

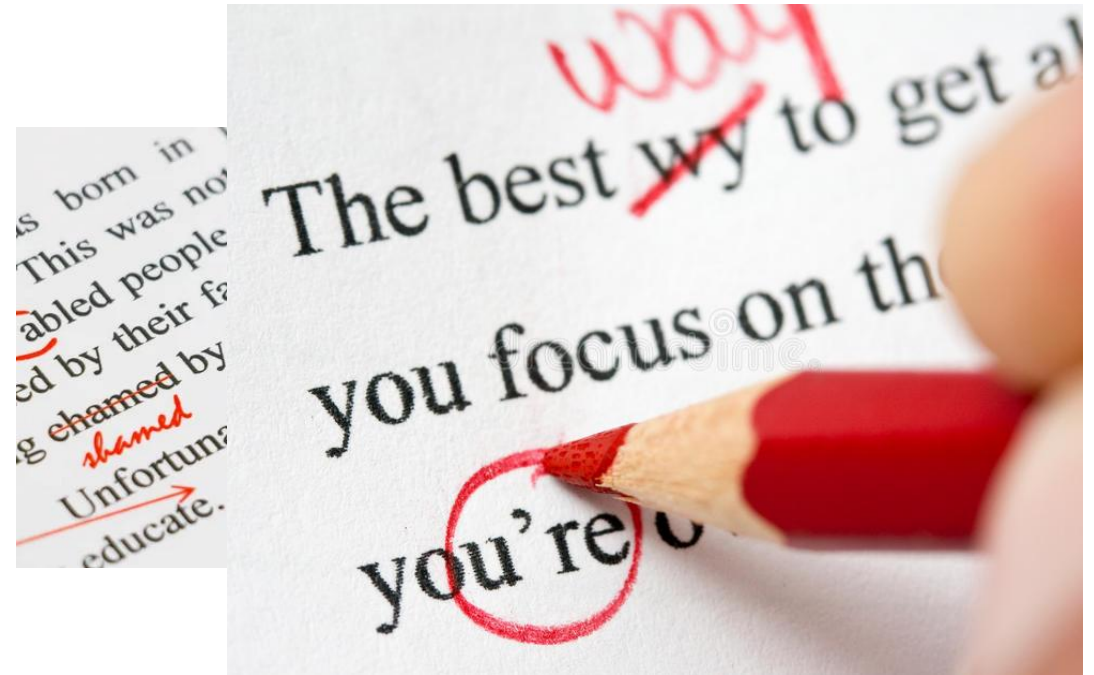


VicTESOL  
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# What Grammatical Knowledge is Powerful for Specialist Language Teachers?

Chris Corbel

- How would you rate your knowledge of English grammar?
- What does “knowing” grammar mean?
- Key point - Explicit grammatical knowledge is important for specialist language teachers.





- Language is unique as a subject, being both the focus and means of analysis.
- All teachers need language awareness. Specialist language teachers also need grammatical knowledge.



Welcome! Grammar is one of the oldest subjects in this or any university. It's been a source of interest and debate for millennia. Now you're joining the conversation!

- Post graduate subject in Masters in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
- One semester, compulsory
- Focus on English but also other languages used by class
- Informal influence of national curriculums and IELTS
- Link to the Trivium of the medieval university – Grammar, Logic, Rhetoric



First and additional language speakers of English, now almost all Chinese

- A variety of formal and informal prior learning of first and additional languages
- Varying levels of tacit and explicit grammatical knowledge
- A variety of goals, mainly teaching in home country
- Some uninformed and negative attitudes towards grammar

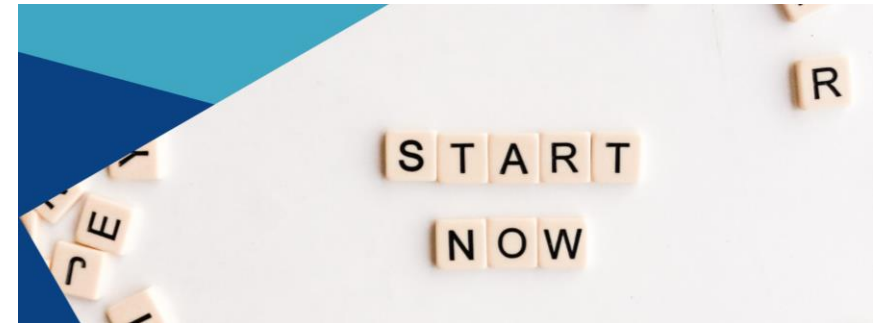
(The only professional whose members dislike or are afraid of their subject matter?)



Given the context, what is the appropriate content?

## Powerful knowledge

- Powerful knowledge is the specialised knowledge used by professionals.
- It is generated by academic disciplines.
- It is independent of the knower.
- It enables learners to go beyond their own experiential knowledge to think the previously unthinkable.
- It is not merely the knowledge of the powerful.



Ro, J. (2024). Enacting powerful knowledge: Overcoming the chasm of curriculum and teaching through teacher professionalism. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*. doi:DOI: 10.1080/00220272.2024.2318726



What grammatical knowledge is powerful for learners and teachers?  
TWO types:

Grammatical know-how - procedural knowledge - 'grammaring' (a skill)

- The ability to apply grammatical constructions for communicative purposes
- The ability to teach grammatical constructions for communicative purposes
- The ability to learn about grammatical constructions (learning how to learn)

Grammatical know-that – propositional knowledge – 'threshold concepts' (a type of knowledge)

- The understanding of the core concepts underlying the grammar of a language.
- Not 'mastery' of the details

Both can be either tacit (implicit) and/or declarative (explicit)





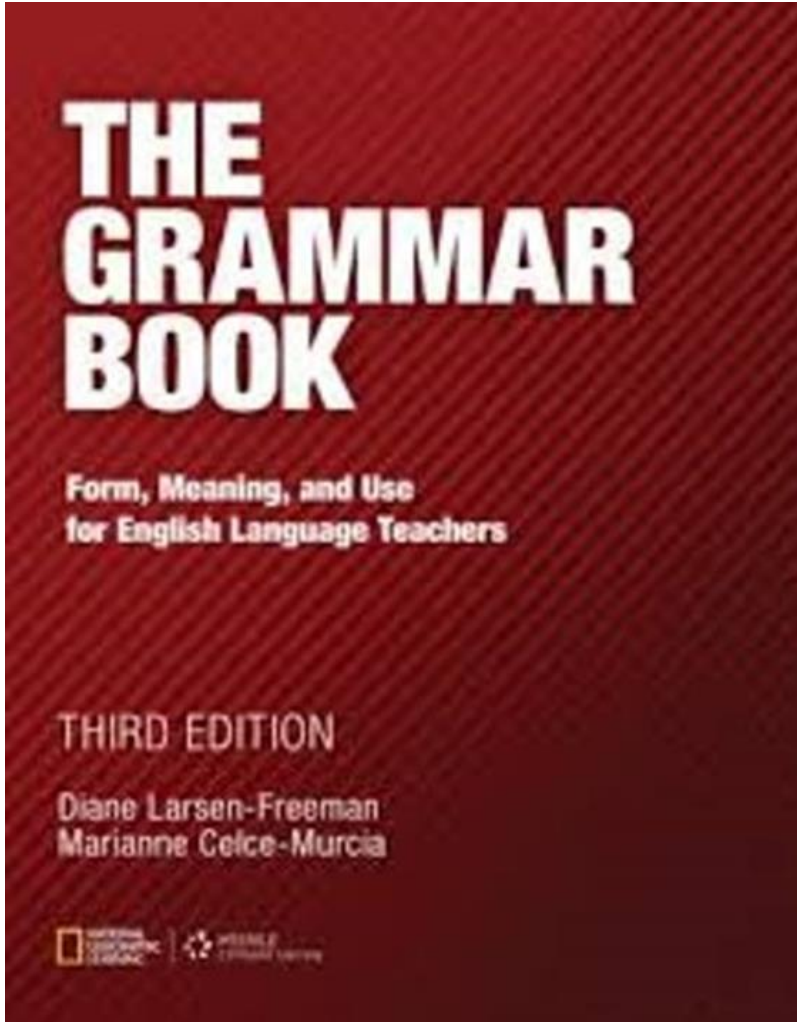
In this subject we focus on grammatical know-*how* as well as grammatical know-*that*, that is, skill in the identification of learners' grammatical needs and the design of applications to address them, as well as the underlying propositional knowledge.

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## Grammar for Language Teachers



The focus is not on the memorising of the details of a particular grammar but on the know-how or skill of using appropriate scholarly resources to find the information that will help participants address learners' grammatical needs as well as their own.



## The Grammar Book

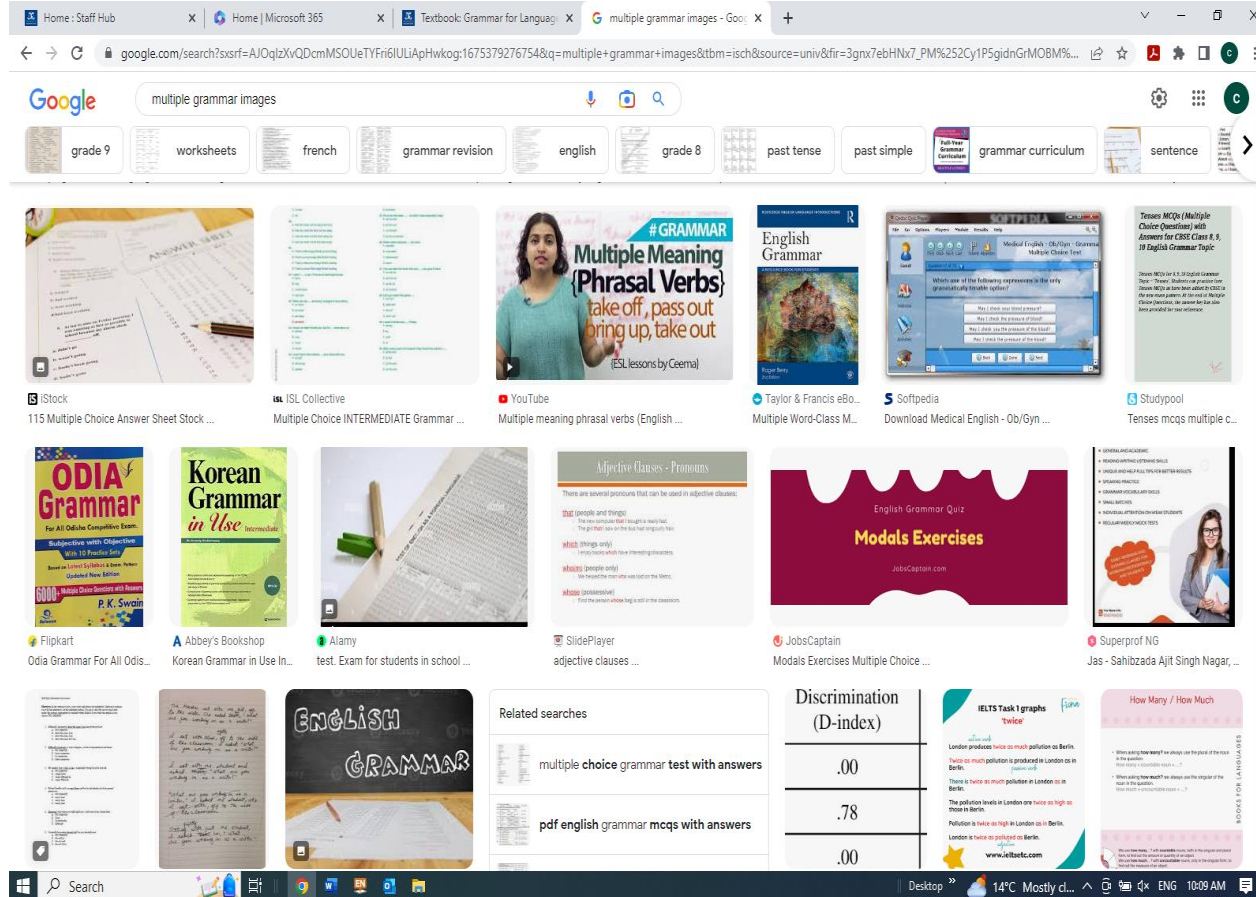
TGB focuses on the skills involved in 'grammaring'

- It's comprehensive and up-to-date.
- It draws on both traditional, structural and systemic/functional models of language.
- It's scholarly. It's based on corpus evidence, not opinion.
- It provides examples from a range of languages.
- It has a pedagogic focus. It provides reasons, not rules.
- It's a lifelong professional resource.
- The subtitle is significant

Larsen-Freeman, D., & Celce-Murcia, M. (2016). *The grammar book: Form, meaning and use for English language teachers* (3 ed.). Boston MA: National Geographic Learning.



# A book? Seriously?



- Why not just use the internet or Google, ChatGPT or CoPilot?
- The internet is okay for everyday purposes for non-specialists but not rigorous enough for professionals.
- Professionals need to be able to use features of professional resources, such as indexes.



Threshold concepts are disciplinary concepts that fundamentally challenge and unalterably change learner perceptions of the subject matter. (Meyer and Land)

They are claimed to be

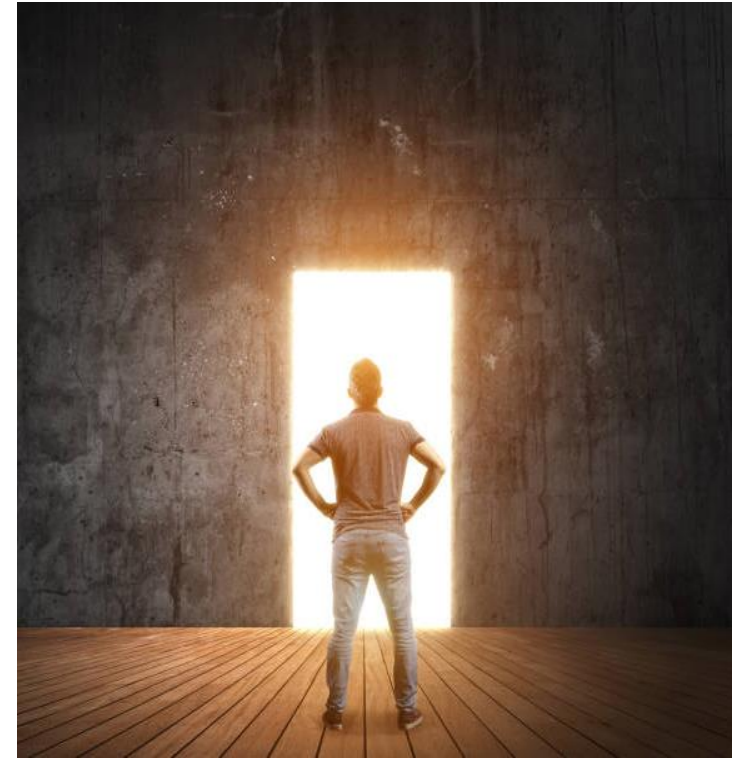
- transformative
- troublesome
- irreversible
- integrating
- bounded
- discursive
- reconstitutive

There are numerous interpretations in different disciplines.

They are hard to distinguish from key concepts.

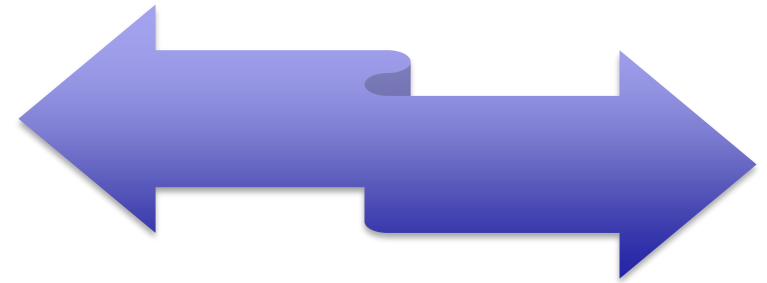
In Economics mine was *simplifying assumptions* and *scarcity*.  
What was yours?

What are they for grammar?





# Five potential threshold concepts in grammar





The Grammar 'Bridge' –  
Grammar is a resource  
for communication.



## The Grammar 'Balloons'

– Understanding that grammar is about patterns, not just rules.

(Rules are patterns that have become fixed. They change over time.)

Grammar is descriptive, not just prescriptive





## The Grammar 'Pie'

Grammar has three broad Dimensions:

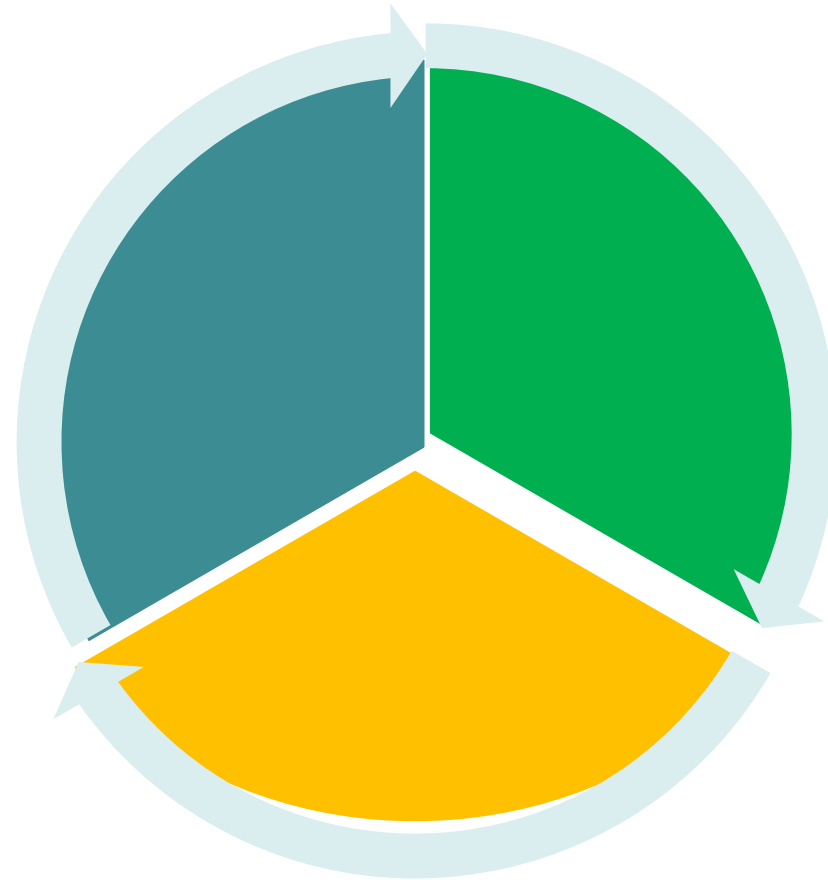
1. Form (Accuracy)
2. Meaning (Clarity)
3. Use (Appropriacy)

In Linguistics these align with

1. Syntax and morphology
2. Semantics
3. Pragmatics

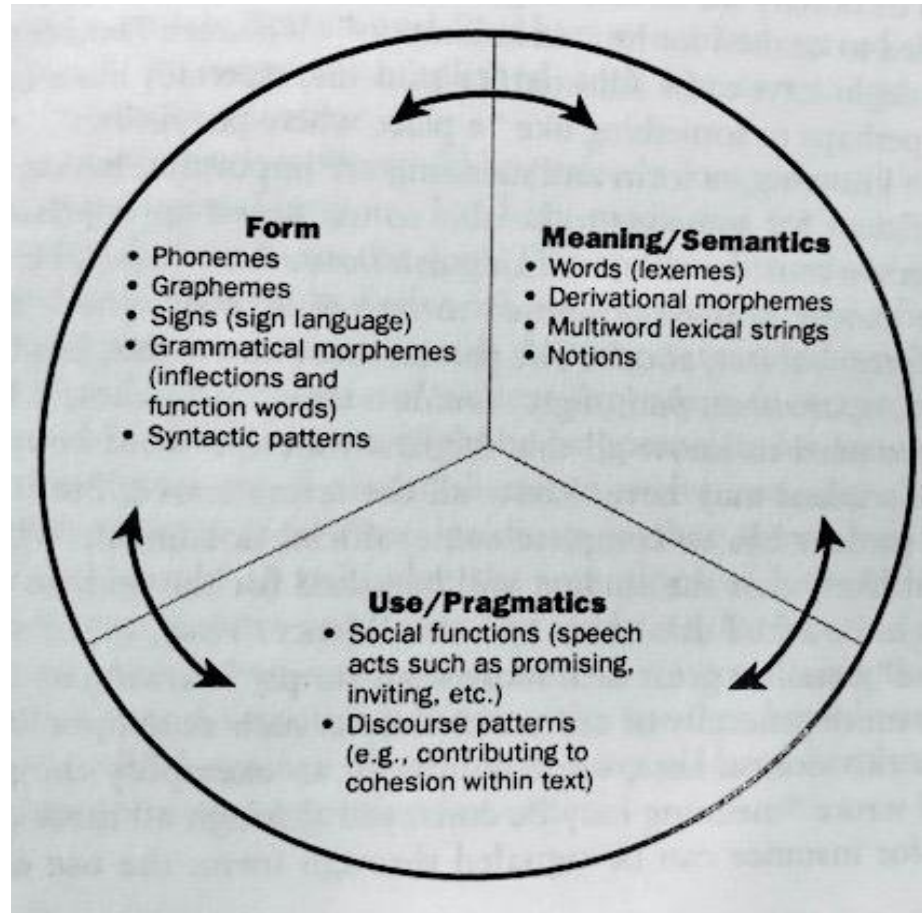
In the medieval Trivium they align with

1. Grammar
2. Logic
3. Rhetoric





## Prototypical units of the three dimensions (Larsen-Freeman 2003 p. 35)



The levels are not exclusive – there's lots of overlap



The Grammar 'Frame' –  
Grammar has categories  
and hierarchies, not just  
words and sentences

These are in three broad  
Levels:

Subsentential,  
Sentential,  
Suprasentential

Each contains one or  
more elements from the  
level below it.





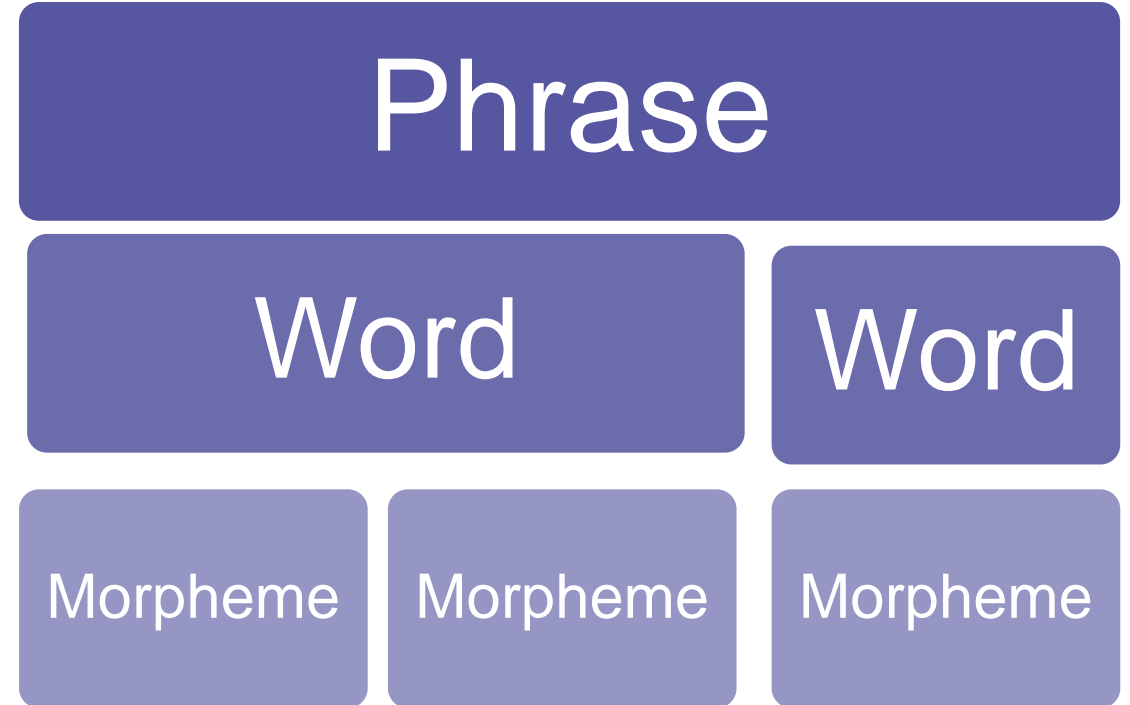


**Phrase** – a grammatical unit, a group of words that function together without a finite verb and S/V structure

**Word** – the smallest unit that can exist on its own

“**Emes**” - the smallest grammatical category

- morphemes (grammar)
- phonemes (sounds)
- graphemes (writing)





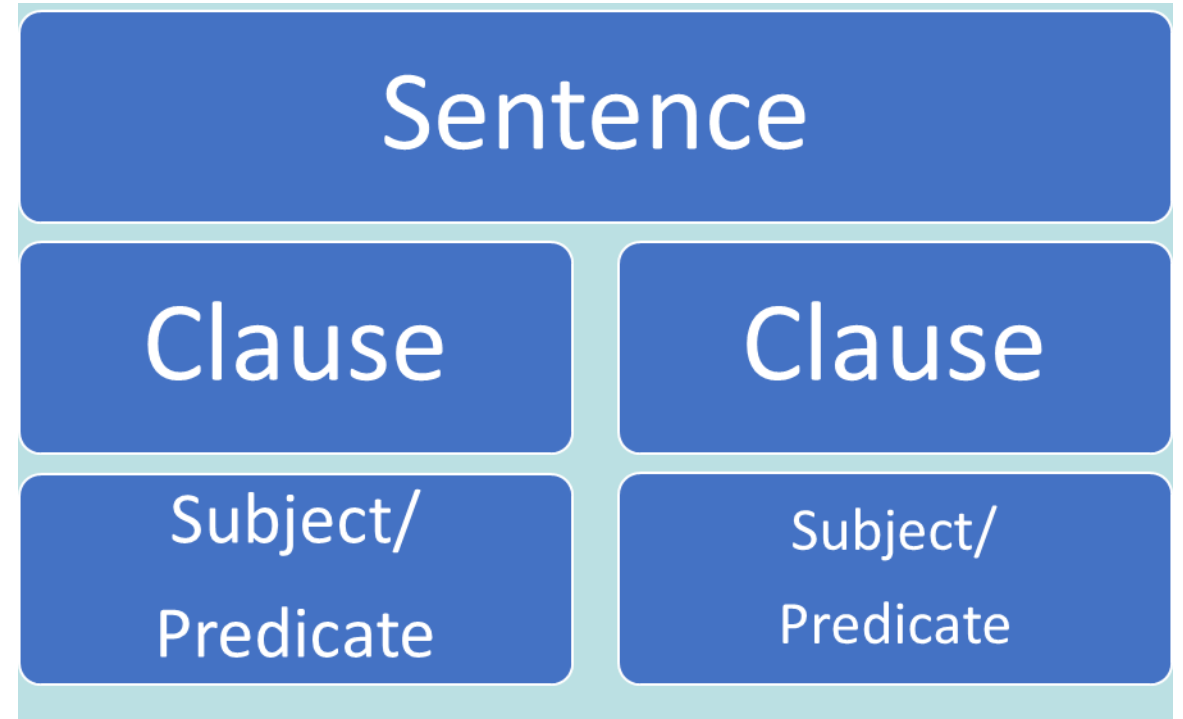
**Sentence** – the largest grammatical category,  
contains at least one clause

A **clause** - a grammatical unit  
with a finite verb

Each clause has a **Subject** and  
**Predicate**.

Sentence types

- **Simple** (single clause)
- **Compound** (more than one – addition)
- **Complex** (more than one – subordinating or embedding)





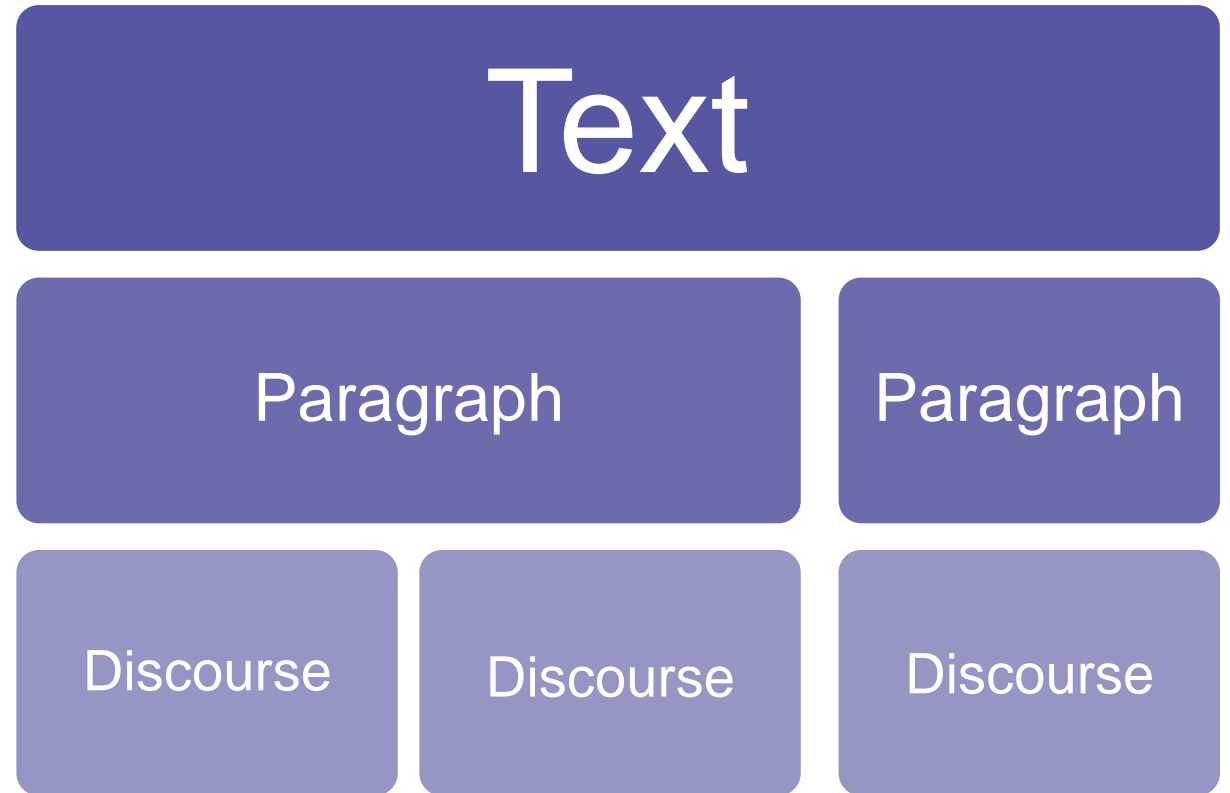
## Text

- a coherent piece of language

Contains

**Paragraphs** (written texts only)

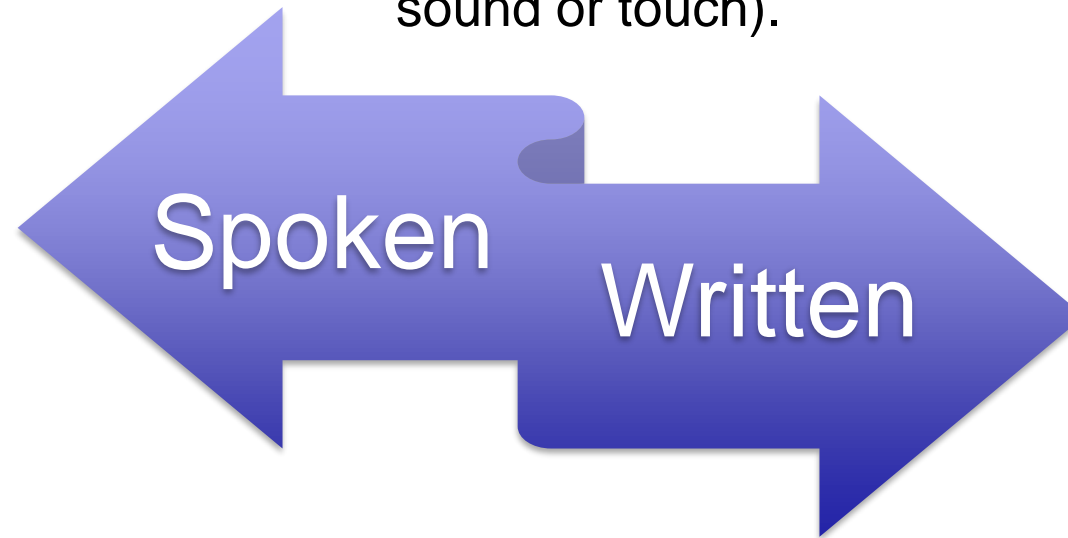
**Discourse** - groups of connected sentences





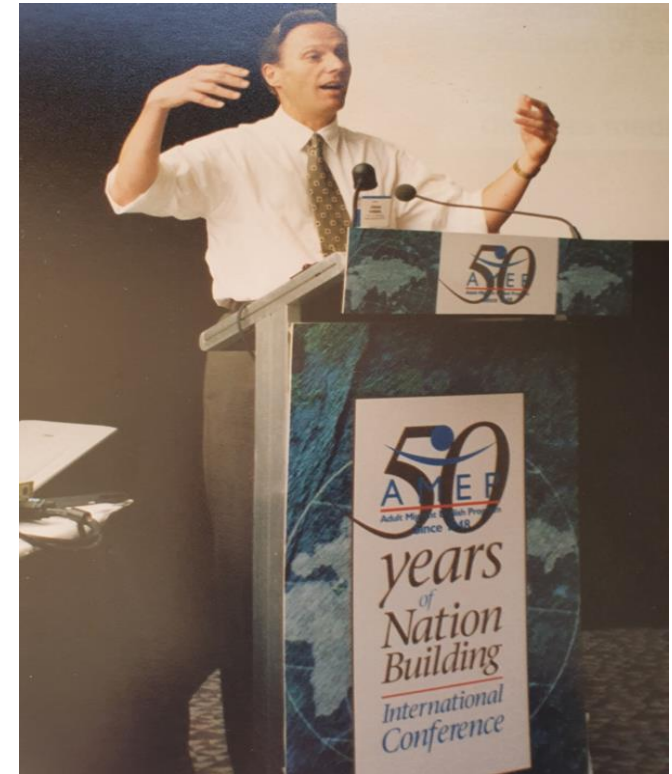
The Grammar 'Arrows' – Grammar has two main Modes: Spoken and Written. All texts have elements of both and can be located on a continuum.

Any text is located on this continuum based on its use of grammatical elements typical of its mode (speech or writing), not on its use of the channel (sight, sound or touch).





# From “more” to “less” spoken

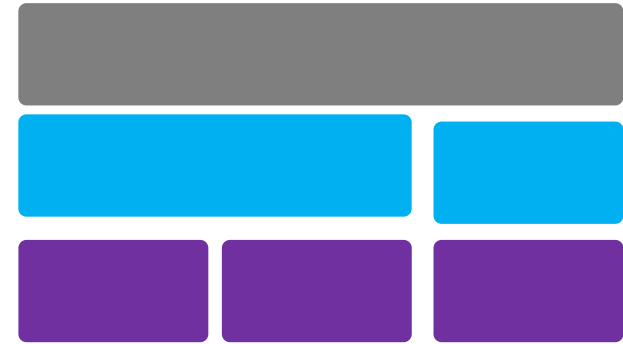
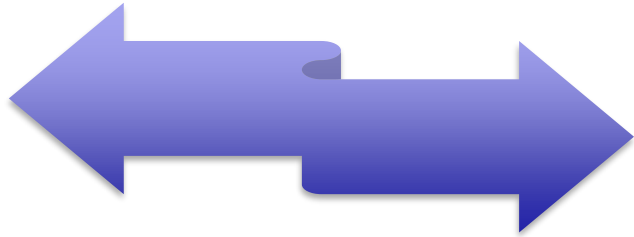




In grammar (for me) they are:

1. Grammar is a resource, not just a subject.
2. Grammar is made up of patterns, not just rules (descriptive/prescriptive).
3. Grammar is about Meaning and Use, not just Form (accuracy/clarity/appropriacy, not 'correctness')
4. Grammar works in categories at multiple levels including morphemes, lexical items, phrases and clauses to discourse, not just words and sentences.
5. Spoken grammar matters, not just written grammar.







*The Needs of Teachers of Grammar in their Home Countries*

Question - is our approach effective in meeting participant needs?

Data - text analysis of student written reflections and focus group discussions

Initial findings

- The most significant concept seems to be Form, Meaning and Use
- The 'aha moment' is independent of future plans







## What Grammatical Knowledge is Powerful for Specialist Language Teachers?

### Knowing that

The concepts of Form, Meaning and Use have been a feature of the language curriculum, in one form or another, with varying emphases, for millennia. They apply to all languages, although they are manifested differently, and their features change over time.

They remain relevant today as threshold concepts to frame the grammatical curriculum.

### Knowing how

The skill of grammaring is an effective basis for grammatical methodology.

