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ON THE ISSUE OF THE ROLE OF GRAMMAR IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract. The significant body of the literature illustrates the central role of grammar instruction in foreign language teaching. Though the views on the importance of grammar instruction had been changing throughout the history of methods and approaches to foreign language teaching, from having a principal to having a minor role in language teaching, the role of grammar would soon be revisited, it occurred in the case of communicative language teaching method as well – accuracy became equated with fluency and currently, grammar is considered to be an essential component of communicative competence.

A considerable amount of studies point to the significance of grammar skills for facilitating the development of four macro skills of language. Grammar is viewed as a foundation and aid to develop students' receptive (reading and listening) and productive (speaking and writing) skills. Possession of grammar skills is important for receiving the (written and oral) message properly and producing the (written and oral) message correctly.

Keywords: Language teaching and learning, methods, the role of grammar, language skills

К ВОПРОСУ О РОЛИ ГРАММАТИКИ В ПРЕПОДАВАНИИ И ИЗУЧЕНИИ ЯЗЫКОВ

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Аннотация. Значительный объем литературы иллюстрирует центральную роль обучения грамматике в обучении иностранному языку. Хотя взгляды на важность обучения грамматике менялись на протяжении всей истории методов и подходов к обучению иностранному языку, от основной до второстепенной роли в обучении языку, роль грамматики вскоре была пересмотрена; это произошло и в случае коммуникативного метода обучения языку – точность стала отождествляться с беглостью, и в настоящее время грамматика считается важным компонентом коммуникативной компетенции.

Значительное количество исследований указывает на важность грамматических навыков для облегчения развития четырех макро навыков языка. Грамматика рассматривается как основа и помощь в развитии у учащихся рецептивных (чтение и аудирование) и продуктивных (говорение и письмо) навыков. Владение грамматическими навыками важно для правильного восприятия

(письменного и устного) сообщения и правильного воспроизведения (письменного и устного) сообщения.

Ключевые слова: преподавание и изучение языка, методы, роль грамматики, языковые навыки.

INTRODUCTION

Grammar is an indispensable constituent of any language. It is considered to be the backbone of a language. Grammar has been defined in various ways by linguists though, overall, they all refer to the regulations of arrangements of units in a sentence. Grammar has always had a central role in foreign language teaching, including teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Cook (2008) claims that “however important the other components of language may be in themselves, they are connected to each other through grammar” (p. 18). In accordance with Nassaji and Fotos (2011), “without grammar, language does not exist” (p. 1).

It should be noted that the views on grammar instruction had been changing throughout different methods and approaches to foreign language teaching. Grammar was the main focus of classroom instruction of *lingua franca*, Greek and later Latin, in the medieval period. The necessity of grammar teaching was connected to the need of rhetorical skills development required for the dominant disciplines of that time, namely philosophy, theology, law, medicine, etc. After the appearance of European languages in the educational environment in the 18th century teaching foreign languages was highly influenced by the model of Latin language teaching. The method with a grand emphasis on grammar teaching became known as the Grammar-Translation Method.

After rising the need for communicative abilities in a foreign language during World War II and laying foundations for the development of the alternative, Audio-Lingual Method the focus transferred to studying structural patterns through memorization and repetition though it is noteworthy that the patterns being taught were still basically grammatical structures. Likewise, many other methods that came to light later - the Reading Approach, the Oral and Situational Method, the Silent Way, and the Total Physical Response - differed in their outlook on language learning but essentially, they all were grammar-based (*ibid.*).

The role of grammar was relatively declined during the application of the Direct Method also known as the ‘oral’ or ‘natural’ method stemmed in the second half of the 19th century and promoted by Gouin (1892). On this occasion, vocabulary teaching was prioritized over grammar teaching and learners tried to study everyday speech topics in the target language without the actual use of their native language.

In the later period, grammar instruction had a 'limited role' during the Natural Approach, developed by Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Based on Krashen's theories of second language acquisition (Krashen 1981) the Natural Approach aimed at enhancing natural language acquisition through comprehensive input in the classroom with a diminished emphasis on conscious and explicit grammar study.

Gradually the goal of language learning has shifted to the acquisition of communicative competence. Communicative language teaching began to emerge in the 1970s. Many linguists started emphasizing the importance of the development of communicative competence. The term 'communicative competence' was coined by Dell Hymes (1972) which was advanced against Chomsky's (1965) linguistic theory representing language competency predominantly by linguistic competence. Hymes (1972) added communicative competence, a sociolinguistic perspective of linguistic competence as a paramount element for the attainment of language proficiency. Henceforth, a paradigm shift arose in the field of language teaching and learning having communication at the core of instruction.

However, the form of grammar teaching was reconsidered by many educational researchers and prominent scholars in a little while. On account of classroom-observation evidence of teachers pointing to the deficiencies of mere communication-based teaching, scholars started to revisit the role of grammar in language teaching. After drawing a distinction between a focus on forms and a focus on form by Long (1991), in other words, distinguishing between teaching grammar rules and teaching grammar through activities and tasks, a form-focused instruction integrated with communicative activities has been put forward.

At large, with the advent of communicative language teaching and emphasizing the need for learners to develop communicative competence, the teaching of grammar has long been a matter of debate among teachers and researchers. There has been a certain controversy about whether to teach grammar. Novice teachers often seemed to give prominence to enhancing the communicative abilities of learners ignoring the role of grammar and grammatical accuracy in language teaching. Eventually, scholars (e.g., Ellis, 2006; Williams, 2005) came to a consensus that without a good command of grammar one cannot become a proficient user of a foreign language. Currently, accuracy along with fluency is viewed as a key component of language acquisition. According to Leong and Ahmadi (2017), learners should be fluent in a foreign language, but one of the characteristics of speaking performance is accuracy. As stated by Fikron (2018), "grammar has its role to deliver meaning or messages within the communication" (p. 101). Linguistic competence

and knowing the structures of the target language is considered to contribute to the communicative competence of language learners.

Thus, the role of grammar has been significantly re-evaluated in the last decades. In the modern era of language education affected by processes of globalization and internationalization where English stands as a global language and effective communication represents a key to success, the inclusion of grammar in teaching a foreign language with a much-acclaimed communicative approach is highly regarded.

In contemporary teaching, language competence is standardized by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) which characterizes language proficiency at six levels: A1 and A2 (basic user), B1 and B2 (independent user), C1 and C2 (proficient user). The CEFR differentiates between general competences and communicative language competences. It refers to competence as 'the sum of knowledge and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions' (ibid., p. 9). Communicative language competences are classified into three groups: a) linguistic competence consisting of lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic and orthoepic competences; b) sociolinguistic competence comprised of linguistic markers of social relations, politeness conventions, expressions of folk wisdom, register differences and dialect and accent; c) pragmatic competence divided into discourse and functional competences. It can be seen that grammar evidently holds a decent place in the curriculum of current foreign language teaching regulated by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Based on the CEFR, Reference Level Descriptions (RLDs) have been developed for individual languages. In this regard, Grammatical Reference Level Descriptors for English (English Profile, 2011) have been designed to support English language teachers in material development and curriculum planning activities. It provides a description of what grammar knowledge learners are required to possess at each proficiency level ranging from beginner to advanced level.

The CEFR also supplies a self-assessment grid for listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing skills (Council of Europe, 2001). Grammatical competence as an essential constituent of linguistic competence can undoubtedly be supposed to be a determinant factor to demonstrate proficiency in each of these skills.

It appears evident that grammar plays an important role in the development of four language skills. Sometimes the basic four skills are mentioned as macro skills whereas grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling are referred to as micro skills. For learners, grammar serves as a

foundation and aid to develop their receptive (reading and listening) and productive (speaking and writing) skills. In a word, grammatical competence facilitates receiving the (written and oral) message properly and producing the (written and oral) message correctly.

Grammar as a prerequisite for language skills advancement is recognized in many latest studies. Shahi (2016) describes how grammatical knowledge contributes to reading comprehension based on his research conducted with EFL students. Analogously, studies by other scholars (e.g., Akbari, 2014; Steinlen, 2017; Yang, 2014) confirm the positive correlation between learners' grammatical competence and their reading comprehension.

Akbari (2014) applied grammar to facilitate and enhance students' reading comprehension. Firstly, his research identified a set of comprehension problems students encountered in reading on grounds of deficiency of grammatical knowledge. Thereafter, some strategies for each grammatical problem that restrained students' reading comprehension were elaborated. Subsequently, he concludes that grammatical knowledge promotes detailed reading comprehension, enhances learners' reading speed and boosts their confidence. Likewise, Yang (2014) in providing suggestions for developing English reading ability addresses the issue of comprehension skills improvement by fostering grammatical understanding.

Needless to say, grammatical knowledge contributes to the listening comprehension process; accordingly, poor grammar skills of students can affect their performance in listening comprehension tests.

Grammar is critically important in writing as without grammatical knowledge correct sentences cannot be built and intended meaning may not be conveyed. To expand upon, grammar is a fundamental tool of accurate writing and accuracy constitutes the principal feature of academic writing. A number of studies (e.g., Chandler, 2003; Hartshorn, 2008; Hinkel, 2012) have investigated the benefits of addressing grammar errors and the effects of providing corrective feedback on grammar errors on students' writing accuracy. Shen (2012) infers that "no writing can achieve its writing purpose without the correct use of grammatical concepts" (p. 78).

Moreover, a number of scholars (e.g., Andrews, 2010; Myhill, 2010; Williams, 2011) suggest teaching grammar in the context of writing for more efficiency on students' writing skills. As reported by Mulroy (2003), ignorance of grammar and insufficient teaching of grammar in schools causes a deficiency in students' reading and writing skills later in college.

Grammar enables language users to express their views and opinions successfully. It takes part in conveying meaning. Without a good command of grammar effective communication cannot be

achieved. Grammar is a tool that makes our speech coherent, comprehensible and logical. What is more, grammar mastery contributes to the achievement of communicative competence, the ultimate goal of language learning (Fikron, 2018; Leong & Ahmadi, 2017; Mahamadaliyeva, 2019).

Brown (2004) enumerates several constituents of speaking: grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency and pronunciation. Thus, grammar as one of the features of speaking ability is an indispensable part of foreign language learning. In addition, grammar skills promote speaking fluency itself as grammar supports organizing and expressing ideas smoothly. On the whole, grammar learning plays a crucial role in the development of learners' oral language proficiency by promoting their accuracy and fluency.

It is noteworthy that all language skills are highly interrelated in obtaining mastery of the language. As can be seen, grammar as a subskill plays a significant role in students' language performance. In addition, according to Azar (2007), grammar teaching gives an additional advantage to language learners – it enables them to 'discover the nature of language' (p. 2).

To conclude, the teaching of grammar has undergone significant changes from playing a central role to having a diminished role, but soon at the advent of communicative language teaching, the role of grammar has been revisited, reevaluated and grammar is no longer doubted to have a key role in the development of language proficiency. With the progress of globalization mastering languages, especially the universal language, has become extremely important for students. Accuracy is an important aspect of foreign language proficiency. It ensures effective oral and written communication and is the foundation for academic written and spoken language. Grammar is a device for the accurate use of language. Learning grammar promotes the accuracy and development of productive skills as well as supports comprehensibility and enhancement of listening and reading skills. Thus, grammar plays a tremendous role in foreign language acquisition.

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