher* (Question 6, 7, 83).

It is very common for language learners to make mistakes when they translate something word for word. The result is that you have interference from the first language because the two languages are different.

How much of one language is similar to the new language? How much is different? The differences are important for all learners to consider when they are learning a new language. In fact, it is often these differences that account for the questions that our students ask us in class.

To help you learn more about these **interference** errors, you should begin making a list. If you are familiar with the English of ESL students, perhaps you can make a list of 10 to 20 errors frequently made by speakers of a certain language. In addition, conducting an internet search of “common English errors made by _____ speakers” (fill in the blank with a native language such as Spanish, Korean, or Japanese) will help you locate a list. Use the list to help increase understanding of why the student is making the error. Give students a copy of the list and ask them to study the most frequent of these errors one by one. The first step for learners to reduce errors is to recognize that they make those errors.

Two useful resources for learning about typical errors made by speakers of a certain language are the 16 Native Language Interference charts in *Keys to Teaching Grammar to English Language Learners, 2nd Edition* (Folse, 2016), as well as *Learner English* (Swan & Smith, 2001).

This chart shows some common errors made by speakers of different languages (but not just the language listed) that are caused by interference from translating.

Native Language	Learner Error from Native Language Interference	Correct English Sentence
Arabic	*The honesty is important.	Honesty is important.
	*This is the pen I bought it yesterday.	This is the pen I bought yesterday.
Chinese	My sister is a doctor. *He is 42.	My sister is a doctor. She is 42.
	*Even though it's late, but I'm not sleepy.	Even though it's late, I'm not sleepy.
French	That's not John's car. *Her car is red.	That's not John's car. His car is red.
	*Mary speaks very well English.	Mary speaks English very well.
Japanese	*I have stayed in Tokyo from 2014 to 2016.	I stayed in Tokyo from 2014 to 2016.
	*I read book in school.	I read books in school.
Korean	*I didn't like the game. I was boring.	I didn't like the game. I was bored.
	*I went to home late.	I went home late.
Portuguese	*She has 19 years.	She is 19 years old.
	*The people is in favor of this new plan.	The people are in favor of this new plan.
Russian	*He is good teacher.	He is a good teacher.
	*I am agree with you.	I agree with you.
Spanish	*I have hungry.	I am hungry.
	*They bought a car white.	They bought a white car.
Vietnamese	*My brother live there.	My brother lives there.
	*My pet is cat.	My pet is a cat.

What Do We Mean by “Correct” English Grammar?

Some languages have an official group of people who decide what is and is not correct usage. The French language, for example, has the French Academy, which was founded in 1635. The 40 members are called immortals, and new members are chosen by the existing members. The French Academy is the official authority on the French language. As such, it publishes an official dictionary of French. Likewise, the Royal Spanish Academy, founded in 1713, has a similar function with the Spanish language. The Royal Spanish Academy works with organizations in 22 other Spanish-speaking countries. Other languages that have similar official organizations include Arabic, Cantonese, Czech, Dutch, Italian, Nepali, Persian, and Russian.

English, however, does not have such an organization. Instead, correct usage in English has been determined over the years by a range of people, from religious leaders to eminent scholars, dictionary writers, and TV broadcasters. The bottom line is that no single person or organization or even country now dictates what is and is not correct English, which explains why people are often unclear about the status of a certain language usage in English.

There are two different approaches to determining what correct language usage is. When analyzing a given sentence, the traditional prescriptive approach tells us what is correct and what is wrong. In contrast, a descriptive approach would consider who produced the sentence and under what conditions—that is, was it written or spoken, for example? How old was the person? Was the speaker a man or a woman? What was the relationship between the speaker (or writer) and the audience? For example, in a prescriptive approach, *whom* would be required in the question *Whom did you call?* However, a descriptive approach would recognize that, today, almost everyone would almost universally ask, *Who did you call?* In a descriptive approach, *whom* is grammatically accurate, but it is more likely used by older speakers than younger speakers and in very formal settings and almost never in everyday conversation.

To answer the question of “What is correct English usage?” it is very important for us to remember that this book is aimed at teachers of non-native speakers who are learning English. First and foremost, teachers should teach what students need. If your students

only want to improve their conversation, then you should teach students about forms that are common in conversation. On the other hand, if your students need to write academic papers, then you should teach grammatical patterns that are favored in academic writing. Therefore, students writing an academic paper should write *The patient for whom the doctor had written the prescription died*, but they should be taught that speaking this way could certainly draw negative attention. In normal conversation, learners should say *The patient who the doctor had written the prescription for died*.

Students who are attempting a new language do not want to be bombarded with a lot of extra information. Therefore, teachers should exercise caution with how much information is taught when any new language form is introduced. The standard form should be taught, and once students are comfortable with this new form, then the teacher can and should address any variations that students may encounter from native speakers or may themselves use when speaking with people in their own age or social group.

For example, a grammar point that ESL students learn at the beginning level is the conjugation of verbs in the simple present tense: *I need, you need, he needs, she needs, it needs, we need, they need*. The difficult part is the addition of *-s* for *he, she, and it*. The negative form is *does not* or *doesn't*, such as *she doesn't need*. However, learners who listen to songs will almost never hear the word *doesn't*. Instead, they will hear a non-standard form of *he/she/it don't*, as in these song titles: *He Don't Love You (Like I Love You)* and *It Don't Matter to Me*. In addition, learners may be interacting with native speakers who routinely use *he/she/it don't*.

The message here for teachers is twofold. The first part involves what should be taught and when it should be taught. If a grammar point has a standard usage and a frequent non-standard usage, teachers should first teach the standard form and allow learners to become familiar with that form. If—and this is a huge caveat—teachers really think that students would benefit from knowing the non-standard form as well, then they should introduce that non-standard form and clearly explain any limitations, such as who typically uses this form, when they might use it, and very importantly, how ESL students will be perceived if they use this non-standard form. Will they sound cool? Will they sound young? Will they sound uneducated? Will they sound impolite? Teachers should be

aware that some forms of English that once were non-standard but now seem ubiquitous have implied associations about status (class or level of education)—that is, something uttered by someone from one group may be evaluated as “cool” but that, when uttered by someone from another group, may be judged in a negative way.

The second part of the message here for all teachers is that you need to know the grammar of English inside out. You need to know the standard form, and you need to be aware of what the non-standard form is. You also need to have a good idea about what kind of person would use this non-standard form. You need to explain to college students that they may need to use one form to blend in with other college students but a different form in their general English or when in a high-stakes situation, like when applying for a job. Teachers cannot teach what they themselves do not know, so teachers need to learn extensively about English grammar. Teachers also need to know not to attempt to explain everything when a second language learner is attempting a new grammar structure.

Quiz: How Much ESL Grammar Do You Already Know?

Here is an opportunity for you to see how much you know about ESL errors. Each of these examples was written or said by an ESL learner. Can you find the one or two errors in each sentence, correct them, and then explain what the problem is? The language in parentheses indicates the language of the person who wrote or said this sentence, but each error may be typical of more than one language.

1. My family and I came to this country for begin a new life.
(Spanish)
2. My sister and me love the jewelry. (Arabic)
3. In the future, I want study biology and become the most smart dentist in my country. (Spanish)
4. If I can speak English well, I can get good job later.
(Chinese)

5. My friends went to the Disney World yesterday, but I have never gone to there. (Japanese)
6. My name is Ahmad, and I from the Kuwait City. (Arabic)
7. I like miso soup because it is really good taste. (Japanese)
8. Our teacher always give us a homework every day. (Korean)
9. I am from Turkey, but I have been in United States since 2016. (Turkish)
10. When I was a child young, I wanted to be a bus driver, but after awhile, I was no longer interesting in driving a bus. (Spanish)
11. My mother is teacher in elementary school. (Arabic)
12. If I improve my English, I can talking with my American friends. (Chinese)
13. I was married on August. (Arabic)
14. I was born in New York, but I live in Peru my whole life. (Turkish)
15. My hobbies are play the soccer and going to the gym. (Portuguese)
16. My name is Daniel, and I have sixteen years old. (Spanish)
17. In my country, I work for the traffic office, so I am interested in the traffic problems. (Chinese)
18. I always dream of go to many countries. (Vietnamese)

xviii ♦ Introduction

19. I like many things, but my favorite activities for fun is football and music. (French)
20. I love Italian food, but I like eat a lot different kinds of food. (Russian)
21. In this class, I hope have fun and learn a lot of English. (German)
22. As a teenager, I played only baseball but I also considered others sports like tennis and badminton. (Korean)
23. *Opening* and *begining* are two words that some people do not spell them correctly. (Arabic)
24. My sister love me very much and always gives me advices about life. (Vietnamese)
25. I love my country very much. Is awesome place to live. (Spanish)
26. Today my life is very good, but it is no easy to have a good life in my country. (Portuguese)
27. Last summer I have been in Malta for six weeks. (German)
28. I was born and grow up in Japan. (Japanese)
29. Last summer I could visit many country, and I liked them very much. (Spanish)
30. After I graduate from college, I want to become a English teacher one day. (Japanese)