As a native speaker of English, many Taiwanese people assume that I would be an inherently better teacher than a local person; the entire cram school enterprise around Taiwan and the world is almost entirely based on this assumption. There are various arguments for and against this particular bias, but I can tell you from personal experience that a well trained local teacher is a superior teacher of grammar than I could ever be, even on my best day!

When I was in Elementary school, ironically formerly referred to as Grammar School in my mother’s day, we learned the parts of speech and the three basic tenses: past, present, and future. There begins and ends my formal grammar education. There was absolutely no mention of terms like Simple Past or Present Continuous; I would first hear these words and others like it soon after I began receiving a paycheck as an English teacher. I learned how to speak and write formally naturally through my environment and most importantly my family. My grandfather was the Vice-President of a university when he retired and my grandmother had been an instructor in English literature at this same university. As a result, my speech patterns were naturally corrected by my grandparents over Sunday dinner. Here is a fairly typical example:

“Yesterday me and Jimmy …” I began.
“You mean Jimmy and me, or I and Jimmy” My grandfather would interrupt.
Past tense, a major stumbling block for most Taiwanese students, was also patiently corrected by my family in this manor. Anyone eavesdropping on one of those Sunday dinners would also overhear something like this:
“Yesterday Jimmy and me go to …” I attempted to continue.
“You mean Jimmy and me went to” My grandmother would quietly correct.

During my school days my mother, who also has a degree in English literature, was a fulltime homemaker and would patiently help me with my homework and
correct any glaring writing errors. These influences instilled in me what linguists call native intuition. In other words, although I can’t tell you what is technically wrong with a sentence, I just know it sounds wrong. Fortunately, I can help you make it sound more natural and fluent. While this ability is quite useful, it is of absolutely no use to Taiwanese students who need firmly fixed rules so they won’t make the same mistake twice. Their placement into a good high school or university may just depend upon getting that one extra question correct. Thus, “It just doesn’t sound right” doesn’t really cut it as an explanation.

I remember quite clearly the day this revelation about my serious lack of grammar knowledge struck me; my Taiwanese colleague and I were starting to get along quite well and she asked me to take a look at some article that she had written in preparation for her TOEFL test. After I reviewed them and marked the most obvious mistakes, she asked me quite earnestly “Do you think it would be more appropriate if used Past Perfect Progressive?” As I looked into her thoughtful, anticipating face I wondered to myself if I would be able to fake my way out of this one. Being a terrible liar, I fessed up and told her the truth that in fact I had no idea what Past Perfect Progressive was. To her credit, my colleague did not get upset, but offered to loan me a rather ominous black covered book, “The Fundamentals of English Grammar.”

As I read through this book, I was struck at how many rules English grammar actually had. When I read about the different tenses, I was constantly murmuring, “Oh, that’s what it’s called.” It turns out I am quite familiar with all the grammatical tenses; I just had no idea what they were called. After much discussion with my colleagues and students, I also came to realize why many Taiwanese students didn’t like taking English class in Chinese school it is all grammar! Consequently, a highly accomplished Taiwanese English teacher is more of an authority on the technical aspects of English grammar than I ever hope to aspire to.

When I first began studying Chinese, my Chinese language teachers employed a similar method to their Chinese school English language counterparts, a grammatical one. I learned the parts of speech, different types of verbs, word order, and the dreaded measure words, a grammatical device used in English primarily, but not exclusively with uncountable nouns (e.g. a piece of paper, a cup of coffee or a murder of crows). While sharing these difficulties with one of my students, she looked at me quite seriously and asked “Chinese has grammar?”

As native speakers we take the intricacies of grammar for granted, since we learn
naturally in an environment where our mother tongue surrounds us. Attempting to teach grammar has been the single largest challenge of my six year tenure as an English teacher in Taiwan. What have I learned? Quite frankly I have learned that I am not qualified to teach grammar; at least nothing more complicated than correcting simple tense mistakes. I am sure that there are excellent foreign grammar teachers, but I just don’t happen to be one of them.

Early in my teaching career, I felt that I needed to give off an air of confidence, to create the impression that there was no area of English that I wasn’t completely qualified to teach. Today, I am up front with my students if you want to learn grammar, then the best teacher for you is my wife. My wife, born and raised in Taiwan, studied both her undergraduate and graduate degrees in the United States and then returned to Taiwan to work, is an English teacher. I have never met anyone in my life, besides my father, who has so meticulously studied the rules of grammar. A case in point, she proofreads all my articles, including this one, before I even consider giving them to anyone else to look at.