

The role of grammar in ESL and EFL courses

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Abstract

The teaching of grammar has been a controversial issue in second and foreign languages. On the one side, one can find those who oppose teaching grammar in language courses, and on the other side, one can also find many language teachers and applied linguists who favor teaching grammar in the same said courses. This paper deals with some issues related to the teaching of grammar, how teachers should teach, and when is the best time to introduce it in second and foreign language courses. While many language courses focus on grammatical forms, other courses, such as those adhering to the communicative language teaching approach, try to exclude the explicit treatment of form from the syllabi. It is known that native speakers of any language acquire their native language without grammar explanations; consequently, one can assume that this can work as well with second-language (L2) learners. Although many opponents of the teaching of grammar in second and foreign language courses continue to object with considerable reasons, this paper aims to prove that second language learners can benefit from both the explicit and implicit teaching of grammar in language courses.

Introduction

The main purpose of this article is to assess some approaches to grammar instruction in foreign and second language classrooms. The author argues about some topics concerning the teaching of grammar, such as the



role of grammar in language classrooms and the natural acquisition of grammar. The author also delves into the teaching of grammar inductively and deductively, teaching functional grammar and teaching grammar in context. These are some of the most relevant concerns for linguists and language teachers when deciding about how and when to teach grammar in a language course. The key question that the author is addressing in this article is the role that grammar still plays in second and foreign language classrooms. Firstly, it is relevant to mention that in the USA, the teaching of English grammar in the English Language Arts courses has been almost excluded from the school curriculum (Kolln & Hancock, 2005); in contrast, the ESOL and EAP courses offered in American state colleges advocate the integration of grammar as a critical part of the curriculum. However, when one analyzes if grammar is to be taught explicitly in ESL and EFL courses, one still encounters those who oppose and others who embrace this approach. Subsequently, it is also known to those in the field of second and foreign language teaching that many approaches and methods are designed for language learners to acquire the grammatical rules without any explicit explanations, whereas others are more form-focused.

The role of grammar in language learning

One of the key issues in L2 learning and teaching is the role that grammar plays in learning second and foreign languages. According to Steven Krashen (2013), grammar should not be taught explicitly in second language classrooms. Krashen believes in the input hypothesis; this hypothesis affirms that L2 learners acquire language competence by the exposure that they have in the target language and not by teaching explicit grammar. He also states that learners will acquire the language if they are exposed to language that is comprehensible and used in a meaningful way (as cited in Taylor, 1986). Paradoxically, although Krashen does not advocate the teaching of grammar explicitly, he suggests that grammar should be left for homework through story-telling and reading, and it should be taught only in high school and to adult learners (Krashen, 2013).

Furthermore, he recommends that grammar should be taught only in mini-lessons, and simple rules should be taught just to please the curiosity of L2 learners and to fill in gaps that they may not have acquired in the process of acquisition. He further argues that one cannot expect that learned-grammar rules will be acquired in the classrooms. Like Krashen, Nassaji and Fotos (2004) also argue that there are many claims made about the teaching of grammar based on the hypothesis of Universal Grammar (UG) and its application to second language learning. They argue that many linguists claim that if UG is accessible to second and foreign language learners, then learning grammar in an L2 will be like learning an L1 grammar, meaning that the teaching of formal grammar will not be necessary in the process of acquiring the L2. In this case, both Nassaji and Fotos agree with Krashen's theory.



Krashen (1981) points out the difference between the terms acquisition and learning, and he posits that grammar should be acquired through natural exposure to it and not learned in a formal context. He uses a model called “the monitor” to explain the performance of adults speaking a foreign language, in which they evaluate their speeches and results. The ideal teaching of grammar will be the one in which a process of creative construction that is stimulated by contextualized exercises occurs, so learners can learn grammar in context. The hypothesis that this process maintains is that when grammatical rules and corrections are presented, the phenomenon of monitoring will be effective.

Should grammar lessons be form-focused?

The term *form* is not only a linguistic term; it is also a philosophical term that denotes a philosophical category as opposed to that of content and refers to the external expression of language. In philosophy, grammar has always been treated as the structure or organization of language. From the linguistic point of view, the form is the vehicle in the language used to express meaning. As meaning could be defined as the content of a form, the connection between the philosophical and the linguistic term is evident.

According to the *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (2013), the form is defined as the means by which an element of language is expressed in speech or writing. Also, David Crystal (1995), in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, defines the term as the outward appearance or structure of language; as opposed to its function, meaning, or social use, as well as the variations in which a linguistic unit can appear. The role of form in L2 teaching and learning is not new; many strategies have been implemented to teach form in language classrooms, and this has been a controversial debate among linguists and language teachers for decades.

It is a fact that the form-focus approach shifted from the translation method to the current method. In the past, the translation method was used to teach form, making grammatical analysis of the rules of the target language, and later focusing on translating sentences and texts from one language into another. Therefore, the importance of memorization of vocabulary and syntax was paramount. The translation method focuses more on reading and writing instead of speaking and listening; consequently, it is not considered a method where students will reach communicative competence, but they will learn about the form of the target language. In this method, learners are considered good language learners when they develop skills to do accurate translation from one language into the other language.

Too much focus on meaning and avoiding the teaching of grammar is not enough to achieve competence in the target language (Long, 1998). To support this theory, Long states that grammar should not be taught in a discrete way, or in isolated grammatical features, but rather teaching the grammar in context. The



form-focus approach is the most traditional method that language teachers have used to teach grammar; however, this does not mean that it is the most effective one. One of the problems that grammar courses have when the teachers focus too much on form is that they do not consider learners' needs and learning styles. Another problem that form-focus lessons present is that even when delivered by the highly qualified teachers, learners can find the lessons boring and tedious, and it will reduce the learners' motivation in learning the target language.

Furthermore, according to Long (1991), form-focus is more of a structural approach in language teaching because the pedagogy that language teachers were using was to isolate the grammatical elements and de-contextualize them. This approach involves drawing learners' attention to linguistic features that arise naturally, and if grammar is introduced in a meaningful context where learners can practice communication, then the approach can be considered an effective way for L2 learners to acquire grammar. However, the question language teachers should be asking is how much form focused the grammar lesson should be, and if explicit grammar explanations should be completely excluded from language courses. Brown (2000) suggests that some grammar rules must be beneficial to adult learners in a communicative language course. He further prescribes some strategies for teaching grammar such as making brief explanations and not going too deep into language terminologies. He also advises not to spend time in explaining exceptions of rules, but to use charts and visuals to support the explanations.

Nevertheless, this works better when teaching adults; however, one can question if these strategies can be used in other contexts, such as classes made of adolescents or even students who are native speakers of English (Brown, 2000). Even though Brown suggests using these strategies to teach adult learners, they can also be useful for teaching other learners. Adolescents can also benefit from these explanations, since they do not know the rules of the language and will run the risk of making mistakes if they never learn the rules. The reality is that every language has a grammar, and every grammar has grammatical structures, which are the forms and functions used to express meaning. Therefore, learning structures suggest learning how they are formed, in addition to learning the meaning, and its functions. According to Dekeyser, in Doughty and Williams (1998), language learners must practice the structures in a meaningful way because language teachers who just focus their lessons on drilling forms, and do not provide chances to practice the language communicatively, will deprive the language learners of practicing the language structures communicatively.

Moreover, Basturkmen et al. (2004) argue that focus on form is a feature of communicative language teaching (CLT); therefore, the form should not be completely excluded from courses that focus on the CLT approach. However, many schools that follow the CLT approach have been forbidding their teachers to teach form-focused lessons, and others have even gone as far as to exclude the teaching of grammar in their programs.



Likewise, if schools and language programs follow the opponents of the teaching of grammar, then it should be fair to ask why linguists and language teachers are so concerned about writing so many books and articles about the pedagogies, approaches, and methods of teaching it. The reality is that grammar should not be excluded from the field of second, foreign, and first language learning. The question that teachers should be asking themselves is how to teach the grammar for each specific course since not all courses have the same purpose. It is common sense that language learners who are being trained to work in a tourist industry to serve and interact with tourists in countries where English is not the first language do not need a sophisticated grammar as learners who are enrolled in American, Canadian, and British colleges and universities. Consequently, the setting and the purpose of learning the target language will influence the approach that must be chosen to teach grammar.

A clear example is research that was conducted in Canada with native English-speaking learners who were taking French in immersion courses. The results proved that these learners were able to communicate their thoughts in French at some level, yet their vocabulary and grammar did not show good proficiency in the target language. These learners were receiving grammar lessons in French, and the lessons were not being taught in context, so the approach used was more of a rote and drilling learning (Swain, 1985).

Swain (1985, pp. 65–69) argues that a factor that might have caused the poor grammar proficiency of these learners is the little amount of time they spent in the output of the utterances. Moreover, a study conducted in Toronto, Canada at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), shows that the output language learners do in practicing the target structure also affects how well they acquire the language. She states that the output helps learners to notice the utterances in the target language; based on the theory of what has been noticed, the structure can be acquire. Therefore, what has been observed can be reported, and the process in perceiving must be conscious. On the other hand, Doughty and Williams (1998) do not agree with this theory, stating that perceiving can be just to notice a hole in the language; nonetheless, Swain points out that noticing a hole can trigger the stimulus for observing a gap. This theory can be applied if learners are learning gerunds and present continuous in English because both structures have the “-ing” form. The learner may get confused in differentiating them at some point, but at least, he or she will notice that both the gerund and the present continuous are formed with the (-ing) morpheme. Swain further claims that what the language learner may be doing in the output process is experimenting which form might fit in the speech that he or she is trying to convey, and feedback may not come from an instructor in the process of doing it. As a result, this can be perceived as a self-interaction with the target language, experimenting with new utterances.

Swan (1997) considers that learners’ L1 plays an important role in L2 vocabulary learning and use; as a result, he proposes that the L1 can support, fail to support, or slow someone who is learning or using the



vocabulary of an L2. For example, in the case of Spanish learners learning French or Italian as an L2 in immersion classes, the form-focus approach may not be needed much because Spanish, French, and Italian come from Latin; therefore, the grammatical and morphological similarities in these languages will be bigger compared to English. Thus, few differences in form between L1 and L2 will stick out and confuse the L2 learner, requiring the assistance of a Form-Focus Approach. Yet, one should not assume that the result of form-focus courses in English L2 courses will be the same in the case of other languages as L1 that does not have so many similarities with English.

Yet, there is no doubt that based on the research that has been conducted on the role of focus-on-form-approach (FonF) to language teaching, one can arrive at the conclusion that L2 learners will benefit from form-focused instructions if this is combined with other approaches, so the teaching process becomes more eclectic. Of course, one cannot assume that all learners will neither need the same type of instruction, nor the same amount of focus on form. It will depend on the type of learners and goals of the course. Learners that are being trained to become foreign language teachers will need more instruction of focus-on-form than regular EFL learners. Much substantial research shows that well-delivered and well-practiced form-focused lessons can improve the proficiency of language learners. For example, Lightbown and Spada (1990) claim that language learners need to focus on form to overcome incorrect language structures that they may not acquire properly. Moreover, Long (1998) also points out that FonF instruction can increase the students' levels of language proficiency; however, he clearly states that language teachers must leave behind the old method of rote practice and focus more on grammar lessons with a communicative approach and not on overcorrection of errors that can cause frustration and anxiety in the learners. Of course, this does not mean that teachers must skip correcting errors that interfere with the communication and the message the learner tries to convey.

Can language learners benefit from grammar lessons?

Even though the researched-based evidence mentioned above gives enough reasons to include grammar in language courses, these might not be substantial reasons for those who oppose this approach. A clear example can be observed in several reasons that Weaver (1996) gives on the reason teachers continue to teach grammar. Weaver states that teachers assume that teaching grammar will improve learners' writing skills and that this assumption is based on articles they read, which are based on a behaviorist approach to learning, and this is also based on the idea that practice makes perfect. She also points out that these teachers believe that formal grammar teaching is effective if applied to writing; however, she refutes this idea, stating that these people have no idea that great writers have little understanding of a conscious grammar as a system. Weaver further gives other reasons why these teachers might be teaching grammar,



such as fear of the school administration, and they also expect great outcome from the grammar they teach. She also implies that learners can apply good grammar without having to learn the parts of speech.

Furthermore, Weaver argues why teachers must replace the explicit teaching of grammar. Firstly, she mentions that grammar must be limited for those who enjoy taking this class for the pleasure of learning about the language. Secondly, she suggests minimizing the use of grammar terminology and examples and focusing more on teaching grammar in context. She recommends engaging second language learners in using the language the best they can and letting them know that language interaction will be more effective in learning the language than learning grammar rules. To support her claim, she cites a statement that Noguchi (1991) made on the teaching of grammar, where he mentions that less grammar is better since teachers should allow learners to discover language on their own. According to Noguchi, less grammar instruction will also mean more time to develop writing skills.

Weaver (1996) also supports her position based on research that was conducted on 300 college essays. They studied the most frequent errors students made in writing, and she points out that writing instructors did not mark all the errors students made, and the purpose was to avoid inhibiting them from writing. Ironically, this study shows that the most frequently marked errors in these papers were not the most critical errors students made. Therefore, can one assume that English composition instructors in the USA are doing a good job or giving learners proper corrective feedback? In addition, Weaver speaks about errors marked by teachers, but she does not mention that today thousands of teachers across the USA are using turnitin.com, software that detects many grammatical and other mechanical errors too. Accordingly, a good way for students to have a good command of the grammar can be to start teaching grammar in middle and high school and not wait until students arrive in college. If these problems are tackled in middle and high school, students will enter college more prepared and show less grammatical errors in their writing.

Nonetheless, if one looks closely at Weaver (1996) and Noguchi's (1991) philosophy on the role that grammar plays in the teaching of English, one can also see that they do not point out the benefits that grammar has for developing speaking proficiency. Besides, contrary to what Noguchi states, that learners should spend more time on writing and less time doing grammar, the author takes a different position based on his experience of teaching eight years of college writing in the state of Florida, USA. In the colleges the author has taught, he found that both native speakers and ESL learners encounter problems in using the indefinite pronouns in English. These learners have completed grade twelve in American high schools and are still struggling with indefinite pronouns in their writing. So, should a teacher hope that these learners will acquire the pronouns in the long run or is it better to teach them explicitly, and have learners practice the pronouns in sentences and in context, so they can have sufficient exposure in the language and learn to use them correctly? One of



the problems that these learners face with the indefinite pronouns is that they fail to notice that indefinite pronouns are always singular; consequently, many learners made errors when using subject-verb agreement in sentences.

The errors become more frequent when they use the indefinite pronouns: each, some, neither, and every. The errors increased when the indefinite pronouns are used with non-countable nouns. The following are some sentences that could be problematic: “Some of the food is good”; “neither Betty nor Janet is here today”; “each of us has a car”; “each of the partners is responsible” “some of the grain was ruined in the flood”; and “neither of these choices appears good to me”. These are just a few sentences where ESL learners make errors when trying to make agreement with indefinite pronouns. Therefore, can ESL teachers assume that learners will acquire these indefinite pronouns and be able to use them properly in their writings without any explicit explanation and enough practice? The author also keeps track of these errors, since many of these courses were taught using turnitin.com, software that keeps students’ work indefinitely.

Of course, indefinite pronouns are not the only problems ESL and EFL learners face. Murcia and Freeman (1999) also point out other errors that these types of learners make when trying to make subject-verb agreement. They give examples where learners omit the -s in 3rd person, such as “they goes to the movie”; “Pete can sings salsa”; and “he don’t know”. They point out that the cause of these errors is phonological factors, since many learners can produce these utterances properly when they write. However, they omit them in speaking, and this is the result of a phonological transfer from their first language. In French, for example, the final -s does not as frequently as it does in English, and learners will transfer this element from their L1 into English.

Furthermore, Savage et al. (2010) highlight the importance of ESL/EFL learners to know grammar when they plan to attend college or university in an English-speaking country. They address that these learners will benefit in understanding the meaning of grammatical structures when they listen to lectures and for reading and writing academic articles. Once learners learn to correct themselves, this will help them to lead to self-sufficiency and be able to edit their own papers without having to depend on others. Grammar is the structural foundation and the ability human have to express themselves. According to Crystal (2004), the more aware one is of how grammar works, the more one can monitor the way one speaks and uses the language in a meaningful way, and the more grammar one knows, the more one can understand and differentiate how others use the different dialects and varieties of a given language.

Moreover, when teaching grammar, Ellis (2006) makes a distinction between intensive and extensive grammar teaching. For him, intensive grammar teaching is to teach grammar for a continuous period. This may consist of a lesson or some mini-lessons, which can take several days or weeks, concerning a single



grammatical structure or several of them. On the other hand, extensive grammar teaching refers to an instruction concerning a more variety of structures in a short period of time. In this case, the attention that each structure will receive will be minimal. Ellis suggests that when teaching grammar, teachers should leave space for both, extensive and intensive grammar practice, so learners can have the chance to practice the grammatical structure in a communicative context as well. However, this will depend on the focus of the course and the needs that learners have in learning the target grammar. Today, many grammar courses are embedded with writing courses, yet many schools continue to teach grammar as a separate course, and language learners spend more time doing just grammar.

Conclusion

Finally, since language is considered the main vehicle for social interaction among humans, and it serves as different types of communication, such as formal, informal, oral, and written, the teaching of grammar can also be applied in the classroom, depending on the type of course that has been designed to teach the target language. Moreover, since there is a difference in how humans learn a second language from their first language, this factor must also be considered when designing a grammar course. Nassaji and Fotos (2004) explain the need for grammar instruction, suggesting that learners must also have opportunities to learn, develop, and use instructed grammar. This grammatical knowledge will allow language learners to function better in the target language and be more proficient in it. In addition, it will help language learners to develop self-confidence in speaking with native speakers of the target language.

It is a reality that language learners do not need to become grammarians nor learn all the grammatical terminologies in the target language to gain proficiency in it. While there are claims “that the study of grammar does not have a role in a language program” (Krashen, 1995, p. 57), based on the evidence that this article provides, the author proves that the competence and performance of grammar in any language helps the language learner to have a better understanding of how the language he or she speaks and writes works. At the same time, the learner will be more aware of using the language in different social contexts and for different purposes.



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