

# Debate on the Relevance of Grammar Teaching in ELT



**Nasim Akhtar**

Assistant Professor,  
Deptt.of English,  
Gandhi Faiz-e-Aam College,  
Shahjahanpur

## Abstract

This Paper highlights the debate on the relevance of grammar teaching in ELT-English Language Teaching. Many learners of the English language may be victims of grammar with the difficult task of learning grammar. This fear experienced by them is not unwanted. The learner's experience of being taught grammar involves memorization, drills and so on. At times methods do very little to help the learner understand the language and its structure. This has led to the questioning of the pedagogic benefits of grammar study.

The role of grammar in the language curriculum has been a topic of immense debate among the teachers and academicians. This debate is something that is not a recent development, but it has been going on for decades.

The emergence of English as a universal link language and the power of the language to broaden an individual's job opportunities have resulted in the mushrooming of a large number of establishments that promise to teach fluent English. A lot of people ultimately end up getting admitted in such establishments and institutes. At the same time the situation in the education system in India is in need of an overhaul, because even today majority of learners, despite years of learning English, are still not capable of forming grammatically correct sentences.

As a consequence, through the study of the debate about the use of grammar in teaching English or for that matter any second language, an attempt will be made to understand the arguments generated by the two warring groups and suggestions will be made at the end of the study. These suggestions are in no circumstances solutions to the debate, but will serve as an investigation into the problem.

**Keywords:** ELT-English Language Teaching, Grammar, Pedagogy, Pedagogic Grammar, G1- Grammar 1, G2- Grammar 2, and G3- Grammar 3, Greek, Latin, Greco-Roman, Debate, CIEFL-Central Institute of English and Foreign Language,

## Introduction

The teaching of grammar has been perceived differently by its consumers. While some learners and teachers liked it, the others at to lump it as a part of language courses. Michael West (1952, cited in W.R. Lee 1967: 29, *ELT Selections* 1) perceives grammar as "a preventive and corrective medicine safeguarding or rectifying those points of word-use which are (perhaps owing to the analogy of the mother tongue specially liable to error."<sup>1</sup>

## Aim of the Study

The main aim of this paper is to compile the debatable issues that came especially after the emergence of Modern Linguistics with regard to pedagogic grammar. It was found that grammar has always been a part and parcel of a language teaching programme, be it the phase of structuralism or that of communicative approach. The recent trends have certainly changed the extent of grammar items in the language course and even the teaching and learning methodology. The last couple of decades have especially stressed on the innovative role of the teachers and the importance of functional grammar.

## Review of Literature

Hannan (1989), (cited in Nachiengmai Yawalak's article, *The Teaching of Grammar in Thai TESOL, Bulletin*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Aug. 1997) considers "grammar is highly valuable as an important part of the study of language, of ideas, and of writing".<sup>2</sup>

Garner (cited in *TESOL Bulletin*, Vol. 10, No. 2, August 1997) in Nachiengmai Yawalak's *The Teaching Grammar* believes that:

"Grammar gives us a means to analyze and describe our language".<sup>3</sup>

Regarding the purpose of grammar teaching in a language course Nachiengmai (cited in TESOL Bulletin, Vol. 10, No. 2, August 1997) observes

The main goal in grammar teaching is to enable learners to achieve linguistic competence and to be able to use grammar as a tool or resource in the comprehension and creation of oral and written discourse efficiently and appropriately according to the situation. Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988) are in agreement with Larsen-Freeman (1991) that grammar should never be taught as an end in itself but always with reference to meaning, social functions, or discourse, or a combination of these factors. In other words, teachers are required to have knowledge of linguistics, because teaching grammar as meaning and discourse entails a knowledge of syntax.<sup>4</sup>

Garner (1989: 209) considers the significant role of the teacher in grammar teaching and instincts that:

The teacher should be able to explain, when it is appropriate, a point of grammar accurately and succinctly to non-native learners.<sup>5</sup>

Even Lewis (1986: 20) observes the same when he suggests that the teacher should "Stop explaining, start exploring."<sup>6</sup>

Above mentioned were some of the instances where some linguists give their views in favour of grammar teaching. Oppose to them there are others who are against the practice of erroneous grammar teaching.

Smith and Cawley (1957) perceive grammar as a dull and dried subject and believe that it is boring. Cawley (1957, cited in Kohli, A.L. 1999: 138) believes as: "teaching of grammar is a waste of time."<sup>7</sup>

Brumfit and Johnson (1979: 165) observe that "the study of grammar as such is neither necessary nor sufficient for learning to use a language."<sup>8</sup>

They further explained that "The students' craving for explicit formalization of generations is usually met better by textbooks and grammars than he reads outside class than by discussion in class."<sup>9</sup>

Michael West (1952: 68) refers to the ineffective teaching of grammar, when he says that: "There is probably no subject on the school timetable on which more time is expended unprofitably than English grammar."<sup>10</sup>

The reason for the lack of utility of grammar teaching or even the repulsive attitude towards it can be easily sorted out in the following extract from Shastri (1987, cited in CIFEL – Teaching Grammar Block-1, 1995: 26-29) where the talks of the mismatch between the principle and practice of grammar teaching, explains the three types of operative grammars on the learners, and also suggests for the innovative role of the teachers in grammar teaching.

A distinction is traditionally made between three kinds of grammar. This is a useful distinction for the teacher. The three kinds of grammar can be called G1, G2, G3.

Now read this extract from H N L Sastri (1987):

1. Grammar is the *total mechanism* which a language possesses and through which its users are able to communicate with each other. (To avoid confusion, let us call this Grammar 1 or G1).

Every native speaker of a language, literate or illiterate, knows and controls his or her G1; without this, communication is not possible—Each language possesses a distinctive G1, peculiar to itself — although some linguists maintain that the G1s, of all languages, though superficially different from each other, are the same at some deeper level.

2. *Grammar* refers also to the formal *analysis* and description of the rules of the language. (Let us call this Grammar 2 or G2).

The illiterate native speaker of a language may know its G1 but not its G2. However, when s/he begins to think about language consciously, to wonder what should be said in a particular situation in order to get the 'message' across, s/he is involved in the G2 of the language; ("Yesterday I saw two mongooses — or should that be mongeese?"), A distinction is thus made between formal grammar (G2) which codifies and presents the 'facts about a language' and functional grammar (G1) which merely illustrates the correct use of the language.

3. Grammar refers also to the rules for the correct use of a language, which may be prescribed for its users. (Let us call this Grammar 3 or G3)

A "grammar" of the kind produced by Nesfield consists largely of rules which a learner is expected to master. But some modern grammars merely describe the facts of the language, instead of prescribing rules. This leads us to distinguish between a *descriptive* and a *prescriptive* grammar; between a G2 and G3. The linguist is concerned only with G2 whereas the language teacher may be more concerned with G3.

#### **Discussion**

This is what H N L Sastri (1987) says:

Every learner of English must ultimately learn the G1 of English, since this is what enables him/her to use the language.

As for the teacher no matter what one is teaching in the English class, if s/he is using the language correctly and making his/her students use it correctly, s/he is contributing to the learning of G1. The professor of poetry is also teaching G1, though s/he may not realise that s/he is teaching grammar.

What the 'grammar lesson' teaches, however, is the G2 or the G3 of English. But does the teaching of G2 or G3 help the student in learning G1?

The Indian situation seems to provide a ready answer to that question. Many of our students know a lot of G2 or G3 (this, at least, is what their marks in the school examination indicate), but they can neither speak nor write correctly; their G1 is poor.

On the other hand, a student can certainly be made proficient in G1 without any exposure to G2 or G3 — this is what happens in the case of native speakers, and could happen with a student who is able to learn in the same way as a native speaker - that is through constant "exposure" to the language. This is what we find in the case of students of the best English medium schools in our own country.

If the teaching of G2 (or G3) does not ensure the learning of G1, why is it taught?

Partly, this is a hangover from the scholarly tradition which emphasized the study of grammar (G2) as a mental discipline; it is also partially due to a failure to distinguish between G1 and G2.

It would not be true to think that all teachers are happy about this. In fact, the reaction against the teaching of G2 and G3 has gone to the other extreme: in many cases teachers are warned that they should "teach the language not *about* the language".

This new approach emphasizes, as we have already seen, the practice of language in meaningful situations: oral drilling, pattern-practice, substitution exercises, etc. The student is systematically exposed to G1 (functional Grammar) by the teacher, and the learner absorbs as much of it as s/he can.

At the initial stages of learning, there is no attempt to make the student think *consciously* about language or to provide explanations of any kind. Formal grammar (G2) is rigorously excluded, as it is believed that explanations will only confuse the young learner who does not possess the maturity to benefit from them.

But after several years of learning, when the learner has gained sufficient control over G1, it is felt that s/he may be exposed to some formal grammar (G2), as this helps to systematize and consolidate what s/he already knows of G1.

At this stage, the exponents of the new approach maintain, the *kind* of G2 selected for teaching should be carefully considered. Nesfield-type grammars which rigorously prescribe rules (which are no longer valid in most cases), or which provide explanations or categorizations drawn from Latin and are in no way applicable to modern English, should be replaced by more modern 'scientific' grammars, based on current linguistic research.

The teacher is often told that "traditional' (Nesfield-type) grammars are useless; but unfortunately there is, so far, no 'scientific' grammar available which can describe or explain *all* the facts of English. However, attempts are being made to produce the 'perfect' grammar.

The current feeling is that an adequate G2 should explain to the learner what happens in language and provide rational insights into the process of communication as well as of language acquisition. It is not the business of a G2 merely to prescribe rules, or catalogue the observed facts of a language.

Hitherto, some teachers have been very emphatic about one thing: not even the best G2 can really ensure that the student learns G1. The answer is to provide more and more practice, without wasting time over formalizations.

But, as we have been emphasizing, we are less sure today that we really know how language is acquired. There may be good reason to believe that the learner of language is not simply a robot who can be put through his/her paces mechanically; each learner may be a miniature grammarian, trying to construct his/her own private G2 out of whatever s/he observes in G1, and constantly experimenting with the G2 that s/he produces for himself/herself.

In any case, it is unrealistic to hope that the Indian learner can get enough practice in the use of English G1 to be able to *absorb* it, as a native speaker does. There isn't enough English around us for this to happen.

The teacher will have to compensate for the lack of available practice, and provide a short-cut to the learning process. This is where an explanatory, insightful G2 can help.

But G2 has to grow out of G1: the explanations and insight? are derived from exposure to language. (This is what seems to happen with the native child too.) We can only generalise on the basis of what we experience; the explanations cannot *precede* the exposure. Usually, grammar (G2) is taught and examined in isolation from all other parts of the language course. Grammar is even separated from composition. In the grammar class, the teacher merely provides the rules for correct writing; the actual production of writing is left to the composition class. There is thus a divorce between the theory and practice of G1.

This approach to the teaching of Grammar (G2) is linguistically unsound and pedagogically undesirable. Grammar does not exist in isolation from language: language vs. grammar. The objective in teaching grammar (G2) to the ordinary student is to improve his/her receptive and productive language skills — to make him/her a better user of language — and not to give him/her a lot of specialised information *about* language. Such G2 as is taught should only be *incidental to the teaching of language skills*. The grammar lesson should emerge out of the language material being used to inculcate the other skills. The course book, or the text being used to develop the skills of reading and comprehension, as well as vocabulary, should (ideally) form the basis of the grammar lesson too.

What we are advocating is the use of text-based grammar. Grammars of the Nesfield-type, or even more 'modern' grammars like W.S. Allen's *Living English Structure* (used in many schools and colleges) have one great disadvantage: none of the examples given to illustrate a grammatical point is *contextualised*. An awareness of grammatical rules develops only when language is used in proper contexts. Furthermore, the language material (corpus) used to illustrate a grammatical principle should be related to the

student's experience of language; and in the Indian situation, the student may have no other experience of the English language except that provided by his/her textbook (and the teacher). So it is important to make use of the reading text for introducing grammatical explanations, etc.<sup>11</sup>

In actual practice, however, the text used for teaching the reading skills may prove to be unsuitable for teaching grammar. The reason is that to illustrate a point of grammar adequately, we need several *repetitions* of the pattern involved, and we don't normally find so many repetitions in a piece of text. The teacher may, therefore, have to *write* his/her own text, using suitable material, to teach grammar.

Latin adopted Greek as a model and started to teach Latin grammar, the Romans had to identify the aspects of grammar that needed to be taught as a part of curriculum. This issue kept expanding with the consideration of Latin grammar as the model for teaching of the vernacular languages in the whole of Europe including English.

The first problem that came before the pedagogic grammarians was the difference between the languages. For instance, English is non-inflected language, while the Greco-Roman, models are inflected languages and hence did not fitted.

#### Conclusion

This paper provides a wholesome picture of the debatable issues and suggests for bridging of the gap between the various dichotomies at pedagogic level. Besides these English was a young language, emerging out of various transitions and confusions of the earlier stage. To overcome such a situation languages started to be compared and contrasted for the purpose of teaching. Such concepts as comparative and historical linguistics, contrastive analysis at the psychological theory of behaviourism came to the rescue until the time when pure linguistics is to be differentiated from applied linguistics that included English Language Teaching (E.L.T.) besides other related interdisciplinary areas of the studies. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century grammar of a language was taught on the basis of traditional assumptions regarding language with Latin grammar as a modal.

The emergence of linguistics and the research advancements in sociology, and psychology introduced a remarkable change in the Pedagogic Grammar. The significance of 'what' and 'how' of grammar were questioned.

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