

Present Position of Teaching English Grammar in the High Schools of Assam - A Case Study

Pranjal Saikia, M.A., Ph.D. Candidate

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Abstract

This paper attempts to throw lights on the methods adopted by the teachers of Assam for teaching English Grammar at the Secondary level. It has been observed that students from Assamese medium schools are made more conscious about the rules and regulations of grammar which indirectly generate in them a fear for the language. However, the rules and regulations of Grammar cannot be ignored. So, the question arises what methods should be employed in teaching English Grammar which might help a student learn the rules effortlessly.

This paper aims at concretising some suggestions regarding effective methods of teaching English Grammar.

Keywords: Grammar, English teaching, Teaching learning process, English Classroom.

Introduction

Students in Assam are generally poor in English as reflected by the results of the Public Examinations. The teachers are often seen to put the blame entirely on the students for their failure to acquire an effective knowledge of the language. Unfortunately, however, improper and defective teaching is at the root of the problem. Teaching a foreign language requires proper knowledge, training, experience and devotion on the part of the teacher. In Assam anybody can manage to become a teacher and do the blunder of teaching English.

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Regarding English grammar teaching, our teachers are always seen to advise the students at first to learn the grammar and then practise the language. But at the same time it is also seen that a child born in England learns his mother tongue, English unconsciously, i.e., without knowing the rules and regulations.

Actually, people learn their mother tongues from the socio-cultural surroundings. For us English is a foreign language and the process of learning this language is a complex one. A non-native learner always finds it difficult using grammatical rules in various real-life situations.

Our English teachers are always seen to force the students to learn the grammatical rules and regulations but when the students face various day to day situations they find it difficult to use those rules and regulations of grammar.

English as a Compulsory Subject – What Students are Required to Master

Majority of the students study English language or General English as a compulsory subject under either language component at the school level or under foundation course component at the undergraduate level.

The General English course comprises a prescribed textbook containing some lessons followed by comprehension questions, vocabulary items and exercises in grammar and composition.

The exercises involve filling blanks with suitable articles/ prepositions/ pronouns / modals or changing voice/ narration or combining sentences. Examples given in the exercises do not have any correspondence with the communicative situations which students come across in their daily lives. The result is that even after learning rules of grammar for so many years, our students fail miserably in acquiring fluency in the use of language.

Position in Assam - Need to Rethink and Reorient

It has therefore become necessary to rethink and to reorient the material and methodology of grammar teaching in order to equip our students to use the language items not only currently but also appropriately in different real life situations.

Hence, this paper attempts to provide some suggestions to the English teachers as to how English grammar should be taught to the school students.

Objectives

The main objectives of this paper include:

- a) Finding out how English grammar is taught in the Secondary classes.
- b) Providing some suggestions to the English teachers for improving the teaching learning process English grammar.

Methodology

This paper is an outcome of mixed methodology. For the quantitative part, a questionnaire was administered to teachers and students to find out the actual problems they (students) face in learning and using English grammar. Classrooms were also observed. For the qualitative part, focus group discussions, one each for teachers and students were organized so that their opinions could be gathered about the topic. For the expert opinion on English grammar teaching methodology, four subject specialists of English were interviewed. Fifteen (15) schools, thirty (30) teachers and one thousand (1000) students were taken as sample while using stratified sample giving due representation to male/ female and rural/ urban schools.

Research Questions

Following were the research questions raised in this study:

- a) What methods do the teachers use for teaching English grammar?

- b) What problems do the students face in the classroom in learning English grammar?
- c) What needs to be done to resolve the problem in teaching English grammar at the Secondary level?

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative research techniques were adopted for classroom observation related to effectiveness of classroom situations. Data related to training of teachers, availability of teaching learning materials, etc., were collected during the visits to the schools. Simple percentage calculations had been used for analysis as and when necessary. The interview techniques was adopted for gathering related information from students, teachers and subject experts for the teaching learning process of English grammar.

Findings of the Study

After the classroom observations and the analysis of the data, the following facts were identified:

- a) In 90% schools, “Grammar Translation” method is used by the teachers.
- b) In only 10% schools, somewhat proper methods of teaching English grammar have been witnessed.
- c) Students are generally very poor in using grammatical rules in real life situations.
- d) Students’ confidence level of learning English grammar is not satisfactory.
- e) No awareness of Communicative Teaching Method among the English teachers is found.
- f) No development of reading, writing, speaking and listening skills is found.

g) It was noticed that there was no effort on the part of the English teachers to teach English grammar by creating real life (practical) situations.

Suggestions

1. A grammar teacher should teach grammar to the students by creating different types of communicative situations inside the English classroom. Normally after knowing the rules of grammar, one is expected to be able to speak English fluently, but that is not the common experience. On the other hand, through communicative situations, one will be capable of using grammatical items in real life situations. Through the use of these communicative situations, a learner can also avail the chance of developing the communicative skill.

An efficient teacher can create different situations according to the needs of this teaching topic of grammar. Around us lots of personal and impersonal situations are available and with the help of these real life situations a grammar teacher can provide effective teaching to the students. Personal situations may be a person's likes, dislikes, family background etc. and impersonal situations may be games and sports, day today issues social problems, government policies etc. Excluding these personal and impersonal situations a teacher can also create some imaginary situations for communicative purposes. To fulfill this target of imaginary situations audio-visual aids can also be applied. With the help of the text book too a teacher can create some communicative situations for teaching and providing practice in the use of a grammatical item.

Grammar pedagogy in the traditional methodology and classrooms was confined to mere prescription of rules. The priority of a grammar teacher was to prescribe rules and ask the students to first memorize them and then to apply the rules on the sentences given to them for practice. Even structuralists, who found the traditionalists guilty of prescriptivism and who advocated descriptive approach, have made the teaching of grammar mechanical by following analytical methods of breaking language items into small isolated units. The result is that both the

traditionalists and structuralists failed in creating communicative activities in the class room. To encourage communicative activities in the classroom and to integrate grammatical rules with their uses it becomes necessary for pedagogues to create some interesting situations in the class room to facilitate the learners to use the grammatical items in them.

A grammar teacher should study the minds of the students, in which subjects they (students) are interested. For example, if the students show interest in 'Bhaona' (by Sankardeva) the teachers can give them the idea of the 'past tense' with the help of the mythological stories. Now-a-days everyone is familiar with the skyrocketing prices of the daily commodities. So, the teacher can use this topic for giving the students the concept of the present tense. Likewise, the common topic of population explosion may be used to create the picture of tomorrow's world and thereby give the students the concept of future tense. It is to be noted that an efficient teacher can only create such types of situations. Having these situations the teacher should try to communicate with the students in English as much as possible.

A grammar teacher can also teach grammar with the help of a poem or a paragraph from the text. This will create text centered communicative situation. For example a teacher can ask the students to find out the prepositions/ main verbs/ auxiliary verbs etc. from the given poem or paragraph. In conducting this, the teacher can try to create interest in the minds of the students so that they use to consider this practice to be a kind of game. With the help of festivals, government policies, T.V. serials, fashion shows etc. a grammar teacher can create different situations inside the classroom and can teach the students practically. Since second language teaching should help the learner achieve some kind of communicative skills in the language, all situations in which real communication occurs naturally have to be taken advantage of and many more suitable ones have to be created (Klippel 1995 : 4)

2) Regarding voice change, narration, transformation of sentences, determiners, prepositions etc. it is seen that in the examination same questions are repeated year after year because of which their (students) knowledge of grammar becomes limited. So, the teacher should provide the students a long paragraph or passage from the text to solve, instead of isolated questions (sentences). It is unquestionably a difficult task for the students, but if once they can do such exercises the students will definitely acquire better knowledge of the items involved. Attempting to do such exercises with the guidance of the teacher is equivalent to situational learning. However, it depends upon the ability of the teacher to make such exercises an interesting experience like a game for the students.

3) Group activities can be given for teaching English grammar to the Secondary stage students, particularly for writing and speaking ability, reacting and listening comprehension, recalling the structures and as such overall knowledge of English. Group work can be used along with the other methods of teaching English. At the Secondary stage, the students will be found too much interested towards group activities that will definitely give them a platform to practise spoken English (conversation) among themselves.

Conclusion

If the English grammar teachers follow the above mentioned suggestions, they will undoubtedly be able to overcome the challenges which stand as obstacles before them in teaching English grammar to the students. Teaching of English grammar always should be practical not theoretical.

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Pranjal Saikia, M.A., Ph.D. Candidate
English Department
C.M.J. University
Shillong - 793003
Meghalaya
India
pranzalsaikia@gmail.com