

The Role of Grammar in Learning Business English

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Abstract

The students of business should acquire skills of effective communication. For this, they should have a good command of English grammar. So teaching learning of English grammar is a must for business students. Grammar teaching is an age-old practice. However, from time to time there were strong reactions against grammar. As a result, approaches like Natural Method, Direct Method, Audio-lingual Method, Communicative Method and many other methods of different names dominated the language-teaching scenario time and again as a substitute for the grammar teaching. Anti-grammar trend reached an extreme point in mid seventies and eighties when Communicative language teaching was getting firm root in the scene. At that time the teaching – learning of grammar was almost totally neglected in America, England and many other parts of the world. But soon it was realized that communicative competence alone is not sufficient enough to acquire a mastery over a language without the linguistic competence e.g. without acquiring the grammatical rules of the target language. So, there again reappeared the traditional grammar teaching either explicitly or implicitly in the scene. In the present study, an effort has been made to examine the circumstances under which people lost interest in the study of grammar. In this connection, another effort is made here to show how essential it is to teach English grammar to our young boys and girls of Bangladesh where English is hardly used communicatively.

Business School and English

Now we are living in a globalized world. Today every nation depends on other either for trade, higher education, up-to-date information, modern technology, financial assistance or for a host of other reasons. More the world is advancing scientifically, the more dependent we are becoming on each other.

English has become the language of global communication. It is now the language of international trade and commerce, higher education, international seminars and forums, science and technology. So the knowledge of English is, now a days, looked upon as a kind of asset for a man both from national and international point of view. Today in the

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very competitive job market the knowledge of English is in heavy demand. If we look at a job advertisement we see that one essential requirement of the applicant is his knowledge in both spoken and written English.

In Bangladesh teaching learning of English is not up to the mark. If we fail to the situation soon, we will be hundred years behind the times in this fast world of great competition. We must improve this situation to modernize our industry, our agriculture, our education – in short, our to modernize our national life.

A student of Business School of today is a business executive tomorrow either at home or abroad tomorrow. After the end of his academic carrier he will shoulder the great responsibility of leading a business firm to the path of prosperity by virtue of his efficient management. It is the nature of his occupation that requires him to communicate with people of all walks of life. In regard to this Stewart Zimmer and Clark remind a business student that---

The greater your skills in speaking and writing the greater your chances of success in many aspects of life from friendships to business dealings. To build up a successful relationship with someone – a new acquaintance, a son or daughter, a boss, a client, a salesman – you must maintain or hone the skills that help you to say what you mean and to understand what others are saying to you (19985:83).

So every student of Business School should acquire full competency in English. Because a student with poor skill in English cannot carry out communication successfully. In order to acquire accuracy in English, he should study English grammar very thoroughly. Because “a solid foundation in English grammar is essential for successful communication”. No foreign student of English can expect to write good letters, memorandums, or reports or master word processing without “having first learned the basics of grammar.”

While teaching business school students we should bear in mind that-

More than ever before, job applicants today must have superior grammar skills because employers are aware that an understanding of grammar provides an excellent basis for good writing, speaking, listening and reading skills-skills that help business succeed" (Stewart, Zimmer and Clark 1985:83).

Business Grammar and Traditional Grammar

Now it is clear that the knowledge of English grammar is a must for our business students. The medium of instruction is English for them, they have to study English texts, English newspapers, and magazines and write their examination paper in English. They have to use computer the language of which is English too. In addition, many of them will go abroad for higher studies or job or to seek the market their commodities. and many of them will work for multinational company in their home country. In this connection, Scott R. Pancoast and Lance M. White are worth mentioning. According to them -

Promising ideas (and promising careers) are often times lost as a result of ineffective communication involving words, data or both. We have found that most highly educated of business writers have difficulty with certain grammar concepts and chart presentation principles (1992:1).

Business English Grammar and Traditional English Grammar

Now it is obvious that a student of business school is required to study grammar seriously. Now the question is whether he needs a special type of grammar or the common traditional grammar. Answer can be both 'yes' and 'no.'

It is an established fact that even a native speaker of a language, let alone a foreign learner, cannot know the whole of a language. So a business

student should learn that much of English which he will need for his business communication. He, therefore, needs to be taught English for Special Purpose (ESP), which is very popular in the English teaching world now- a- days. For teaching ESP to the business students, the concerned teacher has to prepare a special kind of grammar, which can be called either as business grammar or as pedagogical grammar.

“Business grammar is no different from English grammar, it is just more specialized. Business people have special demands, special needs and special difficulties when it comes to communicating. Thus a special body of rules facilitating the use of language is appropriate for the business person” (Scott R. Pancoast and Lancer M. White 1992: 7).

If the teacher is not competent enough to do it, he can comfortably follow the traditional grammar without any hesitation. Because one great advantage of acquiring the basics of traditional grammar is that, it will enable the learner to use the language more confidently and most accurately. In that sense, the students of business should be taught all the basics of traditional grammar.

A Brief History of Grammar Teaching Learning

A look at the history of language teaching shows that the whole gamut of language teaching- learning scenario swings between two trends- the trend of learning the language by use as we did while learning our mother tongue and the trend of learning it by learning the rules of its grammar as do in our schools (Mackey 1965). The important feature is that a certain period is dominated by either of the two.

Human history shows that at the beginning people started learning a second language by contacting the people of that language. Learning a second language with the help a grammar was a much later development in the history of language teaching – learning.

History also shows that it was a sheer necessity that compelled a man to pick up the language of other community. The Romans first learnt Greek by engaging the Greek tutors or Greek speaking slaves or servants (Titone 1968). Then the Greeks learnt Latin the language of administration, rulers, education and religion. As long as Latin was a living language of mass communication, people learnt it through interaction with its' speakers.

In the long past there was also grammar study in Europe. At that time grammar was a separate branch of education. The people undertook the study of grammar as an intellectual activity. It was rather a philosophical communication, and became a dead language, people started using grammar rules to learn it. The custom of using grammar rules which was basically developed for learning a dead language like Latin became a regular practice as a powerful method in classroom at schools while teaching young boys and girls modern languages like German, French and English.

The system of grammar teaching -learning was also exported to all the colonies that then followed the British system of education. The British India was not an exception. Because when Macaulean model of modern western English education was introduced in the Indian sub- continent in 1835, the syllabuses of English were designed according to those of Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Today's grammar teaching – learning in our present Bangladesh is a continuation of Macaulay's model with some adds and cuts.

Reactions against Grammar

Popular grammar teaching – learning received serious setback from time to time.

“It has become fashionable to speak disrespectfully of grammar - a natural reaction from the excessive reverence formerly paid to it. The name Grammar School remains to remind us that the study of Latin grammar was once thought to be the only path to culture” (Fowler 1968: 231).

In the middle of the last century people lost all interest in grammar due to the rapid development of phonetics, a prominent branch of linguistic science, which attaches topmost priority to the analysis of spoken language instead of written texts that are the main concerns of grammar. Another reason of neglecting grammar was that after the Second World War there developed a strong interest for learning the languages of other nations. People strongly felt the urge of learning the spoken language as a means of communication for the interest of world trade, acquiring knowledge in modern science and technology and for foreign tour. As a result, grammar teaching started declining gradually. Finally, increasing interest in communicative language teaching in mid seventies also weakened the tradition of grammar teaching at school levels in the different parts of the world.

This state of affairs appeared very painful to some scholars. They lamented the situation. Frank Palmer expressed his anguish –

“ ... they (students) may well never know the difference between an adjective and a verb this is extraordinary and quite deplorable state of affairs” (Palmer 1971: 7).

Once in the long past there was neither a written grammar book nor any grammar teaching system in English. This situation without grammar was also deplored by certain scholars. One such scholar was Bullion. He lamented the situation saying:

“ Prior to the publication of Lowth’s excellent little grammar, the grammatical study of our language (English) formed no part of the ordinary method of instruction, and consequently the writings of the best authors were frequently inaccurate” (Bullion cited in Kachru 1996 : 13).

In recent years, English language teaching scenario has experienced the revival of grammar. Recently many researchers have written a lot advocating the importance of teaching – learning of grammar. Even the Communicative language teaching, which was almost dead against the explicit learning of grammar at the beginning, now admits the need of teaching - learning of grammar. In this respect Corder et al say-

“Recently, however, a change of attitude has been apparent among writers on second language teaching methods. The experience of a large number of teachers over many years suggests that a combination of inductive and deductive methods produce the best results... We do, however, believe that in any given classroom situation just so much attention should be given to grammar as may be necessary in order to promote quick and efficient language learning”(Corder and Widdowson 1975--: 47).

Now it is obvious that the role of grammar in teaching – learning of a second or foreign language cannot be denied completely. But the exponents taking anti-grammar stand are very strong in their arguments.

Exponents and Their Arguments against Teaching – Learning of Grammar

The first reaction against grammar teaching goes back to John Webbe. In 1620s he initiated an anti- grammar stand. He believed that language should never be taught using grammar because it rather hindered the learner’s progress (Howatt 1984).

Montaign (1533—92) and Comenius (1592 –1670) were also against the use of grammar. According to them, “Every language must be learnt by practice rather than by rules” (Comenius cited in Titone 1963: 14 – 15).

Jean Joseph Jocotot (1770 – 1840) and Gouin (1831 – 1896) started a movement against grammar under the banner – Natural Movement. Instead of explaining grammar rules their method encourages the learner to use the language extensively in the classroom (Richards and Rodgers 1986:4).

At the beginning all the exponents of Communicative language teaching advocated against the use of grammar in the language classroom.

Following are the strong arguments given by modern theorists against teaching – learning of grammar:

- I. Much input produces little output; what was learnt was not applied with sufficient point and frequency.
- II. Many of the definitions and explanations of the grammatical forms and functions were unsatisfactory.
- III. The traditional method was inadequate; the teaching of grammar concerns itself with ‘picking out’ ‘parts of speech’; the parsing of words in a sentence; word relationships and grammatical functions; the meaning of the sentence escapes notice and slips through the net of grammatical analysis and synthesis. Grammatical analysis breaks up the unity of thought by its focus on detail and fails to relate the detail to the whole.
- IV. In grammar teaching there is usually no application of what is studied. Grammatical rules may be thoroughly understood and learned by a pupil and yet not applied in practice. The only application that is common is limited to correction of sentences. It is the lack of adequate application of the grammar learned that leaves the pupil with the impression that grammar is a profitless study (Gurrey 1961).
- V. Error correction and explicit teaching of rules are not relevant to language acquisition (Brown and Hanlow 1970).
- VI. The study of grammar is not necessary for children and it is not sufficient for adults; meaningful exposure is sufficient for children and necessary for adults (Newmark and Reibel 1968).
- VII. The best way of imparting even grammatical competence is through use and usage (Widdowson 1979).
- VIII. It is therefore difficult to apply conscious learning to performance successfully. Situations in which all these conditions are satisfied are rare (the most obvious being a grammar test) (Krashen 1981).
- IX. Our description of when we can Monitor what can be Monitored, and the linguistic effect of Monitoring all reach similar conclusions. The use of conscious grammar is limited. Not everyone Monitors. Those who Monitor some of the time

and use Monitor for only a sub-part of the grammar (Krashen 1987)” (Krishnaswamy 1995: 5-6).

Besides all these arguments, there are many other theorists who strongly argue against teaching – learning of grammar.

Recently Communicating language teaching method has been introduced in many countries with great enthusiasm but the outcome is not satisfactory rather discouraging. In India and Nepal the Communicative language teaching has not been able to meet the expected level of success rather it is far below the expectation (Agnihotri and Khanna :1995,1997; Vishnu: 1999). This has happened due to many reasons e.g. lack of competent teachers, absence of enough exposure to the target language outside the classroom, big size of the class and other factors. The main problem is with teachers. The Communicative language teaching, in order to be effective, requires native speakers as teachers, or at least such teachers who possess almost near native skills in the target language. Realizing this reality, Japan has taken some positive steps in this respect. To teach her young boys and girls English effectively she has recently appointed a large number of native speakers of English as teachers at primary and secondary levels. But what has become possible on the part of an economic giant like Japan is quite impossible for poor countries like India, Nepal, Bangladesh etc. In Bangladesh the linguistic competency of the vast majority of our English teachers beggars description (The English Teaching Task Force Report – 1975). So, teaching –learning of English is now at doldrums in Bangladesh.

The Importance of Studying Grammar in Bangladesh

With the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 English has been reduced to a foreign language – a compulsory subject of academic study. In addition, it is the medium of instruction in all the private universities, Bangladesh University of Technology, Bangladesh University of Agriculture and all the medical colleges. It is rarely used here communicatively except while communicating with the foreigners. So, here our students require English academically, mainly to follow class lecture, read and interpret accurately English texts, newspapers,

magazines periodicals etc and write effectively examination papers, research papers, applications, reports etc. Very few of them require English for communicative purpose. Our students, therefore, need to learn rules of English grammar thoroughly to achieve these goals.

Our present study shows that the exponents of communicative language teaching now admit the necessity of learning grammar. Even in case of learning our mother tongue we internalize the rules of grammar without being aware of them. So Stern says:

“The language user knows the rules governing his native language and he can apply them without paying attention to them.” (1983: 342)

Because of this a native speaker knows how to distinguish between correct and incorrect sentences in his mother language. In this respect Greenbaum says:

Your (native speaker's) ability to recognize such distinctions is evidence that in some sense you know the rules of grammar even if you have never studied any grammar. Similarly you operate the rules whenever you speak, write ... and whenever you interpret what others sayBut knowing the rules in evaluative and operational sense does not mean that you can say what the rules are.” (1991--:1)

From the above discussion it is now clear and also affirmed by many researchers that if a learner has enough exposure to the target language (whether it is his mother tongue, a second language or a foreign language) he can learn it quickly and in this case the teaching of grammar can be given less importance or can be done implicitly. But if there is no environmental support (e.g. enough exposure to the target language) other than classroom input, the need for learning grammatical rules of the target language cannot be ignored.

Since there is not much scope for the communicative use of English in Bangladesh, the success of communicative language teaching in our schools and colleges is not beyond question. Instances of India and Nepal are before us. Our teachers, our classroom, social environment and other related factors to make Communicative method a success are not in favor of it. On the other hand, our teachers (who are well acquainted with grammar), public attitude (the popular belief is that knowing a language means to know the grammar of that language), the education system including method of teaching, classroom size, state policy, examination pattern and finally the objectives of studying English (mainly to enable our learners to read to interpret the written texts accurately, follow lecture and to write English effectively) are in favor of teaching it through grammar. Therefore, grammar should get topmost priority while teaching our students English in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Since English is very important for business students, they should be taught English grammar well, preferably business grammar. But the stern reality is that there is a great dearth of competent teacher to prepare a specialized kind of grammar and teach our students, it is wiser to adapt the traditional grammar for the purpose. While teaching grammar whether traditional or specialized, the concerned teacher must take all the precautions so that grammar class instead of becoming boredom should turn into a very lively and interesting one to the learners. Finally the teacher while teaching grammar should also bear in mind that teaching of grammar is not an 'end' in itself but a 'means' or an 'aid' to help the learner to acquire the desired skills in English.

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