

The Role of Grammar in ESL/EFL Classroom

文法在語言學習中所扮演的角色

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the definition of grammar and grammatical competence. In addition, it reveals the relationship among the role of grammar and grammar instruction as well as grammatical competence. Furthermore, it provides the concepts about the role of grammar in communication, learning, and teaching. Finally, the author suggests that classroom instruction has the potential to influence students' learning. In this view, teachers should go beyond the pros and cons on grammar debates and manipulate teaching approaches that are appropriate for students in different levels to improve their grammatical competence.

摘 要

本研究針對文法及文法能力的定義做討論，並呈現文法的角色、文法教學及文法能力三者間的關係。此外，本研究還說明了文法在溝通、學習與教學上所扮演的角色。最後，筆者提出在教學影響學習的前提下，面對不同的學生，教師應著重於如何靈活運用不同的教學方式來幫助學生學習文法以提升其文法能力。



Introduction

Grammar debates seem to go on and on. It is critical whether grammar should be taught to ESL/EFL students. Marianne Celce-Murica has said:

There are currently two extreme positions in ESL concerning the teaching of English grammar. At one extreme, the proponents of audio-lingualism (Lado, 1964)[36] and the methodologists such as Gattegno (1972, 1976)[23, 24] argue that we must make grammar the core of our language instruction and that we must correct all student errors. At the other extreme, methodologists such as Krashen and Terrell (1983) tell us not to teach grammar explicitly and not to correct any learner errors (Celce-Murica, 1988, p. 4). [7]

Celce-Murcia’s statement highlights the ongoing debate about grammar in ESL/EFL teaching and presents two extreme positions. The following will discuss literature relating to previous research on the role of grammar and grammar instruction as well as grammatical competence. The relationship among these three elements can be revealed in Figure 1.

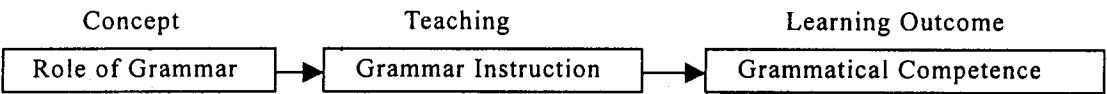


Figure 1
The Relationship among the Role of Grammar, Grammar Instruction, and Grammatical Competence

The Definition of Grammar

The debate about the teaching of grammar in foreign language classrooms often starts with an attempt to define what grammar is. Table 1 presents different definitions of grammar.

Table 1
Definitions of Grammar

	Scholar	Definition
1	Hartwell (1985)[26]	Grammar One is the set of formal patterns in which the words of a language are arranged in order to convey larger meanings (p. 109).
2	Hartwell (1985) [26]	Grammar Two is the branch of linguistic science which is concerned with the description, analysis, and formulation of formal language patterns (p. 109).



3	Hartwell (1985) [26]	Grammar Three is linguistic etiquette. The word in this sense is often coupled with a derogatory adjective: we say that the expression "he ain't here" is "bad grammar" (p. 109).
4	Hartwell (1985) [26]	Grammar Four is the rules of common school grammar, literally the grammar used in the schools (p. 110).
5	Hartwell (1985) [26]	Grammar Five is stylistic grammar, defined as grammatical terms used in the interest of teaching prose style (p. 110).
6	Bowen, Madsen, & Hilferty (1985)[5]	Grammar provides the rules by which we put together meaningful words and parts of words of a language to communicate messages that are comprehensible (p. 161).[4]
7	Richards, Platt, & Platt (1992)[49]	Grammar is a description of the structure of a language and the way in which linguistic units such as words and phrases are combined to produce sentences in the language. It usually takes into account the meanings and functions these sentences have in the overall system of the language.[31]
8	Ur (1996)[57]	Grammar is a set of rules that defines how words (or parts of words) are combined or changed to form acceptable units of meaning within a language (p. 87).[36]

According to Table 1, it can be seen from the first (Hartwell's Grammar One), the sixth (Bowen, Madsen, & Hilferty, 1985), the seventh (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992), and the eighth (Ur, 1996) definitions that grammar is the underlying system of any language which holds it together, and that meaning is an important part of this system. Hartwell (1985) divided grammar into five categories. Grammar Two is linguistic science, learning about language rather than learning to use the language. Grammar Three is not actually grammar, but usage. Generally, the grammar in grammar instruction refers to the first four definitions above. However, the researcher thinks Grammar Three and Grammar Five also should be taught. Lacking knowledge of English etiquette, EFL/ESL students are sometimes hampered in their communication.

The following conversation between an American and a Chinese speaker illustrates this:

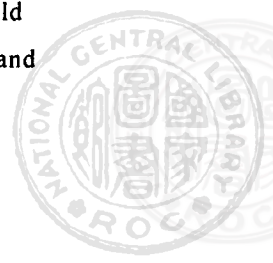
American: "May I close the door?"

Chinese: "I'd like you to close half of it."

American: "I'll close the whole door half way."

(Zhang, 1994, p. 65)[62]

According to the above conversation, the words are in English, but the logic is in Chinese. This kind of example can be found often among Chinese students. Therefore, in order to make EFL/ESL students both grammatically and communicatively competent, we should teach them Grammar Three. Additionally, EFL/ESL students need to learn some style and



format in order to be accepted by the academic setting. Stylistic grammar enables them to control the language by manipulating it in meaningful contexts. Hence, Grammar Five should be taught.

The Role of Grammar

The role of grammar is perhaps one of the most controversial issues in language teaching. Some theorists and practitioners consider grammar the goal of second language instruction (Huguenet, 1959)[31]. Some others view it as a tool to be used in and subordinate to communication (Rutherford & Sharwood-Smith, 1988). In contrast, some scholars have banished grammar from the curriculum entirely (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989)[4].

In the early parts of the twentieth century, grammar teaching formed an essential part of language instruction. In the early 1970s, the concept that knowing the grammatical rules of the language enables learners to use it for communication was argued. During this period, grammar teaching became less prominent, and in some cases, was abandoned. In recent years, grammar teaching has regained its rightful place in the language curriculum.

Ellis (1993)[15] proposed two major questions with regard to grammar teaching in second language pedagogy: (1) Should we teach grammar at all? (2) If we should teach grammar, how should we teach it? The first question has been answered by some scholars. Krashen (1982)[34] argued that formal instruction in grammar would not contribute to the development of acquired knowledge (the knowledge needed to participate in authentic communication). In contrast, Canale and Swain (1980)[7] did not suggest that grammar was unimportant. Similarly, the findings of the Savignon's (1972)[51] study did not suggest that teachers forsake the teaching of grammar. Furthermore, Prabhu (1987)[46] suggests that classroom learners can acquire a second language grammar naturalistically by participating in meaning-focused tasks. Ellis himself claimed that grammar teaching does help second language acquisition.

According to Marianne Celce-Murcia (1985)[10], whether or not grammar is important and should be taught depends on a number of learner and instructional variables. Table 2 shows a clear picture of the variables.

Table 2
Learner and Instructional Variables (Celce-Murcia, 1985, p. 4)[6]

	Less Important	← Focus on Form →	More Important
Learner Variables			
Age	Children	Adolescents	Adults
Proficiency Level	Beginning	Intermediate	Advanced
Educational Level	Pre-literate	Semi-literate	Literate
	No formal	Some formal	Well-educated



	education	education	
Instructional Variables			
Skill	Listening, reading	Speaking	Writing
Register	Informal	Consultative	Formal
Need / Use	Survival	Vocational	Professional
	communication		

According to Table 2, grammar is more important for adult learners. EFL/ESL college students belong to the category of adults. When we talk about teaching EFL/ESL college students, we have to realize that the way adults learn a second language is quite different from the way we learn our native language while we are growing up. Native language can serve both as a bridge and a block in foreign language learning. Robert Bley-Vroman (1988)[3] maintains in “The Fundamental Character of Foreign Language Learning”:

Adult foreign language learners are equipped with a general Universal Grammar. They construct a kind of surrogate for Universal Grammar from knowledge of the native language. The native language must be sifted: that which is likely to be universal must be separated from that which is the accidental property of the native language (p.20).

Adult learners have ideas of what in their native language is universal and hence transferred to the language to be learned, and what is specific to the native language and hence would not transfer well. Researchers in the field of second language learning believe adults want and need rules. Krashen (1981)[33], for example, found that age influences second language acquisition in a number of ways. Adults are better suited to study form and to use what they have learned in “monitoring,” a self-editing process. In addition, Ervin-Tripp (1974)[18] claims children learn language in a tangible, immediate context, while adults tend to learn in an abstract context and have a greater capacity to remember explicitly stated grammatical rules. Adults are more advanced cognitively and better able to apply learned rules. Therefore, the way adults learn a foreign language is very different from how children learn a native language.

Grammar and Communication

Grammar is one of the major ways for foreign language learners to enter the world of another language. Therefore, the role of grammar should be reconsidered in language learning. Savignon (1991)[53], one of the leading advocates of communicative language teaching, emphasizes that communication cannot take place in the absence of structure, or grammar. Contemporary practices tend to include grammar in combination with the communicative approach. Comeau (1992)[12] views the study of grammar as a social activity and puts communication on a par with correctness. Dekeyser (1990)[13] maintains that communication can be taught by using grammar if it is taught functionally; that is, if students are made aware that the end goal of the grammar exercise focused upon is use in



communication. In addition, Frodesen (1991)[21] argues that grammar still has a role in teaching since it is an essential part of communication and it is that part of language which makes our meaning clear and precise. From a psycholinguistic view, Garrett (1986)[22] postulates that if grammar is considered as processing rules and the concept is applied to teaching, then the result may be that grammar can have a part in the acquisition of communicative proficiency. Higgs (1985)[28] also argues that communication and grammar are not separable concepts. For that reason, successful foreign language learners need to be both communicatively successful and linguistically precise, and both of these aspects need to be at the heart of any foreign language pedagogy. Moreover, according to Widdowson (1988)[61], it is essential to know how grammar mediates for language learners, thereby enabling them to achieve meaning. Grammar, therefore, has a central role in language learning for “language learning is essentially grammar learning” (p. 154). As second language learners’ level of proficiency increases, the learners become more skilled at incorporating intricate grammatical forms. Thus, “grammar and communication become mutually inclusive.” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 1992, p. 13)[43]

Grammar and Learning

Many scholars in the field of language teaching and learning emphasize the role grammar plays in language learning. Wilga Rivers, for example, emphasizes that grammar is the framework within which the language is operating. She explains that language without grammar “is like saying that you can have a chicken walking around without bones” (Arnold, 1991, p. 3)[1]. Students with good grammatical competence will improve their reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. Mohamed (1998)[41] attended an intensive summer school course in German at the University of Cape Town and found that grammar explanation helped students to read and understand German dialogues and to answer simple questions in German. In addition, in his teaching of Arabic to adult learners at the community outreach Tono-Bungay school of Arabic, he found that students were able to read passages in Arabic without much difficulty after students were receptive to learning Arabic grammar. “The teaching of grammar becomes even more essential in a grammar course that aims to develop the reading skill as a first priority” (Mohammed, 1997, p.50)[42]. Celce-Murcia (1991)[11] stresses that grammar is a tool or resource to be used in the comprehension and creation of oral and written discourse rather than something to be learned as an end in it. However, she further explains that when learned as a decontextualized sentence-level system, grammar is not very useful to learners as they listen, read, speak, and write in their second or foreign language. Furthermore, the practice of teaching grammar in isolation through written exercises has a “negligible or even harmful effect on the improvement of writing... Grammar does not exist outside of a sentence” (North Carolina Communication Skills Curriculum, 1992)[43]. According to the North



Carolina Department of Public Instruction (1992), there are several concepts addressed about the role of grammar. First, in the study of a foreign language, mastery of grammar is associated with success in language ability. If students knew the grammar, they would automatically be able to transfer this knowledge to speaking and writing skills. Second, grammar provides the essential framework for supporting meaning. Without grammar, it would be difficult to make sense of the words provided. Third, in writing, the role of grammar would be essential in the revising and editing part of writing process. Finally, grammar can be used for several purposes: that is, for communication, for understanding one's own language, and as a means for talking about language. Therefore, grammar provides a firm foundation for language learning.

Grammar and Teaching

Although teaching grammar is as old as teaching language, it still occupies the attention of researchers in the field (e.g., Burgess, Turvey, & Quarshie, 2000; Dekeyser, 1990; Ellis, 1995; Ellis, 1999; Fitch, 1995; Fotos, 1994; Hood, 1994; Kane, 1997; Krashen, 1998; Lally, 1998; Larsen-Freeman, 1991; Mohammed, 1997; Nunan, 1998; Schuster, 1999; Turvey, 2000; Weatherford, 1997). Foreign language educators and applied linguists examining the effectiveness of various approaches for foreign language teaching are not all in agreement about whether explicit grammar instruction is essential or even helpful in learning a new language. Some scholars believe that grammar instruction is necessary in adolescent and adult classroom language learning (Hammerly, 1985; Higgs & Clifford, 1982; Valette, 1991)[26, 29, 58]. In addition, some scholars believe that grammar instruction can be helpful in enhancing and accelerating adolescent and adult foreign language learning (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Lightbown, 1998; Long & Robinson, 1998)[14, 39-40]. In contrast, Wilga Rivers is against teaching grammar through giving didactic explanations of grammatical rules. Instead, she claims, teaching grammar should be done through providing activities that enable students to perform rules so that they are actually becoming familiar with the structures and accumulating a performance memory and integrating the material into their semantic networks. Celce-Murcia (1988)[9] also believes that grammar teaching should be meaning-focused rather than rules-focused. Meaning-focused grammar teaching is contextualized, text-based and presented in a meaningful context beyond a sentence.

Grammatical Competence

Grammatical competence is viewed as one component of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Cele-Murcia, 1991)[7, 11]. Grammatical competence is defined by several scholars. Grammatical competence is the knowledge of lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, semantics, and phonology (Widdowson, 1978)[59]. Savignon (1983)[52] asserts that "Grammatical competence is mastery of the linguistic code, the ability to



recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactic and phonological features of a language and to manipulate these features to form words and sentences” (p. 9). Oxford (1990)[45] claims that “Grammatical competence or accuracy is the degree to which the language user has mastered the linguistic code, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, spelling, and word formation” (p. 7).

In 1990, Bachman [2] proposed a model of communicative language ability containing two primary components: language competence and strategic competence. Language competence includes organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence contains grammatical competence which includes those competencies involved in language usage as described by Widdowson (1978)[59]. On the other hand, Garrett (1986)[22] discusses the paradoxical problem of grammatical competence being a part of communicative competence. In 1996, Scott [55] pointed out that “grammatical competence alone is an insufficient condition for good foreign language learning” (p. 124).

Conclusion

This study discussed the definition of grammar and grammatical competence. In addition, it revealed the relationship among the role of grammar and grammar instruction as well as grammatical competence. Furthermore, it provided the concepts about the role of grammar in communication, learning, and teaching.

Classroom instruction has the potential to influence students' learning. In this view, teachers should go beyond the pros and cons on grammar debates and manipulate teaching approaches that are appropriate for students in different levels to improve their grammatical competence. Further research should focus on what approaches are appropriate for different students and exploring how to assist students in grammar learning to develop their grammatical competence.



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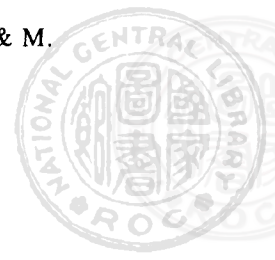
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