

Making English Grammar Meaningful and Useful

Mini Lesson #1

Simple Grammar Terms: How They Can Help

The **purpose** of this lesson is to present the justification for using simple, self-describing terms for grammatical features of English in place of traditional grammatical terminology.

Traditional English grammatical terminology has evolved essentially from the analysis of Latin in Roman times and the Middle Ages. It has been given status and authenticity by linguists and grammarians, experts who are already proficient in English. However, this terminology was not developed for the purpose of helping ELLs learn English. Examples of this terminology are terms such as ‘conjugation’, ‘perfect tenses’, ‘participles’, ‘gerunds’ and ‘auxiliaries’. These terms are useful for grammarians, but they are not helpful for language learners.

The first problem with this terminology is that it consists of words that are inherently difficult to learn and internalize. For beginning ELLs, who are learning basic English vocabulary and structures, most traditional grammatical terms are beyond their proficiency level.

Second, the terms are based on the Latin language and analyses of Romance languages. They only have limited applicability to describing English. Take the word ‘conjugation’ for example. It is a useful word for languages whose verbs have different endings for different persons. Typically, conjugations are used for 6 persons: first singular and plural, second singular and plural, and third singular and plural. Additional forms are sometimes made for familiar-formal distinctions. Except for the verb ‘be’, English verbs only have two forms per tense, one of which is used for 5 out of the 6 persons in typical conjugations. English does not apply familiar-formal distinctions to its verbs. Therefore, conjugating English verbs does not help the English language learner. Learning a second verb form for singular third person subjects is much more direct.

Third, the terms do not suggest by their nomenclature what they actually mean. Perfect tenses refer to tenses which use the verb ‘have’ as a helping verb. However, nothing about these tenses means that they are ‘free from error’ which is what the word ‘perfect’ usually means.

Terms used to describe grammatical features and structures can be more descriptive of what they actually do, and they can be more readily learned and applied by ELLs of all proficiency levels. Examples of two such terms are ‘**control verbs**’ and ‘**connectors**’. In English there are many verbs which in context are often followed by a second verb: verbs such as ‘like’ and ‘enjoy’. These verbs control the form of the verbs that follow them, ‘like to study’ and ‘enjoy studying’. Therefore, these first verbs are called ‘**control verbs**’. English speakers use word groups such as clauses and phrases. When these word groups are expressed, they are usually connected to other parts of sentences with connecting words. Examples of these connecting words are ‘that’, ‘when’, ‘but’, etc. In traditional grammar, these words are given various names, but in all

situations, their function is to connect their word groups with the rest of the sentences. They are more easily learned and remembered when they simply are called ‘**connectors**’.

Another illustration of using simplified, self-describing grammatical terms is with regard to the various **Verb Forms** of English. Most English verbs have only 5 forms, and these forms are often given traditional grammatical names. **Verb Forms Chart** presents samples of verbs in their 5 forms with traditional names in the top row, and more self-describing names in the bottom row.

Verb Forms Chart

Base Form	Present Participle	3rd person Singular Form	Past Participle	Infinitive
attend like walk	attending liking walking	attends likes walks	attended liked walked	to attend to like to walk
SIMPLE Form	ING Form	S Form	ED Form	TO Form

Notice the complexity and lack of consistency among the traditional terms versus the simplicity and uniformity of the self-describing terms. Notice also that two of the traditional terms are misleading. The **Present Participle** does not necessarily refer to present actions and the **Past Participle** does not necessarily refer to past actions.

A counter argument to using simplified, self-describing terms for grammatical features is that traditional grammatical terminology is more widely known, and ELLs have frequently already been made aware of the terms. Therefore, won't the ELLs be confused more than helped by these new terms?

There are two responses to this question. First, for the learners that have not yet been exposed to traditional terminology, the simple terminology will help them really master the features and structures they refer to, and once learned they can apply the traditional terms as they are exposed to them. For ELLs who have already been exposed to the traditional terminology, their mastery of the features is often incomplete. Using the self-describing terms will better serve these ELLs to really master the target features and structures. Once they reach this point, their understanding of the traditional terms will be that much more complete.