

KLARO! A practical Guide to German Grammar

Susan Tebbutt

London/NewYork: Arnold, 2001, 200 pp., ISBN: 0 340 76020, (Pb.) £12.99

German Grammar in Context; Analysis and Practice

Carol Fehringer

London/NewYork: Arnold, 2002, 226 pp., ISBN 0 340 763108, (Pb.) £14.99

Essential German Grammar

Durrell, Martin; Kohl, Katrin; Loftus, Gudrun

London/NewYork: Arnold, 2002, 305 pp., ISBN 0 340 741889, (Pb.) £14.99

Reviewed by Astrid Kuehlmann-Lee, London

Language teachers will be delighted to find such a wide choice of new German grammar books for English-language learners. Coming from the same publishing house (Arnold), they aim at different segments of the market. *KLARO!* is a less weighty volume (intellectually and in Grams or Ounces) than the others and aims at the post-GCSE ‘improver’ and lower-level university student. However, this does not detract from its real usefulness in this context and may well encourage students to carry it with them to dip into during otherwise underused ‘waiting times’ not spent communicating by mobile phone.

All the new grammar books are very user friendly and make appropriate concessions to today’s world dominated by visual images. All of them are more pleasing to the eye and present graphically better designed charts and tables than older reference grammars. The *Essential German Grammar* even uses red in bold typeface and as background colour to the final “in context”-sections. (These authentic German texts are translated into English in the final part of the book.) One has to admire Arnold for their bold decision to publish three new grammar books in quick succession and can only hope that this heralds a new era in German teaching, where teachers implicitly expect students to acquire the meta-

language to discuss the finer points of the German language. As someone said (and I may well have read this in one of the introductions) if you discuss the performance of your car, you'll have to refer to 'shafts' and 'velocity' and other technical details; so why not in language learning?

Unlike cheaper, slimmer grammar books, all three volumes present quite an extensive glossary of essential grammar terms and their German equivalents in the introductory pages. In the case of *KLARO!* the German rendering sometimes turns out a little quirky and unusual in an attempt to make it easier for the learner to understand the German terms. One wonders if one could not have substituted more commonly used German words to effect further learning or decoding strategies (e.g.: 'unterordnende Konjunktion' instead of: 'subordinierende K.' or 'Zustimmung' instead of 'Affirmativ', after all, it is only at the elaborate level that German and English lexis are more similar to each other and these 'learners' should be steered towards the inoffensive 'middle level' of style or register.) From a teacher's point of view, *KLARO!* contains an extremely useful section listing the 'themes' used to tie in the specific grammar exercises in the various sections of the book, so that teachers can incorporate grammar exercises into their topic work. However, one other slightly disconcerting point is the fact that not all the grammar examples show correct usage ("Ich habe Drogen nicht genommen"* should read: "Ich habe keine Drogen genommen.") The explanation of where to place the 'nicht' which is added to this example, is not relevant.) Other examples do not give truly idiomatic sentences and makes me wish that the text had been proof-read more carefully. Also, a number of somewhat English-sounding examples throws into question the translation method employed to practise grammar, but being realistic, one has to admit that this is exactly what learners at lower levels will do.

Out of the three, my personal favourite is *German Grammar in Context*, with its 200-odd pages a lot more concise - and surely in some respects more limited than the *Essential German Grammar* that is just under 300 pages, the final 100 pages containing the exercises, the 'Key' to the exercises and the translations of the authentic German texts. Both books have a solid feel to them, both with regard to the traditional sequence of all the grammar points, as well as the heavy quality of the paper that will keep it from yellowing as fast as Arnold's grammar books of even 10 years ago. The former appears

slightly more traditional and ‘well-rounded’, even giving Revision Texts in Appendix 3 (after the verb lists and adjectival tables and followed by the ‘Key’ to the exercises in the body of the book).

Carol Fehringer uses similar openers to the grammar chapters as Brigitte M. Turneure’s *Der treffende Ausdruck* (1996 2nd edition) which is to use selected prose passages of high (literary) quality to introduce advanced grammar issues. It is an approach which a number of other advanced courses utilise (*Kaleidoskope* (Boston / NY 1998), *Impulse* (Boston / NY 1999), *Kenntnisse* (Routledge, London / NY 1999). However, Carol Fehringer has managed to find extremely useful passages from a variety of sources, some even from the Internet (e.g.: *Spiegel on-line*), to highlight the main point right at the start of each chapter. There are lots of useful lists and texts with glossaries. As in *KLARO!*, the grammar exercises are incorporated into each of the grammar chapters, and are very varied; e.g. a passage from Kafka’s *Die Verwandlung* is used to practise adjectival endings. This points to the fact that *German Grammar in Context* is aimed at the upper segment of the learner community, the ‘improvers’ in the final years of a university course.

Essential German Grammar is eminently suitable for learning and revision purposes in the Sixth Form and in the first years of university courses which are aimed at more extensive academic studies than the narrower fields of ‘travel & tourism’ or ‘hotel management’. Anyone needing to drum up support for a German course or increase their students’ motivation can find plenty of ammunition in the opening pages to support their argument. The FAQs and a boldly stated ‘no-nonsense’ approach to the usefulness of learning grammar - even by rote! - will surely work for a younger language learner. It is an extremely well put-together volume and can teach many teachers a thing or two and introduce some of them to a thoroughly modern approach to grammar and methodology. (Test yourself: Are you familiar with ‘copula’? If not check out p. XIII. The German past tenses are labelled “Imperfekt” and “Perfekt”, and throughout there is use of terms like ‘complement’ and ‘valency’.)

There are plenty of little cartoons, showing implicitly that Germans have a sense of humour, or do they? (pp. 12, 24, 51, 153). The authors decided to use texts at the end of each chapter under the heading ‘... in context’, just as Martin Durrell states in the

preface to the latest revision / 4th edition of *Hammer's German Grammar and Usage* that he took the deliberate decision NOT to include any passages, presumably because this is a key point of the other new grammar books 'from the same stable'. The text works just as well in summing up the points made in that particular chapter as it does in Carol Fehringer's grammar book, where it is used as an opener. The variety of sources is even more impressive and the selections are clearly made with a young audience in mind. (e.g.: *Bravo Sport, Brigitte Young Miss, Cosmopolitan, Popcorn*; Posters and graphs relating to the Chinese population explosion, and demonstrating register in the context of an article on Bodybuilding). This very useful and highly professional volume makes me live in hope that Durell / Kohl / Loftus will come up with a thoroughly modern remake of '*Practising German Grammar*', the companion to *Hammer's German Grammar*. This author-trio seem to have the right chemistry to produce a string of successful books.

It is always difficult to recommend any one grammar book to one's students, but these three grammar books offer a good choice and the purchasing decision will not necessarily be driven by financial considerations or by choosing 'the lesser evil'. The teacher will know their target group best and make an informed choice that will benefit their particular students. Unfortunately (or thankfully) it is not a decision I can make on the teachers' behalf.