Challenges and Problems in the Teaching of Grammar

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Abstract

Teaching of Grammar has always remained a controversial subject as the method and material adopted in teaching it. L1 learners learn their mother tongue intuitively but for L2 learners, teaching of grammar becomes inevitable in order to acquaint them with the norms of the target language.

In the 21st century, so many paradigms – Structuralism, Transformational Generative Grammar, Functional Grammar, and Pragmatics etc. came into existence and bewildered the language teachers with their jargon and hypotheses.

A grammar teacher remains in a state of confusion to decide whether he should follow the old prescriptive approach or the descriptive approach of the Structural Linguists; whether he should aim at the achievement of grammatical competence or communicative competence of the learners; whether he should concentrate on the parts of sentences by parsing them or on the utterances of the speakers; whether a teacher should concentrate in his pedagogy on the teaching of rules or the correct use of language.

The paper attempts to explore the challenges and problems faced by a language teacher in the teaching of grammar. It is written in the light of the necessity of grammar teaching to maintain intelligibility and comprehensibility of the speech of the learners of the second language.

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Introduction

Before initiating a teaching programme, a teacher must know whether he is going to teach the learners of L1 or L2. In an L1 situation, learners learn their mother tongue intuitively. It is culturally and environmentally inherited by them.

The culture or the environment around them becomes their covert teacher that provides them sufficient exposure through which grammatical forms and structures required to use a language correctly and proficiently are naturally transferred to their memory. But when it comes to the learning of a second language and if it is a foreign language, exposure is very limited, artificial and conscious.

Learners, therefore, do not feel at home and if not motivated properly feel it an extra burden on them. Even if the L2 learners receive some exposure, it is received not through the native speakers but through those who themselves have learnt the target language as L2. In such a situation, for an effective learning of L2, learning of grammar becomes very necessary.

According to C. Paul Verghese, "A knowledge of grammar is perhaps more important to a second-language learner than to a native speaker. This is because in the process of acquiring the language the native speaker has intuitively internalized the grammar of the language whereas the second language learner has to make a conscious effort to master those aspects of the language which account for grammaticality. It is, therefore, necessary for us, to whom English is a second language, to learn the grammar of the language" (Verghese1989:41).

Hence acquainting the learners of L2 with the correct norms of the target language and providing them practice through creating meaningful situations in the class room becomes necessary. The present paper aims to investigate the various problems and challenges faced by a pedagogue in teaching grammar effectively to the learners of a second language.

Standard of the Students

One of the problems generally faced by most of the teachers of English at the college level is the poor standard of the students. Students are even ignorant of the basic rules and structural patterns which they are supposed to have learnt at the school level. If a teacher directly starts his teaching at the graduate level without trying to know the level of the students, his efforts will not bear any fruits as he will not be able to raise a structure over a feeble foundation.

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Therefore, a teacher before starting his teaching programme must assess the language background of the learners. Keeping in view the background of the learners, he should select his teaching items, grade them and present them in accordance with the local situations.

A teacher should begin from the simple grammatical items and proceed towards the complex ones. Each succeeding grammatical item has to be based on the previous ones taught earlier in the class. Thus, by carefully selecting the frequently recurring grammatical items and by grading them as per the background of the learners, a teacher should provide constant practice to the students in creating and using sentences based on the grammatical forms and structures in various day-today situations of their lives.

Problem of Selection of Material for Teaching Forms and Structures

One of the challenges and problems before the teachers of grammar is the selection of suitable examples to teach grammatical rules and forms. In the old traditional grammars examples used for illustrating rules are of alien context for the Indian students.

According to Professor Sinclair, "It is now generally accepted that it is extremely difficult to invent examples which sound realistic, and which have all the features of natural examples. I am convinced that it is essential for a learner of English to learn from actual examples, examples that can be trusted because they have been used in real communication" (Sinclair1990: vii).

Professor Sinclair regards "Train stopped" and "Frey agreed" as genuine examples than "Bird sing" as "real examples have a communicative value that the invented one lacks" (Sinclair1990:xi). Many of the examples are taken from old English classics. Many of the sentences used are of poetic and figurative type and do not match the existing communicative needs.

Many examples used in Wren and Martin's "High School English Grammar and Composition" have the literary flavour and do not have any bearing to the native environment of the Indian children. How can our children acquire proficiency in the use of English through these examples which they are unable to understand due to their colonial associations and proverbial nature?

Let us look at some of the examples used by Wren and Martin on page numbers 1 and 2 of "High School English Grammar and Composition":

1. Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.
2. Down went the Royal George.
3. Sweet are the uses of adversity.
4. The cackling of geese saved Rome.

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5. Tubal Cain was a man of might.
6. Borrowed garments never fit well.
7. The early bird catches the worm.
8. Ascham taught Latin to Queen Elizabeth;
9. All roads lead to Rome.
10. No man can serve two masters. (Wren and Martin1986: 1 and 2).

One of the challenges before a teacher of grammar is to make the teaching meaningful and relevant to the needs of the learners by contextualizing it using examples derived from the socio-cultural situations of the learners. But the examples of the above type do not differentiate the teaching of grammar from the teaching of rhetoric.

An L2 learner who is ignorant of the archaic and diachronic data of English does not find such type of examples congenial to learning. Since a learner has to use a language in day-today situations of his life, examples drawn from the actual life situations are helpful to him as they relate to real communicative acts and needs.

These real examples are natural and easy to learn than the invented ones or the borrowed ones from the literary texts which are alien to the native surroundings of the learners and make the comprehension difficult for the learners.

A data based on the current form and socio-cultural situations will interest the learners rather than the archaic and obsolete data borrowed from the old writers. The diachronic data may contribute to grammatical competence but not to the communicative competence which is the ultimate aim of language pedagogy.

The traditional grammars mix up the modern English forms and their use with the past conventions and the outdated use of language.

The school grammarians push the study of modern English into Anglo-Saxon mould. One of the features of language is change and so we do not need past usage and information to study the present state of language.

For example, the inflected form 'whom' has almost disappeared from the modern English though it is still artificially kept alive by the traditional grammarians. The native speakers quite commonly use: "Who did you see?" or "Who is the message from?" than "Whom did you see?" or "Whom is the message from?"

Amount of Rules to be Taught

One of the challenges before a teacher of grammar is to decide the amount of rules to be taught to the learners. As C. Paul Verghese says, "While introducing learner to the linguistic rules, care should be exercised so that learning the rules does not become the main activity. Any unusual insistence on grammaticality and correct usage is likely to

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make the learner over-cautious and sensitive about committing mistakes. And to this extent speech becomes inhibited" (Verghese1989:21).

A teacher should select those grammatical rules and patterns which have greater communicative potential. Overtaxing of learners with rules which do not exist and which are pedantic and do not facilitate the learning of a language have a retarding effect on the learners.

Teaching excess of rules and the irrelevant ones which do not exist in the current form of a language makes the learning irrelevant.

There are many grammatical categories which do not exist in English today and yet are taught to the children over years. For example, gender as a grammatical category does not exist in English as the same form of verb is used in English for all the sexes and the addition of the inflexion 'ess' is not a regular phenomenon.

Similarly only two forms of nouns 'John' and 'John's' exist in the case system but the old grammars unnecessarily teach five cases:

(i) Nominative
(ii) Vocative
(iii) Genitive
(iv) Accusative and
(v) Dative to the students (Nesfield1961:15).

It, therefore, depends on a language teacher to make a selection of only those grammatical items and patterns which have wide communicative range and could cover a number of speech situations.

Generally, in most of the school syllabuses a list of 200 to 250 structures is prescribed. To make the learning of a language smooth and convenient, this long list can be reduced and a priority list should be prepared by a teacher.

Structures, which are rarely used, should be removed and structures, which are commonly used in a large number of situations, should be introduced and provided practice to the learners in a phased manner.

Through the minimization of rules and structures and removal of pedantic and non-existent rules and grammatical categories from a teaching programme, teaching of grammar can be used as an accelerant rather than a retardant in the learning of English.

Word Grammar or Sentence Grammar

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The traditional method of teaching grammar was based on the analysis of sentences into parts and then parsing these separate constituents of sentences. Propositions which are encoded into the form of sentences are analyzed and their parts like subject, verb, object or complement are separated and students are taught rules pertaining to their identification and description.

This method which separates the parts of sentences and describes their features with respect to grammatical categories like number, gender, case, voice etc. is known as parsing. It is akin to Immediate Constituent Analysis in Structural Linguistics in which a unit like a sentence is broken into its two immediate constituents which are labeled as NP and VP. NP and VP are further broken into their respective immediate constituents like (Det) +Noun and (Aux) +Main Verb.

However, these methods based on analysis do not contribute to language learning as they concentrate only on parts by destroying the whole rather than unifying the parts into a whole. Such types of methods confine themselves to rules pertaining to the identification of parts of sentences and apply only to the correction or errors.

These methods completely ignore the applicability of grammatical rules in creating units of communication like sentences. Teaching of isolated words and their forms distract attention of the learners from their communicative use and do not provide practice to the learners to create and use full length sentences.

A grammar teacher has to, therefore, decide whether he has to teach rules pertaining to the separate parts of sentences or rules regarding construction of sentences and their use in various communicative situations.

Teaching of Isolated structures and Forms

Most of the books on grammar deal with structures and rules in isolation without integrating them with the other rules and structures which are near and related to them. Many of these structures and forms can co-occur in various situations. One of the challenges before a teacher of grammar is to create situations in which structures which can be paired are used together.

Professor Leech refers to the problem of sequencing of thoughts for approximate communication and finds its solution in grammar which unites thoughts through various cohesive devices. He writes, "Grammar is flexible enough to offer a considerable choice in such matters.

This may be called the 'textual' or 'discourse' aspect of communication, because it concerns the composition of a whole text or discourse, not just the way we construct a single sentence" (Leech and Svartvik 1991:13).

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For example, present simple and present continuous, present perfect and present continuous can be used together in various situations. However, they are taught in isolation. Teaching isolated forms and sentences will serve no purpose without providing practice to the learners in creating a connected text.

The task of teacher, therefore, is to create a context in which such types of different structural and grammatical items are used together. In this way learning of a language can be extended from word level and sentence level to compositional and textual level.

Identification of the Core Rules and Structures and their Practice

One of the challenges before a teacher of grammar is to identify the core rules and structures of English and to provide practice in their use. The selection of core rules and structures will limit and minimize the amount of rules to be taught to the learners.

The rules and structures which have greater frequency in use should be taught first and emphasized by a teacher and the rules of peripheral nature which represent the exceptions, irregularities and anomalies of grammar should be taught at a later stage when a learner acquires competency in the use of core rules and structures.

Bright and Mc Gregor disapprove of teaching and testing the rare grammatical items and recommend to teach first the common ones. According to them, "There is no objection to sentences containing common problems but we do not want pupils to spend time learning the three uses of the colon or the fifty-seven uses of the comma and we think they have more important things to worry about than whether Esq on an envelope should be followed by a comma, a full stop and a comma, or nothing at all" (Bright and Mc Gregor1977:267).

Chomsky preferred the children to internalize the core rules of a language before the peripheral ones. He writes, "We should expect the order of appearance of structures in language acquisition to reflect the structures of markedness in some respects, but there are many complicating factors, e.g., processes of maturation may be such as to present certain unmarked structures to be manifested only relatively late in language acquisition, frequency effects may intervene, etc"(Chomsky1981:9).

Chomsky's main goal was the formulation of universal grammar which he thought could be accomplished by discovering the core grammatical categories and rules of various languages as it is their core features which are manifested in universal grammar.

By teaching and providing practice to the learners in core rules and structures, a teacher can trigger the same which are already present in the mind of the learner in the form of universal grammar.

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This concentration on the teaching of the main rules and structures will keep away the learners from the irregular and the chaotic aspects of language present in the form of irregularities, anomalies and exceptions which are part and parcel of human languages but which also demoralize learners particularly the beginners who on encountering the deviant rules and forms are discouraged to learn and practice them.

Teaching of Rules or Learning of a Language

One of the dilemmas of a teacher is to decide whether the aim of teaching grammar is to teach rules, structures and systems of a language or to help the learners in learning a language.

A learner's grammar which is prescriptive in nature is solely written for the beginners who do not have proficiency in the target language. It aims to teach the learners how to speak and write a language correctly.

A linguist's grammar, on the other hand, is descriptive in its approach. It aims to describe a language by discovering rules and principles underlying the use of a language.

A learner's grammar is concerned with the rules and principles pertaining to a particular language whereas a Linguist's grammar aims to theorize human languages by providing tools to describe and explain them.

A linguist's grammar is theoretical in nature and hence is not useful for an L2 learner although it provides necessary insights to a language teacher. But a teacher's grammar includes insights of both the learner's grammar and a linguist's grammar. It is not confined only to the teaching of rules. It extends the teaching of rules to their application and use in a language.

Therefore a teacher's grammar is more suitable for the teaching of an L2. The aim of an L2 programme is to provide necessary exposure to the learners in the learning of a language. Teaching of only rules without providing sufficient practice in their use will not contribute to the learning of a second language. Rules should be taught simultaneously with their uses.

Students should be given written as well as oral practice to use their knowledge of rules to create sentences in various socio-cultural situations. Both grammatical rules and their situational uses should be taught side by side, and then only communicative competence which is the ultimate aim of a teaching programme can be achieved.

The challenge, therefore, before a grammar teacher is not only to acquaint the learners with the norms of a second language but also to provide them practice in using them in different types of communicative situations.

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Exclusive Nature of Various Schools of Grammar: Need for an Interactive Approach

Various schools of grammar follow a single methodology to describe and teach English. Old traditional grammars were confined to the teaching of rules or making the learners familiar with the norms of English. But with the arrival of Structural Linguistics on the horizon in the first half of the twentieth century, the inadequacy of the old traditional approach was realized. Due to prescription of rules and so many of them abstract ones, these grammars became a dictatorial pulpit and consequently a cumbersome activity.

Traditional grammars even prescribed rules which were counter to the usage of the native speakers. The use of the nominative 'I' in place of both subject and object and the omission of Preposition at the sentence final position are the classic examples of prescriptive approach of the old traditional grammars.

Linguistics turned the tables in the opposite direction and advocated descriptive methodology which based the study on the description of the forms of language and ignored the meaning completely. Their too much occupation with forms and analysis to discover the underlying recurring patterns and systems divorced them from the actual use of language.

Chomsky realized the inadequacy of the structural paradigms and included semantics in his domain by suggesting analyzing language at the deep level too.

According to Richards and Rodgers, "For Chomsky, the focus of linguistic theory was to characterize the abstract abilities speakers possess that enable them to produce grammatically correct sentences in a language" (Richards and Rodgers 1995:70).

However, Chomsky too confines his study to the grammatical competence and ignored the use of language in various socio-cultural situations. It was socio-linguists and functionalists like Hymes, Searle, Halliday and Leech who extended language learning from grammatical competence to communicative competence. The functional grammarians believe that various grammatical categories which express various semantic concepts perform various communicative functions.

According to the functionalists, various formal categories like Interrogatives and Modals perform various communicative functions.

The traditional as well as the Structural and Transformational approaches confine their studies to the semantic and the formal analysis.

According to a semantic approach, "An interrogative sentence is that which asks a question" and modals express various semantic notions like request, threat, permission, compulsion, duty and desirability, possibility etc, whereas according to a formal approach

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"An interrogative sentence involves 'subject–verb inversion' and modals are characterized by what Huddleston (1976) call the 'NICE' properties (negation,inversion,code and emphasis). However, the semantico-formal approach used to describe grammatical categories by Traditional Grammarians, Structuralists and T.G.Grammarians are vulnerable to exceptions and ambiguities as they ignore the socio-cultural situations in which various formal and semantic categories are used.

The functional grammarians believe that various semantic notions expressed through grammatical categories like Interrogatives, Modal Auxiliaries etc. are used to perform various communicative functions.

Halliday particularly refers to Modal Auxiliaries which express different semantic categories like permission, request, obligation, necessity, possibility etc. to perform various communicative functions like questioning somebody, requesting or commanding somebody or telling somebody something.

According to Halliday, such types of interpersonal functions are reflected in various sentence types like declarative, interrogative and imperative and also through the system of modals. The three choices in the mood system perform various communicative functions like declaring, asking a question, making a request or giving a command. With these sentence types, modal verbs like 'can', 'may', 'will', 'must' etc. help in expressing various social functions such as making a request, seeking permission, expressing rights, obligation and possibility. In this way Halliday relates modality a notional category expressed by means of moods and modal auxiliaries to the social functions of language.

The main challenge, therefore, before a teacher of grammar is to relate form with communicative function and communicative function with form. According to Professor Leech, "More generally, my conclusion will be that the correct approach to language is both formalist and functionalist" (Leech1983:46).Hence a teacher should provide sufficient practice and exposure to the learner in the correct use of forms as well as their communicative functions.

A wide range of form focused and communication focused activities should be included in a teaching programme. Competency in the use of language not only requires correct use of form but also an appropriate use of form in various socio-cultural situations. To acquaint the learners with the correct form of a language, teaching of rules of grammar becomes essential. But the formal knowledge of a language should be complemented by providing knowledge and practice in the communication functions.

Communicative functions are actually a role played by a form in a particular communicative situation. For example, the form of an interrogative involves subject-verb inversion. But the interrogative form may be used to perform a number of communicative functions like asking for information, complaining, making suggestion, request, offer, invitation etc.

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In a language a form can be used to express a number of functions and similarly, a function can be performed by using a number of forms. Hence one of the challenges before a teacher of grammar is to correlate form with function and function with form.

Therefore, a singular pedagogical theory that emphasizes only on the teaching of form or only on function will not serve the purpose of achieving communicative competence. A grammar teacher particularly in an L2 situation has to focus not only on semantico-formal activities but also on semantico-communicational activities.

Wallwork rightly says, "It is perhaps the most important task of the language teacher to try to modify both attitudes – to encourage realization of the true nature of functions of language as an integral part of human life and society, and also to relate students to acquire the linguistic resources necessary to equip them to cope adequately with the tasks with which they are likely to be confronted" (Wallwork1974:160).

Conclusion

As a result of rapid changes taking place in the world due to globalization and privatization, the need to acquire proficiency in English has been felt more than ever before. Communication – written as well as oral has become very necessary for the learners of English as a second 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 to integrate the concepts of different approaches in his teaching programme.

As has been evident from the above discussion, no single paradigm – Traditional Grammar, Structural Linguistics, Transformational Generative Grammar and Functional Grammar seems to be self-sufficient to aid the learner in acquiring proficiency in the use of language.

Professor Shantanu Ghosh regards 'restricted variety of linguistic contexts' provided to the learners as the main handicap in the success of the teaching of English as a second language in India. According to him, "English learning is severely restricted, in a vast

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majority of the cases, to a small set of social domains, and very few role-relationships with a similarly low number of speech-functions. Exposure to the variety of rich socio-linguistic-cultural material with a focus on 'what to say and how and when' which is necessary for effectively learning a language, is thus severely lacking in the Indian ELT scenario" (Ghosh2007:68).

Therefore, the main challenge before a teacher of grammar is to provide practice to the learner in the use of forms in a wide-range of diverse socio-cultural situations. Only when learning of rules of grammar is extended to their spontaneous and automatic use in different socio-cultural contexts, L2 learners will be said to achieve communicative competence which is the main aim of language teaching.

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