

Teaching Grammar: An ESL/EFL Perspective for Sustainable Development in Education

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Abstract

Observation is a position paper that argues for a learner centered approach to the educating the English grammar. It highlights unprecedented need for intercultural communication in the context of globalization and underscores the imperativeness of cross-cultural pragmatics. As English has been nativized to enable it holding the weight of the culture in the new lands of its transplantation, prescriptive use of grammar alone cannot serve the purpose. The changing paradigms demand that descriptive and nonnative grammars also be included in the grammar curriculum. This paper suggests ways to teach grammar with a view to enhance learners' communicative competence instead of mere metalinguistic knowledge. It also presents a grammar lesson that takes the learners through the different stages of presentation, clarification, practice and feedback and thus exemplifies how the teaching of grammar can promote communicative competence.

Key words: grammar, communicative competence, context, *sustainable development*, *environmental*

INTRODUCTION

There was a time when teaching or learning a language tantamounted to teaching or learning the grammar of that language. Grammarians were held in high esteem as the knowledge of the grammar of a language was suggestive of erudition and a mark of the elite. This was a natural concomitant of prescriptiveness in grammar. However, with the ushering in of new methods and approaches such as the cognitive and the communicative approaches to language teaching/learning, grammar became a controversy. Of late, it has become highly improbable to find even a pair of English language teaching (ELT) practitioners with unanimity in regard to the teaching of grammar. Questions on teaching/learning grammar vary in a continuum of necessity to educate grammar to the models of teaching it. The springboard of these discussions has been the fact that an in-depth knowledge of grammar seldom guarantee proficiency in communication, which is the primary purpose of learning/acquiring a language. In the absence of communicative competence, any level of knowledge in grammar becomes ineffective.

The importance of grammar teaching/learning is not the same in all linguistic scenarios. For example, everyone acquires the first language (L1) almost seamlessly through mere exposure to it. However, the level of exposure to the target language varies in second language and foreign language contexts. When natural exposure is limited, learners depend on grammar teaching/learning to get accurate utilization of target language. However, language being a skill, knowledge of grammar alone does not make one a proficient user of the language. Communicative competence goes far beyond mere knowledge of grammar. Thus, we need to fix our objectives of teaching grammar and think of alternative ways of teaching it. This position paper emphasizes the need to teach grammar in meaningful contexts in order to enable the learner to use language accurately and appropriately.

What grammar is and is not

When seeking accurate explanations of grammar, it is important to recognize that they can differ based on various theories of grammar and their specific goals. Classify into two methods in the grammar theories: formal theories, aimed the word categories as well as sentence-level combinations, with theories of function, emphasize the connection between forms and meanings in texts. Additionally, grammars can have different

purposes, like prescriptive grammars to dictate to speak as well as write to be considered learnings, or pedagogic grammars that simplify grammar descriptions for learners (Spiro, 2013).

Towards the end of the 12th century, grammar with a dominant theory was field as linguistics, generative linguistics, based on Noam Chomsky's (1965 work). This formal theory tries to examine principles as well as rules of grammar by which grammatical or ungrammatical corrections can be determined. It orders rules to judge the dependents with built up problems that look as though the rules happen to have some kind of idealized competence, not as in what language is actually used out there in the real world. According to this theory, there is somehow a distinction between an idealised version of language (competence) and actually what we do with language (performance). It also partitions the concept of grammaticality from decisions in everyday use. Thus, a sentence such as Chomsky's 'Colorless green ideas sleep furiously,' which is grammatical but nonsensical, is an instance of the concerns of this theory. The theory also assumes an innate language ability, and it tries to explain the sharedness and differences of languages in a universal grammar variation (Spada & Lightbown, 2013).

Shortly, Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday 1994) are functionalist grammars view language for resource for making meanings for the words and aim to evaluate the connection with form vs meaning. Perspective, grammar is nor innate whether as a product of language use for social purposes over time. Grammatical patterns and syntax rules are in systematic resource parts to draw for create ideal words appropriate for specific contexts.

Larsen-Freeman (2003) argues that teaching subject is important based on their own conceptualizations (p.105). Hwang's (2023) study also shows that there is a marked discrepancy marked to connect the teachers' grammar instruction with pedagogical instruction studies (p.734). the perceive grammar was formal, idealized set of rules, our focus will be on grammaticality and the distinction between correctness and incorrectness. On the other hand, if we see grammar as a means of conveying meaning, our focus will be on the message and appropriateness. This perspective influences what we choose to teach and how we teach it.

For correctness the functional perspective from the formal language to raise questions. Solely focusing on grammatical correctness or incorrectness, we need more nuanced judgments about what is possible and appropriate. By examining real language usage rather than relying on mind voice dependent on an idealized standard, we can observe a wider range of structures and patterns to be included in grammar descriptions. The availability of computer-based corpora or collections of texts has enabled researchers to access and analyze large amounts of language, which is utilized for giving information to learner grammars, dictionaries, and ELT textbooks.

Spiro (2013) talks about how the idealization of native speaker grammar has been changed in a globalized world. Considerations of appropriateness and correctness in grammar can also apply to varieties of English used in specific contexts, such as Singaporean English or English as a Lingua Franca, or solely focusing on native narrator standards. Ultimately, it is up to educator vs students regarding these issues by making choices, as Kuo (2006) argues, context with teaching English as an International Language (EIL).

The trajectory of and the paradigm shifts in grammar teaching

The choice of a method is often influenced by teacher beliefs and perspectives. When the concept of prescriptive grammar dominated the language teaching/learning scenario, language was taught deductively. Learners were first taught the rules of grammar and were then given practice exercises that mainly focused on conversions of various types. Thus, most students were adept at transforming a simple sentence into a compound or complex sentence and a sentence in the active voice into a sentence in the passive voice. However, this linguistic competence, as mentioned earlier, did not lead to communicative competence which is the very soul of language learning/teaching. This was due to the reason that English was not taught as a skill but as a subject. Thus, anyone with metalinguistic knowledge of English could masquerade as one proficient in the language.

This method of teaching was very closely associated with traditional translations of grammar which was huge familiar from late 40s of the 19th century till the early years of the 20th century. This method, with some

modifications, is still prevalent at least in some parts of the world. It was started with educating formal in Latin and Greek that prevailed in Europe for various centuries and was not related to particular master teacher tenets or methodologist. Latin and Greek were considered the appropriate media for intellectual discourse in those days and so they were not learned for any communicative purposes but merely as prestige symbols (Nagaraj, 1996). Put the other way, a few quotes from these classical languages added some grandeur to intellectual discussions. The belief was that a language could be learned by the proper education of grammar with learners were expected to apply grammar rules in sentences translation as well as the parts of words from the target language mother tongue and vice versa. The approach was prescriptive and great importance was given to accuracy. The objective was to enable learners to learn the grammar rules and produce correct sentences in the target language. Though, this method was helpful in developing linguistic competence, it did very little in terms of communicative competence.

With the ushering in of behaviorist theories, audiolingual methods found a way into language educating/learning. Outcomes, teaching of the four skills (LSRW) and the subskills (Grammar and vocabulary) moved to the traditional Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP); more of a teacher-centered approach. As the acronym suggests, the first phase of this method is the presentation of the new information by the teacher. This information is presented in sufficient detail and later confirmed that the new item presented is well received by the learners (Howard, 2016).

There has been a large-scale advancement, in English Language Teaching (ELT) since the starting of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Concomitantly, the way we teach the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) has shifted from the PPP method deal to known as Pre, While and Post Lesson Stages (PWP) which focuses more on learner centered instruction. However, when it comes to teaching grammar there seems to be a delay in integrating the PWP lesson stages. The issues associated with PPP still persist in grammar instruction. Therefore, it is necessary for us to change our perspective, on grammar and move beyond instruction. We should aim to make grammar teaching purposeful, communicative and engaging.

Controversial approaches to grammar educating.

Grammar teaching has contentious issue in ELT. There were extremists who vehemently opposed the teaching of grammar and there were also moderates like Alwright (1983) who argued that it should be left to the choice of the learner. Their argument was that if the learners want grammar they should get it. There were yet some other linguists and ELT practitioners such as Brumfit (1984) and Prabhu (1999) whose objective was to teach communication through communication and not through successful application of grammar rules. Prabhu argued the structure of the language is not used in education by having ability to develop in direct relation to communication (p.5). Brumfit advocated for a shift from traditional methods that overly focused on isolated grammar rules and vocabulary to a more holistic approach that prioritizes real communication and language use. Brumfit likely supported interactive and collaborative learning environments where students engage in communication with their peers, fostering the improvement seems in the linguistic along with communicative competence. As Veettil (2018) suggests, communicative, not been taught. Acquiring something with the teacher's job should be to provide the learners with opportunities to develop competence (p.82).

Prabhu (1999), one of the proponents of task-based learning, used the notion of problem solving to help learners gets grammar in English language unconsciously. With the emergence of CLT approaches to language teaching, the term 'incubation period' came into prominence encouraging a focus on process and not on product. Accuracy and immediate production of language was sidelined and the learner's attempt to produce language gained more prominence.

When seeking descriptions of grammar, it's important to acknowledge the variation based on different theories and goals. Grammar theories can be broadly categorized into formal theories, focusing on word categories and sentence-level rules, and functional theories, emphasizing the connection between forms and meanings in real-world texts. Purposes of grammars vary, ranging from prescriptive ones dictating proper usage to pedagogic ones simplifying descriptions for learners.

In the field of linguistics, generative linguistics, influenced by Noam Chomsky, has been the dominant theory. It's a formal approach aiming to identify rules determining grammaticality, relying on idealized knowledge rather than real-world language use. This theory separates an idealized language version (competence) from actual language data (performance) and assumes an innate language ability.

Systemic Functional Linguistics as a functionalist grammar view language as a resource for making meanings, rejecting the notion of innate grammar. Grammar, in this perspective, evolves over time based on language usage for social purposes, with patterns serving as resources for creating meaningful texts.

The choice between a formal and functional perspective influences teaching practices. A formal view emphasizes correctness, while a functional perspective focuses on conveying meaning and appropriacy. Shifting to a functional perspective challenges traditional notions of correctness, prompting more nuanced judgments about what is possible and appropriate. The use of computer-based corpora allows researchers to analyze large amounts of language, broadening grammar descriptions.

Globalization concept of world English question the idealization of native speaker grammar. The relevance of grammar descriptions depends on the context in which the language is used. Appropriacy and correctness may involve considering non-native varieties like Singaporean English or English like Lingua Franca. Ultimately, teachers and students must make informed choices in teaching English, particularly in the context of English is considered as an International Language.

It is gratifying to see that the grammar teaching scenario is not the same any more. However, it needs further improvements in terms of classroom practices. We have observed that teachers even in the primary schools expect children to memorize definitions of parts of speech and grammar rules. A paradigm shift from metacognitive knowledge of grammar to meaningful real time scenarios utilizing the grammar for pressing priority. As Scrivener (2005) puts it:

Testing and doing exercises are not necessarily learning grammar. In fact, there is no hard evidence to prove any of these things do help people be able to use grammar accurately and fluently in speech. If these things are useful, there must be some way that the knowledge has been studied comes out of them in a living ability to use the language. It is itself not much use for the information. In real life, people rarely say to you: "Please tell me about conditionals". (p. 253).

Thornbury (2005) resonates Scrivener when he says that grammar is not a noun but a verb. What matters is not knowing but doing.

Towards a different approach

In the context of globalization, where the world is so much interconnected, the inevitability of English for lingua franca cannot overemphasized. Whether can learn it as option language or a foreign language, as Kenny (2024) observes, the ultimate goal is communicative competence. Thus, merely developing metalinguistic knowledge in learners cannot serve the purpose.

An analysis of the current scenario in several ESL classrooms, as Nair (2013) points out, reveals the irrational focus on memorizing literary periods and the heroic deeds and venturousness of epic heroes. Though it is imperative for an appropriate understanding and aesthetic appreciation of literary works, they should not be at the cost of developing communicative competence. Real-life use of language calls for communicative competence and not for the overarching use of high-sounding words and literary expressions. The malady is that in most ESL classrooms English learned to content subject for skill subject. To put it in the words of Nair himself, a teacher of English in ESL contexts starts with the career in small knowledge of grammar and conclude with slightly improved knowledge of grammar but not in communication competence for the simple reason that in her steadfastness to make her learners erudite at grammar she forgot the communicative aspects of language teaching/learning.

Yet another wrong notion etched in the minds is used as second language is that the use of bombastic words make them standard users of the language. Sanyal (2006) labels this as 'the whirligig of circumlocution' (p.14). She also comments that this vain attempt to sound erudite invokes laughter, especially, in intercultural communication. She gives a few interesting examples wherein the Indian speakers of English tend to say "Pray repress such instantaneous motions repress pray of the merriment" (p.14) instead of saying 'please don't laugh so loudly'. Patil (2008) ascribes this malaise truly most second language followers of a language are visual learners, i.e., they learn the language from books and literary works and hence the tendency to use formal language even in day-to-day communication. Patil observes that this malady pervaded most literature classrooms in India and teachers of English literature expected their students to sound like the Elizabethans and the Victorians. He opines that a perusal of some of the sample essays given to students will corroborate this.

By implication, if the goal is communicative competence, language to taught in real life contexts and the learners should be encouraged to use language for communication.

A Learner-centered Approach to Teaching Grammar

Effective language teaching uses a communicative approach where the focus is on the learner. This approach emphasizes exposure to different language materials, whether through reading or listening, prior to analyzing the language in it. The learner then explores how the language works, understanding its specific uses. Finally, they practice using the language and strive for future purpose. Key question, how can we virtually achieve this?

As per the above-mentioned assumption, language learning thrives on exposure to the language. Therefore, it's more effective to introduce language first, and then delve into its grammatical details later. This "text-based" approach gives students the opportunity to get immersed in the language naturally. The benefit is that the language is presented within a meaningful context, making it more relevant, authentic and memorable. As Grewal, et al. (2024) point out, when teachers prepare materials for students, it's very crucial to have appealing activities. The text and task which are developed for learners are interesting with enjoyable, positive comments. In this way, students can associate with the tasks easily and acquire the skill to understand how and when to utilize real-life situations. Furthermore, teachers can easily guide learners' focus to the particular elements by well-crafted questions. Eventually, learners become capable of identifying the language element, analyzing its structure, and understand the related grammatical rules easily. This process can be guided by the teacher or driven by the learners themselves. Whether using text or other methods, language should always be seemed it in the beginning. A skilled teacher can create situations for the desired language is used. Figures, classroom scenarios, and other tools can be effectively used to achieve this. The goal is to create situations where students need to use the desired language. To teach modals of deduction, you could use pictures or scenarios that require students to make guesses, ranging from highly likely to almost impossible. The teacher can begin by creating a situation or a scenario, like informing the students that a fried fish which she brought from home for lunch has gone missing from the classroom. She can ask students to guess who took it, igniting their curiosity and connecting the activity to the topic. Next, she can show pictures: one with a fish on a plate and a cat nearby, and another with the plate with only bones left, suggesting the cat ate it. This is the perfect moment to introduce the desired language. Asking students to guess who ate the fish, leading them to say, "The cat must have eaten the fish." Teacher can either elicit the target language or present it. This approach is effective because the language is introduced when students genuinely need it to express an idea, in this case, a strong possibility. It also helps improve retention because it's presented within a context and a real-life need.

The next crucial stage after introducing the target language is clarification stage. It's very important to clarify the form, meaning, and function (FMF) of the language. Learners need to understand how the language is actually used. As Larsen Freeman (2003) emphasizes, an effective pathway to communication requires a grammar theory can connects form, meaning, with function (as cited in Spiro, p. 59).

Visual aids such as timelines, diagrams, as well as substitution tables can used to clarify meaning. To get clarity for understanding of a specific target language item, teachers should ask various concept check questions (CCQs). For example, to check understanding of "The cat should have eaten the fish," you could ask:

Did you see the cat eating the fish?

Do you think the cat ate it?

How sure are you?

These questions help the teacher evaluate whether the learners have understood the particular language item. It's always better to avoid general questions like "Did you all understand?" or "Do you have any questions?" as some students might be hesitant to speak up in front of the class.

In future is the practicing in the stage. As Scrivener (2005) notes, the learners use the language in the real-time experience " (p.255). Entire effort in the input stage must be reflected seemed in the output stage, where learners demonstrate their understanding of the target language item through practical application of the language. They should be able to use the particular grammar item in speaking and writing. Practice of the language should progress from controlled to free practice. Controlled practice provides a safe space for learners to experiment with the language in a safe way in a limited context, minimizing errors and emphasizing accuracy. This eventually builds confidence among the learners in using the language. Language is excel by practice, learners need opportunities to practice both speaking as well as writing. In the long run, teachers should move on to free practice activities for learners have the freedom to use the language in various contexts, allowing them to apply all their knowledge.

After the practice of the target language, the next stage is feedback. While a grammar lesson emphasizes marking, it's not advisable to correct students on the spot during speaking activities. This can disrupt their flow and make them hesitant. Instead, the teacher can note common errors and provide entire class feed back encouraging learners to check their mistakes in group. Spot correction has addition advantage for individual written practice activities. Feedback should be specific and honest. As Scrivener (2005) suggests, excessive praise and overly easy tasks can reduce the sense of accomplishment for learners. Tasks should be challenging enough to be worthy of trying or taking up.

CONCLUSION

Overall, grammar teaching should not be reduced to rote learning of grammar rules or the definitions of metalinguistic terms. It really should focus on the language being used in a real use case. Therefore, grammar should be taught in meaningful contexts for use in other meaningful contexts, this is a communicative approach to teaching grammar and in teaching grammar, teachers should use a communicative approach.

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