

Trends toward Grammar Instruction in the Context of Second Language Acquisition

Azamat Akbarov

English Department, International Burch University
Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
aakbarov@ibu.edu.ba

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to review the historical background of grammar instruction in ESL/EFL to find out its present status, and to suggest how to approach grammar instruction. Language teaching methodologists have not presented consistent advices to teachers about the role of grammar in language teaching and learning over the past some decades. Even today the situation is not clear because of the many conflicting positions taken in the methodological literature. The status of grammar in second or foreign language teaching and learning has shifted to a considerable degree. The shift of grammatical status has been from a position of central importance to disregarded status, and back to a position of renewed importance. Some focus on form is necessary for many learners to achieve accuracy and fluency in their acquisition of a second or foreign language. Grammar interacts with words, and it is resources to create and negotiate meaning and communication between speaker/writer and listener/reader. Structures are not learned in isolation, and language learning is an organic process characterized by backsliding, leaps in competence, and grammatical elements.

1. Introduction

Language teaching is not easily categorized into methods and trends. So far, the field of second or foreign language teaching has undergone many changes. The major methodological approaches to language teaching have differed from each other with regard to grammar instruction.

In the last few decades of the 20th century lots of developments began to take place in grammar instruction and research. There was renewed interest in an explicit focus on form in the classroom. Especially, publications argued that learners benefit from grammar instruction (Celce-Murcia, 1991; Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurell, 1997; Ellis, 1998) and suggested new approaches to grammar instruction, such as teaching grammar in a discourse context and designing grammatical consciousness-raising (Ellis, 1995).

In the 1940's the Audiolingual Approach appeared in foreign language teaching as a reaction to Direct Method and Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP). And the method enjoyed many years of popularity (Brown, 2001) and dominated language teaching for over twenty years. In the Audiolingual Approach, it was held that the learners learn their target language largely through habit formation. However, this view came to be challenged by proponents of the cognitive code approach whose basic assumption was that language learning was rule-governed behavior. The decade of the 1970's was innovative era in second and foreign language research, and major changes have taken place with respect to content, curriculum, and the implications for teaching grammar. This led to a movement toward integrating grammar into a communicative curriculum. As a result, in the 1990's grammar in language teaching began to draw a new attention of applied linguists to the revised name, form-focused instruction (Spada, 1997). Even though the questions of when, how, and how much focus grammar has not been settled, recent works on grammar pedagogy show new ideas and new approaches.

2. Methodological Background

In the history of second or foreign language teaching, the teaching of grammar was a central concern. In fact, the teaching of grammar had often been considered to be most important part of language teaching until the era of Direct Method. However, currently the place of grammar in the language classroom is rather uncertain.

Traditionally, it was hoped that, through the study of the grammar of the target language in the Grammar-Translation Method, the meaning of the target language would be made clear by translating it into students' native language (Larsen-Freeman, 1986.p.12). In the method, grammar provided the rules for putting words together, and instruction often focused on the form and inflection of words (Brown, 2000). However, this method couldn't satisfy the learners' needs of developing communicative competence. Since then, many language teaching approaches have appeared in the field of foreign language teaching, especially in the 1970s.

Among many approaches, I will survey four methodological approaches in this paper – (a) Grammar Translation Method, (b) Audiolingual Approach, (c) Cognitive Approach, and (d) Communicative Approach.

Grammar Translation Method has the longest history in the teaching of foreign language. Until recently, this method has been very stalwart among many competing methods or approaches. In this method, classes are taught in the mother tongue, with little active use of the target language. Long and elaborate grammatical explanations are given. Students study grammar deductively: that is, they are given the grammar rules and examples, are told to memorize them, and then asked to apply the rules to the examples. Reading or difficult classical texts is begun in the early state. Little attention is paid to the content of texts, and the only drills are exercises in translating disconnected sentences from target language into the mother tongue. As a result, it does nothing to enhance students' communicative ability in the target language.

During the World War II, the Audiolingual Approach was developed in the United States as an attempt by structural linguists to have an influence on the teaching of modern foreign languages. This approach was firmly grounded not only in linguistic theory but also in psychological theory. In the 1940s and the 1950s, structural linguists were engaged in a scientific and descriptive analysis of languages. Applied linguists came to apply such analysis to teaching linguistic patterns. At the time, behavioristic psychologists advocated conditioning and habit-formation models of learning that were perfectly married with the mimicry drills and pattern practices of audiolingual methodology (Brown, 2001, p. 23). In this approach, grammatical structures were sequenced, rules were taught inductively and vocabulary was severely limited in the early stage of learning (Celce-Murcia, 1991a, p. 6). Moreover, it was important to prevent learners from making errors which lead to the formation of bad habits. In the Audiolingual Approach, according to Larsen-Freeman (1986), new vocabulary and structures were presented through the dialogues which were learned through imitation and repetition. At the time, teachers wanted their students to be able to use the target language communicatively, and the structures of the language were emphasized over all the other areas. The focus was largely sentence-oriented.

The Cognitive Approach, a reaction to the behaviorist features of the Audiolingual Approach, was influenced by generative transformational linguists, such as Chomsky and his followers.

In the approach, language learning was viewed as rule acquisition, not habit formation. This led some language-teaching programs to promote the deductive approach rather than the inductive approach in the Audiolingual Approach. Arguing that children acquire a system of rules subconsciously, the proponents of the Cognitive Approach injected more deductive rule learning into language classes (Brown 2001). However, they did not ignore inductive rule learning entirely. In developing students' language ability, the teaching tried to proceed from linguistic competence to linguistic performance. Language learners must know the rules of the language before being asked to apply those rules. This base was believed to be made up of the grammar of the language. In cognitive teaching, the major emphasis is placed on meaningful learning, meaningful practice, and expression of meaning (Chastain, 1976, p. 149). Errors were viewed as inevitable in language learning. However, the focus of instruction still rarely moved beyond the sentence level.

In the 1970s, some anthropological linguists and functional linguists had an interest in an idea of viewing language as an instrument of communication. Thus, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) grew out of a theory of language as communication, originated in the works of Hymes (1972) and Halliday (1973). The late 1980s and 1990s saw the development of the approach that highlighted the fundamentally communicative properties of language. It has no monolithic identity. No single model of CLT is universally accepted as authoritative. Canale and Swain's (1980) definition of communicative competence is probably the best known. They identified four dimensions: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Under this influence, the syllabus of a second/foreign language course should not be organized around grammar but around subject matter, tasks, semantic notions and pragmatic functions.

Language classrooms were increasingly characterized by authenticity, real-world simulation, and meaningful tasks. The goal of language teaching was to develop learners' ability to communicate in the target language. Fluency and accuracy were seen as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques. The role of the teacher was primarily to facilitate language use and communication. It was only secondarily to provide feedback and correct learner errors. Students were given opportunities to focus on their own learning process. Students were encouraged to construct meaning through genuine linguistic interaction with other people. The communicative language subsumed under various functional categories. In the Communicative Approach, less attention was paid to the overt presentation and discussion of grammatical rules than in other approaches. Currently, there is some debate on the nature, extent, and the type of grammar instruction among the proponents of the communicative approach.

3. The Instruction of Grammar

There was the communicative revolution in language teaching in the 1970s. Since then, it has become apparent that grammar is an instrument for the comprehension and production of spoken and written language

and that grammar itself is not be goal of learning. In many face-to-face communications, sociolinguistic appropriacy and discourse competence are more important than grammatical accuracy. However, there are situations in which a reasonable degree of accuracy is also critical.

Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988) suggest that ESL\EFL teacher should never teach grammar as an end in itself but always with reference to meaning, social factors, discourse, or a combination of these factors. Similarly, Larsen-Freeman (1991) sees form meaning, and function as three interacting dimensions of language. Thus, grammar is not merely a collection of forms but rather involves the three dimensions of what linguists refer to as syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 4). Therefore, we cannot think of language learning and teaching without grammar.

3.1. Teaching Grammar as Meaning

Meaning cannot be separated from forms in language learning and teaching and teaching. As an example, teaching the different aspects, like simple present tense and present progressive, is best viewed as grammar in the service of meaning. Simple aspect refers to events that are conceptualized as complete wholes. The events are not presented as allowing for further development. This aspect stands in contrast to progressive aspect, which is incomplete or imperfective – where the event or state is viewed as some portion of a whole and where there is room for further development or change (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). If students are presented with many well-demonstrated examples as in (1) below, they have a basis for understanding and practicing the correct use of these two aspects:

- (1). a. Lejla and Aldin live in Sarajevo.
- b. Lejla and Aldin are living in Sarajevo.

The simple present in (1.a) presents the fact that Lejla and Aldin live in Sarajevo as a whole events, not allowing for further development. There is no suggestion of change. The present progressive in (1.b) suggest that their living in Sarajevo may be temporary, thus allowing for the possibility of change. In (1.b) Lejla and Aldin's living in Sarajevo is in some position of the whole. In the sense that we understand that they may have lived elsewhere before moving to Sarajevo and will likely in the future move again. Like this, form and meaning are interrelated.

3.2. Teaching Grammar as Social Function

Grammar is often used as a means of expressing socially appropriate messages. As an example, we use certain modal auxiliaries for polite expressions when requesting a favor. Would and could are more polite than will and can.

- (2) a. Will you open the door?
- b. Would you open the door?

With regard the politeness, Carrel and Conneker (1981) found considerable agreement among native speakers and learners of English as to which forms were considered the most polite in making requests as in the following examples:

- (3) a. A glass of water
- b. Give me a glass of water
- c. I want a glass of water
- d. I'll have a glass of water
- e. I'd like a glass of water
- f. Do you have a glass of water?
- g. Can you give me a glass of water?
- h. Could you give me a glass of water?

In (3), there is a hierarchy of politeness. According to Celse-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), sentence mood contributes the most to the order of the politeness: interrogative-most polite: declarative – next most polite: imperative –least polite. Presence of modals contributes next to politeness.

However, learners must become aware of the possible consequences of using the wrong modal forms when requesting a favor. So, in order to establish the link between grammar and socially appropriate behavior. ESL/EFL learners need sufficient-meaningful practice with intended social messages in dialogues, role plays, and simulations.

3.3. Teaching Grammar as Discourse

Language has often been defined as a system of arbitrary symbols used for human communication. With respect to human communication, there is a set of universal conventions on all communication. As the conventions are universal, they appear in almost all types of spoken and written discourse.

To master the conventions of discourse that cross sentence boundaries is almost as important as to develop a sense of when to use certain structures in discourse depending on topics or genres. Halliday and Hasan (1976) refer to these features of text structure as cohesion. According to them, cohesion involves the principled use of referential forms such as pronouns, demonstratives, definite articles: substitute expressions such as *do* and *so*; ellipsis; conjunction; and lexical chaining to create texture in discourse. With regard to ellipsis, students are invited to expand a conversation as in (4) into a complete one.

- (4) A. Coming?
B. Where?

A. Ayers Rock.
B. Why?
A. Holiday.
B. When?
A. Next week.
B. Sorry.
A. Why?
B. Work. (Nunan, 1995, p. 150)
- (5) A:coming...?
B: Where....?
A:.....Ayers Rock.
B: Why?
A:....holiday.
B:When...?
A: Next week
B:sorry....
A: Why?
B:....work.

Like this, students should have the ability to fill in the blanks using conversational context and grammatical knowledge. In the following written test, what do the italicized referents refer to?

(6) After they saved a little money. However and Ellen wanted to buy a house. So they did. The floor plan was almost exactly the same as that of Ellen's parents home where she was reared. Buying it was not easy for the young couple, but Ellen was determined to go to through with it. (Rutherford, 1987, p. 161)

In the above written test, coherence is accomplished by using reference, substitution, and other noun phrase. The link between grammar and discourse is crucial for learning and teaching a second or foreign language.

4. Grammatical Consciousness-raising

Current views of language teaching are almost universally agreed on the importance of some form-focused instruction within the communicative framework, ranging from explicit treatment of rules to noticing and consciousness-raising (Fotos, 1994) techniques for structuring input to learners. The forms of language include the organizational components of language and the systematic rules that govern their structure (Brown, 2001). With respect to the forms, there are three formal categories phonological, grammatical, and lexical forms. In this paper, the main focus is on grammatical form. According to Spada (1997), form-focused instruction (FFI) is pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learner's attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly (p. 73). A range of approaches to form is implied in this definition.

On one end of the continuum, there are explicit explanations and discussions of rules and exceptions. On the other end, there are (a) implicit, peripheral references to form; (b) learners paying attention to specific linguistic features in input; and (c) the incorporation of form into communicative tasks or grammar consciousness raising.

It is clear that grammar is needed in a communicative language teaching framework. However, the questions of when, how, and how much focus to place on grammar has not been settled so far. In the question of whether particular students benefit more from FFI. Brown (2000, p.235) suggests as following: The wide-ranging research on learner characteristics, style, and strategies supports the conclusion that certain learners clearly benefit more than others from FFI. Analytic, field-independent, left-brain-oriented learners internalize explicit FFI better than relational, field-dependent, right-brain-oriented learners. Students who are judging and thinking students on the Myers-Brigg's scale will more readily be able to focus on form (Ehrman, 1989).

In the current research, there is a general agreement on the importance of FFI. But there are some different points of view on how instruction should be given to learners. Brown (2001. pp. 365-8) gives several issues about this:

- (a) Should grammar be presented inductively or deductively
- (b) Should we use grammatical explanations and technical terminology in a CLT classroom?
- (c) Should teachers correct grammatical errors?

Though both inductive and deductive approaches are applied to grammar instruction, an inductive approach is more appropriate in most contexts and it is more suitable in keeping with natural language acquisition. It can confirm more easily the concept of interlanguage development and build more intrinsic motivation by allowing learners to discover language rules. According to the situations and contexts, however, there are times when grammar is presented deductively.

In the use of grammatical explanation and terminology, different approaches were applied in language teaching. In Grammar-Translation Method, there was a strong emphasis on grammatical explanations and on the terminology necessary to perform those explanations. But in recent Communicative Language Teaching, grammatical explanation and terminology must be used carefully. Language learners need to gain linguistic form by seeking situational meaning. The linguistic form is learned incidentally rather than as a result of focusing directly on linguistic form. But adults can benefit from occasional explanation. If necessary, the teacher needs to keep his explanations brief and simple. And he can use students mother tongue if students cannot follow the explanation in the target language.

Grammatical consciousness-raising contrasts with traditional grammar instruction. In grammatical consciousness-raising, a great attention is paid to form-function relationships. It also attempts to relate the grammatical structures in question to a broader discourse context. And it takes an organic view rather than linear view of learning. Rutherford (1987) rejects the traditional beliefs that language is constructed out of discrete entities and language learning is the gradual accumulation of these entities. Thus, classroom activities should be basically inductive rather than deductive.

Some of grammatical consciousness-raising exercises bear a superficial resemblance to traditional grammar exercises. According to Nunan (1995), however, they have quite a different purpose. Above all, they are derived

from genuine interactions and authentic texts. Their context is basically communicative in nature. The exercises recycle language points over several units. They inductively invite learners to develop hypotheses about the feature of the target language.

5. Integration of Grammar Instruction into a Communicative Curriculum

For more than half a century, language teaching profession has identified the four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – as important. They tend to focus on one or two of the four skills. They tend to treat the four skills in separate segments of a curriculum. However, in recent research there is a trend toward skill integration in language teaching (Brown, 2001), for an example, when teaching reading, the course will deal with related listening speaking and reading skills.

Before the advent of Communicative Language Teaching, the focus on the forms of language almost predisposed curriculum designers to segment courses into the separate language skills. At that time, a syllabus dealt with pronunciation of the phonemes of the target language, stress and intonation, structural patterns which were sequenced according to grammatical difficulty, and variations in those patterns. Moreover, a preoccupation with language rules and paradigms taught students a lot about language at the expense of teaching language itself. However, we cannot deny that recent proficient teachers who follow principles of CLT would never conduct a reading class without use of speaking, listening, and writing in the class. Such a course might encompass phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical semantic, and discourse elements.

Grammar is an essential component in language learning and teaching. In the verbal communication, a speaker cannot express his or her idea properly and a listener cannot receive the speaker's messages properly without the knowledge of grammar. But the knowledge of grammar itself is also of no use. Grammar interacts with other aspects of language, content, and culture

In an attempt to integrate grammar with content-based and task-based language teaching, teachers and students need to deal with both bottom-up and top-down language skills. Both bottom-up and top-down skills are applied to four skills of language – listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The bottom-up skills represent the accurate use of words and structures needed to perform the suitable tasks. On the other hand, the top-down skills involve the understanding of the content and tasks, especially how meaningful components are organized and sequenced.

In case of listening comprehension, some listeners segment the stream of speech into constituent sounds, link them together to form words, chain the words together to form clauses and sentences, and so on (Nunan, 1995). In this bottom-up approach, it is unlikely that the listeners would be able to comprehend the aural messages by listening to the text. However, if listeners are provided with a context for making sense of text, the listening task becomes relatively easy. Meaning doesn't reside exclusively within the words on the tape recorder or on the page. Nunan (1995) stated successful listeners and readers can utilize both inside the head knowledge to interpret what they hear and see. The use of inside the head knowledge, that is, knowledge which is not directly encoded in words, is known as the top-down view of listening even though grammar instruction often comes in when bottom-up approach is not adequate, successful learners use both bottom-up and to-down strategies in language learning.

Grammar exists to enable us to mean. Without the knowledge of grammar, it is impossible to communicate beyond a very elementary level. Acquiring the grammatical system of the target language is often of central importance because an inadequate knowledge of grammar would limit linguistic creativity and the capacity for communication. The notion that the learning of grammar is a linear, step-by-step process has largely been replaced by an organic view in which the development of grammatical competence is seen in terms of process as well as product.

In the current language teaching, the greatest potential lies in integrating focus on form with content-based and task-based language teaching. Both language teachers and learners need to appreciate that dealing with such content and tasks requires both top-down and bottom-up language skills and both deductive and inductive learning if necessary. The top-down skills refer to understanding the content and tasks. On the other hand the bottom-up skills represent the accurate use of the words and structures needed to carry out the tasks in relation to content. Thus, grammar without regard to intercommunication-spoken or written-does not contribute to language learning and teaching. Relevant discourse structures might be helpful. We need integrate grammar instruction into a communicative curriculum.

6. Conclusion

Consistent advices have not been presented to teachers about the role grammar in language teaching over the past some decades. Even today the situation is not clear because of the many conflicting positions taken in the

methodological literature. Many, not all researchers suggested that some focus on form be necessary for many learners to achieve accuracy and fluency in their acquisition of a second or foreign language. There is an evidence (Higgs & Clifford 1982) that a grammarless approaches can lead to the development of a broken ungrammatical pidginize form of the target language. And there is no convincing evidence that grammarless instruction would ultimately be beneficial to second or foreign language learners especially those who want achieve a high level of accuracy and proficiency. During the past four decades the status of grammar in second or foreign language teaching has shifted to a considerable degree. The status of grammar has been from a position of central importance to disregardful status and back to a position of renewed importance. For a few decades language teaching profession saw grammar as a essential part independent of meaning social function and discourse structure. However now we can see grammar as one of important components in communicative competence. It is inadequate that grammar is a system that simply emerges on its given input and practice without meanings function and discursal context. Grammar interacts with words and it is resources to create and negotiate meaning and communication between speaker/writer and listener/reader. Grammar needs to be learned and it sometimes needs to be taught inductively or deductively according to situations. In addition, we always need to think of its new in the organic view of language learning and to integrate grammar into a communicative instruction.

References:

- Birdsong, D. (2006). *Age and second language acquisition and processing: A selective overview*. Language Learning, 56, 9-49.
- Brown, G. (1995). *Speakers listeners and communication: Explorations in discourse analysis*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press
- Brown, H.D. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (4th Ed.) White Plains, NY. Pearson education.
- Brown, H.D. (2001). *Teaching by principles an interactive approach to language pedagogy* (2nd Ed.) White Plains, NY: Pearson Education)
- Canale, M. & Swain, M (1980). *Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing*. Applied Linguistics. 1(1). 1-47
- Celce-Murcia, M (1991a). *Language teaching approaches: an overview*. In M. Celce- Murcia (ed) Teaching English as a second or foreign language (2nd ed.) New York, NY: Newbury House
- Ellis, R (1995). *Interpretation tasks for grammar teaching*. TESOL Quarterly 29 87-105
- Ellis, R (1998). *Teachings and research: Options in grammar teaching*. TESOL Quarterly 32 87-105
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Halliday, M.A.K (1973). *Explorations in the function of language*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Larsen Freeman, D. (1986). *Techniques and principles in language teaching*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Long, M. (1983). *Does second language instruction make a difference? A review of research*. TESOL Quarterly, 17(3) . 359-82
- Nunan, D. (1995). *Language Teaching Methodology: A textbook for teachers*. New York NY: Prentice-Hall
- Rutherford, W. (1987). *Second Language Grammar: Learning and teaching*. London: Longman
- Selinker, L. (1972). *Interlanguage*. International Review of Applied Linguistics, 10 (3), 209-231.
- Spada, N. (1997). *Form-Focused instruction and second language learning acquisition: A review of classroom and laboratory research*. Language Teaching , 30.