

Teaching of English Grammar in India – Are We Sailing in the Same Boat?

Sugata Samanta, M. A., M.Ed.

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Abstract

For centuries, importance and place of grammar in second language learning has been a topic of hot debate. In the past centuries, language learning had almost been synonymous with grammar learning. However, at the beginning of 1970, the interest of ‘real language’ teaching emerged and more interest was taken in the social and cultural teaching of language. Consequently, it proved to be a shift from audio-lingual and grammar translation methods to the exploration of the communicative teaching of language. Current theories of L2 learning, however, suggest that an explicit knowledge of grammar is important in a number of respects. Naturally, Indian classrooms are also influenced by those developments regarding grammar teaching. This article is an attempt to explore the real classroom situations of the Indian subcontinent in relation to teaching ESL grammar

Keywords: English Grammar Teaching, ESL (English as Second Language), Inductive Approach, Deductive Approach

Introduction

In South Asian regions, grammar is one of the most obscure areas in ESL learning. In fact, all over the world, lots of debate and controversies exist about the role of grammar in language teaching and learning and, as Borg & Burns point out, perhaps, no area of second (L2) and foreign language learning has been the subject of as much empirical and practical interest as grammar teaching. (Borg, & Burns, 2008) Usually, debates about grammar often lie at the heart of various methodological orientations whether grammar should be taught inductively/deductively or implicitly/explicitly. Traditionally grammar is taught deductively, that is, by presenting a rule followed by example drills (from general to particular) whereas inductive grammar teaching is one in which learners are given many examples in different contexts and are asked to find out the rules by themselves (from particular to general), and then apply them to various exercises to learn how they actually work in real language use. A

third alternative to grammar teaching is the golden mean of both inductive and deductive approaches to benefit from the advantages of both; it is grammar-based teaching (GBT). It is an approach recommended by Azar to grammar practitioners and believes that "placing specific grammar structures within their larger conceptual framework is more helpful to students than a random, piecemeal approach to explicit grammar teaching" (Azar, 2007). It takes the advantages of both inductive and deductive approaches.

Fries (1945) conceives grammar or the structure as the starting point in teaching L2. The structure of the language is identified with its basic sentence patterns and grammatical structures and teaching technique concentrate on repetition of a pattern a number of times so that the learner becomes perfect in the use of the pattern. However, the approach which has now come to be considered as the ideal approach is the eclectic approach. In the move away from teachers following one specific methodology, the eclectic approach is the label given to a teacher's use of techniques and activities from a range of language teaching approaches and methodologies. The teacher decides what methodology or approach to use depending on the aims of the lesson and the learners in the group. It is stated that eclectic approach provides the learner with opportunities for developing their individual creativity as well as helping them fully understand the features of the target genres (Y. Kim, & J. Kim, 2005). Naturally, the Indian subcontinent is also heavily influenced by those developmental teaching approaches. However, different studies try to unveil whether the classrooms of the Indian subcontinent are really congruent with those modern theories of grammar instruction.

Teaching of English Grammar in South Asian Region

Krashen (1982) observed that "the tendency of Asian students to self-correct based on their conscious application of grammar rules leads to over-correction. For Asian students, grammar is an essential tool in building confidence, language knowledge, and fluency. In the classroom setting, despite students' interest in the lesson, discussion topic or subject matter presented in the English classroom, most students will be less inclined to speak if they are not confident about their oral language skill. Therefore, students' reliance on grammatical and form-focused instruction should not be completely abandoned in the CLT classroom." Leisak observed that South-Asian students lack the proficiency in writing grammatically correct sentences or in expressing coherent thoughts in paragraph writing. "Grammar skills include run-on sentences, fragments and verbiage, inclusion of necessary information, use of different

types of sentences, subject-verb agreement, and placement of modifiers, tense agreement and parallel construction' (Leisak, 1989). Grammar is more than just a set of rules; it is an ever-evolving structure of a language' (Kleisar, 2005). Students know how to construct sentences but they feel some confusion while combining two sentences to make one longer sentence. 'Parallelism is also one of the problems.'

According to Harshbarger, et al. (1986) students are very shy in their language classrooms. Chinese students like to listen to their teachers rather than actively participating. The teachers explain each and every thing of the text and grammatical rules to the students whereas the students passively listen, take notes and answer questions. It is due to this traditional approach adopted by the teachers that students play the role of passive learners or recipients of knowledge transmitted from teacher's end rather than to be an explorer and interpreter by themselves. "It, therefore, seems sensible that teachers choose eclectically from among those approaches available, in line with the needs of learners, and always remembering the need to cater for individual differences in style. Teachers can also carry out their own observations and explorations to discover what students prefer and report as useful" (Hedge). She further suggests that learners will apply themselves better to the task of learning when they feel positive about the approaches used.

Teaching of English Grammar in the Indian Subcontinent

"English as a potent vehicle of communication serves as link language in a multicultural and multilingual society like India, and also as a global linguistic mediator" (Sarangi, 2005). However, as Sarangi further observes, "teaching of English suffers from the general malaise that afflicts the educational system of India". Sociolinguistic language contact usually results in an uneven distribution of language patterns among the groups involved. In India, "English and Indian languages co-exist in a dialossic relationship" (Parasher, 1977). The difficulties related to bilingualism in India stem from the complex interplay and variability of social, psychological and sociolinguistic factors, which determine individual conduct. The most important practical problem related to the teaching of English in India is the presence of a large number of learners as all the learners do not come from the same socio-linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds. It is practically impossible in Indian classrooms that the groups are approximately equal in ability and "Peer teaching", "role

play”, “group activities” are rare in L2 classrooms of India. In our classrooms, lecturers speak. The class listens passively. The learners are not encouraged to ask questions.

A detailed ethnographic study on teacher-learner behaviour and classroom processes conducted by Fauzia Shamim (1993) revealed that in classroom practices a distinction which was always made between doing a lesson and doing grammar. ‘Doing a lesson’ consists of the following stages:

- A text (the lesson) is read aloud by the teacher or pupils
- A text is explained by the teacher, often in Hindi or a local language
- The meaning of ‘difficult words’ is given in English, Hindi or a local language
- Pupils write follow-up exercises in their notebooks

Meanwhile ‘doing grammar’ consists of the following steps:

- The form of a grammar item is explained by the teacher.
- The pupils write sentences illustrating the grammar item.
- The teacher dictates an essay or letter or writes it on the blackboard to be copied by the pupils.
- Pupils memorize the essay or letter and reproduce it in the examination

As Aslam (2003) observes: “Most of our teachers remain largely ignorant of the changes taking place in English teaching/learning across the globe. They never bother to analyze why English is taught in schools and what is expected of them.” Thus, the attitudes of teachers here play a crucial role in classroom instructions.

Regarding the teaching of English grammar in India, National Focus Group of NCERT, in a position paper (2006), observes that in India “The term grammar seems to be understood in a variety of ways. We do not rule out the possibility of encouraging “parsing” skills or strategies (identifying sense groups to see how they fit into the sentence or inserting sense groups to expand a sentence) as a means of making input more comprehensible at earlier stages, especially in English-minimal environments. Some grammar (such as the appropriate use of prepositions) may more appropriately be termed the learning of vocabulary (including now under this term idiomatic or fixed expressions, for example, in time and on time)”. It has been further pointed out that “There is a persisting teacher concern that grammar is necessary for “accuracy” (as against “fluency”) in language. This presupposes

that the learner has had enough exposure to the language to produce it with sufficient systematic rules to allow the identification of recurrent errors.”

Different researchers in the Indian subcontinent have conducted many types of research on the position of English grammar in classroom practices. Tahira Kalsoom & Dr. Prof. Mumtaz Akhtar (2013) conducted a study in Pakistan (“Teaching Grammar: Relationship between Teachers’ Beliefs and Practices”). In this context, a doctoral thesis on ‘An Exploratory Study of the Interplay between Teachers’ Beliefs, Instructional Practices & Professional Development’ by Naashia Mohamed (2006) needs special mention. Her study primarily focused on grammar instruction in the context of English teaching in the secondary schools of the Maldives. It reveals the interconnections between teachers’ beliefs, their instructional practices, and professional development, by examining the extent to which the introduction of an innovative teaching approach impacts teachers’ beliefs and behaviour.

Indian Scenario

In India, in a study entitled “Teaching English Grammar: Teacher's Perception and Practice”, Shashirekha S. M. (2014) during her survey in the schools of Bengaluru, finds that all participant-teachers confessed that grammar instruction is very important in English language learning. But the classroom observation of the teaching conducted in the classrooms by the investigator showed that the teachers do not give much importance to grammar teaching. Again, Most of the teachers do not teach grammar regularly. The researcher observed that there were many opportunities to present grammar in a functional way but no teacher concentrated on functional grammar. Instead, the participant-teachers taught only formal grammar. All participants said that while teaching grammar they used the inductive method and that they presented grammar item in different ways and combinations. But in reality, only some of them created relevant situations, used charts, pictures, etc. and no participant provided an opportunity to students for explicit discussion of grammar rules. The researcher finally feels that the teachers’ perception is a base for their classroom practices. Based on their perception and practices it is essential to give some suggestions, which help to improve the grammar instruction and classroom practice. This should help the learner to learn the language in effective and efficient ways. So it is a prerequisite to know the English teachers’ perception and practice and suggest to them to incorporate suitable methods in their regular grammar instruction.

In another study entitled “Present Position of Teaching English Grammar in the High Schools of Assam - A Case Study” conducted on the teachers of Assam, the researcher Pranjal Saikia (2013) reveals that in 90% schools, “Grammar Translation” method is used by the teachers and in only 10% schools, somewhat proper methods of teaching English Grammar have been witnessed by him. He also noticed that there was no effort on the part of the English teachers to teach English grammar by creating real life (practical) situations. He, therefore, suggests that the attitudes of teachers towards English grammar should be changed and that for an effective classroom instruction a grammar teacher should teach grammar to the students by creating different types of communicative situations inside the English classroom, since only through communicative situations, one will be capable of using grammatical items in real life situations.

A Survey on the Place of Grammar in Classrooms of West Bengal

The present author had conducted a survey in 2015 for a dissertation purpose on some teachers of English from several districts of West Bengal in India. The survey was related to different attitudes of teachers about the role of English grammar in teaching and the place of grammar in actual classroom practices. The survey was comprised of structured open-ended interviews and non-participatory classroom observations. Structured open-ended interviews were conducted to elicit necessary information about teachers’ language learning background, their attitudes towards grammar as well as their teaching methodologies. Regarding their own grammar learning experiences, almost all the teachers admitted that they were taught English grammar through grammar translation method and that was done through class lecture mainly. As their classes were teacher-centered, they had to remain passive listeners. They were supposed to copy class works from the blackboard to their notebooks and to memorize all the rules without making any changes on the class works.

In response to the questions about their views on the place of grammar in English language learning, each teacher showed different attitudes towards the role of grammar according to his/her perception. According to a few teachers of the sample, grammar helps the learners to communicate in the target language with others. Some believed that grammar is the foundation of L2 which gives structure a solid base of the construction of language related concepts. However, it is evident from the interviews that the primary focus of the

teachers is to teach grammatical structures and rules rather than usages. It seems the teachers think that to speak grammatically accurate sentences, the form-based approach is the most suitable. Almost all the teachers also confessed great influences of their own grammar learning experiences on their attitudes towards grammar teaching and methodologies of teaching. Most teachers even admitted that they do not take recourse to any special kind of grammar activities in the classrooms. Rather they use textbooks, grammar books, and practice books exercise to teach grammar lessons. As this information is in agreement with the facts provided by the other researchers from other parts of the country, it may be assumed that it is the common picture of Indian classrooms. Thus, it seems that in India, the attitudes regarding the role of grammar in learning English as a second Language have remained almost the same across generations.

Through the non-participatory classroom observations, the present author found that grammar was actually taught explicitly. Almost all of them first wrote the grammar rules on the blackboard and explained the rules with the help of some examples. Most of the classes were teacher-centered and students were allowed to participate in class discussion in a restricted manner. The main focus was on the structure rather than on the usages. Filling the gaps with grammatical concepts and working in the changes as directed were the most widely used activities in the observed classes. During the classroom observation, it was found that most teachers at first wrote the structure on the blackboard before explaining it to the whole class. After that, examples were provided and to make the concept clearer, the strategy of comparison and contrast between different grammatical structures were also used frequently. In almost every class, students' grammatical errors on notebooks were corrected immediately. It was also noticed that 80% teachers of the sample did not at all use the strategy of oral-pattern practice drills in their grammar classes.

In response to a question in the structured open-ended interviews, the teachers of the sample also claimed that they follow inductive approach while teaching grammar. However, observations have made it clear that teachers first presented grammar rules directly on the blackboard and then explained them by giving examples without remembering the fact that the students are required to infer the rules from contextualized practice, or go through the process of "discovery learning" (Ellis, 2001). Actually, they are teaching grammar deductively though they seem to be under the false notion that they are practising inductive

approach. This approach may enable students to grab grammatical rules. But certainly they will be utter failures when the rules will have to be applied in writing or speaking.

Thus various studies in the area of teaching English grammar in Indian classrooms unveil the fact that in spite of several efforts on the part of governments and policy makers, most of the teachers are sailing in the same boat as their predecessors. Studies also revealed that there is a close relationship between teachers' attitudes regarding the place and role of grammar and their use of different instructional strategies in the classroom practices. It will be of much help to teachers if attempts are made to identify their different attitudes on grammar teaching. Crandall (2000) opined that as many detrimental attitudes may be held unconsciously by the teachers, in order to change which, teachers must first be made aware of them. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to know about their own attitudes regarding different aspects of grammar teaching. Regular feedbacks on the classroom practices as well as in-service orientation and refresher courses are the demands of the day for professional development. These steps may unveil several interesting facets which will aid school authorities, teachers and other stakeholders to plan for effective instructional designs in teaching and learning the grammar of English as Second Language. (ESL) Teachers need to continually bring about changes in their instructional practices of teaching grammar which is a prerequisite for the betterment of the present condition of grammar teaching in Indian schools. Teachers must also be provided enough opportunities "so that they can be encouraged to articulate and reflect on their beliefs". (Richards and Farrell, 2005) These steps can be real aids to get rid of the age-old detrimental methods of grammar teaching in favour of modern communicative approach in present day India.

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Sugata Samanta, M. A., M. Ed.
Research Scholar
Techno India University
Kolkata 700091
West Bengal
India
sugata.samanta@gmail.com