Book Review: the small big picture book of english grammar

By Jonathan English

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English grammar obviously encompasses far more than just verb tenses/forms, but that is undoubtedly the area that first springs to the mind of any teacher-practitioner when "grammar" is mentioned. It likewise goes without saying that a sound grasp of the essential principles of the verb system, along with the ability to apply them appropriately and accurately enough for effective communication, is fundamental to achieving linguistic competency at any level of language learning.

One of the leading guides in the field is undoubtedly Scott Thornbury's *How to Teach Grammar*, in which he sets out an "E-factor (economy, ease and efficacy)" and "A-factor (appropriacy, which includes learners' attitudes and expectations)" (1999, p. 25-27). Kyriacou's *the small big picture book of english grammar* is clearly targeted at a young readership (it is in fact dedicated to his daughter, who is also credited with having inspired the illustrations) and heavily focused on verbs. That said, it is arguably suitable for a wider audience who are at an approximately elementary level in their English learning, particularly those students who may have (to some extent) a preferred "visual learning style" (Herzfeld-Pipkin, 2006), and does also consider comparatives/ superlatives.

Kyriacou's book commences at the outset by assuring the learner that "This book will help you to understand English grammar… simplify it very much and look at grammar separated onto different islands … help you to see how English works and all the confusion … will disappear" (p. 13). The verb system is then visually represented in terms of a series of "islands" (starting with the "be" island), progressing through a series of units until the student has built up an archipelago. For instance, by p. 53 (i.e. the page pictured on the front cover above), the "be" islands (i.e.
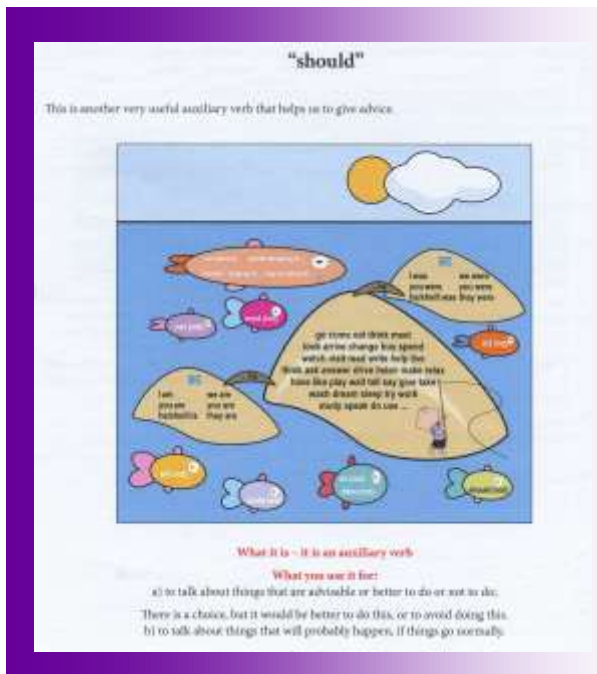
present simple and past simple forms of "be" respectively) are connected (here, with the progressive aspect "-ing") to the "present simple" island, and surrounded by various "fish" (which the learner "fishes out of the sea" to help them progress), including the "be going to" auxiliary forms (listed by like pattern subjects, i.e. "I, you/we", etc.), and "can" and "could", "do/does" and "did", and "will" (plus their negative forms). Certain modal verbs (e.g. "should", which has multiple applications in English (e.g. recommendation, prediction, obligation), have been portrayed both as "fish" (e.g. on p. 56) and also as "ships" which "look forward/backward" when further uses are considered (e.g. "should [not] have" on p. 122).

It is clear that a dedicated teacher could develop from *the small big picture book of english grammar* physical materials to accommodate (to use Herzfield-Pipkin's (2006) terminology) the more "kinaesthetic/tactile learner", possibly combining it with drilling exercises to include "auditory learners", and thereby compensate for those difficulties that many students seem to experience with certain otherwise highly credible texts at beginner/ elementary level. Despite incorporating various pictures and other visual aids, many grammar exercise books arguably remain too focused on textual-analytical learning. This also tends to be an issue with various lower-level integrated skills books which, despite being replete with colourful images and listening and speaking exercises, often evidently pre-suppose a quite

forms that look at now, the future and back – "should"

high literacy level and ability to cope with grammatical metalanguage.

That is not to say that *the small big picture book of english grammar* completely avoids all metalanguage, but a concerted effort has apparently been made to introduce such terminology in a relatively unobtrusive manner, such that the learner may become familiar and comfortable with rather than daunted by it. Similarly (*per* Benson's (1999) criteria), the consistent ethos appears to be to try and provide explanations resulting in understanding, accompanied by appropriate quality and quantity of text. The key to such understanding is what Michael Lewis (1986), in his seminal work *The English verb – an Exploration of Structure and Meaning*, terms "conceptualization" (of the situation or event) in the mind of the writer/speaker. The educator's role is thus to impart a set of "fundamental truths", i.e. reliable guidelines on the basis of which the language learner is consequently empowered to make, with a degree of confidence, informed and intelligent choices.

Lewis (1986) would probably be somewhat displeased at, for example, "will" being labelled as "the simple future" by Kyriacou (p. 21), but would no doubt be gratified by the immediately-following explanation that if "will' is placed upon any verb on the "the present simple island", this results in a "usable future for normal verbs" and the caveat that "There are other ways of speaking about the future, but this is the easiest for now". Lewis (1986) *inter alia* emphasizes that it is extremely unhelpful to language learners (and in fact quite untrue) to describe the English verb system as "complicated", replete with irregularities, "sometimes rules" and numerous exceptions to the rule.

There is likewise plenty of text in *the small big picture book of english grammar,* and of a type familiar to any teacher who has used, for example, Raymond Murphy's (2007) *Essential Grammar in Use* at this level, with features such as verb tables and practice exercises which are clearly designed to consolidate a particular lexico-grammatical pattern. While it is possible to criticise such exercises as being artificial and contrived, it should also be recognised that the vast majority of such grammar exercises rely on sentences (semantic abstractions) rather than utterances (such as
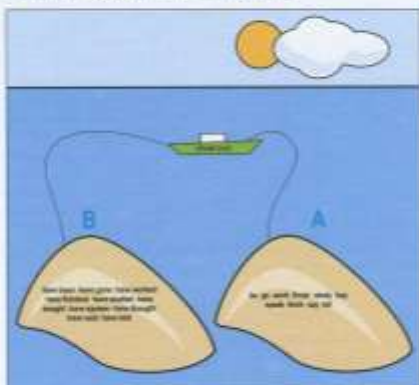
are produced in authentic discourse) specifically in order to achieve this aim (Watkins, 2006), and that Kyriacou gives due consideration to realistic uses of English (e.g. contracted forms).

One similar book to *the small big picture book of english grammar* that did incorporate authentic discourse (e.g. extracts from instruction manuals) was David Maule's (1991) *The English Verb – the Meaning of the English Verb Tenses*, but the similarities between Maule's and Kyriacou's works far outweigh the differences. Maule incorporated *inter alia* visuals such as Venn diagrams to explain the English verb system, and dedicated his work to his parents (native French speakers), from whom he learned English grammar. In the final analysis, Kyriacou's *small big picture book of english grammar* likewise incorporates a refreshing and innovative approach to teaching English grammar at lower levels.

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