

Grammar

MY WORD with Rodney Martin



Does the word *grammar* strike a hidden fear button in your mind – a result of uncomfortable memories in early schooling? Recently, with the first buds of spring, *grammar* raised its head in SA education with the NAPLAN test results for literacy.

The media focused on SA students being “below national averages”, “ranking equal bottom”, “not up to scratch” and “performing poorer” in grammar.

Parents, whether they believe they are ‘good at grammar’ or not, teach it to their children well before they reach school age.

Young children do not simply learn words; they also absorb the patterns of grammar in the language. When a three-year-old says, “*I falled over and hurted my knee*”, it shows the child’s awareness that *ed* on the end of a verb makes the past tense. But no one gives a three-year-old formal grammar lessons about tenses – well, not unless you are a grammar geek! Instead, the teaching usually comes in a sentence type called an ‘echo’ bouncing the words back to the child.

“Oh, darling! You *fell* over and *hurt* your knee did you? We’ll rub it and make it better.”

The child learns the exceptions to the general rule from natural modelling by parents and other adults, similar to modelling with the language in books during ‘story time’ sessions.

A highly respected linguist, David Crystal, says that if you express a sentence and another English speaker understands you, then you *know* grammar. If you can describe how you constructed your sentence and how it might be changed, then you *know about* grammar.

Grammar is taught in modern primary schools by having children observe and discuss how the language works in various styles of writing; at high school, languages are more likely to be taught and learned grammatically. How much a child knows about grammar is a complex area to assess and the people best qualified and placed to do this are teachers.

Learning a second or third language gives a child another perspective on how the grammar of their first language

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From Greek *grammatikē* ‘the art of letters’ came Latin *grammatica*, which then became Old French *grammaire* ‘learning’. In the 1300s, it came into English as *grammer*, but originally referred to Latin grammar; English grammar was not taught at that time. During the 1600s, the word began to mean ‘the study of English’, and its spelling changed to *grammar*. Today the misspelling *grammer* is commonly found as a search word on the internet.

works because they learn that each language has its own patterns of grammar, not just a different vocabulary.

In the words of Charlemagne, “To know another language is to have a second soul.” It is also to have a greater appreciation of grammar.

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