The Importance of Grammar in English Language Teaching
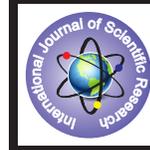
English

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In the field of English Language Teaching there have been arguments and counter arguments about the role of English grammar in learning a language. Over the centuries, grammar teaching has been critically in and out of favour in educational programmes. One harmful result of the wrong approach to grammar was to give it's a pejorative connotation so that the formerly respectable title of grammarian became a term of reproach.

What is Grammar?
Grammar is generally thought to be a set of rules specifying the correct ordering of words at the sentence level. Grammar explains how the language should be structured, using various categories.

To speak in a clearer and more effective manner, we study grammar. A person who has unconscious knowledge of grammar may be sufficient for simple language use, but the ones who wish to communicate in an artful manner and well, will seek greater depth of understanding and proficiency that the study of grammar provides.

Sentences are acceptable if they follow the rules set out by the grammar of the language. For example, in English, one rule states that - a subject followed by a verb followed by an object is grammatical. The sentence - The letter the man wrote is ungrammatical because it violates this rule whereas The man wrote the letter is acceptable because it obeys this rule.

Definitions of Grammar:
Etymologically, Grammar is the "Art of Letters". The word comes via Anglo-Norman "Gramere". According to The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, Grammar is referred to as "study or science of, rules for, the words into sentences (syntax), and the forms of words (morphology)". Dr. Johnson in his book English Grammar states that "Grammar is the science of speaking correctly:

The art which teaches the relations of words to each other". The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines grammar as "the study of use of the rules by which words change their forms and are combined into sentences." In fact, grammar is "multi-dimensional" and has multi-meanings. It is generally thought to be a set of rules for choosing words and putting words together to make sense. Every language has a grammar. It has been held that if a language is a building, the words are the bricks and the grammar is the architect's plan. One may have a million bricks, but do not make a building without a plan. Similarly, if a person knows a million English words, but he doesn't know how to put them together, then he cannot speak English.

Let us now try to understand what people in general follow by the word "Grammar". This word means differently to various people. To an ordinary citizen "Grammar is correct and incorrect English".. To a student it is "analytical and terminological study of sentences". While to a linguist it means "the total set of signals by which a given language expresses meaning".

It is said that there are three kinds of Grammar namely; G1, G2 and G3.

G1 is the total mechanism which a language possesses and through which its users are able to communicate with each other. Every native speaker, whether literate or illiterate, knows and controls his or her G1. Each language possesses a distinctive G1, peculiar to itself.

G2 refers to all formal analysis and description of the rules of the language. The illiterate native speaker of a language may know its G1 but not G2. However, when he or she begins to think of language consciously, to wonder what should be said in a situation to get the message across, he or she is involved in the G2 of the language.

G3; grammar refers to the rules of correct use of a -language which may be prescribed for its users.

Grammar topics are usually sorted in books into word grammar and sentence grammar. Word grammar sections are further divided according to the different parts of speech-content words, containing Verbs, Nouns, Adjective, and Adverbs; and Structure words, containing Determiners, Pronouns, Prepositions, Conjunctions and Interjections. Sentence grammar relates to the construction of Phrases, Clauses and full sentences, all the way up to paragraphs and full texts.

In order to teach English, a teacher needs to be aware of the structure and form of the language not only to enrich one's own knowledge of the language, but to be aware of what he/she is presenting to the learners. Phonology helps the teacher become aware of the differences in languages and the difficulties that the learners might face.

Principles of Teaching Grammar:
a). ***Integrate both inductive and deductive methods***: In the deductive classroom, the teacher gives a grammatical explanation or rule followed by a set of exercises designed to clarify the grammatical point. In deductive grammar one moves from rules to examples. Inductive procedures reverse this process. Examples are presented to the learners and through a process of guided discovery; they work out the principles themselves. This leads us to the question, which is better? It depends on the grammar point being learnt. A combination of both is needed; however inductive techniques appear to result in better retention in the long term.

b). Connect grammatical form and communicative function: Many grammar based courses are relatively ineffective because they teach grammar as an abstract system and fail to give learners a proper context for the grammar point. Teaching was limited to the form of the new grammatical item. For example, when the passive voice was introduced students were given a list of sentences in the active voice along with a model of how to form the passive. Such a procedure did not give students any insights into the communicative contexts in which they should use the

passive. Therefore, when teaching the passive voice, show why the passive voice is used-to place emphasis on the action rather than the doer, to hide the identity of the doer.

Language that is introduced and taught in context presents real situations that encompass the physical setting, the purpose of the exchange, the roles of the participants, and the socially acceptable norms of interaction, in addition to the medium, topic, tone, and register of the exchange. Grammatical structures that might otherwise be devoid of context become an integral part of the communicative acts that occur in contexts.

Contextualization involves meaningful language use for real communicative purposes and helps students to understand how meaning is constructed by language users (be it writing, speaking, reading, or listening) depending upon the context. Context refers to the topic and situation of a communicative act that are necessary for understanding according to Walz. He points out that a number of language textbooks provide contextualized grammar exercises. These exercises provide thematically related sentences requiring mechanical manipulation of a grammatical form, but often do not force students to understand. Therefore, contextualization of mechanical drills in this sense is certainly not the same thing as creating a context.

Classes that focus on language form for the purpose of increasing comprehension and meaning have been shown to result in greater language gains than classes in which no focus on form is available or in which forms. are learned as meaningless structures, not connected to any meaningful communicative act or applied in any way. That is, focus on form is only useful if this knowledge can be used by the learners in a new way at a later time.

A few techniques in the teaching of grammar:
(1) Motivation: Fun should be an element in any class, especially one that deals with grammar. Usually as soon as the word G-R-A-M-M-A-R is announced, there is a sense of doom that looms over the students. The immediate reaction is an inward groan or -- turning off due to a lot of apprehension. It is also the same for any teacher, especially a one who is new and less experienced, therefore the one and only weapon that can diffuse the situation is FUN. (2) Games. (3) Songs. (4) Mime. (5) Poems. (6) Audio visual aids are all potential ways to have fun and introduce almost any topic on grammar.

Grammar is therefore now seen, not merely as a theory, but as an enabling tool for authentic language practice. As some rules still need to be taught formally, a balanced combination of all the approaches is the solution for using grammar effectively.

Creating different communicative situations in the classroom for teaching grammar: Due to prescription of textbooks and curriculum, teachers are restrained to confine themselves to the completion of the curricula and to follow the methodology accordingly. The text, curricula and the examination pattern dictate them to aim at assisting the learners in scoring good marks in the examination rather than facilitating them to gain fluency in the use of language. They follow prescriptive approach and emphasize more on teaching of rules than their use in different communicative situations. This results in limited exposure and makes the classroom closed-ended for communicative activities. The main challenge before a grammar pedagogue is to make the classroom open-ended by creating enough scope in the classroom for the students to participate in the communicative activities. A grammar teacher should create such types of learner-centred communicative situations in the classroom, which enable a learner to repeatedly use different frequently occurring grammatical items in various life- like situations.

A Resourceful Teacher can explore the creation of different types of situations in the classroom. A Competent Teacher can create situations spontaneously depending on the level of the students, the grammatical item he is teaching, and the topic. An Effective Teacher is the one who can inspire and motivate the students by creating personal as well as impersonal situations in the classroom.

a). Personal Situations: These may be related to the personal lives, likes and dislikes and family background of the students and the teachers. The teacher can create various types of personal situations - student-centred as well as teacher- centred on different subjects like ones hobbies, likes and dislikes, routine activities, habits, friends, relatives, family professions, health etc. to provide sufficient opportunities and time for the students to participate in the meaningful situational dialogues. For example, while teaching simple present tense, we initiate discussion in the classroom by asking some questions about the daily routine of the students.

b). Impersonal situations: It is not necessary that a teacher always creates personal situations to initiate conversational exchanges in the classroom. Apart from personal situations, creation of impersonal situations can also be explored for communicative purposes. Impersonal situations that cover topics related to politics, sports, cinema, theatre, fashion, books, celebrities, finance, transport, vehicles and any other topic in which students have some background knowledge and information should be explored for creating communicative situations in the classroom.

c). Text-centred communicative situations: A grammar teacher can also teach grammar with the help of a poem or a paragraph from the text. This will create the textual centered communicative situation. While teaching the prescribed text for the purpose of reading comprehension, a teacher can select some interesting passages from the text and can create some communicative situations based on them for teaching and providing practice in the use of a grammatical item. For example a teacher can ask the students to find out the prepositions! main verbs/auxiliary verbs etc. from the given poem or paragraph. In conducting this, the teacher can try to create interest in the minds of the students so that they use to consider this practice to be a kind of game.

There is also a scope for creating interesting situations in the classroom for providing practice in the use of some grammatical items from the text taught for the purpose of reading comprehension. Since the primary to under-graduate level, for all the classes a text book is prescribed. The text contains some lessons — essays and poems for reading comprehension. The contents of the lessons from the text may also be used for creating situations and activities in order to provide practice in the use of grammatical items. However, the situations created from the content given in the text should not be directly copied from the prescribed text, but should be modified to create communicative activities in the classroom.

Nowadays, there are modern approaches to grammar, which bring it alive and relate it to our real life situations. Pedagogical grammar for language learning teaches only those grammar rules relevant to successful practical communication themes like shopping, looking for a job or opening up a business. Grammar is therefore now seen, not merely as a theory, but as enabling tool for authentic language practice. As some rules still need to be taught formally, a- balanced combination of all the approaches is the solution for using grammar effectively.

Knowing the structure of grammar is different from use and usage of language. Remembering the rules is not the thing, but using the rules or applying rules is the thing in learning a language.

Today a teacher of English is baffled not because he does not have enough tools in his repertoire, 'but because of the large number' of approaches, methods, theories which came into existence as a result of developments and researches which took place in Linguistics and Language Teaching. Sometimes teachers of language are attracted towards new approaches and without examining their merits and demerits, they are excited to use them due to their novelty and difference from the earlier ones. The challenge before a language teacher is to choose the right approach, or technique or to integrate the concepts of different approaches in his teaching programme.

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