
UNIT 13 : TEACHING GRAMMAR

Structure .

13.0 Objectives

13.1 Introduction: The Importance of Grammar

13.2 Grammar: A Definition

13.3 Should Grammar be Taught ?

13.4 Approaches to Teaching Grammar

13.5 Current Trends in Teaching Grammar

13.6 Let Us Sum Up

13.7 Key Words

13.8 Suggested Readings

13.9 Answers

13.0 OBJECTIVES

What should you do with the help of this unit?

- You should understand the different meanings of the word 'Grammar' as used in different contexts.
 - You should be able to compare different approaches to teaching grammar and choose the one most appropriate to your context.
 - You should become familiar with current trends in teaching grammar.
-

13.1 INTRODUCTION : THE IMPORTANCE OF GRAMMAR

What is grammar? Is there only one grammar? Is it compulsory that we should teach grammar? If so, how should we go about it? If not, why not? What is the role of grammar in language teaching? These are some of the questions that worry every English teacher.

The ultimate aim of every language learner is to acquire the ability to speak and write the language correctly. In order to do this, s/he requires a knowledge of grammar in some form or the other. Hence any course in language teaching assigns an important role to grammar. As teachers of English we need to know:

- a) What is grammar?
- b) How should we teach grammar?

Some of you have been teaching grammar for sometime. Now you could re-examine your approach in the light of what we shall discuss in this Unit. Others of you may have no teaching experience, still you have "learning experience" - that is you have been taught grammar in a specific way by some of your teachers. You could now try to look back and examine, to what extent you have benefited from your teachers.

There are a handful of people who are fascinated by the magic of grammar. But most of us generally feel 'bored' with it; nor do we have any pleasant recollections of our grammar classes — either as teachers or as learners. We would rather teach 'poetry' than 'grammar'.

This unit will help you to examine some of the prevailing misconceptions in grammar teaching and enable you to make your grammar classes livelier and more interesting. We do hope, that at the end of this unit, you would have developed a balanced attitude to grammar.

Think of a grammar class you taught recently (or a class where you were taught grammar). What feelings do you associate with it? What caused those feelings? Would you attribute them to the teacher, the learner or the subject? Why.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

13.2 GRAMMAR : A DEFINITION (WHAT IS GRAMMAR?)

Grammar is defined as a theory of language. We consider language as rule-governed behaviour, relating to sounds, word formation and structure. Here grammar constitutes a subset of rules relating to morphology and syntax. According to Palmer the rules of grammar enable us to link sounds to meaning. According to modern linguistics, grammar is a device that specifies the infinite set of well-formed sentences and assigns to each of them one or more structural descriptions. In other words, grammar tells us what the possible sentences of a language are and provides a description of them.

1. All of us are able to speak our mother tongue correctly. We do not make any grammatical mistakes. If someone else speaks our mother tongue incorrectly, we are able to identify the mistakes and correct them. Even an illiterate native speaker is able to do this in spite of the fact s/he has not learnt grammar formally at school. S/he knows the grammar of her/his mother tongue instinctively. Grammar, in this sense refers to the total mechanism of the language, which enables its users to communicate with each other. Let us call this Grammar 1, or G1.

2. Consider the following sentence :

He going to school every day.

An illiterate English speaker knows that this sentence is wrong. S/he is even able to correct it for you as "He is going to school every day". However, if you ask him/her why it is wrong, s/he is not able to tell you. On the other hand, an educated native speaker or grammarian would say : This sentence is wrong because the 'ing' form of the verb is used without the auxiliary 'be'. The progressive verb phrase in English always takes the form : be + ing. Such an ability to think about language consciously and attempt a formal analysis and description of what one knows intuitively (G1) is also referred to as grammar. We can distinguish this from G1 by referring to this as Grammar 2 or G2.

3. 'Grammar' also refers to the rules for correct use of language, which may be prescribed for its users; for example words beginning with a vowel sound are preceded by 'an' whereas words beginning with a consonant sound are preceded by 'a'. Text books on grammar written by Wren and Martin, or Nesfield consist of such rules, which prescribe what learners should/should not do. Hence they are also referred to as prescriptive grammars. In contrast to this, Grammars of the G2 type merely 'describe' the facts of the language. Hence they are known as descriptive grammars. Let us call this third type Grammar 3 or G3.

4. According to modern linguists there is a fourth meaning for the term 'grammar' - 'Grammar' is regarded as the innate capacity which all human beings possess; it allows them to acquire language. In this sense grammar is a property of the human brain, rather than that of any language. This may be termed Grammar 4 or G4.

What is Grammatical?

Consider the following dialogues:

- a) i) Who's there?
ii) It's me!
- b) i) Would you like some coffee?
ii) No. coffee has been drunk by me.

Traditional grammar teachers, brought up on the Wren and Martin tradition would say that **It's me** is wrong; the correct form is **It's I**. With regard to (b) they would happily accept **Coffee has been drunk by me** as correct, being the passive transformation of **I have drunk coffee**. However we notice that almost every native speaker uses **It's me** and hardly any native speaker uses **Coffee has been drunk by me**. Does this mean that native speakers are often ungrammatical? Not at all. In fact, grammar is described as the set of conventions used by native speakers. Hence we add another dimension to language — that of **appropriacy** — a (ii) is appropriate but b (ii) is inappropriate even though it is grammatically correct. To cite another example, traditional grammarians approve of **Whom did you see?** This shows that one cannot be too rigid regarding grammatical correctness, since language keeps changing.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Summarise the four meanings of Grammar in the table below:

Type	Meaning
.....
.....
.....
.....

2. To which type of grammar would you attribute the following statement:

- i) Every human child acquires a language but no animal does so.
- ii) In English, a sentence should not end with a preposition.
- iii) There are no articles in Tamil.
- iv) I know that it is wrong to say I didn't went there. I'm sorry I can't explain why it is wrong.
-

3. Discuss whether the following sentences are grammatical and appropriate:

- i) Everyone gave their share.
- ii) Grammar is the most wonderful subject on earth.
- iii) Where you are going?
- iv) We gave no one nothing.
- v) Did you visit the Taj?
Yes, the Taj has been visited by me.

13.3 SHOULD GRAMMAR BE TAUGHT?

Traditional teachers of English considered grammar as an integral part of the language curriculum. They felt that it was not possible for a learner to speak or write English correctly if s/he did not know the grammar in English. Hence students were taught all about articles, prepositions, conditional clauses, etc.

However, modern ELT experts feel that a knowledge of grammar may not be necessary for one to communicate in a language. As evidence, they cite the example of a child acquiring its first language. The child is able to speak the language grammatically by the age of five, even though no one has taught him/her the grammar of the language. So they argue that a second language learner can also acquire a language without learning grammar.

Widdowson, a famous applied linguist, holds a similar view. He feels that second language learners do not benefit from a knowledge of grammar, because they are not able to transfer this knowledge to their own communication. In other words, they are not able to apply or use their grammatical knowledge to actual situations of communication. Newmark goes to the extent of suggesting that a knowledge of grammar is neither necessary nor sufficient for language learners. First language learners find grammar unnecessary; they are able to communicate even without knowing any grammar. Second language learners find a knowledge of grammar insufficient, for even after learning grammar for several years, they are not able to speak or write grammatically.

What should English teachers do then? Should they teach grammar or not? I feel that grammar has an important place in the English curriculum and it has to be taught, for the following reasons:

- a) The purpose of learning any language is to acquire the ability to speak/write it grammatically, that is, grammar construction. Hence every learner should have at least an implicit knowledge of grammar.
- b) Most of the English syllabi in India give considerable importance to grammar, hence we have to teach 'grammar' whether we like it or not.
- c) Learners demand grammar. When we tell them they are wrong, they want to know why. Hence grammatical explanation has to come in.
- d) Second language learners cannot have as much exposure to English as first language learners. A knowledge of grammar may help them to compensate for this lacuna.

Hence we suggest that grammar should be taught. In the next section we shall explore the best approach to teaching grammar to our learners in the Indian context.

Check Your Progress 3

- a) Examine your experience of teaching grammar. In what ways has it helped your students? In what ways has it been useless?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- b) How would you react to the following statement?
The grammar book and the grammar curriculum are like the language of an unskilled camper who does not know where he is going or what he is going to do there; so he has tumbled into his bag all sorts of useless articles - like the 'white knight' in 'the Looking Glass'.

.....

.....

.....

13.4 APPROACHES TO TEACHING GRAMMAR

Language learning is a complex phenomenon: it would be foolish to reduce it to simplistic terms and say that "this is the best way to teach grammar". What works for one context may not work for another. As teachers of English, it is necessary for us to be familiar with various approaches so that we may use the one appropriate to our needs. Sandra McKay discusses three major approaches to teaching grammar:

- a) Formal explanation of grammatical rules.
- b) Practice of common grammatical patterns.
- c) Providing opportunities for students to use English in realistic situations.

Let us look at each of them in detail.

a) Formal presentation of grammatical rules

Traditional teachers of English followed this approach to grammar teaching. There are several grammar books which present the rules of English grammar. e.g. Wren and Martin, Nesfield, etc.

These rules are prescriptive; while they have their own value, we should be careful not to exaggerate their importance. For, some of these rules are no longer valid; if we continue to follow them, our English would sound quite funny. There is an interesting anecdote of how Churchill was once asked to observe the rule "A sentence should not end with a preposition". He retorted by saying "This is a rule which I cannot put up with".

The mastery of the rules of grammar will surely make our learners veterans in grammar; they will be able to answer the questions on grammar well and secure full marks in the grammar section of the paper. But when they speak or write they generally forget the rules they learn and commit numerous mistakes. Hence they are not able to communicate effectively in English, outside the classroom.

b) Practice of common grammatical patterns

In this approach students are not taught the rules or grammar; they are merely asked to practise the structures of language. They are given substitution tables which drill them in the correct use of structures. It is thus impossible for them to come out with an ungrammatical sentence. (e.g.) Make as many sentences as you can from the following table:

I		
They	like	mangoes
Smita		
Rakesh		

Such drilling helps students to become familiar with the basic sentence patterns in English. However, it does not tell them when to use these patterns. There is also the danger that they may mechanically repeat the sentences without understanding the grammatical rules involved.

c) Providing opportunities to use English in realistic situations

In this approach, the teacher is not concerned with teaching grammar - either in the form of rules or drills. His/her major objective is to create opportunities for the learners to communicate in English. It is believed that by engaging in the process of communication, the students will implicitly master the rules of grammar. Hence, the more opportunities learners get for communication, the better their proficiency.

We should not however imagine that the teacher will allow the students to speak or write ungrammatically. When learners come out with ungrammatical sentences, the teacher will provide the correct form incidentally. S/he will not immediately start a remedial grammar lesson in that area. The basic belief of this approach is that learners learn by doing - that is, they learn to communicate by communicating, and not by mastering a set of rules or repeating a set of patterns. Though these learners will develop fluency, it is possible that they will not know how to explain the grammatical rules of English.

The difference between the first and third approaches could be represented as follows:

Approach (a) : Grammar _____ Communication

We learn grammar rules now so that we will be able to communicate later.

Approach (c) : Communication _____ Communication

Implicit understanding of grammar. Learners are given opportunities to engage in the process of communication; this will enable them to acquire the proficiency to communicate (which includes grammatical competence as well).

These two approaches represent two extremes - the one focussing totally on grammar and the other completely on communication, to the exclusion of grammar. Practising teachers, however, try to arrive at a 'via media' between the two. We shall present one such approach to grammar, recommended by Celce Murcia and Hilles. According to them a grammar lesson consists of four parts:

1. Presentation

The teacher selects a grammar structure relevant to student needs and introduces it. The teacher could present the structure (e.g.) the passive in a natural context.

(e.g.) My book was stolen.

She could then elicit the rule for forming the passive.

2. Focused Practice

In this stage, students get practice in the use of the Passive, through various exercises, (e.g.) filling in passive forms of verbs in the continuous paragraph. After they finish the exercise the teacher gives them the correct answers and also discusses their errors.

3. Communicative Practice

Now, the learner engages in communicative activities to practise the structure that has been learnt. These activities are similar to communication in real life. There is a genuine information gap as in real life contexts. As in real life the learners have the choice i.e., the freedom to say what they want. They also get feedback from their peers regarding the effectiveness of their communication.

4. Teacher feedback and correction

Although it has been listed last, feedback and correction actually form an integral part of all the three stages above. The teacher should not merely point out the error and correct it; instead s/he should provide a cognitive challenge to the learners and provide them opportunities to discover their own mistakes.

The approach of Celce Murcia and Hilles, thus attempts a compromise among the three approaches discussed earlier. Prabhu, on the other hand, would not recommend such eclecticism. He believes that as learners engage in communication, grammar will take care of itself.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1. Three approaches to grammar have been presented in this section. Which do you prefer? Why?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

2. Look through grammar books (both traditional and modern), and try to find a sample exercise for each of the three approaches.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3. Choose any area of grammar and prepare a lesson plan for teaching it, based on the plan of Celce Murcia and Hilles.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

13.5 CURRENT TRENDS IN TEACHING GRAMMAR

The teaching of grammar has undergone a sea-change in recent times. If a grammar teacher in the year 1900 happens to visit a grammar class today, s/he may not recognize that it is a grammar class. We shall briefly outline the basic principles below. A detailed discussion, with examples will be provided in Courses 4 and 5.

- a) **Teach grammar for communication - not grammar for its own sake**

Our aim in teaching is to help learners to communicate effectively. We are not interested in producing grammarians. As we pointed out earlier, students may be very good in grammar when they do isolated exercises on grammar; but they often fumble and commit mistakes when they attempt to speak or write independently.

We want our learners to acquire knowledge of language and not knowledge about language. It is not necessary for them to know what a noun or a verb is; they can still communicate without such knowledge. Hence let us not frighten our learners with excessive use of grammatical labels. An analogy might help you to understand this better. If you want to learn driving, it is not necessary for you to know everything about each part of the car. That is a mechanic's duty. You can still drive a car without knowing, for example, what the different parts of the engine are. Similarly you can still speak/write a language without an explicit knowledge about grammar.

- b) **Teach grammar as discourse - not isolated sentences**

The traditional grammar books present numerous exercises, which consist of isolated sentences, unconnected with each other. This is artificial and unrealistic. In real life, we always speak/write in continuous stretches of language (known as discourse). If our language classes should help our learners to communicate effectively in real life, then we should also give them practice in the use of continuous discourse.

- c) **Teach grammar in context**

Most of our time-tables allocate a separate period for grammar. We select a particular area of grammar and teach the various aspects. Most often students feel bored with this, because they do not understand its relevance to real life contexts. They are often puzzled and confused. After all, what is the difference between saying "I ate a mango" and "A mango was eaten by me", when they both mean the same thing? A little more planning will make the class more interesting. For example passives may be taught through the context of laboratory reports or newspaper reports where the agent is not important. The Present continuous tense may be presented in the context of running commentaries for cricket, tennis, etc.

d. Make grammar learning fun

Interactive games for grammar are very popular now. They motivate learners highly and help them to shed inhibitions. Games also help learners to practice the relevant structures without even being conscious of the fact that they are learning grammar. We shall give you many ideas on grammar games in Course 4 Block 4.

e. Focus on fluency first and accuracy later

We, English teachers, on the whole feel very possessive about English grammar. If anyone makes a grammar mistake (whoever it may be) we have to point it out immediately, otherwise our conscience troubles us! But we should think of the effect of such correction on our learners who are just beginning to struggle to communicate. The moment we point out a mistake, they feel humiliated and inhibited. They feel it is better not to speak, rather than speak ungrammatically. Hence it is advisable to pretend to ignore their mistakes in the early stages of learning. After they gain some fluency and confidence, we could slowly begin to emphasize the need for accuracy.

Check Your Progress 5

- a. Think of another analogy to bring out the difference between knowledge of and knowledge about something.

.....

- b. Write a dialogue which you could use as a starting point for teaching 'if' clauses.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

- c. Choose any five areas of grammar, now identify the contexts where they are likely to be used frequently.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

- d. Discuss the concept of fluency vs. accuracy with your learners and colleagues. Do you find any difference in their views?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

13.6 LET US SUM UP

- i. Grammar is a theory of language. It consists of a set of rules which relate sound (letters) and meaning.

- ii. The word 'grammar' is understood in four different ways:
 - a. G1 - the total mechanism of the language, which enables its users to communicate with each other.
 - b. G2 - a formal analysis and description of what a native speaker knows intuitively.
 - c. G3 - prescriptive rules for correct use of language.
 - d. G4 - the minute capacity that all human beings possess, which enables them to acquire language.
- iii. It is not enough if sentences are grammatical; they should also be appropriate.
- iv. For various reasons, grammar needs to be taught in the Indian context.
- v. There are three major approaches to teaching grammar :
 - a. Formal explanation of grammatical rules.
 - b. Practice of common grammatical patterns.
 - c. Providing opportunities for students to use English in realistic situations.
- vi. The four parts of a grammar lesson are: Presentation; Focused Practice; Communicative Practice; Teacher feedback and Correction.
- vii. Recent trends in grammar teaching are:
 - a. Don't teach grammar for its own sake; teach grammar for communication.
 - b. Teach grammar as discourse - not as isolated sentences.
 - c. Teach grammar in context.
 - d. Make grammar fun.
 - e. Focus on fluency first, accuracy later.

13.7 KEY WORDS

appropriacy	when producing an utterance, a speaker needs to know that it is grammatical, and also that is suitable (appropriate) for that particular situation
descriptive grammar	a grammar which describes how a language is actually spoken or written, and does not prescribe how it ought to be spoken or written
fluency vs accuracy	fluency refers to the ability to produce spoken and written language with ease. However, it may be pointed out that the vocabulary, grammar and intonation need not be perfect. Accuracy , in contrast, refers to the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences, but may not include the ability to speak or write fluently.
prescriptive grammar	a grammar which states rules for what is considered the most correct usage. Prescriptive grammars are often based not on descriptions of actual usage but on the grammarian's view of what is best.

13.8 SUGGESTED READING

1. Celce-Murcia, Marunne and Hilles, Sharon. 1981. *Techniques and Resources in Teaching Grammar*. Oxford: OUP
2. Mckay, Sandra, L. 1985. *Teaching Grammar*. Oxford: Pergamon Press Ltd.
3. Ghosh, R.N., Sastri H.N.L. and Das, B.K. 1977. *Introductions to Language Teaching - Vol. 3 - Methods at College Level*. Madras : OUP.
4. Palmer, Frank. 1971. *Grammar*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

13.9 ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

(e.g.) Boredom - a state of being not interesting, or relevant — to be attributed to the syllabus designer.

Check Your Progress 2

- | a. | Type | Meaning |
|----|------|--|
| | G1 | - Total mechanism of a language. |
| | G2 | - Formal analysis and description of a language. |
| | G3 | - Rules for correct use of a language. |
| | G4 | - The innate capacity of human beings. |
- b. i.G4 ii.G3 iii.G2 iv.G1.
- c. i. Not grammatical, but appropriate.
ii. Both grammatical and appropriate.
iii. Ungrammatical; appropriate in India.
iv. Ungrammatical; appropriate in a dialect.
v. Grammatical; inappropriate.

Check Your Progress 3

- a. A variety of answers possible.
(e.g.) It has helped them to know the labels; it has not helped them to speak.
- b. A variety of answers possible.

Check Your Progress 4

1, 2, 3. A variety of answers possible.

Check Your Progress 5

- a. Swimming
- b. Open-ended (Refer Bhaskaran & Horsburgh, *Strengthen Your English*)
- c. (e.g.) Past tense: Narration of stories.
Future tense: Weather Forecast.
- d. Depends on the answers of teachers and learners.