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# Review on the changing role of grammar teaching in second language instruction

**Abstract**

*The numerous trends in the field of second language instruction have always resulted in different approaches to the role grammar teaching plays in this process. They have varied from the ones which positioned grammar at the heart of second language learning and even equated it to the language itself to the ones which totally disregarded its role thus ignoring it completely. This study aims to review the tendencies regarding the changing role of grammar teaching overtime by giving brief descriptions of most popular approaches. It will also focus on the importance that late approaches and recent research in the field give to the teaching of grammar and the role it plays in developing communicative competence.*

***Key words****: grammar teaching approaches, second language learning, communicative grammar*

## Introduction

Learning a foreign language has been part of education for over 2000 years. Developments in different fields have had their influence on education and on language learning as well. Approaches to foreign language learning have also been affected by the dominant learning theories of the respective time. With regard to the role grammar plays/should play in second language instruction the language learning world has experienced three major periods: a) grammar age which meant learning a second language is equal to learning its grammar; b) zero grammar age which meant grammar is not important for communication; c) grammar and meaning age which means reconsideration of the importance of grammar because of its importance in target language acquisition and communicative competence.

## Grammar-based approaches

## Grammar translation method

At its very beginnings learning a language meant knowing the rules of grammar with the aim of being able to read and write in the target language rather than communicate. This grammar-based approach to language learning resulted in methods which consisted in teaching rules, concepts and structures of grammar which aided understanding the target language. Since this was firstly achieved through explicit explanation of grammar rules of the target language by translating them in L1 the most popular method came to be called the grammar translation method. Its popularity continued to prevail for a long time and for many reasons it still does in lots of countries, one of them being China with the main reason as LIU Qing-xue and SHI Jin-fang say it being easy to apply and making few demands on teachers. (LIU Qing-xue,SHI Jin-fang, 2007)

There have been lots of arguments for and against the use of grammar translation method in the classroom and numerous survey results have been proof to both cases. Based on his survey results Nazary believes if we want to have proficient L2 users we should free ourselves of misconceptions and reconsider the alliance between the mother tongue and foreign languages. (Nazary, 2008) Our knowledge of L1 determines the way we think and as such it adds to our second language acquisition and ability to use it.

 When it comes to evaluating learners' knowledge of L2, accuracy is something that cannot be ignored. Accuracy prevents misunderstandings and enables the L2 user to get his message through appropriately and correctly. In communication especially accuracy means grammar. As Celce-Marcia concluded in 1991 since there is no evidence that lack of  grammar instruction benefits the L2 learner, especially the ones who need to achieve a high level of proficiency and accuracy, no one can dismiss grammar instruction altogether. (Celce-Murcia, 1991) Accurate knowledge of grammar can be obtained through grammar instruction in whatever methods. In his contrastive study of grammar translation method and communicative approach in teaching English grammar Chang concluded that learners who used grammar

translation method made more progress in grammar learning than those who used the communicative approach. (Chuan, 2011)

## Audio-Lingual and Direct Method

The need for oral communication and ability to speak foreign languages fluently led to the emergence of Audio-Lingual and Direct Methods. Unlike the grammar translation method they concentrated on the structure of grammar and not on separate categories. The focus was also on memorizing structural patterns important for L2 learning by emphasizing the development of oral competence rather than written abilities. But as Hinkel put it "these methods were a reaction to the grammar translation method which produced learners who could not use the language communicatively despite their considerable knowledge of grammar rules."(Eli Hinkel, Sandra Fotos, 2002) The direct method attempted to make the language learning environment a place where language was used as if in real situations and grammar rules were learned inductively. Through this method the learner was supposed to pick up the L2 grammar in much the same way the child picked up the grammar of his mother tongue. (Thornbury, 1999)

Language learning was viewed as hypothesis formation and rule acquisition rather than habit formation (Celce-Murcia, 1991), which resulted in learners being unable to communicate fluently.

According to Griffiths and Par audio-linguism viewed the learner as a passive entity waiting to be programmed thus paying little or no attention at all to the possibility that learners might contribute to the programming process. (Carol Grifiths. Judy M.Par, 2001)

## Presentation-Practice-Production method

Inadequacies of the grammar-based approach methods led to the appearance of communication-based methods

Although PPP method was intended to make a contribution to enhancing learners' communicative competence it was not successful in doing so and remained very grammatical.

In this model a new grammar rule or structure is presented in a dialogue, reading text or listening part in order to make the learner familiar with the new structure. In the practice phase the student repeats or reproduces the structure through different exercises controlled by the teacher. This phase aims to focus the learners' attention on specific structures. The practice stage is less controlled with activities that enable the learner to use the new structures spontaneously and fluently. In this view presentation and practice play a key role in the acquisition of language. (Hossein Nassaji,Sandra Fotos, 2011) Although pretended to promote learners' communicative competence this method was also grammar-based and didn't really make its contribution to the learners' communication skills. According to Thornbury

attempting to move from accuracy to fluency this method only pretended to engage learners in freer practice activities because it required learners to imitate model texts or pre-selected structures. (Thornbury, 1997) some researchers believe that in countries where students do not have much exposure to English and have little need for communication in English in their daily lives it is crucial to reconsider the effects of the traditional PPP approach. (Sato, 2010)

Ellis makes his case against the traditional viewing of grammar teaching as presentation and practice of grammatical structures. He agrees that grammar teaching can consist of both but not necessarily arguing that some of the grammar lessons might need presentation while others might consist of only practice. He also adds that grammar teaching can involve learners in working out the rules for themselves. (Ellis, Current issues in the teaching of grammar: An SLA perspective, 2006a)

## Arguments for grammar teaching

Since the role of grammar teaching in second language acquisition has been a priority in recent studies in this chapter we will review the major reasons for the reconsideration of grammar of the role grammar plays in language learning.

## Conscious learning

Most SLA researchers agree that conscious learning of forms and structures plays an important role in second language learning. Ellis uses the term consciousness-raising as an effort to provide the learner with an understanding of a grammatical feature. When contrasting the 5 characteristics of practice to those of consciousness he underlines that instead of repetition of the targeted feature the learner should be expected to utilize intellectual effort to understand the targeted feature. (Ellis, Grammar teaching:practice or consciousness-raising, 2002)

According to Hinkel and Fotos the foundations for this view involves the distinction between explicit (conscious) and implicit (unconscious) grammatical knowledge. Based on this model they believe that "activities that raise the learners' awareness of grammar forms-whether through explicit instruction or through communicative exposure-can assist learners to acquire these forms." (Eli Hinkel, Sandra Fotos, 2002) Ellis argues that although consciousness-raising does not contribute directly to acquisition of implicit knowledge it certainly facilitates acquisition of knowledge necessary for communication. (Ellis, Grammar teaching:practice or consciousness-raising, 2002)

Nassaji and Fotos hold the view that language learning without some degree of consciousness is theoretically problematic. (Hossein Nassaji, Sandra Fotos, 2004)

## Focus on form

As opposed to focus on forms which means instruction where the learner focuses on accuracy, focus on form concentrates on meaning of form arising out of communicative activity. It combines formal instruction and communicative language use in a way that enables learners to recognize the properties of L2. (Eli Hinkel, Sandra Fotos, 2002) This approach is very useful if it involves learners in communicative tasks. (Ellis, Current issues in the teaching of grammar: An SLA perspective, 2006a)

When discussing variables that determine the importance of grammar for learners Celce-Murcia(1991) argues that when teaching young adults at high-intermediate proficiency level, teachers have to focus on form if they want the learners to be successful in their composition requirement. (Celce-Murcia, 1991) Focusing on form or forms so depends on the learners' level of the target language and on what they expect to achieve. Celce-Murcia makes two other cases for teaching grammar with a focus on meaning. First, she views teaching the different meanings of prepositions in and on through the examples in the box and on the table as grammar in the service of meaning. Secondly she explains how grammar serves the social function well. The use of will/would instead of can/could in requests does not lead the addressee to thinking that the nonnative is being inappropriately abrupt or rude.

I believe the case is the same with defining and non-defining relative clauses where in written form it is the comma that demonstrates the difference in the number of brothers.

Example   *My brother who lives in London is a teacher.*
          *My brother, who lives in London, is a teacher.*

## Task-based instruction

As opposed to grammar-based approach task-based instruction emphasizes the involvement of the learner in activities with a focus on the learning process rather than the grammatical forms resulting in students more engaged in communication activities.

They may contribute directly by providing opportunities for the kind of communication which is believed to promote the acquisition of implicit knowledge, and they may also contribute indirectly by enabling learners to

develop explicit knowledge of L2 rules which will later facilitate the acquisition of implicit knowledge.

As Ellis points out task-based teaching requires learner-centered practices that encourage the learner to engage actively in controlling the discourse and topic development. He also emphasizes that this type of instruction calls for learners to forget they are in a classroom learning a foreign language and it requires

them to believe they can succeed in learning this language indirectly through communication. (Ellis, The methodology of task-based teaching, 2006b)

Ellis is for the type of language learning tasks that encourages communication about grammar. In their exploratory study of the use of communicative, grammar-based task in the college EFL classroom Fotos and Ellis concluded that these tasks provide opportunities for the kind of communication which is believed to promote acquisition of implicit knowledge. It may also contribute indirectly by developing learners' explicit knowledge of L2. (Ellis, Grammar teaching:practice or consciousness-raising, 2002); (Sandra Fotos, Rod Ellis, 1991)

Lina Lee believes that tasks that promote communication and meaningful use of the target language are crucial to second language acquisition. Her study in Hong Kong suggests that a combination of online interaction and task-based instruction enhances learners' communicative competence through a lively online environment. (Lee, 2002)

According to Robinson because the complexity of tasks exerts a considerable influence on learner production sequencing tasks on basis of their complexity should be preferred. (Robinson, 2001)

Task-based instruction offers the learners the communication environment which can not always be provided outside class especially in non-English speaking countries. Arrangement of sequencing communicative tasks on basis of difficulty and communication tasks about grammar promote learners' acquisition of implicit and explicit knowledge of the target language.

**Conclusion**
Although grammar itself as a language component and grammar teaching as a part of language learning have been central issues of controversy their contribution to second language acquisition is undisputable. When it was noticed that grammar-based approaches did not provide adequate communicative competence for the learner a shift in teaching tendencies regarding the role of grammar seemed to prevail the language learning world. Because this new trend led to communication with inaccuracies which were incompatible with the required high levels of proficiency the role of grammar teaching needed to be reconsidered. This reevaluation of grammar generated new approaches which targeted communicative competence without ignoring grammar.

Researchers and teachers have always looked for the most efficient ways and methods to teach language in general and grammar in particular. A big challenge for them remains the designation of communicative tasks which focus on learner interaction and encourage effective learning.

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