

Relevance of Teaching English Grammar

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to highlight the relevance of grammar in teaching and acquiring a second language. The role grammar plays can take many dimensions. Some of the roles discussed in this paper are its ability to convey unambiguous meaning, having the capacity to create an infinite set of sentences and a substantial enabling skill. Additionally, grammar forms an important subject in almost all the syllabuses all around the world. Be it English grammar or any other grammar, be it a native or a bilingual a person cannot write or speak eloquently without this key factor. Mastering grammar is the foundation in the proficiency of a language. Grammar teaching is also an essential part of language teaching. In terms of the theory of linguistics, this paper specifically explores the status of grammar in language learning, the characteristics of foreign language learning, theoretical basis of communicative teaching approach, and the practical effect of ignoring grammar teaching to reposition grammar teaching for a comprehensive understanding of the necessity of teaching grammar.

Key words: Grammar teaching, communicative teaching approach, strategy, necessity of grammar

Introduction

Definitions of grammar vary greatly according to one's knowledge and expertise in the realm in question. A laymen's definition of grammar would be much distinct from a grammarian's or a linguist. This distinction is primarily on account of the extent of knowledge one possesses over the field or the orientation one has chosen to pursue. A laymen's definition would only scratch the surface of grammar while a grammarian's definition would delve into more elaborate aspects like word class and part of speech. As for a linguist, he would tackle the linguistics components of language such as phonology, semantics and so on. Grammar is a tremendously vast field which could be approached from a myriad of ways.

The Role of Grammar

Grammar plays a substantial role in governing the use and application of language. It gives the user the structure to build complete and meaningful sentences. The role of grammar can take many dimensions and varies according to the situation and context in which it is used. The underlying role of grammar lies in being the language which enables us to talk about language. It names the words and words groups that make up sentences as well as the way in which they can be accurately put together. It is true that natives can subconsciously pick up their languages without any kind of explicit or formal instruction, but they can't talk about it or explain some of its irregularities without having learnt them.

Grammar also plays an important role in the writing and reading processes. One cannot write efficiently and professionally without this instruction. It would be nearly impossible for the writer to articulate his thoughts and make them intelligible for the reader. How would he be able to express the future perfect or doubt without knowing grammatically how? In addition to that, without grammar, one cannot even read without misunderstanding the meaning. If the reader has to go back and re-read a sentence several times because they are not quite sure what it means, it spoils their reading experience and they are quite likely to misunderstand the point or even to give up and not read any further. Knowing about grammar also helps us understand what makes sentences and paragraphs clear and interesting and without it any language will be totally coarse and ugly to deal with, not to mention that the language would eventually become completely illegible and nonsense.

Grammar, as Chomsky put it, is a set of finite rules which, if learnt and mastered, can generate an infinite set of sentences. This is also one of the attributes of grammar. Moreover, Grammar also serves as an enabling tool for articulating complex thoughts. Baby-talk is fine to a certain point, but there comes a time when we need to express more complicated concepts and meanings for which simple words are not enough. To do that, rule of syntax and morphology must be employed.

And last but not least, grammar is considered to be a prerequisite factor for effective communication. The role of grammar in communication comes in organizing words, clauses and phrases into meaningful sentences. The exchange of these sentences results in a conversation. In this respect, the importance of grammar here resides in making it possible for each person to say exactly what they want to and be able to understand the other. It serves as a mechanism against ambiguity and confusion. On the other hand, however, when grammar is lacking in a conversation, there is a good chance for misunderstanding and disagreement. Imagine going to a foreign country and using a dictionary of the local language to communicate. We may pick the right word but the way you put them together can be funny, maybe even dangerous. The purpose of grammar in communication is to be able to convey our thoughts through language. If we are not understood, then the whole point of the conversation is lost. Thus, the roles grammar play are multiple and diverse.

The Status of Teaching English Grammar in India

Grammar as a set of rules for choosing words and putting words together to make sense plays a significant role in language teaching. Without grammar, language does not exist. Also, it is difficult for students to speak English well without learning English grammar. So, in the formal education, it is inevitable for teachers who teach foreign languages to teach grammar. However, with the development of the history of language teaching, the position of English grammar in language teaching has always been disputed. As “communicative approach” was introduced to India in the 70s of 20th century, educational reformers in India tend to emphasize the students’ communicative ability to use the actual language. Some teachers simply think that is to dilute the teaching of grammar, without attention to grammar. Some teachers tend to neglect grammar teaching which is regarded as inherently “dull” or “old-fashioned”. Some are even going to extremes by avoiding talking about grammar under the supposition that grammar teaching does no good to students’ communicative competence. Therefore, grammar teaching is in a state of

crisis. Now it is essential and imperative to arouse foreign language teachers' attention to grammar. From the following different theoretical and practical arguments, our foreign language teachers will have a new understanding of grammar's place in language teaching and learning.

The Relevance of Grammar Teaching in Terms of Theory of Linguistics

Linguistic theory is the basis of foreign language teaching. Principles and methods of teaching are inseparable from linguistic theory. The following different theoretical principles show the necessity of grammar teaching in foreign language learning.

(i) The need of the components and basic features of language

The components and basic features of language determine the need for grammar. Contemporary linguists agree that language consists of sound, lexicon and grammar, and these three elements influence each other, have interaction and constitute the material basis of the whole language system, i.e., the content of language can be expressed through sound, while sound has to use lexicon and grammar to achieve its function; grammar is the sound, structure, and meaning system of language, and only through the grammar can sound and lexicon form meaningful language system. Therefore, linguists argue that grammar is the most important part in a language system. A complete language system cannot be constituted without grammar. Thus, we can imagine that grammar is just like a frame of a house. Without this framework, good materials and building blocks cannot constitute a solid house. Many linguists also have incisive exposition on the importance of grammar. Bastone (1994) asserts that “language without grammar would be chaotic; countless words without the indispensable guidelines for how they can be ordered and modified” (p. 35). Chomsky (1965) explains that grammar can be thought of as a theory of a language. Thus, for foreign language teachers, grammar is an indispensable part in language teaching.

(ii) The requirement of the standard of mastering a language

The standard of mastering a language embodies the importance of grammar teaching. It is often said in the real life that to master a foreign language is the need for social development. So, what should we learn to master a foreign language? On this issue, different people have different answers. Some people say that to understand a language is to understand its grammar and vocabulary well. Some say that it is to understand its grammar, vocabulary, and also to know how to use this language to do what we need. Famous linguist Woods (1988) also addresses that when we say someone understands a language, we mean the person has obtained the ability to produce the target language that can be accepted in grammar. Although people have different viewpoints on the standard of mastering a language, there is a commonality, that is, to master a language must master its grammar.

(iii) The need of the feature of foreign language learning environment

As for Indian students studying English as a foreign language, they have no more English environment to apply their target language after all. Only in English classrooms and English activities that schools launch can Indian students just have an opportunity to be exposed to English language. Therefore, it is very difficult for them to judge and distinguish semantic

characteristic and difference between the mother tongue and purpose language accurately and in time. In terms of this situation, grammar seems particularly important when being studied and taught. The correct grammar is the “walking stick” teaching themselves English. Students must be supported by English grammar in many aspects while studying English. So, grammar teaching is the important component of language teaching, especially in the environment of foreign language.

(iv) The requirement of the nature of the theory of “communicative approach”

The nature of the theory of “communicative approach” determines the need for grammar teaching. When we talk about “communicative competence”, we have to come to “communicative approach”. With the development of functional linguistics, “communicative approach” receives teachers and students’ favour. The traditional teaching methods were gradually abandoned because of their limitations. Communicative approach has been adopted for more than 40 years in India. However, there are some dilemmas in current language teaching: some teachers always stress “communicative competence” and neglect “linguistic competence”. Teachers and students are always in search for fluent oral expression, but reading and written knowledge is very weak. Meanwhile, Students often make errors in oral and written expression and lack basic knowledge of language. Obviously, this is the result of a one-sided understanding of communicative approach, so that foreign language teaching goes to an extreme. Therefore, we should have a comprehensive and all-sided understanding of the following theory of communicative approach.

The concept of “linguistic competence” is put forward by Chomsky (1965) on the basis of denying the language theory of behaviourism and defined as language knowledge system of native speakers’ internalization, including sound, lexicon, syntax, semantics and other rules, and the linguistic competence native speakers have enables them to understand and produce grammatical sentences they have never contacted before. With the development of sociolinguistics, in view of insufficiency of the concept of “linguistic competence”, American sociolinguist Hymes (1972) puts forward the concept of “communicative competence” and argues that “communicative competence” should include “linguistic competence” and “linguistic performance”, i.e. while the language is used, both sides of communication need to know not only whether the structure of communication words is correct or not, but also the feasibility, appropriateness and purpose of the communication words in the particular linguistic context, that is, there are four aspects in the concept of “communicative competence”:

sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence and grammatical competence.

The Necessity of Grammar Teaching in Terms of Practical Effect of Foreign Language Teaching

The practical effects in foreign language teaching in the past require paying much more attention to grammar teaching. Practice is the sole criterion for testing truth. In terms of the past practical effects of English language teaching, ignoring and neglecting the teaching of English grammar is not conducive to the promotion of the teaching of English as a whole, and even affects students’ correct use of English.

Because of the lack of correct grammar, many students inside and outside the class can't express accurate sentences. In the English foundation stage, grammar's weakness directly affects students' grades and further higher education. After they go to high schools or universities, many students do not understand sentence structure and use of language difference. Some mistakes of translation and writing make teachers puzzled. Similarly, in the reading comprehension of long and difficult sentences, they also cannot correctly analyse sentence structure. Many college students say that their reason for the unsatisfactory performance in English is that the concept's ambiguity of syntactic structure causes problems of reading, grammar, translation and writing.

Conclusion

At any time, at any stage and in any circumstances, relevance of teaching English grammar cannot be diluted. It ought to be an important part in foreign language teaching in India. This is the requirement of the basic characteristics and features of language learning and subjective environment for foreign language learning.

Moreover, grammar is an effective way to train students' communicative competence in English language teaching. Grammar and communicative competence should not be in opposition. Without grammar, language, communicative knowledge and competence are just "castles in the air". With a good knowledge of grammar, students can fully improve their integrated English proficiency and promote the overall levels of their English. Therefore, teachers who teach the foreign language should try to reform the current conditions on neglecting grammar teaching in English education, and strive to explore grammar teaching methods to fully promote students' English level.

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