

# Teaching a Language with/without the Teaching of Grammar: Challenging the Myths

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**Abstract:** Grammar is rule based and essential to the teaching and learning of languages. It is also one of the core complex aspects of language to perform well in the classroom. The misconception lies in the view that grammar is a collection of arbitrary rules about static structures in the language. Grammar is the base of the English language. Many people, including language teachers, hear the word "grammar" and think of a fixed set of word forms and rules of usage. Grammar operates at the sentence level and governs the syntax or word order that is permissible in the language. It also works at the sub sentence level to govern such things as number and person agreement between subject and verb in a sentence. To grammar learning some pupils may have a more analytical learning style than others, but if he/she is keen to use the English language accurately it is essential for the learner to understand the grammatical rules since grammar teaching is rule governed, methodical and systematic. Grammar is not different from something else; it is rule based and it is likely that pupils learn at different rates depending upon their cognitive skills.

Today the tendency is as the saying goes, forget the rules of grammar, teach the language people speak, and allow your students to have fun. A child, who goes to live in a foreign country, may learn to speak the language by just listening and interacting with others. As we understand a child's mental lexicon is fast and powerful enough to pick up the language he is exposed to while respecting all the aspects of the language—grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Regardless of which approach or what methods are used, most foreign language students do find themselves severely handicapped by an institutional structure that works counter to their best interests.

Both scenarios may seem good for various and other specific purposes but I personally feel both are inappropriate for most language learners. For beginners, let us say, a good command of the grammar of a language does not imply that the person is able to communicate effectively, as we usually observe the students who have only been exposed to an all-grammar-oriented approach sometimes for many years. Many could recite the grammar by heart but if asked to express the basic information, they would hesitate, become nervous and browse through all the grammar rules in their heads before making an utterance, or simply become dumb or speechless. Secondly, just talking in the class without anything else done in order to learn from the actual conversation is not good enough either. It may be helpful of course, but to a certain extent. This approach may be more useful for very advanced students who just need to brush up their second language, but for those in need of building up the foundations of a new language, it is certainly too vague and without any consistency. This paper demonstrates a comparative approach tries to make a brief illogical construction analysis of necessity of grammar teaching before it gives a relatively objective description of its function and significance in language teaching. It argues that, grammar teaching is indispensable in language teaching.

**Keywords:** Grammar, English language teaching, Necessity.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1.Necessity of Grammar Teaching

Grammar is often neglected in the language teaching field. The misconception lies in the view that grammar is mere a collection of arbitrary rules of the language. This study is an endeavour tries to make a brief analysis of necessity of grammar teaching before it gives a relatively objective description of its function and significance in language teaching. It argues that, grammar teaching is necessary in language teaching.

## 1.2. Attitudes to grammar

Many language authorities have different attitudes to grammar. Joseph Webbe (1622) maintained that grammar could be picked up though simply communicating: 'By exercise of reading, writing, and speaking---all things belonging to Grammar, will without labour, and whether we will or not, thrust themselves upon us.' Webbe was one of the earliest educators to question the value of grammar instruction, but certainly not the last. In fact, no other issue has so preoccupied theorists and practitioners as the grammar debate, and the history of language teaching is essentially the history of the claims and counterclaims for and against the teaching of grammar. Differences in attitude to the role of grammar underpin differences between methods, between teachers, and learners. It is a subject that everyone involved in language teaching and learning has an opinion. And these opinions are often strongly and uncompromisingly stated. Here, for example, are a number of recent statements on the subject: There is no doubt that a knowledge-implicit or explicit—of grammatical rules is essential for the mastery of any language.

It is exact that putting grammar in the foreground in second language teaching, because language knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is the base of the English language. Grammatical competence is one of communicative competence. Communicative competence involves knowing how to use the grammar and vocabulary of the language to achieve communicative goals, and knowing how doing this in a socially appropriate way. Communicative goals are the goals of learners' studying English language. So grammar teaching is necessary to achieve the goals.

## 1.3. Grammar and Its Teaching: Challenging the Myths

Grammar is often viewed differently in the language teaching field. The notion lies in the view that grammar is a collection of arbitrary rules about static structures in the language. Further questionable claims are that the structures do not have to be taught, learners will acquire them on their own. Consequently, communicative and proficiency-based teaching approaches to language learning sometimes unduly limit grammar instruction. Of the many claims about grammar that deserve to be called myths, this study will challenge them. Further it deals with form and function relationship and the due importance to function based learning.

## 1.4. Grammar is acquired naturally; it need not be taught.

It is true that some learners acquire second language grammar naturally without instruction. For example, there are immigrants to the United States who acquire proficiency in English on their own. This is especially true of young immigrants. However, this is not true for all learners. Among the same immigrant groups are learners who may achieve a degree of proficiency, but whose English is far from accurate. A more important question may be whether it is possible with instruction to help learners who cannot achieve accuracy in English on their own.

It is also true that learning particular grammatical rules require a great deal of time even for the most skilled learners. Carol Chomsky (1969) showed that native English speakers were still in the process of acquiring certain grammatical structures in English well into adolescence. Thus, another important question is whether it is possible to accelerate students' natural learning of grammar through instruction. Research findings can be brought to bear on this question from a variety of sources (see Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). Pienemann (1984) demonstrated that subjects who received grammar instruction progressed to the next stage after a two-week period, a passage normally taking several months in untutored development. With regard to whether the instruction can help learners acquire grammar they would not have learned on their own, some research, although not unequivocal, points to the value of form-focused instruction to improve learners' accuracy over what normally transpires when there is no focus on form (see Larsen-Freeman, 1995).

## 1.5. Grammar consists of arbitrary rules

While there is some synchronic arbitrariness to grammar, not all of what is deemed arbitrary is so. If one adopts a broad enough perspective, it is possible to see why things are the way they are. Consider the following sentences: (a) *There is the book missing.* (b) *There is a book missing.* Grammar books will say that sentence (a) is ungrammatical because sentences with existential *there* almost always takes an indefinite noun phrase in the predicate. The reason is not arbitrary. *There* is used to introduce new information, and the preferred position for new information is toward the end of a sentence. A noun phrase that contains new information is marked by the use of the indefinite article, *a* or *an*, if it is a singular common noun, as in the sentence (b).

### **1.6. Grammar is boring and uninteresting**

This myth is derived from the impression that grammar can only be taught through repetition and other rote drills. Teaching grammar does not mean asking students to repeat models in a mindless way, and it does not mean memorizing rules. Such activities can be boring and do not necessarily teach grammar. This does not mean there is no place for drills, but drills should be used in a meaningful and purposeful way. For example, to practice past-tense yes/no sentences in English, the teacher may ask her students to close their eyes while she changes five things about herself. She takes off one shoe, takes off her watch, puts on her glasses, puts on her sweater, and takes off her ring. Students are then asked to pose questions to figure out the changes she has made. Students may ask, "Did you take off a shoe?" or "Did you put on a sweater?" This kind of activity can be fun and, more importantly, engages students in a way that requires them to think and not just provide mechanical responses. Teaching grammar in a way that engages students may require creativity, but the teaching need not and should not be boring.

### **1.7. Students have different learning methods: Not all students can learn grammar**

Research shows that some people have a more analytical learning style than others. According to Hatch (1974), some learners approach the language learning task as "rule formers." Such learners are accurate but halting users of the target language. Others are what Hatch calls "data gatherers," fluent but inaccurate producers of the target language. This observation by itself does not address whether or not all students can learn grammar. While it may be true that learners approach language learning differently, there has been no research to show that some students are incapable of learning grammar. Students have different strengths and weaknesses. It is clear that all students can learn grammar as is evident from their mastery of their first language. As grammar is no different from anything else, it is likely that students will learn at different rates.

### **1.8. Grammar structures are learned one at a time**

This myth is demonstrably untrue. Teachers may teach one grammar structure at a time, and students may focus on one at a time, but students do not master one at a time before going on to learn another. There is a constant interaction between new interlanguage forms and old. Students may give the appearance of having learned the present tense, for example, but when the present progressive is introduced, often their mastery vanishes and their performance declines. This backsliding continues until the grammar they have internalized is restructured to reflect the distinct uses of the two tenses. We know that the learning curve for grammatical structures is not a smoothly ascending linear one, but rather is characterized by peaks and valleys, backsliding and restructuring.

### **1.9. Grammar has to do only with sentence-level and subsentence-level phenomena**

Grammar does operate at the sentence level and governs the syntax or word orders that are permissible in the language. It also works at the subsentence level to govern such things as number and person agreement between subject and verb in a sentence. However, grammar rules also apply at the suprasentential or discourse level. For example, not every choice between the use of the past and the present perfect tense can be explained at the sentence level. Often, the speaker's choice to use one or the other can only be understood by examining the discourse context. Similarly, use of the definite article with a particular noun phrase after the noun phrase has been introduced in a text is a discourse-governed phenomenon. It would be a mistake to teach students grammar only at the sentence and subsentence levels. Much of the apparent arbitrariness of grammar disappears when it is viewed from a discourse-level perspective.

## **2. GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY ARE AREAS OF KNOWLEDGE: READING, WRITING, SPEAKING, AND LISTENING ARE THE FOUR SKILLS**

While grammar can be thought of as static knowledge, it can also be considered a process. Language teachers would not be content if their students could recite all the rules of grammar but not be able to apply them. The goal is for students to be able to use grammar in an unselfconscious fashion to achieve their communicative ends. As with any skill, achieving this goal takes practice.

What sort of practice is warranted? Ellis (1993) postulates that structural syllabi work better to facilitate intake than to teach learners to produce grammatical items correctly. He suggests that grammar teaching should focus on consciousness raising rather than on the practice of accurate production. In support of this assertion is VanPatten and Cardiero's (1993) finding that students' experience with processing input data is more effective than giving students a grammatical explanation followed by output practice.

### 2.1. Grammars provide the rules/explanations for all the structures in a language

Explaining why things are the way they are is an ongoing quest. Because languages evolve, linguists' descriptions can never be complete for all time; they have to accommodate the changing nature of language. For example, most grammar books make clear the fact that progressive aspect is not used with stative verbs; therefore, the following would be ungrammatical: (c) *I am wanting a new car*. For some English speakers, the sentence is not ungrammatical, and even those who find it so would be more inclined to accept progressive aspect when it co-occurs with perfective aspect, as in: (d) *I have been wanting a new car* (for some time now).

The point is, languages change, and any textbook rule should be seen as subject to change and non-categorical. Just as grammar learning is a process--witness the persistent instability of inter-languages--so is grammar itself. There is little static about either.

### 2.2. I don't know enough to teach grammar

Teachers often say this when they have opted to teach one of the other language skills, or when they choose to teach a low-proficiency class. While it is true that teachers can only teach what they know, teachers who articulate the above often know more than they think they do. The pie chart introduced earlier can be a useful tool for teachers to collect what they know about form, meaning, and use of a particular grammar structure. What they don't know will become apparent from the gaps on the chart and the gaps will nominate themselves as items for the teacher's agenda for further study.

## 3. APPROACHES TO GRAMMAR TEACHING

Four approaches to the teaching of grammar will be presented here: PPP, input processing, focus on form, and grammaticality, in addition to one non-interventionist approach to language teaching that calls for no explicit grammar instruction.

### PPP (Present, Practice, Produce)

Across the various languages and subsystems of grammar, perhaps the most widely practiced traditional approach to grammar instruction has been portrayed as the three Ps – present, practice, produce. In the first stage, an understanding of the grammar point is provided; sometimes by pointing out the differences between the L1 (first language) and L2 (second language). In the second stage, students practice the grammar structure using oral drills and written exercises. In the third stage, students are given “frequent opportunities for communicative use of the grammar to promote automatic and accurate use” (Sheen, 2003, p.226). DeKeyser (1997) offers Anderson’s skill-based approach to explain how grammar practice may work on the second stage. Once students are given a rule (declarative knowledge) in the first step, output practice aids students to proceduralize their knowledge. In other words, with practice, declarative knowledge takes the form of procedural knowledge, which encodes behaviour. Continued practice automatizes the use of the rule so that students do not have to think consciously about the rule any longer. As Doughty and Williams (1998, p. 49) states, “proceduralization is achieved by engaging in the target behaviour – or procedure – while temporarily leaning on declarative crutches . . .” Countless generations of students have been taught grammar in this way – and many have succeeded with this form of instruction. However, it is also true that the traditional approach has had its detractors. One of the most trenchant criticisms of this approach is that students fail to apply their knowledge of grammar when they are communicating. Appropriating Alfred North Whitehead’s term, Larsen- Freeman (2003) has referred to this as the “inert knowledge problem.” Students know the grammar – at least, they know the grammar rules explicitly – but they fail to apply them in daily communication. There is no doubt that a knowledge-implicit or explicit—of grammatical rules is essential for the mastery of any language.

### 3.1 Grammar teaching is essential

According to the dictionary definition, there are at least two senses of the word grammar, (1) study or science of, rules for, the combination words into sentences (syntax), and the forms of words (morphology). (2). A book containing the rules of a language. Language teaching is generally concerned with the former---uncountable---meaning of grammar. That is, grammar as a system of rules (or patterns) which describe the formation of a language’s sentence.

Grammar is not a simple thing. It is something that---in certain condition ---happens. To use an analogy: an omelette is the product of a (relatively simple but skillful) process involving the beating and frying of eggs. The process and the product are clearly two quite different things, and we could call one *making an omelette* and the other *an omelette*. Similarly, the grammar is the result of a process. We need to maintain a distinction between the product and its process of creation.

To take the analogy one step further: to someone who had never seen an omelette being made, it might be difficult to infer the process from the product. They would be seriously mistaken if they thought that making an omelette was simply a case of taking a lot of little bits of omelette and sticking them together. So was the grammar. What you see and how it came to be that way are two quite different things. The same goes for the way we learn languages. The language teaching equivalent is: I, the teacher, will cut the language into lots of little pieces---called grammar---so that you, the learner, will be able to reassemble them in real communication. Thus: conjunction *if* +subject pronoun +past perfect (consisting of past auxiliary *had* +past participle), followed by nominal *that*---clause, consisting of---some other bits what happens, is that learners take these little bits of grammar description and try to stick them together, and then wonder why they can produce sentences like *If I'd known you were coming, I would have baked a cake*. It ignores the fact that the product and the process are two quite different things. So grammar (the product) ought to be taught.

#### **4. THE CASES FOR GRAMMAR**

There are two kinds of attitudes to grammar: one, for grammar, the other, against grammar. As a language teacher my attitude is for grammar, it ought to be put in the foreground in second language teaching.

##### **4.1 Grammar is the sentence—making machine**

Part of the process of language learning must be what is sometimes called item-learning -----that is the memorization of individual items such as words and phrases. However, there is a limit to the number of items a person can both retain and retrieve. Even traveller's phrase books have limited usefulness-good for a three-week holiday, but there comes a point where we need to learn some patterns or rules to enable us to generate new sentence. That is to say, it is grammar. Grammar, after all, is a description of the regularities in a language, and knowledge of these regularities provides the learner with the means to generate a potentially enormous number of original sentences. The number of possible new sentences is constrained only by the vocabulary at the learner's command and his or her creativity. Grammar is a kind of 'sentence-making machine'. It follows that the teaching of grammar offers the learner the means for potentially limitless linguistic creativity.

##### **4.2 Grammar is the advance—organizer**

The linguist Stephen Krashen makes the distinction between learning and acquisition. Learning, according to Krashen, results from formal instruction, typically in grammar, and is of limited use for real communication. Acquisition is a natural process: it is the process by which the first language is picked up, and by which other languages are picked up solely through contact with speakers of those languages. Success in a second language is due to acquisition, not learning, moreover, he claims that learnt knowledge can never become acquired knowledge. However, the researcher Richard Schmidt kept a diary of his experience learning Portuguese in Brazil. Initially he had enrolled in formal language classes where there was a heavy emphasis on grammar. When he left these classes to travel in Brazil his Portuguese made good progress, a fact he attributed to the use he was making of it. However, as he interacted naturally with Brazilians he was aware that certain features of the talk---certain grammatical items---seemed to catch his attention. He noticed them. It so happened that these items were also items he had studied in his classes. What's more, being more noticeable, these items seemed to stick. Schmidt concluded that noticing is a prerequisite for acquisition. The grammar teaching he had received previously, while insufficient in itself to turn him into a fluent Portuguese speaker, had primed him to notice what might have gone unnoticed, and hence had indirectly influenced his learning. It had acted as a kind of advance organizer for his latter acquisition of the language. I think this is also with learning English language.

##### **4.3 Grammar teaching is the rule-of-law**

Grammar is a system of learnable rules, it lends itself to a view of teaching and learning known as transmission. A transmission view sees the role of education as the transfer of a body of knowledge from those that have the knowledge to those that do not. Such a view is typically associated with the kind of institutionalized learning where rules, order, and discipline are highly valued. Many learners come to language classes with fairly fixed expectations of what they will do there. These expectations may derive from previous classroom experience of language learning. They may also derive from experience of classroom in general where (traditionally, at least) teaching is of the transmission kind. On the other hand, their expectations that teaching will be grammar-focused may stem from frustration experienced in trying to pick up a second language in a non classroom setting, such as through self-study, or through immersion in the target language culture. Such students may have enrolled in language classes specifically to ensure that the learning experience is made more efficient and systematic.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The necessity of grammar teaching is important in the English language teaching field. Grammar is the base of the English language. It is not acquired naturally, but learning, it needs be instructed. Grammar operates at the sentence level and governs the syntax or word orders that are permissible in the language. It also works at the subsistence level to govern such things as number and person agreement between subject and verb in a sentence. To grammar learning, some students may have a more analytical learning style than others, but if one hopes to use the English language accurately and fluently, it is necessary for him to receive grammar rules instruction. Grammar is not different from something else, it is likely that students will learn at different rates. In a short word, grammar teaching is necessary in English language teaching. If the goals of language instruction include teaching students to use grammar accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately, then a compelling case can be made for teaching grammar. Instead of viewing grammar as a static system of arbitrary rules, it should be seen as a rational, dynamic system that is comprised of structures characterized by the three dimensions of form, meaning, and functional effect.

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