



On Approaches to English Grammar Teaching and Its Current Situation

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How to cite this paper: Han, J. (2023) On Approaches to English Grammar Teaching and Its Current Situation. *Open Access Library Journal*, 10: e11059.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1111059>

Received: November 29, 2023

Accepted: December 19, 2023

Published: December 22, 2023

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Abstract

This thesis provides a comprehensive review of grammar teaching in English language education, comparing the traditional structural approaches with the more recent communicative approach. The traditional methods analyzed include the grammar translation method, direct method, audio-lingual method, and silent way. In contrast, the communicative approach emphasizes communication and interaction over the strict adherence to grammar rules. However, despite the potential benefits of the communicative approach, the thesis also discusses some of the challenges and limitations of this method. Finally, the thesis concludes with a discussion of the current state of English grammar teaching, noting the obvious disadvantages of the exclusion of grammar teaching and the necessity to resume the right position of grammar in both language communication and language teaching in the classroom.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Grammar Teaching, Traditional Structural Approach, Communicative Approach

1. Introduction

A great variety of approaches or methods have been devised in the long search for the best way of English language teaching. From grammar translation to direct method, from audio-lingual method to cognitive code, each method is based on a particular view of language learning, and usually recommends the use of a specific set of techniques and materials, which may have to be implemented in a fixed sequence. Ambitious claims are often made for a new teaching method, but

none has yet been shown to be intrinsically superior. The contemporary attitude is flexible and utilitarian: it is recognized that there are several ways of reaching the goal of FL (foreign language) competence, and that teachers need to be aware of a range of methods in order to find the one most appropriate to the learner's needs and circumstances and to the objectives of the course. It is frequently necessary to introduce an eclectic approach, in which aspects of different methods are selected to meet the demands of particular teaching situations.

2. The Current Situation of English Grammar Teaching

No other area of the English language has aroused so much passion and controversy as grammar. In the past forty years, there have existed throughout the world both scholars and teachers who are either against grammatical instruction or for it.

Prabhu (1987) [1] argues that language should be acquired through the involvement of communication, thinking that grammar teaching is impossible because the knowledge that a speaker needs in order to use a language is simply too complex. There is an extreme rejection of grammar by some theorists, such as Krashen (1985) [2], who firmly asserts that the formal teaching of grammar does not contribute to the "acquisition" of the knowledge essential for effective participation in real communication. He underscores that grammar teaching is superfluous since knowledge cannot be imparted in a stable, regular form; rather, it can only be unconsciously acquired through the process of language contact. In a more general sense, critics argue that the goal of language learning is to cultivate communicative competence. From this standpoint, learners attaining communicative competence should not only have an understanding of the target language but also showcase proficiency in using it across diverse contexts.

However, the exclusion of attention to grammar is never a necessary part of foreign language teaching. There have been theorists and teachers pointing out that grammar is important and necessary in foreign language teaching, even though their voices may have been for a time drowned out in the noise of learners busily practicing conversations. Harmer (1983) [3] argues, "...for students to have communicative efficiency, they should have a grasp of the major grammatical concepts that are essential for any language user". Batstone (1994) [4] also argues that language without grammar would be chaotic: countless words without the indispensable guidelines for how they can be ordered and modified. Moreover, "Crucially, effective communication in a language could be seriously impaired without an ability to put grammar to use in a variety of situations." (Batstone, 1994) [5]. In fact, as early as the 1960s, Chomsky (1966: 24) put forward: "A grammar can be regarded as a theory of a language; it is descriptively adequate to the extent that it correctly describes the intrinsic competence of the idealized native speaker." [6] Chomsky went on to explain that a grammar describes and attempts to account for the ability of the speaker to understand an arbitrary sentence and to produce an appropriate sentence on a given occasion. Ellis (1992) [7] also believes that grammar teaching does contribute to second

language acquisition, but its effect is delayed and difficult to be reflected at the time. Alexander (1988) [8] even points out that the ultimate source of accuracy in any language is grammar. “Grammar plays a very supportive role. We can say that it is a shortcut to language acquisition.” (Alexander, 2000) [9]

With the advent of the communicative approach, grammar teaching appeared to lose its position in FLT. During a certain period in the 1980s, under the influence of Krashen’s and Prabhu’s exclusion of attention to grammar, grammar teaching even disappeared in language classrooms for a time. However, when things start to get extreme, it tends to go in the opposite direction. After a long time of practice and unfavorable feedback, more and more people came to realize the obvious disadvantages of the exclusion of grammar teaching, and as a result, linguists have re-started to resume the right position of grammar in both language communication and language teaching in the classroom. In one of his speeches, Widdowson [10] pointed out that language consists of two components, one being comprehensive lexical chunks, the other analytic grammatical rules, which function as an adjustment in language. Without learning the grammar of a language, learners can’t acquire the ability to produce grammatically acceptable utterances, let alone master the language.

3. A Brief Review of Grammar Teaching

In the last decades of the 19th century, Western Europe experienced a robust reform movement that subsequently spread to numerous countries. Within these nations, modern languages became integral to the school curriculum. The movement concentrated on classroom instruction, instigating a century-long discourse on teaching methods. The conventional translation methods, rooted in grammar and emphasizing the mastery of language structure as an object of study, faced significant criticism in schools during this period. The reformers promoted direct translation, underscored the importance of oral practice, and discarded the practice of teaching translation as a language in itself.

During World War II, an immediate need arose for language proficiency to achieve military objectives. The subsequent two decades witnessed a remarkable proliferation of innovative ideas and daring experiments in language education. This period reached its peak around 1960 with the advent of the audio-lingual method, the widespread adoption of language laboratories, research advancements in language teaching methods, and the expansion of second language instruction into primary education. The concentration of the audio-lingual method was on skill rather than knowledge, and grammatical teaching was highly systematic, but not dominant as they had been in the grammar-translation method. In the late 1960s, significant shifts in linguistic and psychological perspectives began to undermine and diminish audiolingualism, prompting a quest for a more effective teaching approach. Cognitive theory emerged as one avenue to address the deficiencies of audiolingualism. Another novel direction emphasized the human dimension of language teaching and learning. The argument was made that more critical than the teaching method itself is the interaction be-

tween teacher and learner, as well as the personal characteristics of the learner. Several distinct methods of teaching, for example, Community Language Learning and the Silent Way, were discovered and widely discussed, which were soon joined by a whole spate of new methods, including Suggestopedia¹, Total Physical Response², and the Natural Approach³.

However, some writers—most prominent among them Grittner and Rivers—have not fully embraced any of these approaches, arguing that none of them are comprehensive or strong enough to garner pure support. Aligned with this belief, they regarded eclecticism as the most suitable method at the time, aiming to overcome unnecessary conflicts and embrace the current of modern thought with a positive outlook. However, the weakness of the eclectic position lies in its lack of criteria to determine the best theory and the absence of principles to include or exclude features from existing theories or practices. Recently, among the concepts extensively employed in language teaching, there is no doubt that the term “communication” or “communicative” stands out prominently. The Communicative Approach, in which teaching and learning are for communication, and the classroom activities are learner-oriented with conversation as its predominant feature, shifts attention from language competence to communication competence. As a consequence, grammar is often neglected in classroom activities.

4. Structural and Communicative Approaches

As a normal human task, language learning involves not only knowing things, but also being able to do things with acquired knowledge. There are two aspects to language learning: knowing and doing (ability and performance). Different approaches to language teaching have tended to emphasize one rather than, and often at the expense of, the other (Widdowson, 1990) [10].

4.1. Foreign Language Competence

In the realm of English language education, the diverse approaches to grammar teaching play a pivotal role in shaping learners’ foreign language competence. This paper delves into the current situation of English grammar teaching methodologies and seeks to shed light on effective approaches. However, it is crucial to establish a clear understanding of the fundamental goal—foreign language competence—right from the outset.

Foreign language competence, in the context of this paper, refers to the various abilities and skills acquired by learners in the process of studying English. These encompass not only grammatical accuracy but also proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The elucidation of this goal is paramount as

¹An approach based on the suggestology, the science of suggestion. Devised by a Bulgarian psychiatrist, the method is based on the view that the brain has great unused potential, which can be exploited through the power of suggestion.

²The name derives from the emphasis on the actions that learners have to make, as they are given simple commands (e.g. ‘stand’, ‘sit’, ‘stop’).

³This method emphasized the role of ‘natural’ language acquisition. There is no formal correction.

it sets the foundation for our exploration into various approaches to grammar teaching.

By offering a comprehensive definition of foreign language competence, we aim to guide the reader through an informed discussion on English grammar teaching methodologies, their implications, and their impact on learners' language proficiency.

4.2. Traditional Methods

The traditional teaching method, also known as “structured teaching” focuses on knowledge. In this approach, language items such as words and sentences are introduced and practiced in a manner aimed at facilitating learners' internalization of them as meaningful forms, akin to semantic capsules. The underlying assumption is that once learners have attained mastery of semantic knowledge, they can effectively apply it in practical language skills such as speaking, reading, and writing. In short, it is possible to engage in the same type (if to the same extent now) of communicative activities related to the mother tongue. This assumes that the main task of teaching is to impart knowledge, and that learners can discover for themselves how to do things with knowledge.

This does not mean that there is no activity in classrooms using this approach. Typically, there is a great deal of doing: learners speaking in pairs or groups, reading passages, composing sentences, busy practicing the four skills. But in this approach, in general, these activities are basically seen as a means of internalizing knowledge rather than an end achieved through the use of knowledge, and activities requiring the practice of different skills are designed to help learners consolidate their knowledge of the language. They are devices which are designed to service language learning. The doing is subservient to knowing. The following are some common traditional teaching methods:

4.2.1. The Grammar Translation Method

The origin of this method is the Old Latin and Greek teaching method, which was very influential in the 19th century society. It is based on the meticulous analysis of the written language, in which translation exercises, reading comprehension, and the written imitation of texts play a primary role. Learning mainly consists of two parts, one is mastering grammar rules, and the other is memorizing literary words, which are often chosen for their well-known meanings rather than for interest or language difficulty. The chief activities in the classroom are oral translation from reading books into the target language, while the main homework activities are written translation from unseen passages into the target language. Grammar rules are discovered through the repeated practice of translation and are mechanically used by the learners. The activity of listening or speaking is rarely emphasized. *The result of this method in the past was [that] students who had spent years studying English and could probably read quite difficult literary texts, but were totally incapable of ordering a cup of tea. They had a lot of knowledge but very little skill, but their knowledge is far from deal-*

ing with real life activities (He, 2002) [11].

This approach dominated early work in modern language teaching. A minority still find its intellectual discipline appealing; but the vast majority of teachers now recognize that the approach does little to meet the spoken language needs and interests of today's language students.

4.2.2. The Direct Method

This method, also known as the oral method or natural method, is based on the learner's active participation in speaking and listening to the foreign language in realistic everyday situations. Not using the learner's native language; Encourage learners to think in a foreign language rather than translate in a foreign language. A great deal of emphasis is placed on good pronunciation, and students are often led to look at phonetic symbols before seeing standard orthography. Avoid formal grammar rules and jargon.

The direct method continues to attract interest and enthusiasm, but it is not an easy approach to us in school, for in the artificial environment of the classroom, it is difficult to generate natural learning situations and to provide everyone with sufficient practice. Several variants of the method have thus evolved. In particular, teachers often permit some degree of mother-tongue explanation and grammatical statement to avoid the learners developing inaccurate fluency ("school pidgin")⁴.

4.2.3. The Audio-Lingual Method

This method, also known as the audience-speaking method, stems from the intensive speaking training given to U.S. military personnel during World War II, which enabled them to achieve high listening and speaking skills in a relatively short period of time. Everyday conversation is especially important, and you need to pay special attention to natural pronunciation. Language is seen as a habit-forming process: the structural patterns of everyday conversational situations are imitated and trained (first in chorus, then individually) until the learner is able to respond naturally. We need to pay special attention to the structural contrast between the first language and the second language. Grammatical rules are rarely discussed because language is first a matter of listening, then of practicing orally, and then of being seen and presented in writing.

This approach can instill considerable conversational fluency in a learner, and was widely used, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. It relies on practice and habit formation, which makes it less popular in the current society, especially for learners who are getting a wider range of language experiences, and for those who are doing more creative work in language production.

4.2.4. The Silent Way

This approach aims to provide an environment which keeps the amount of teaching to a minimum and encourages learners to develop their own ways of using the language elements introduced. In the first lesson, the teacher intro-

⁴Here, "school pidgin" refers to slangy expressions used among students at school.

duces a small L2 vocabulary to talk about a set of colored rods, using a few verbs (equivalent to “take”, “give”, “pick up”, and “put”), adjectives, pronouns, etc., and gradually extending the length of the sentence (e.g. “Take the green rod and give it to Michael”). The aim is to help the learners to become self-reliant to select their own sentences and be in control of them, with good intonation and rhythm. The teacher does not repeat the material or provide sentences for students to imitate; and no use is made of the learners’ L1. Charts containing vocabulary and color-coded guides to pronunciation are made available to enable the teacher to guide the students’ learning while saying as little as possible. As the students say more to each other, the teacher says less—hence the “silent” way.

4.3. The Communicative Approach

During the 1970s, there was a widespread reaction, in both L1 and L2 teaching, against methods that stressed the teaching of grammatical forms and paid little or no attention to the way language is used in everyday situations. A concern developed to make FLT “communicative” by focusing on learners’ knowledge of the functions of language, and on their ability to select appropriate kinds of language for use in specific situations. Increased interest was shown in the situations themselves, and in the kind of language the learner would be likely to meet (e.g. at a bank, eating out, etc.). “Situation syllabuses” aimed to recreate these situations, and to teach the various linguistic activities involved such functions as requesting, thanking, complaining, and instructing. “Notional” (or “functional”) syllabuses provided a major alternative to the emphasis on formal language teaching. Here, the content of a course is organized in terms of the meanings (“notion”) learners require in order to communicate in particular functional contexts. Major communicative notions include the linguistic expression of time, duration, frequency, sequence, quantity, location, and motion. Major communicative functions include evaluation, persuasion, emotional expression, and the marking of social relations.

The difference between communicative teaching and structural teaching is that it focuses on making learners use language to do things, express ideas, and carry out interpersonal communication. The content of language courses is now no longer defined in terms of forms, words and sentence patterns, but in terms of concepts and communicative functions. If an approach, in a communicative approach, focuses only on the abstract teaching of knowledge and leads all learners as needed to this end, then it will fail to achieve the communicative possibilities of the conceptual or this is the functional syllabus. Therefore, the key element of communicative pedagogy is to encourage learners to do things in the language they are learning. The assumption is that if learners use language in this way, then they will learn by accident, as a natural consequence of knowing that will arise from doing. In other words, what teaching is concerned with is setting up conditions for effective performance with the language on the assumption that in learning how to perform pragmatically learners will somehow be able to acquire knowledge of the language itself inferentially by themselves.

With respect to L2 grammar, for example, linguistic forms and rules are made available to learners in indirect ways, through reading and listening to meaningful, comprehensible L2 input. This practice often de-emphasizes, or even supplants, direct instruction. A tolerance of learners' grammatical errors is frequently preferred over correction thereof.

5. Problems of the Communicative Approach

It is of course the communicative approach that is in current fashion. It is not difficult to see why its principles should be so appealing, which bring the means of learning into alignment with its eventual ends—the achievement of an ability to use language to communicative effect. However, research has also shown that, in the communicative approach, these activities, materials, and strategies, have not been sufficient enough to bring learners to the levels of proficiency that many now require for effective English language use (Swain, 1985 [12]; Lightbown and Spada, 1993 [13]; Long, 1996 [14]). This realization has thus challenged the popular assumption that a language can be acquired not only for purposes of communication, but also through processes of communication. As recent research has shown, this assumption does not apply to all aspects of language learning, particularly those involving complex grammar rules or subtle socio-linguistic and pragmatic strategies.

In communicative approach, two problems require special attention. One is about natural language learning, the other is about natural language use.

As to natural *learning*, it turns out that learners do not very readily infer knowledge for the language system from their communicative activities (Widdowson, 1990) [10]. An emphasis on communicative methodology can create an environment in which adjusted input is made available (Krashen, 1985) [2]. However, for language learning to succeed, there are several important conditions, such as the learner's attention, and the law of communication is considered to be less reliable. Thus, it has been claimed that when attention is focused solely on the communication of the meaning of the information, the learner is almost entirely absorbed by the meaning and understanding of the input language, while the structure, sound, and form that make up the input are taken second place. For example, the grammar, which they must obviously acquire somehow as a necessary resource for use, proves elusive. So quite often the situation arises where learners acquire a fairly patchy and imperfect repertoire of performance which is not supported by an underlying competence. Their doing does not seem to lead naturally to knowing, as has been optimistically assumed. Communicative experiences of this nature reduce the chances for learners to focus on the interplay between the sounds and structures of the second language and the meaning they convey. They also limit attention to how social norms are linguistically observed and maintained, as well as how concepts like time, movement and activity, space, number, and gender are lexically and/or morphosyntactically expressed. Additionally, such communicative experiences may constrain the utilization of second language features, including function words and

auxiliary words, which convey grammatical information but possess limited semantic meaning.

It has been claimed that for learners to notice such features, to understand the relationships of form and meaning in context, and to apply them appropriately to their speech and writing, much of the input available to them during communication needs to be supplemented and, in some cases, greatly enhanced (Schmidt, 1992 [15]; Long, 1996 [14]).

As far as natural language *use* is concerned, it typically deflects attention from language itself and presupposes a knowledge of the language system as a basic resource which learners have, by definition, not yet acquired. Native speakers of English pay as little attention to language as possible when they are using it to deal with what is familiar to them; when they encounter things unfamiliar, or when they want to express ideas which are fresh and which do not fit conventional schematic patterns—their experiences, cultural values, and so on—they possess systemic knowledge, specifically understanding the formal properties of language, including its semantics and syntax. They also have knowledge of the meanings of words and their arrangement in sentences to rely on. Native speakers of English use this as a communicative resource. But L2 learners should not be encouraged to bypass language when they use it, as native speakers do, because L2 learners do not have a systemic knowledge of English as a back up resource to rely on, which is precisely what they are asked to acquire.

In the communicative approach, errors are often neglected, so that formal corrections are not advocated or even required. However, language learners need to produce spoken and written outputs and modify their speech or writing in situations that are not easily understood, inappropriate, or inaccurate (Swain, 1993) [16]. To achieve this condition, another component is needed, as students need feedback on their work so that they can revise it to be more understandable, appropriate and accurate (Schmidt and Frota, 1986 [17]; Long, 1996 [14]). In the absence of proper patterns, learners may persist in repeating the mistakes they've made, or they might introduce new errors, making their second language learning experience more challenging and intricate than anticipated. Here, communication alone seems inadequate and may even be harmful in the long run, as advanced learners convey their information but receive little feedback about their vocabulary and morphosyntactic imprecision (Williams, 1997) [18]. As a result, many of their inaccuracies are often overlooked, and these learners do not need to correct them to make them more grammatical or to add new grammatical features to their language development.

To sum up, learners who use the communicative approach lack sufficient, meaningful, and understandable input from the second language, so they often cannot selectively pay attention to the form and meaning of the input. They should get feedback to modify their second language product to make it more understandable, appropriate, and accurate. It must be pointed out that, the communicative approach should not belittle the whole purpose of pedagogy, which is to contrive more economical and effective means for second language

learning than is provided by natural exposure and experience.

6. Conclusions

Nowadays, grammar is being rehabilitated (e.g. Doughty and Williams, 1998) [19] and recognized for what it has always been (Thornbury, 1997 [20], 1998 [21]): an essential, inescapable component of language use and language learning. Few would dispute that teaching and learning with a focus on form is valuable. Lately, there has been much research in the field of second language acquisition on whether noticing a particular linguistic form may promote the acquisition of that form. Noticing—a conscious attention to *input* (Schmidt, 1990) [22]—a linguistic form in the *input* is thought to operate as a necessary, though not a sufficient condition for processing. As stated by Robinson, Schmidt and Skehan, the success of learning seems to be correlated with learners' ability to recognize linguistic forms in the input. Of course, what people now put more emphasis on is to find and devise some appropriate approaches to breed and heighten the grammar awareness of language learners, instead of gaining this objective by means of mechanical sentence drills. A logical result is that more and more importance has been attached to grammar instruction in the field of today's foreign language teaching.

As we navigate through the intricacies of methodology and pedagogy, it becomes evident that practical recommendations are essential to bridge the gap between theory and application. Practical suggestions for implementation include: To integrate adaptive learning technologies that tailor grammar exercises to individual learners' needs, allowing for personalized and efficient practice; To design language activities that involve real-world tasks, encouraging students to apply grammar rules in authentic contexts and fostering practical language use; To provide ongoing training for educators to stay abreast of innovative teaching methods, ensuring a dynamic and responsive English language curriculum. By incorporating these practical suggestions, educators can enhance the effectiveness of English grammar teaching, cultivating a more engaging and tailored learning experience for students.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix (Abstract and Keywords in Chinese)

论英语语法教学的途径及其现状

摘要：本文对英语教学中的语法教学进行了全面回顾，并对传统的结构教学法和最近的交际教学法进行了比较。传统方法包括语法翻译法、直接翻译法、听语翻译法和无声翻译法。相比之下，交际教学法强调沟通和互动，而不是严格遵守语法规则。然而，尽管交际法有其潜在的好处，本文也讨论了这种方法面临的一些挑战及其局限性。最后，本文对英语语法教学的现状进行了讨论，指出了排除语法教学的明显弊端，以及恢复语法在语言交际和课堂语言教学中正确位置的必要性。

关键词：语法教学，传统教学法，交际教学法