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Grammar in Language Teaching
The Missing Balance

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Abstract

The teaching of grammar is a basic element in any language teaching/learning process world-wide. This article addresses the question of how much grammar we need and, in some extreme cases, whether we need to teach grammar at all. The article concentrates in its early part on the proper definition of grammar and how it is to be conceived. Then a move is made to present the two controversial issues of how much or how little grammar we need to teach as well as the role that grammar can play in any communicative act. The writer does not take any specific stance, for or against the teaching of grammar. Instead a brief review is presented highlighting the views of people who are authorities in the field to reflect their ideas and believes on issues regarding grammarfull and grammarless teaching. The above-mentioned views reflected a general agreement, though to different extents, on the importance of grammar and they also showed a general inclination towards striking a balance between the two trends of grammarfull and grammarless teaching. Consequently, a brief part of the article is given to highlighting the importance of such balance. Due to interest and concerns for which there is neither the place nor the time to be addressed in this article, it was almost impossible for the writer to discuss such an issue without shading some light on the Libyan situation. Consequently, the article ends with a very brief idea on the teaching of grammar in the Libyan context.

Key words: Grammar - Language Teaching

Grammar in Language Teaching: The Missing Balance

There can hardly be any dispute amongst teachers and textbook writers on the vital role that grammar plays in our day-to-day communicative acts. The issues that made grammar controversial since the emergence of the Communicative Approach always centered on the place of grammar in language teaching, how much grammar, pedagogical or scientific grammar, explicit or implicit presentation of grammatical items, and so on.

This diversity of views is a healthy sign that shows how dynamic the field of language teaching is. However; this positive feature led to a confusion even on defining the term 'grammar' itself. Higgs (1985:289) highlights this when he says that we all use the term grammar frequently "yet, as one reads the professional literature and attends workshops and conferences, it becomes clear that although the term 'grammar' is frequently discussed or written about, the meanings that are ascribed to it vary widely." Therefore; one feels that it is advisable to start by defining the term grammar.

1. Definition of Grammar

The way grammar is defined depends largely on the way it is viewed. For example, Lock (1996:1) Defines grammar as " a set of rules which specify all the possible grammatical structures of language." Here, Lock states that if we approach grammar in such a manner, then our primary concern is with 'forms of grammatical structures' rather than their meanings. When viewed in such capacity it is labeled as 'formal grammar.' Lock (ibid.) continues to state that another approach " analyzes grammar to discover how it is organized to allow speakers and writers to make and exchange meanings." From this function-based view of

grammar comes the label 'functional grammar.' Ur adopts the same line of viewing grammar on the functional basis. She defines grammar as " the way a language manipulates and combines words (or bits of words) in order to form longer units of meaning."

Long before Lock (1996) and Ur (1988), Chomsky (1965:76) gives an overall definition of grammar when he says:

A grammar attempts to account for the ability of the speaker to understand an arbitrary sentence of his language and to produce an appropriate sentence on a given situation. If pedagogic grammar it attempts to provide a student this ability, if a linguistic grammar it aims to discover and exhibit the mechanisms that make this achievement possible.

McEldowney (1989) adopts a clear-cut communicative view of grammar as she says "grammar can be defined as the tool by which we communicate. It marks what it is that lexical words refer to and it marks the relationship between them. We use grammar as the means of encoding and decoding messages."

The above-stated definitions, of course, lead us to look at the issue of grammar and language teaching to locate the exact place of grammar and see how much or how little of it we need to insert in the teaching/learning process.

Most of the English language learners, and may be so many language teachers, believe that a good knowledge of grammar would most certainly lead to a good command of English. The question of whether this is a valid claim or not remains controversial. The general view, however, is and has always been, that grammar is an essential component of any language teaching program. For

consolidating such a view there are two questions that need to be answered in a clear and convincing manner.

The questions are: “Why has grammar teaching become questionable?’ and ‘How much grammar should be taught?’ Before answering these two questions, let us shed some light on the importance of grammar in language teaching.

2. The Importance of Grammar

Acknowledging the importance of teaching grammar, and at the same time highlighting the problem of grammarful teaching, Swan (2002:148) says “Grammar is important, but most of the time, in most parts of the world, people probably teach too much of it.” Sawn (ibid.) goes on to identify seven reasons for teaching too much of grammar. These reasons can be summarized as follows:

2.1 Because it is there, i.e. it is an essential part of any language teaching textbook. Consequently; teachers cannot afford ignoring it.

2.2. It’s tidy. Here Sawn (ibid.) emphasizes that grammar is more “tidy and relatively more teachable” when compared with other language textbook components.

2.3 It’s testable: Swan (ibid.) states that "it is time-consuming and difficult to design and administer tests which measure overall progress and attainment.” In comparison with this, grammar tests are ‘relatively simple.’ It is for this reason that grammar tests are used as what Swan describes as “testing short-cut.” Swan concludes by saying “ so we can easily end up just teaching what can be tested (mostly grammar) and testing what we have taught (mostly grammar.)”

2.4 Grammar as a security blanket: Here Sawn describes grammar as 'reassuring and comforting'. This is because grammar gives the target students the feeling of being able to understand and control what actually happens during the teaching/learning process regardless of the fact that this feeling is misleading or as Swan calls it 'illusory'. It is because 'structural competence is only a proportion of what is involved in the mastery of a language.' Swan (2002).

2.5 It formed my character: During their schooling time particularly when studying language, language teachers spend so much time memorizing and trying to master purely structural items. This gives those teachers a very profound feeling of how important is. Such a feeling causes grammar to be an essential part of their day-today teaching.

2.6 You have to teach the whole system: Swan (2002:148) says "people often regard grammar as a single interconnected system, all of which has to be learnt if it is to work properly." However, he describes this as 'allusion' because grammar is an accumulation of different elements. Consequently, he recommends teaching selected subsystems because issues regarding students' previous knowledge of grammar, time available, and what is important should be considered before we select what to teach.

2.7 Power: some teachers enjoy being powerful due to the fact that they know much more than their students and they are always right. Swan (2002:148) emphasizes that "grammar is the area where this mechanism operates more successfully."

Another authority in the field who stresses belief in grammar is Rivers (1981). In the course of her criticism of the trend belittling the role of grammar, with direct reference to Krashen's model, Rivers (1981) sums up her strong belief in grammar in four points that can be summarized as follows:

a. Even though specialists claim that there is no need for teaching grammar, grammar is there.

b. Grammar is the frame within which languages operates. Therefore; to dissolve such frame is to kill the capacity of operating.

c. To claim that there is no need to teach grammar is illogical or, as she puts it, "is like saying that we can have a chicken walking around without bones."

d. Without grammar, we can have no communication as there would be no agreement on accepted forms to convey meanings.

The notion of grammar importance is further confirmed by McEldowney (1989:23) when she says that grammar "is the tool, or the code which we use to encode and decode messages."

Stating the importance of grammar in the language teaching/learning process can go on and on. However; due to the space available for this article, one feels that it is enough to suffice with the views of the above referred to authorities.

Having stated how important the teaching of grammar is, the issue that needs to be addressed is 'how much grammar should be taught and how should it be taught? To answer this question, let us view two opposing extremes in language teaching: grammarfull teaching and grammarless teaching.

3. Grammarful Teaching

The failure of the structurally-based syllabuses to produce efficient users of the target language led to criticism being waged against the necessity and usefulness of teaching grammar at all by people like Krashen (1982) and Prabhu (1982). It is worth mentioning here that the criticism of presenting rules explicitly and detached from any meaning dates from a few years before both Krashen (1982) and Prabhu (1982) with different views of what language is and why language is taught and how should it be taught as well as the benefit of teaching grammar as an essential part of any language syllabus.Wilkins (1976:1) says that "to a considerable extent the different ways of structuring courses reflect different ways of looking at the objectives of language teaching." Wilkins (ibid.) said this at a time when a teaching era in which grammatical components were the dominant elements was coming to an end, or to be more realistic, was becoming out of fashion.

The profession was experiencing the phenomenon of language learners who are linguistically competent but communicatively incompetent to say the least. A point echoed by Swan (2002) when he states that grammar teaching "has been called into question' due to the fact that students, due to grammarfull teaching, became capable of memorizing lists of grammar rules without being able to 'ask for a cup of coffee.'

Going to Wilkins, it has to be pointed out that Wilkins's criticism of the structurally-based syllabuses should not be viewed as a denial of grammar's place in the teaching/learning process of any given target language. In fact, Wilkins does not deny in any way that grammar has a role to play and a place to occupy in the teaching/learning process. He simply draws attention to the fact that "language

learning is not complete when the content of a grammatical syllabus has been mastered." (Wilkins: 1976:8). A living prove of this is found in the performance of the Libyan secondary school students who, when joining the university, can hardly say anything in proper English when they get involved in any communicative act regardless of the fact that they have eight years of studying English behind them. So, the question becomes ' Why is this?'

Wilkins (ibid.), although, of course, not referring to the Libyan case, asserts that in grammatical syllabi, the targeted grammatical items are usually presented as sets of forms and 'rarely as a set of meanings'. Another reason that Wilkins sees for viewing the grammatical syllabi as inadequate is the fact that "Even when we have described the grammatical (and lexical) meaning of a sentence we have not accounted for the way in which it is used as an utterance." (ibid.10) he goes on to state that even in attempting to insert some communicative elements into the teaching of the basically grammatical syllabi by making our teaching or presentation of the structural item situation-based, the language that the learners rehearse in the classroom may be "inadequately related to what is needed in the situation in which they may actually want to use the language" (ibid.12).

So what then? As this article addresses the place of grammar in language teaching, it is worthwhile to mention that for the replacement of grammatically language teaching, Wilkins suggests an alternative for both the grammatical syllabus as well as the situational syllabus. Here I have to acknowledge that this type of demand for a change took place a long time ago. The reason that makes me take this as the main point of this article is that the echo and the result of such an argument are still very impacting to the day. Going back to the continuation of the article, it has to be pointed out that Wilkins never denied that in both syllabuses

languages are learned for the purpose of communication. His criticism was that the above-stated syllabi do not provide the target learner with the communicative capacity needed.

The alternative suggested by Wilkins was the 'Notional Syllabus' which, as he claims, does not overlook the communicative capacity as it takes it as the 'starting point'. Wilkins asserts that the superiority of the Notional Syllabus over the Situational Syllabus and the Grammatical Syllabus stems from the fact that "it takes the communicative facts of language into account from the beginning without losing sight of grammatical and situational factors" (ibid.19).

However, one cannot overlook the fact that Notional Syllabus has its own drawbacks. As what matters within the limitations of this article is whether grammar has lost its vital position in the language teaching/learning process, those drawbacks are left for, hopefully, another related article.

To look at the position of grammar after the emergence of the communicative approach and giving prominence to the communicative purposes, let us shed some light on the views of those who are authorities in the field of language teaching/learning.

The trend of using grammar for communicative purposes and therefore presenting it in a meaningful communicative context has been gaining supporters by the day. Harmer (1995:22) acknowledges that "knowledge of grammar is essential for competent users of a language." He emphasizes that what we aim for in teaching a language should be to ensure that target students become communicative users of the grammar they learn.

Brumfit (1981:91) expresses his belief in grammar being a communicative tool when he says "grammar has always been seen as a mean to a communicative end." A similar view is adopted by Ur (1988) who states that the necessity of a knowledge of grammar whether explicit or implicit, is beyond doubt, and goes to emphasize the communicative role of grammar when she says that grammar "may furnish the basis for a set of classroom activities during which it becomes temporarily the main learning objective" (ibid.5). She asserts that the key word here in 'temporarily'. By this she calls for a long-term view of grammar to be seen "as one of the means of acquiring a thorough mastery of the language as a whole, not as an end itself" (ibid.). let us look at the other extreme.

4.'Grammarless' Teaching

As an example of the grammarless teaching proponents, I will single out two of the most influential authorities: Krashen and Prabhu.

In his monitor model, Krashen (1983) rejected conscious instruction of grammar arguing that what learners learn cannot be transferred into acquired knowledge that people use when communicating. Addressing the question of how, then, can forms be acquired, Krashen (ibid.) argues that grammatical forms can be acquired by using suitable 'input'. This input must be beyond the learner's level to create an appropriate environment for processing, understanding, then acquiring. Therefore, Krashen (1982:83) emphasizes that language teaching should 'focus on encouraging acquisition'. By this he means that what we should do to provide the type of input that the language users would capitalize on or stimulate is what he calls "the subconscious language acquisition potential all human being have (ibid.). However, Krashen does not deny the role that 'conscious' learning can play. To him grammar is no more than the focus or to use

his words 'the leader player in the play'. The assumption on which Krashen's model is based is that:

Throughout history, man has learned to use languages other than his native tongue for communicating with members of other language groups and other cultures. It is unlikely that much use was made of formal grammar studies to aid his task since it is doubtful such studies or even such knowledge existed (Krashen and Terrell: 1983:7).

Despite casting some doubt on making use of formal grammar studies for performing communicative acts, Krashen and Terrell give formal grammar or, to put it in a wider prospect, conscious learning of the role of monitoring. They claim that language learning can only be used in its capacity as an editor, or what they call 'a monitor'. They say "we use acquisition when we initiate sentences in second language, and bring in learning only as a kind of after-thought to make alternations and corrections" (ibid.18).

Krashen and Terrell (ibid.) refer to the fact that in natural conversation the conditions of time, concern with correctness and knowing the rules which are necessary to monitor and make alternations and correctness are rarely observed. They claim that in any natural conversation the speaker's attention is on what is said and how it is said. However, they acknowledge the fact that the monitor (the learned knowledge) is of a great use and help in grammar tests and other forms of written language because "performers do have time to apply conscious knowledge of the second language and can use this knowledge to improve the form of their output by monitoring" (ibid.:19).

Pienemann (1989) takes a more radical view arguing for 'zero instruction' and claiming that there is a natural sequence for acquisition of forms that would not be affected by conscious learning of grammar.

Another opponent of grammar being the focus of the teaching/learning process is Prabhu, the originator of Bangalore Communicational ELT Project. Brumfit (1984:234) quoting Prabhu (1982), says that "the basic assumption underlying the project is that 'form is best learnt when the learner's attention is on meaning." By this Prabhu means that the systemization of the language input using a linguistically organized syllabus was regarded in India to be less than useful in developing the grammatical competence. Consequently, "the development and exercise of grammatical competence was viewed as an internal self-regulating process." Furthermore, "effort to exercise competence in response to a need to arrive at or convey meaning was viewed as favourable condition"(Ibid.) for the development of the grammatical competence. Prabhu (ibid.) argues that teaching grammatical items should be done through the use of a task-based process the aim of which is the meaning and not the form.

However; Prabhu says that "success in doing tasks involve more than linguistic competence in one sense, and less in another" (Ibid.68). What Prabhu means to say is that the process of understanding, thinking, etc. which he describes as 'necessary in accomplishing the task' are supported by the way tasks are structured, with a limitation of possible interpretations and outcomes, …"

Having viewed the two approaches, one would conclude that despite arguing for 'grammarful' or 'grammarless' teaching, grammar is there to stay and what is needed is a balance between the two extremes.

5. Striking the Balance

One can see no harm in having a midway approach that makes the grammatical item the temporarily focus of the teaching/learning process only to furnish the basis for classroom's communicative activities as suggested by Ur (1998). However, it can be said that "the second half of the 1980s saw a partial reinstatement of grammar, both in mother tongue teaching and in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language" Tonkyn (1994:5). The trend of reinstating grammar prevailed until today although it has to be stated that grammar remained an essential element in language teaching even during the period it witnessed a solid campaign being waged against it. This is confirmed by Tonkyn (ibid.) who says that "for many teachers, grammar had never gone away. The conservatism of some and the canny eclecticism of many others maintained the tradition of explicit teaching of grammar even when such teaching was officially out of fashion."

McEldowney (1989:23) asserts the importance of grammar in communication when she defines grammar as "the tool, or the code which we use to encode and decode messages." Ellis (1994:659) likewise emphasizes the importance of the marriage between form and function in formal instruction when she says "formal instruction combined with opportunities to experience the structures in communication appears to produce the best results." She goes to say "it is not yet clear which kind of instruction works better but there is evidence to suggest that focusing on learners' attention on forms and the meaning they realize in the context of communicative activities results in successful learning." Doughty and William (1998:261) give an assertion of a similar nature when they say

"whatever the pedagogical decision at hand, the primary concern of the teacher should always be the question of how to integrate attention to form and meaning."

Ellis's call for the integration of form and communication is echoed by Doughty and William (1998:197) who, having stated that " the fundamental goal in classroom is to teach language", say that "the larger context of interpreting focus-on-form (FonF research must be the act of communication and development of communicative competence."

6. Grammar in the Libyan Teaching Context

Although this article is not basically about English language teaching in the Libyan context, being so interested and concerned forces us to safely concluded that the grammarless teaching is neither feasible nor useful as far as the Libyan context is concerned for the following reasons:

6.1 The Libyan learner comes in contact with English as a school subject for the first time at the fourth grade of his elementary schooling when he is 10/11 years old. His sole source of input is the classroom. Therefore; without a frame that governs and organizes the input he gets no proper communication can take place. The reason for this is that grammatical and lexical items and all other factors or elements involved in the communicative process will not have the interrelation needed for working together to make what is said means what it is meant to mean.

6.2 Even at the secondary stage (age 16-18), when learners have had at least five to six years of English, grammarful teaching cannot be useful because complete attention to the grammar of the language being used would probably lead to what we can call pidginized or fossilized interlanuage. There

can be guaranteed that this will not be the case with Libyan learners at the secondary stage if a grammarless communicative teaching approach is to be adopted in the Libyan school. On the other hand, it has to be acknowledged that it is obvious that the 'grammarfull' teaching approach currently adopted in the teaching of English as a foreign language at the Libyan school fails to produce efficient English language users upon the completion of the pre-university level.

6.3 The most influential factor that makes adopting grammarless teaching out of question is the fact that both centralized and localized examinations are usually basically grammar-based a thing that goes in line with what is usually being taught within the classroom i.e. grammar.

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