

GRAMMAR COMPONENT IN LANGUAGE CURRICULUM IN ENGINEERING COURSES – AN EVALUATIVE STUDY OF THE SYLLABI OFFERED AT DIFFERENT UNIVERSITIES AND AUTONOMOUS INSTITUTIONS IN THE REGION

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Abstract

This paper aims at analyzing the extent and scope of Grammar component in the language courses offered as a part of the B.Tech programme in the universities and autonomous institutions in the region and attempts to critically evaluate the role and contribution of the said linguistic component. In the light of the “LANGUE-PAROLE DICHOTOMY”, the role of Grammar teaching acquires a lot of significance. It has been one of the much debated issues in the present day academic scenario. The traditional difference between Structural Approach and Communicative Approach takes the front line in the issue. It has been felt these days that the curriculum planners have been overemphasizing the importance of the overt teaching of the principles of sentence construction and the related linguistic binding. It has been claimed that the learners have been subjected to the “Syntax Conscious” predicament of language use. On the other hand, there are ardent advocates of “Standardization” through overt teaching of Grammar. Making the learners proficient in an alien tongue in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multilingual setting is a Herculean task beyond any shadow of doubt. On the other hand, English has been considered a second language for all practical purpose, since the society has been subjected to swift changes. In this context, the researcher attempts at critically evaluating the Grammar component in the curriculum for Engineering students and aims at studying to what extent the current ways of pedagogic execution involved, including the patterns of evaluation evolved would help the learner acquire the communicative competence.

Keywords: Language, Grammar, Approaches, Curriculum

English language occupies an imminent position in professional courses and conventional courses equally regardless of the arguments which position its monopoly on various subjects of study and courses. Surpassing numerous barriers and impediments challenging its permeation as an international language, English could establish itself (since

at one point of time “Volapuk and Esperanto” claimed to become languages of wide public acclaim.) English language has come a long way being the tool of official expression and formal communication with a formidable image as the prime tool of not just winning a career for its learners but to make them global players. In the light of the above, the spoken expression of language and the anatomy of its usage evoke interest, whether language is through grammar or Generative communication regularizes grammar? This is a question of the contemplation ‘which can be acquired’ through ‘which possible means.’ Especially in professional colleges language is taught through diverse means enabling the learners to go through programmed instruction either on audio gadgets or through working on computer interface. Even grammar is relegated to a secondary position condensing it to a single line phrase in the curriculum, in some cases. In many cases the conventional approach of teaching grammar has fallen back taking a miniature form of its being taught in a collateral method of common mistakes in English.

Keeping in view the trends and dynamics in the field, a sample survey has been conducted on the itemized and generalized aspects of grammar components in engineering courses in some of the Universities and autonomous Institutions in the region. Before presenting the observations of the survey, let us have a birds’ eye view of different trends with regard to teaching of grammar.

Case Discussed

The term grammar has multiple meanings. It is used to refer both to language users’ subconscious internal system and to linguists’ attempts explicitly to codify – or describe – that system. With regard to the latter, its scope can be broad enough to refer to the abstract system underlying all languages (i.e. a universal grammar) or, more narrowly, to the system underlying a particular language (e.g. a grammar of English). As Quirk and others et al in Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language refer to a particular school of linguistic thought (e.g. a stratification grammar) or to a specific compendium of facts for a general audience or to a particular audience. (e.g. a pedagogical grammar for students or for teachers).

Additionally, a study of English grammar includes function words, such as frequently occurring articles, whose role is largely syntactic (i.e. not lexical since they may not have an inherent meaning) some grammar also include phonology and semantics, but the usual interpretation of grammar is limited to the structural organization of language.

Grammar in Language Education

The simple binary distinction between formal and functional approaches is reflected in language education. The former is the ‘structural approach’ (Widdowson 1990), and its adherents assume that communicative ends are best served through a bottom-up process: through practicing grammatical structures and lexical patterns until they are internalized.

Means of inculcating a language's grammar include pattern practice and structural drills, through, for example, the audio-lingual method, widely practiced in the 1950s and 1960s. Partly due to the influence of transformational grammar, materials in the 1970s featured sentence pattern into another (Rutherford 1977). Although these teaching practices are still widely used and very visible in current language teaching materials, a major shift occurred during the 1970s.

Factors contributing to the shift include: observations of learners' difficulties in transferring grammatical structures learnt in class to communicative contexts outside, calls to broaden linguistic study from grammatical competence to 'communicative competence' (Hymens 1971[1972, 1979]), the influence of functional grammar, a research project commissioned by the Council of Europe (1971) and encouragement of applied linguists (Widdowson 1978; Brumfit and Johnson 1979). Initially this translated as advocacy for notional-functional syllabuses rather than ones based on linguistic units, such as had been used up to that point (Wilkins 1976). When notional-functional syllabuses themselves were challenged in the 1980s, the commitment to teaching language use remained and was manifest in the "communicative approach" (Widdowson 1990), which was characterized by, for example, role-playing, jigsaw tasks and information-gap activities. There was however, often little attempt to control the structural complexity to which learners were exposed. Over a period of time, learners were increasingly expected to approximate target language forms as they used them for communicative purposes. SLA researcher Hatch commented 'One learns how to do conversation, one learns how to interact verbally and out of this interaction, syntactic structures are developed'. To this day, communicative language teaching (CLT) prevails, although concern has been expressed that newer approaches are practiced at the expense of language form (Widdowson 1990; Bygate et al. 1994).

Functional Grammar

Functional grammarians start from a very different position. In this sense the study of language use (pragmatics) precedes the study of formal and semantic properties of linguistic expressions. (Dik 1991:247)

Thus, where a formal grammarian might accept the challenge to explain how sentence (1) is derived from (2) (by interchanging the subject with the object, inserting *be* and the past participle and the preposition *by* before the displaced subject), a functional grammarian is more interested in explaining the difference in use between these two according to the notion 'perspective'.

1. Mark McGuire and Sammy Sosa broke the home run record.
2. The home run record was broken by Mark McGuire and Sammy Sosa.

A functional grammarian assumes that both sentence; describe the same event, but that this event is presented from the participant's viewpoint in (1) and from the viewpoint of the result in (2). He or she is then interested in determining what contextual influenced the speaker's choosing one version over the other.

Givon (1993) captures the difference between formal grammars and functional grammars succinctly: although grammar consists of a set of rules. What is of interest to the functional grammarian is not that the rules generate grammatical sentences, but rather that the production of rule-governed sentences is the means to coherent communication. Given this communicative orientation, functional grammar's unit of analysis extends beyond the sentence (see Chafe 1980; Longacre 1983) and the explanation for various grammatical structures is sought at the level of discourse. Analysis of spoken and written texts reveals that factors such as information structure and interpersonal patterns of interacting influence grammatical structure. For example, Hopper and Thompson (1980) demonstrated that transitivity is not an a priori category, but is rather motivated from its use in discourse. Sequences of verb tense and aspect can similarly only be explained a the discourse level.

Functional grammarians see meaning as central, i.e. grammar is resource for making and exchanging meaning (Halliday 1978, 1994). In Halliday's systemic-functional theory, three types of meaning in grammatical structure can be identified: experiential meaning in grammatical structure can be identified: experiential meaning (how our experience and inner thoughts are represented), interpersonal meaning (how we interact with others through language) and textual meaning (how coherence is created in spoken and written texts).

Recent Research

Focus of Form

To this point, although there is no unanimity (see Krashen 1992; Truscott 1998), many SLA researchers follow Long (1991) in proposing a focus on form (for reviews, see Harley 1988; Long 1988). They work within a menaing-based or communicative approach, setting research agendas which aim to discover what form-focused practices are most effective, when they are best used and with which forms (see Doughty and Williams 1988). For example, it has also been proposed that, since there is a limit to what humans can pay attention to at any one time and since attending to features of English may be necessary for leaning them, grammar instruction may enhance learners' ability to notice aspects of English that might otherwise escape their attention while engaged in communication (Schmidt 1990). There is research (N.Ellis 1993; De Keyser 1995: Robinson 1996) on whether to do so implicitly (by input enhancement; Sharwood Smith 1993) or explicitly (by the teacher's presenting a rule).

Further benefits of focusing on form have been proposed (R.Ellis 1993, 1998b). One is to help students 'notice the gap' between new features in a target language's structure and how they differ from the learners' inter-language (Schmidt and Frota 1986). Negative evidence that what students have produced does not conform, to the target language enhances this focus. A benefit of grammar instruction may therefore be the corrective feedback that students receive on their performance. Grammar instruction can also help students generalize their knowledge to new structures (Gass 1982). Another role of focus on form may be to fill in the gaps in the input (Spada and Lightbown 1993), since classroom language will not necessarily be representative of all grammatical structures that students need to acquire. Finally, a focus on form should also include output practice (Swain 1985), in order to ensure that students are engaged not only in semantic processing but also in syntactic processing.

A contentious, but potentially far-reaching, question is whether learners must be developmentally ready in order for grammar structures to be learnable and, therefore, teachable (Pienemann 1984, 1998). While there may be this need, it may also be the case that grammar instruction in advance of learner readiness (by, e.g., priming subsequent noticing: Lightbown 1998) is positive.

Sociocultural Theory

Research on the learning, of grammar has also been conducted using Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as a frame of reference. Donato (1994) studied what he termed 'collective scaffolding' to see how language development was brought about through social interaction. Donato found evidence that participating in collaborative dialogue, through which learners could provide support for each other, spurred development of learners' interlanguage. Goss et al. (1994) further concluded that dialogue arising during collaborative problem-solving is an enactment of cognitive activity. Other research (e.g. Swain and Lapkin 1998) corroborates the value of a theoretical orientation towards dialogue as both a cognitive tool and means of communication which can promote grammatical development.

Discourse Grammar

As mentioned above, one of the functionalists' contributions has been to elevate the focus of linguistic analysis to the discourse level. In investigations of grammar at this level, L2 researchers have discovered interesting patterns (Celce-Murcia 1991a; McCarthy and Carter 1994; Hughes and McCarthy 1998). For example, the present perfect operates at this level to frame a habitual present-tense narrative (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1999). Other work shows how the choice of grammatical form often signals such things as the speaker's attitude, power and identity (Batstone 1995; Larsen-Freeman 2001) and the place of grammar in social interaction (Ochs et al. 1996). Other research delves more deeply into the grammar of speech (Biber et al. 1988; Yule et al. 1992; Brazil 1995; Carter and

McCarthy 1995; McCarthy and Carter 1995) and consequently many grammar teaching materials reflect modality differences (see, eg., Biber et al. 1999).

Another important development is research on grammars for spoken as well as written language, stimulating the search for more dynamic models of grammar than currently exist (Halliday 1994; Larsen-Freeman 1997b). Another area of interest is the formal study of teachers' conceptions of grammar, and how these concepts inform their practice (see Eisenstein Ebsworth and Schweers 1997; Borg 1998; Johnston and Goettsch 1999). Borg (1999) researches teachers' use of met language to teach grammar, the effectiveness of which, as Sharwood Smith (1993) has noted, is still an open question.

Current Study

The researcher undertook a survey in which students of B.Tech, teachers and curriculum planners have been involved.

The researcher administered separate questionnaires on curriculum planners and students. In addition to the above some teachers have been interviewed. The following observations have been recorded based on the response of the curriculum planners & teachers.

1. Grammar teaching is very much essential to the students in professional stream.
2. Traditional approaches to grammar like structural method and theoretical presentation may not help modern learners.
3. Grammar component should not be given prime importance in curriculum, but it should be done covertly.
4. Mention in the technical terms and a label in grammar does not offer creative understanding to the learner.
5. Grammar component cannot give way to rhetoric like idiomatic expressions and phrases, but it can be taught through descriptive way.
6. Modern curriculum is not tailored to meet the demands of learner aspiring to acquire proficiency with grammatical encumbrance.
7. Common errors in the curriculum meant for standardization of basics.
8. Tense and structure cannot be taught through vocabulary.
9. There are certain lacunae in the philosophy and process of syllabus which are still to be set right.
10. Teaching LSRW components through grammar may not turn out to be a realizable proportion.
11. Modality of verb can be included in syllabus when the target groups are heterogeneous.
12. Items like models may contribute to the proficiency but one should see that students do not get confused.
13. The scope of grammar component is adequate.
14. Traditional items contribute to generative capabilities, but they do not help the expression and on the other hand, they are repetition in the syllabus.

15. The cloze test etc., which involve grammatical understanding, help the learner provided the tests are authentic.

Statistical Analysis of Student Responses

Sample Size: 100

1. Among all the components in the Syllabus covered so far which one do you feel the most interesting?

Idiomatic expressions – 16%

Vocabulary – 36%

Letter Writing – 20%

Functional Grammar – 16%

Some Other – 8%

2. Among the others in the functional grammar which one do you like the most?

Pronounce -7%

S+V+A – 20%

Rules of Proximity – 27%

Preposition – 11%

Theory of parallelism – 17%

some other – 18%

3. To what extent grammar component is interesting to you when compare to other components?

Greater Extent – 20%; Some Extent – 49%; Not interested – 31%

4. Do you experience any repetition in the components of grammar?

Yes – 32%

No – 61%

Sometimes – 7%

5. Were any of the items of grammar being taught in the current courses covered in the previous courses?

Yes – 51%

No – 29%

Some – 20%

6. Do you experience any improvement in writing skill because of grammar learning?

Yes – 79%

No – 21%

7. Between the two which do you prefer?

a. Explanation of rules following by illustrations – 56%

b. Illustration followed by explanation – 44%

8. When you speak do you get flashes of memory related to rules of grammar taught in class?

Yes – 42%

No – 45%

Some times -13%

9. Which kind of examples do you like?

- a) examples that are simple - 68%
- b) examples with high flown vocabulary – 27%
- c) longer sentences – 0%
- d) None – 5%

10. I conclude grammar component thus

- a) nightmarish – 8%
- b) enjoyable – 16%
- c) tolerable – 15%
- d) necessity – 61%

Conclusion

Considering the above, it can be concluded that the grammar component is very much necessary with certain amount of intrinsic modifications. To a large extent the curriculum planners, teachers and students possess nearly similar ideas with regard to the grammar component. The area is so vast, that it needs extensive exploration in the form of further research. The researcher has his own limitations and within the scope of such limitation this study has been taken up. The researcher invites observations, critical analyses and suggestions in order to extent the scope of study which contributes to working out an agenda that leads on to a better tomorrow.

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