

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODS: State of the Art in Grammar Instruction

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## Abstract

The teaching of grammar has fluctuated and shifted over years. This paper addresses issues such as different ways of teaching grammar, changes in ideas and practices at the present stage of its development as well as the current state of the art in grammar instruction. Several grammar textbooks which were published in different years also are looked at in order to discover the extent of change in terms of the materials used to teach grammar from time to time. A Considerable array of English language teaching methods is available for teachers to utilize since the 1980s. Before deciding to employ a particular method, however educational practitioners need to take several things into consideration such as the objectives of the instruction, the needs, the interests, the expectation, the age and level of the learners, and the available supporting facilities. Of equally important, the possible constraints such as the environment where the students are learning, the time, and the expectation of the institution are also need to be considered.

## Introduction

The notion of the teaching of grammar in formal educational institutions has always been a controversial issue. One of the arguments against the teaching of grammar is that studying the rules of grammar is a useless, old-fashioned, non-communicative and simply a waste of students' valuable time and energy (Byrd, 1994; Thornbury, 1999:19). On the other hand, one counterclaim which puts grammar in the forefront is that the teaching of grammar offers the learners "the means for potentially limitless linguistic creativity" since "grammar is a kind of sentence-making machine" (Thornbury, 1999:15).

Similar to the English language teaching methods, as they are inextricably intertwined, the principal grammar teaching methods have come and gone over the years in which each method has its own distinctive characteristics on top of its strengths and weaknesses. It is worth for ELS/EFL teachers to be familiar with variety of grammar teaching methods to make a wise decision concerning the choice of a method to apply and to weigh up the available materials to use.

This paper mainly discusses the historical background of the teaching of grammar which has fluctuated and shifted over years in order to identify the main trends in a

certain period of time. It will address issues such as different ways of teaching grammar, changes in ideas and practices at the present stage of its development as well as the current state of the art in grammar instruction. Several grammar textbooks which were published in different years – from late 1960s up to now – will also be looked at in order to discover the extent of change in terms of the materials used to teach grammar from time to time. In addition, the discussion will cover predictions and possible recommendations for future directions intended for the teaching of grammar.

### **Historical background**

The teaching of grammar in formal schools swings in and out of favour based on two different assumptions. One is that grammar lessons are not very effective, say for example they do not appear to develop communication skills, thus perhaps it would be better stop teaching them. Another one is that not teaching grammar is not very effective either since disregarding grammar may diminish the standard of written English, so presumably it would be better start teaching it again.

The implication of the first assumption was that there were little formal teachings of grammar for many years even most schools in English-speaking countries such as Britain and Australia stopped teaching it (Hudson, 1998:1). Similarly in other countries like Singapore, grammar has not been given emphasis in the curriculum. As a result of this – neglecting the grammar lessons in formal educations – the standard of written English has declined (Seaton & Mew, 2000:iii).

The decline in the standard of written English worried English teachers who believed that not teaching grammar at schools has a negative impact on the students' writing. In support of this belief, empirical study conducted in Australia revealed that after observing one of the many ways of how sentences are structured, ten-year old children increased their quantity of writing dramatically (Hudson, 1998:6). Another experiment concerning the role of grammar play in improving students' writing was conducted in UK by a secondary school teacher, Geoff Barton. He reported that exploration of simple, compound, and complex sentence types gave extraordinary benefit in particular to some of his weakest students by supplying models for them to look at without worrying about the lack of "context" for the examples (Hudson, 1998:6).

The aforementioned realities have prompted calls from all sectors of education to bring grammar lessons back into the classrooms and presumably most English teachers admit the need for grammar teaching since early 1990s along with the influence of the "Whole Language" approach which supports the teaching of grammar. It is important for English teachers, however, to think better ways of presenting grammar lessons in the contemporary classrooms. Should grammar be

presented or explained explicitly/ overtly/ deductively or implicitly/ covertly/ inductively?

Different opinions on the role of grammar have influenced the flow of different grammar teaching methods. The following section will look at the development of the teaching of grammar since 1960s up to now to include different ways of teaching it and different materials presented in grammar textbooks. By doing so, the main trends in a particular period of time can be identified. English language teaching methods prior to this period (1960s), however, are undoubtedly unavoidable to bring up.

### **Developments in the Teaching of Grammar for the Last Forty Years**

A comparison between the teachings of grammar nowadays with those over the last forty years or so reveals some interesting dissimilarities such as the different approaches or methods being used and the way materials (grammar rules) are presented in the textbooks. Akin to language teaching, in the early days of grammar teaching, the dominant trend was a non-communicative approach.

With the traditional Grammar Translation Method which has been used by many language teachers for hundreds of years (since 19<sup>th</sup> century), for example, grammar was taught deductively (rule-driven learning), by giving the students grammar rules followed by their application in written exercises and involving translation into the learners' mother tongue and vice versa. The Grammar Translation Method users believe that the main purpose of learning a foreign language is to be able to read literature written in the target language. Therefore, students need to learn about the grammar rules and vocabulary of the target language (Larsen-Freeman, 1986:11).

Celce-Murcia (1991:6) listed seven features of the Grammar Translation Method:

1. Instruction is given in the native language of the students.
2. There is little use of the target language.
3. Focus is on grammatical parsing.
4. There is early reading of difficult classical texts.
5. A typical exercise is to translate sentences from the target language into the mother tongue.
6. Students are unable to use the language for communication
7. The teacher does not have to be able to speak the target language.

The Direct Method (late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century) emerged as a reaction to the Grammar Translation Method which failed to produce learners who could use the target language they had been studying (Celce – Murcia 1991:6). Among other features of this method are: no mother tongue was permitted (instruction is in the target language), the teacher must be a native speaker or have nativelike proficiency, the sequence of materials is graded, and emphasis is on accuracy of pronunciation

and grammar. The grammar and the target culture in this period were taught inductively (discovery learning). This means that the students inferred the grammar rules or discover general patterns for themselves from a set of examples or materials presented by the teacher Hudson 1992:8). The basic rule of the Direct Method according to (Larsen – Freeman 1986:18) is “no translation is allowed.”

Another method which best exemplifies or represents the Direct Method is the Berlitz Method. The Berlitz method was simple, systematic, ordered and replicable. Languages are taught in a mechanical and superficial manner. Some features of this method are: asking questions, demonstrating, acting, correcting, using sentences, making students speak more, and following lesson plans.

The Audio Lingual Method which became dominant in the United States during 1940s, 1950s and 1960s based heavily on behaviorist theories of learning which considered language learning as simply a form of behaviour to be learned through formation of correct habit (Thronbury, 1999:21; Harmer 1998:30; Celce – Murcia 1991:6). Teaching grammar utilizing this method was carried out by making students learn language habits through numerous drills and pattern practice. Some characteristics of this method are: lessons begin with dialogues, skills are sequenced: listening, speaking – reading writing postponed, pronunciation is stressed from the beginning, and a great effort is made to prevent learner errors (Celce – Murcia 1991:6). Grammatical structures are sequenced and rules are taught inductively with extensive pattern practice.

In the 1970s and 1980s the Communicative Approach was developed from the work of sociolinguists such as Hymes and Halliday who view language as a system for communication. Its roots was “a response to Chomsky’s abstract notion of the ideal speaker linguistic competence which according to Hymes was too narrow because it neglected the social and cultural skills that an L1 or L2 learners must possess to effectively communicate” (Johnson, <http://www.kennesaw.edu/tell/manual/section6.pdf>).

The goal of teachers who use Communicative Approach is to have the students become communicatively competent which involve being able to use the language appropriate to a given social context (Larsen – Freeman, 1986:131). This approach focuses on meaning rather than form. Grammar rules are not presented explicitly. The teaching of grammar in a communicative approach might perhaps be viewed as inseparable aspects of the whole teaching framework as to improve proficiency and accuracy of the students.

Celce – Murcia (1991:8) lists some features of Communicative Approach:

1. The content of a language course will include semantic notions and social functions, not just linguistic structures.

2. Students often engage in role-play or dramatization to adjust their language use of the target language to different social contexts.
3. Classroom materials and activities are often authentic to reflect real-life situations and demands.
4. The teacher's role is primarily to facilitate communication and only secondarily to correct errors.
5. The teacher should be able to use the target language fluently and appropriately.

The common ideas and practices with regard to the teaching of grammar since late 1990s up to now are based on the recent and current research. Nunan (1998) suggested an approach which enables students learn how to form structures correctly as well as how to use them to communicate meaning. In other words, an approach by which the learners can get an idea about how to achieve their communicative goals through an appropriate development of grammatical resources is needed.

Characteristics of current approaches to the teaching of grammar according to Long and Richards (1987:279) is a tendency to treat grammar as a component of other skills rather than as a separate skill in itself. This means that particular grammar items are dealt with when they are needed for specific kinds of communicative tasks and functions.

Technology is one of the issues concerning the English language teaching methods including the teaching of grammar which has a big influence on. Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), for example plays a significant role in grammar instruction. It offers many potential benefits in terms of providing rich input in the form of multimedia programs such as learner interactivity which in turn leads to the improvement of achievement.

Research finding on teaching second language structures revealed that the computer-based grammar instruction students scored significantly higher on open-ended test than the teacher-directed grammar instruction students (Nutta, 2006:49). Nutta believes that "by using computer for presentation, explanation, and application of grammar structures, more classroom time can be dedicated to real communication." Therefore, computer-based grammar instruction can be as effective or more than traditional classroom interaction.

Interactive CD-ROM computer program is another example where technology has a big influence and plays an important role in grammar instruction. "English Grammar in Use," third edition for example, is provided with CD-ROM which contains numerous interesting valuable activities such as audio recordings of all main exercises and customizing tests targeting specific language areas. Another example of CD-ROM Program for teaching and learning grammar is "Understanding and Using English Grammar: Interactive". In this program, the lessons in each chapter are

typically presented in four major steps. The first step is presentation which is provided by cartoon characters and charts for the grammar explanation.

The second step is practice which covers various exercises such as drag and drop exercises, fill-in the blank exercises and selection and editing exercises. The third step is production which consists of reacting to written and oral prompts. In speaking activities, students can record their voices and compare the recording to a model. The last step is evaluation which contains multiple choice questions. Students can check their score and explanations on the right and wrong answers are provided.

Yet another example where technology profoundly influences how grammar is learned and taught is the internet. Nowadays, students have more opportunity to access information to include teaching and learning grammar through the internet. Internet sites related to the teaching and learning grammar are ubiquitous that students are free to choose which sites to access based on their needs, interests and learning styles.

With regard to the textbooks, in general (specially the old production) they present grammar rules explicitly followed by practice exercises and activities. In textbooks according to Nunan (1998) “grammar is very often presented out of context. Learners are given isolated sentences, which they are expected to internalize through exercises involving repetition, manipulation, and grammatical transformation, unless they provide opportunities for learners to explore grammatical structure in context.”

It is interesting to note, however that some old textbooks share the same characteristics with the new ones. For example “*A Practical English Grammar*” (Thomson and Martinet) published in 1968 and “*English Grammar in Use*” (Murphy) published in 2004, both are not graded courses. In other words, the grammatical categories are not presented according to the level of difficulty, thus the books should not be worked from beginning through to the end. Perhaps “difficult” is difficult to define as what is difficult for some people may not be for the others.

Some textbooks, in particular those which were published in 1990s up to now promoted grammar by not presenting the “rules and meaning” for the language learners to use but rather promoted grammar through self-discovery learning. The Anti-Grammar Grammar book which was published in 1991, for example, as the authors said, was set out to avoid giving students rules, avoid the conventional gab-fill and transformation exercises which reproduced in existing materials. It facilitates the students to act as the role of “thinker”, providing them with problem-solving tasks to discover grammatical rules and meanings for themselves. Put in slightly different words, it provides a variety of cognitive, involving, and creative activities to practice language both in controlled and freer frameworks. The material, therefore, does not say, “Here is a rule and meaning, learn them!” but rather “Here is a sample of English – discover the rules and meanings for yourself.”

A number of recent modern grammar books present the grammar materials in a very fascinating way which stimulates students' motivation to learn grammar. Two examples of the books are "*English Grammar in Use*" and "*Understanding and Using English Grammar*." (Look at section the influence of technology on grammar instruction).

### **Conclusions and Possible Recommendations for Future Directions**

Having discussed the falling in and out fashion of different language and grammar teaching methods over years as well as dynamic presentation of English grammar materials in textbooks, possible recommendations for future directions will be offered after putting forward brief conclusions of the issues being discussed.

In the period when the Traditional Grammar – Translation Method was popular, the teaching of grammar was totally reliance on deduction that is presenting the grammar rules explicitly and using grammar terminology which also known as overt grammar teaching. Since this method produced students who only knew about language but cannot speak it, other methods or approaches arose in reaction to its inadequacies and impracticalities.

The Direct Method, the Berlitz Method, the Audio Lingual Method, and the Communicative Approach, just to mention a few, are examples of methods/approach where the teaching of grammar is implicit. During and within those periods, grammar was taught using inductive approach that is by requiring students worked out the grammar rules from the examples/ materials given by the teachers or taken from the books. This sort of teaching is known as covert grammar teaching.

The current modern grammar textbooks (CD-ROM included) still share some features of the traditional old published books. The diversity of grammar materials and the ways they are presented in any textbooks are in harmony with the English teaching methods or approaches which were favored at certain point of time. Dynamic individuals representing different points of view about the role of grammar in language teaching influences the contents of grammar textbooks. Hence, some textbooks present grammar explicitly or overtly and some others present it implicitly or covertly.

A Considerable array of English language teaching methods is available for teachers to utilize since the 1980s. Before deciding to employ a particular method, however educational practitioners need to take several things into consideration such as the objectives of the instruction, the needs, the interests, the expectation, the age and level of the learners, and the available supporting facilities. Of equally important, the

possible constraints such as the environment where the students are learning, the time, and the expectation of the institution are also need to be considered.

One thing should we be aware of is that there is no single best method could possibly be implemented for obtaining a maximum result. Therefore, it is better for English teachers to conceive and integrate several methods when teaching grammar in order to gain an optimal result that is enabling students to use linguistic forms accurately (form), meaningfully (semantics) and appropriately (pragmatics).

Another suggestion to think of is that language teachers simply employ whatever method works under their teaching circumstances. Language teachers should not be forced to put into practice the new trend approaches or methods if they are not fit with the aims of the instruction, the nature of the course, the students learning preferences and the circumstances where the learning takes place, etc.

Teaching grammar through sophisticated technology such as CD-ROM, multimedia computer program, internet is a wonderful journey of learning a language for the students especially the younger generation. English teachers and prospective English teachers, therefore, should be familiar with and be able to at least operate the basic function of these based-technology pedagogical instructions.

In relation to the grammar textbooks, they should be user-friendly rather than heavy loaded. User-friendly means breaking down the grammatical jargon of grammar explanations into more familiar language that delineate the concept presented in a clearer and more pleasing way. For example, perhaps it is better to say “helping verb” instead of saying “auxiliary verb” in particular when the book is intended to be used by beginner level. This is clearer and therefore may lead to prompting and accelerating language learning.

The value that the teacher can glean may not be apparent to the students. Sometimes the teachers have to facilitate the learning, perhaps by prompting, thus providing cues for self-exploration. We shouldn't attribute quality to the book that may not be there in the eyes of the learners. Conversely, we shouldn't surmise that a grammar book is too hard or too easy for our students which may over or underestimate students' ability rather we should encourage them to explore various explanation of grammar and find one to their liking.

Depending on the class and the students, the teacher should err on the side of caution, therefore simplicity to avoid unnecessarily confusing the students when introducing new ideas. Furthermore, in adapting, deleting, enriching or adding to materials we must be convinced that this is going to make grammar more pleasing and clearer to the students rather than just self-indulgence and so-called “creativity” that distort the concept. If the methodology becomes confusing to the students or directions are not clear or the genre in which an aspect of grammar is presented whether overtly or



covertly, then the students will spend too much time on working out what the teacher wants therefore losing sight of the grammar to be learned.

Nevertheless, communicative approach will provide a wider framework in which the students can use the English language expanding upon their explicit knowledge of grammar moving toward greater self-autonomy of learning. So, in the beginning, depending upon the needs of the schools, the students, the constraints of the teachers – the exigencies that challenge the teachers, a simpler approach that chunks information into manageable amounts will lead to better consumption of grammar in the long terms.

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