

Debates in Pedagogic Grammar

Abstract

This Paper highlights the grammar debate at the pedagogic level. The terms 'grammar' and 'pedagogic grammar' have been defined afresh, keeping in mind the recent dichotomies in grammar teaching. An attempt has been made to discuss aspects pertaining to grammar such as 'Traditional vs Modern', 'prescriptive vs descriptive', 'correctibility vs acceptability'.

In the academic world, grammar has always been hotly debated due to dissensions among groups with regard to its purpose, extent, scope or the contents of its teaching. Despite the best efforts of grammarians and linguists to minimize the debate, it proved to be ineffective in the real teaching and learning situations.

Keywords: ELT - English Language Teaching ESL - English as a Second Language EFL - English as a Foreign Language LSRW - Listening Speaking Reading Writing CLT - Communicative Language Teaching GTM - Grammar Translation Method TG - Transformational Grammar GTM - Grammar Translation Met

Introduction

Teaching grammar is as old as its origin. With the Greeks there happened to be two sets of grammarians. One who were intellectually curious to understand their language better, and the other who wanted to make their living by teaching.¹

This tradition of two sets of grammarians continued till date with the only change that over a period of time even the teachers/ grammarians contributed enthusiastically on such issues as the scope, purpose, types, materials and methodology of grammar teaching.

When the 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 expending 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 Greeco-Roman, models are inflected languages and hence did not fitted. A simple example of the word, 'Like' can be taken from.² (ibid).

The word 'like' in English can be used as an Adjective, Conjunction, Noun or even Verb depending on the context of use in a sentence. In inflected languages, like Greek and Latin a single word such as 'like' can not normally have such a wide variety of functions suffixes would differentiate the noun, verb, adjective, and preposition. In addition to such an inappropriateness of the model, the second problem that arose when the first English grammarians adopted Ancient modals were the respect for Latin that led to prescriptivism. A sense of respect and holiness was attached to the grammar rules that were inherited from Latin – a dominant language of the Church for centuries.

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 18th 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.



Nasim Akhtar

Assistant Professor,
Deptt. of English,
G.F. College,
Shahjahanpur, U.P.

Some of the major controversies that generated debate with regard to pedagogic grammar are as follows:

Traditional vs. Modern Grammar

Dinneen (1967:166) compares the traditional grammar and Modern linguistics in the following words

By Traditional grammar is meant the basically Aristotelian orientation toward the nature of language as exemplified in the work of the ancient Greeks and Romans, the speculative work of the medieval, and the prescriptive approach of eighteenth century grammarians. By "linguistics" is meant the empirical, structural approach to language as represented principally by American Linguists during the period of the early 1940s, to mid-1950s since this is the work best known to those of the traditional approach.³

Traditional grammar consideration Latin grammar as a model where the prescriptive rules are to be generally memorized without any proper rationale and justification. The linguists of the 19th and early 20th century such as De Sassure, Sapir, Bloomfield, et. al., who were basically structuralists attacked the very basis of a traditional grammar. Some of its features are as follows:

1. Traditional grammar is very popular, extensive, influential and easiest method for the comparative study of different languages.
2. It is explicit in approach.
3. It is not premised on any scientific or theoretical assumptions, but it is humanistic.
4. It is purely based on conventional thoughts pertaining to language and grammar.
5. It is prescriptive and normative.
6. It is diachronic.
7. It is based on the written data, hence it gives definite thoughts and references.
8. It encourages bilingualism in the learning process and refers teaching formal language styles.
9. It is form and accuracy based.

Modern grammar on the other hand emerged as a discipline on the basis of sound, scientific theorizations. It looked at language in the new perspective with a preference to spoken form of language over the written mode and tried to describe language data in order to understand it.

They observed that the traditional grammar is full of erroneous and unscientific assumptions. Hence the modern grammarians redefined and recategorized the various aspects of traditional grammar. A comparative presentation of Traditional and Modern Grammar is presented in the following table:

Table-1: Comparative Study between Traditional and Modern Grammar

Traditional Grammar	Modern Grammar
1. It is taught deductively, i.e. it is rule-governed	1. It is taught inductively i.e. exposure to language for discovering rules
2. It is based on prescriptivism, i.e. it is Teacher Centered.	2. It is descriptive and Learner Centered.
3. It is Form – Based	3. It focuses on function but doesn't reject form totally.
4. Its main attention is on 'accuracy' and 'correctness'.	4. It considers 'Acceptability', 'intelligibility' and appropriateness
5. It is difficult to distinguish spoken and written form of language.	5. It considers spoken data as its basis.
6. It is normative and prescriptive	6. It is explicit and descriptive.
7. It is based on logic and philosophy	7. It is based on linguistic science.
8. Aims at accuracy.	8. Focuses on fluency.

Prescriptive vs. Descriptive

As the name suggests 'prescriptive grammar' refers to the prescription of the sets of rule for the correct use of the language. It is this attitude that most people still believe that grammar teaches the 'dos' and 'don'ts' of the language. Many such prescriptions still hammer our minds when we use a language. Some of these are as follows:

1. Make sure that the verbs agree with their subjects.
2. Never use 'me' as a subject of a sentence.
3. Do not split an infinitive.
4. A sentence must not end with a preposition.

Such prescriptive rules refer to the 'linguistic etiquette' failing which one is branded as grammatically incorrect and poorly educated. These and many other rules of the prescriptive grammar codify the distinction between the standard and non-standard variety of language and such rules often influence people choosing between 'good' and 'bad' grammatical forms. The term of 'prescriptive grammar'

is based on the notion that the grammatical knowledge is complete and definitive and that there exists an absolute standard of correctness. It is propagated that following the prescriptive rules help in immediate comprehension and international intelligibility. Any failure to conform to the prescriptive rules is suggestive of bad taste, poor education and introduction of impurity to the language. Therefore, these norms are enshrined in the dictionaries, and books of the school grammar.

A couple of definitions of prescriptive grammar are listed below for further understanding of the term:

David Crystal,(1997 :88) defines prescriptive grammar as-

1. Prescriptive grammar provides "a manual that focuses on instructions where usage is divided and lays on rules governing the socially correct use of language"⁴

2. "Prescriptive grammar lays down rules for the use of a language; "such a grammar would call all those sentences 'correct' which observes these rules and all those sentences 'incorrect' which break these rules". 5 (CIEFL Unit -1: 6)
3. "A prescriptive grammar presents authoritative norms for a particular language and intends to deprecate non-standard constructions. Traditional grammars are typically prescriptive. Prescriptive grammars are usually based on the prestige dialects of a speech community, and often specially condemned certain constructions which are common only among lower socio-economic groups, such as the use of "ain't" and double negatives in English. Though prescriptive grammars remain common in pedagogy and foreign language teaching, they have fallen out of favour in modern academic linguistics, as they describe only a-subset of actual language usage".6 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/grammar#Development_of_grammars)

Prescriptive grammar has been used, 'and still being used in India at least' for centuries by the students and teachers.

Descriptive grammar, on the other hand, states the facts of the language as they exist and record sentences as they are spoken (or written) systematically by a large number of native speakers. CIEFL. (1995:6) Modern English Grammar and Usage. Block 1, Unit 1.

Like prescriptive grammar, the descriptive grammar too contains 'rules', but these rules (may also be called" conventions are those that actually underlie the usage of native speakers).7 (CIEFL, 1995:6)

When the rules of descriptive grammars are violated, these violations are recorded objectively as a changing phenomenon of the current usage. This means that while prescriptive grammar considers language as a static entity, descriptive grammar uses a certain language as a dynamic phenomenon.

The distinction between descriptive and prescriptive grammars can be made clearer if a distinction is made between natural laws and Laws of the Government. CIEFL. (1995:6) Modern English Grammar and Usage. Block 1, Unit 1.

Laws like the Law of gravitation or the law of Planetary motion actually describe the phenomenon found in nature, while the laws of a society, or of a government prescribed what we should do and penalizes if you do not observe them. The "rules" of the descriptive grammar, therefore, the natural laws stated by scientists, based on actual usage, while rules of a prescriptive grammar are liked the laws of the government which tell us how we ought to use the language. 8 (CIEFL, 1995:6)

David Crystal (1997: 88) observes:

An approach that describes the grammatical constructions that are used in a language, without making any evaluative judgments about their standing in society. These grammars are commonplace in linguistics, where it is standard practice to investigate a 'corpus' of spoken or written material, and to describe in detail the patterns it contains.9

(David, Crystal. 1997: 88)

A descriptive grammar attempts to describe actual usage, avoiding prescriptive judgements. Descriptive grammars are bound to a particular speech community, and attempt to provide rules for any utterance considered grammatically correct within that community. For example, in many dialects of English, the use of double negatives is very common, though ungrammatical from the point of view of a prescriptive English grammar. A descriptive grammar of a speech community where "I didn't do nothing" is acceptable will treat sentence as grammatical, and provide rules that account for it. A descriptive grammar of formal English would rather provide rules for "I didn't do anything".10 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/grammar#development_of_grammars)

(Odlin, 1994: 2-3) refers about the kinds of grammar:

From pedagogy point of view the prescriptive grammar, though discouraged by the descriptivists, is encouraged for the fact that "prescription makes possible the standardization of languages, which makes communication easier between highly different dialect regions, as some linguists have noted (e.g., Hughes and Trudgill 1987). Having a target language codified (even if imperfectly) simplifies both the teaching and learning of second languages. If there were no limit to the variation permissible, the speech (or writing), of learners would inevitably diverge much more from the target language. Constraining the divergence through prescription can help to make ways of speaking or writing mutually intelligible when learners modify their language toward a single standard, or at least toward a narrower range of standards (e.g., American, British). While it is true that standard varieties are often associated with the richer and more powerful members of a society, education can – and should – make the standard accessible to all. Pretending

that language teaching does not entail prescription will hardly serve learners. One linguist well aware of the limitations of prescriptivism writes:

If you want to create a truly elitist society, one in which a very few (a priesthood, if you will) control everything, the best way to do so is to deny substantive education to the masses. Inevitably, however much we try to keep it from happening, there will be those intelligent enough to learn on their own, ambitious enough to do so, and ruthless enough to use what they know for their own advancement at the expense of the hapless, undereducated majority. Substantive education must include the development of knowledge about language and skill in using it, and there seems no way to do justice to these twin aims without prescriptivism of a sort. 11

(Odlin, 1994: 2-3)

The above quoted lines represent the present day thought of major chunk of teachers and also suggests that it will be improper to sacrifice one on the cost of the other. Hence there is a need for bridging the two types of grammar for the effective teaching of a foreign/second language.

Correctibility Vs Acceptability

In the earlier section we saw that while prescriptive grammar thinks in term of correctibility, the descriptive grammar, talks of acceptability. The emergence of modern linguistics assumes that language is dynamic and that it changes in time and space. A plethora of examples can be cited to show what was considered to be incorrect yesterday, is being used enthusiastically in the present time. 'correct' and 'incorrect' are relative terms. What is correct in India may be incorrect in England.

Besides this 'correct' and 'incorrect' suggests absolute norms, while language in use is actually determined by a whole on a lot of relative criteria.¹²

(CIEFL. (1995:16) Modern English Grammar and Usage, Block 1 Unit, 2.

Acceptable and unacceptable on the other hand are also norms which are relative, fluid and variable. While the 'correct – incorrect' dichotomy points a division into black and white, the "acceptable – unacceptable" distinction rightly suggests the possibility of many grey areas. 13

(CIEFL, 1995:16)

The concept of acceptability and unacceptability becomes more valid when we think of language as a constituent of both linguistic and paralinguistic features, in addition to the aspects of socio-cultural and aesthetic appropriateness and expressions.

Let us look at the following sentence which is grammatically correct but it is unacceptable because of socio-cultural inappropriateness:

"Hello! old man, how are you?"

It is impolite to call an old man, old.

Concepts and Categories

Since the modern linguistics looked at language in a new perspective of descriptive grammar, it challenged the traditional grammar by discarding the traditional concepts and views of grammar. As a consequence the modern grammarians redefined, recategorized and labelled a fresh existing traditional grammatical concepts and categories. The eight 'parts of speech' of the traditional grammar were replaced by five 'word classes'. A distinction was established between time and tense, formal and functional labeling of grammar items were made; use and usage were distinguished. And all these fresh categories and concepts of modern grammar were incorporated into books on pedagogic grammar. Certainly all these were possible only after a heated debate on these issues at pedagogic level

Aim of the Study

The study of grammar debate at pedagogic level would especially help the teachers, teacher trainers, material producers and even the syllabus designers in determining the extent, status, role and relevance of grammar teaching in the language programme

Conclusion

In our society grammar as a subject has always attracted criticism and controversy for it being boring, difficult, demotivating and what not. The present study as reflected that academically too grammar as perennially been a subject of severe debates. Even today much of the controversies in language teaching or otherwise are caused due to lack of agreement between individuals or groups.

One unfortunately that grammar has experienced over the centuries that it hardly could have a consensus among grammarians or even teachers regarding the purpose, extent, scope or the content of grammar teaching, prescriptive vs. descriptive, traditional vs. modern grammar, Correctibility vs. Acceptability. One theory is often seen to be argued and debated against the other; rejecting one against the other, as if only the new one is correct and the old one has been a mistaken actively that the world was engaged in. Such a shift in theories belief and arguments can be seen most frequently taken place since the beginning of the 20th century. Though some grammarians and linguists did try to minimize the debate, but such efforts were not even heard of in the teaching and learning situations. One can easily find students and teachers appreciating the new one and ruthlessly rejecting the whole one.

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