Grammar – To Teach or Not to Teach

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Abstract
This essay looks at the role of grammar teaching within the TESOL classroom from 3 perspectives. Firstly, traditional approaches to grammar teaching are discussed and their merits stated. Secondly the challenges made by more communicative approaches to language learning are outlined and their strengths and weaknesses assessed. Finally, current theoretical and pedagogical perspectives on the role of grammar teaching are presented and the author’s conclusion stated

The debate over the role of grammar

“Language teaching will not make significant advances… until teachers become convinced of the importance of grammar”(1)

“We’ve all gone over to the Lexical Approach now. We hardly do any grammar at all” (2)

The two quotes above demonstrate two apparently opposing views on the teaching of grammar in TESOL classrooms the world over. Certainly, since the advent of communicative methodologies in the 1960s and 1970s the role of traditional grammar has been called into question. However, a number of commentators have noted that even within the apparently communicative approaches, grammar remains as the main organizing principle, if not the main overt focus of classroom instruction. (see Gains & Redman, (3) Thornbury (4)).

To clarify the debate there are two important questions I would like to pose.

First, What do we mean by “teaching”?
The definition of teaching given by the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English gives two slightly different takes on the concept

1) “pass on knowledge or skill” versus (5)

2) “…helping a person or group of people to learn something” (6)

The traditional approach to grammar, in particular the Grammar Translation method, would fall under the first definition. This is also, perhaps, the most common image that springs to mind when the phrase ‘grammar teaching’ is raised. More recent approaches to grammar teaching, however, fall more into the second definition and will be discussed later and their relevance to the debate evaluated

The second question, then, is What do we mean by grammar?
Grammar is defined by the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English as “The rules by which words change their forms and are combined into sentences” (7). In the world of EFL this has often boiled down
to a syllabus that explicitly presents tenses and aspects along with key aspects of morphology and syntax to attain the required level of proficiency. What is probably meant by grammar teaching to most, is the image of a classroom lesson where students are engaged in learning a single tense or a particular point of morphology.

**Traditional emphasis on grammar teaching and it’s pros and cons**

Most people probably associate learning a second language with gaining accuracy in it’s structure, and by accuracy people usually mean grammatical accuracy. The sentences “I doesn’t know where she lives”, or “I go shopping tomorrow” would likely to be viewed as a need for 3rd person subject verb and future tense use work in class based on the apparent lack of acquisition of the two items. From this standpoint, classroom teaching takes the form of presenting a set body of knowledge, in this case the grammar of a language, in an incremental process, looking for accuracy in the discrete items presented.

Classroom instruction that takes the form of specific discrete grammar points - “Today we’re practicing the present perfect” - has a number of very clear advantages. On the plus side, the students are clear on the learning point of the lesson. They are able to keep clear lesson notes and can consult a myriad of sources outside class in order to review what they have learned. It is also easy for students and teachers to have a clear record of what has been covered in class. Also, grammar, unlike vocabulary, is generative. Learning a single lexical item provides a limited range of communicative flexibility, however a grammatical pattern can give a much wider potential range.

Another important consideration is that learners themselves often want grammar! Often the education culture puts accuracy as a cornerstone of achievement and the role of the teacher as the transmitter of such knowledge. Learning purpose may also be heavily grammar weighted – passing a language proficiency test that has definite need for grammatical accuracy. It is important then, that teachers do two simple things

1) consider the education culture of their students before deciding on the most appropriate method of teaching

2) Consider the study purpose of the students in their class and make the best pedagogic decisions based on those needs

From these two considerations, the best decision may well be to ‘teach grammar’ regardless of any personal attachment to a methodology that favours a different approach.

**The revisionist approaches of the 70’s – did grammar really go away with communicative teaching?**

The change in direction with the advent of communicative approaches to teaching seemed to respond to the disadvantages of the discrete item grammar teaching approach that preceded them. One of the disadvantages of the “Today we’re doing the present perfect” approach is how to ensure the students see beyond the simple mechanical make-up of the language. The danger is that students are able to accurately produce the required target structure within a lesson tailored (or restricted) to such production,
but then revert to ‘default’ language forms due to the lack of appropriate context when learning. Rod Ellis describes a classroom where the focus of the lesson was the use of the present progressive with ‘have’. Within the confines of the lesson the students appeared to be doing well, until a student was asked why he wasn’t doing the assigned writing activity. “I am not having my exercise book” being the response, Ellis concludes that there was a definite gap between the teaching and learning of grammar.

A further problem lies in the notion of accuracy itself. While the sentence “I doesn’t know where she lives” is undoubtedly inaccurate from a grammatical point of view, it’s meaning would seem uncompromisingly clear.

There is also the boredom and relevance of the lesson content. Certainly a lot of course books focus Beginner level students on learning the countability of fruit at a stage when it may not be the most relevant or riveting topic.

A final consideration comes from the study of pragmatics. The understanding of the grammatical nature of the present perfect might not help a student to understand it’s communicative purpose in natural discourse. How would a students interpret the question Have you seen Bridget Jones 2?” A bare request for information? a suggestion of a good film to watch?, or the beginning of an invitation for an evening out?

One alternative approach appeared to come in the form of functional or situational teaching. The notion that language has functions, such as inviting or complaining, seemed to offer a viable teaching alternative. Students would still have the clear lesson aims laid out and teachers too could have a clear record of what had been covered in class. One problem with the approach however is how to structure the syllabus itself. Do learners seek out ever more obscure functions, or ever more obscure grammar to match functions they are already familiar with? The solution is often a grammatically graded syllabus, with the inclusion of functions and notions for classroom presentation. Ultimately, then, the teaching of functions will necessitate at least some grammar teaching putting the argument into the realm of how rather than if to ‘teach’ grammar.

Communicative teaching methodologies focus away from grammar as the basis of presentation and assessment, and instead look at the successful performance of a real or realistic communicative task. There is a potential problem, however, in the assessment of the performance of such tasks, and the degree of complexity of language involved in them. One of the potential downsides of only assessing the completion of a communicative task, without attention to how it was achieved, is that it may only help students to survive in only very basic communicative situations. To “hop through the language …like an agile man with only one leg”.

Perhaps the most forceful attack on grammar teaching came from Stephen Krashen. Krashen’s belief that learned grammatical knowledge hindered spontaneous or fluent production of language played a crucial part in changing the way grammar is viewed within language learning. Undoubtedly, a student who stops to check the grammatical accuracy of each utterance before speaking will have severely restricted language use. Krashen’s emphasis on comprehensible input as the sole arbiter of language acquisition has led to a more balanced view of language, but there is plenty of evidence that input alone
is not enough. Furthermore, Krashen’s Natural Approach becomes increasingly difficult as a classroom methodology in situations where input is limited to classroom time alone.

**Current approaches to grammar**

It would appear clear that learners do not necessarily arrive at an acceptable level of grammatical accuracy without some specific teaching – though the exact relationship between teaching and learning is unclear. Swain’s study of students in immersion classrooms showed that grammatical errors remained despite ample exposure to the target language, apparent proof that Krashen’s input hypothesis was not enough (10). Meanwhile, Michael Lewis’ reaction to the idea that the Lexical Approach negates the need for grammar was suitably robust “…it is a gross misreading ….. to pretend that asserting the pedagogic value of lexis is in any way to deny the pedagogic value of grammar”(11). However, both Rod Ellis and Scott Thornbury provide powerful anecdotal evidence of classroom situations where the explicit presentation of discrete language points fails to produce appropriately grammatical utterances (12) (13) leading to a search for a more holistic approach.

**Conclusion**

Perhaps the debate then is better suited to the question of how, rather than if, to teach grammar. Certainly the approach of the Grammar Translation method would appear to have had it’s day, however a large number of modern course books persist in structuring their syllabus on grammatical lines, perhaps because “syntax is the only generative system so far described for language….a generative system will be more economical as a way of organizing language work.. than a non-generative taxonomy of items. (14).

While the majority of TESOL classrooms have made the transition to communicative activities and assessment of communicative competence, there is still an obvious need not to ignore the importance of grammar in language teaching. With the changes and innovation in TESOL over the past 30 years there is a wide range of communicative classroom activities that can be used to improve a students’ grammatical accuracy: noticing grammatical patterns in written and spoken texts, looking at the most common grammar patterns that go with vocabulary items or engaging in Community Language Learning activities with an accuracy focus to name but a few. While these may not be the same as a traditional grammar rule presentation style of “teaching” all aim to “teach” grammar in one form or another. In throwing out the bath water of straightjacket grammar teaching we need to ensure we hold onto the potential of the grammar baby.
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