

The Status of Grammar within the Process of Teaching and Testing

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Abstract

The paper describes the status of grammar in teaching and testing English language. It aims at the importance of grammar in these two components of the process of education, as well as tries to explain why it crucial to incorporate grammar subtests into test batteries and how to test grammar. Moreover, the author discusses the present state of testing grammar in educational institutions, and in the final lines of the paper she suggests that EFL teachers meet the challenge of applying changes in the field of teaching and testing grammar.

One of the most important functions of language is communication. When we communicate a message, we want the message to be interpreted as effectively as possible. To reach this goal, the message we send to the hearer/reader contains signals that guide him/her to a proper interpretation and to avoid any misunderstanding or ambiguity. We send these signals through grammar. Grammar is important and it is everywhere in communication, it is the 'stuff' with which we communicate. Grammar operates even at the simplest level within the sentence but also beyond it.

The teaching of grammar had often been synonymous with foreign language teaching. In the inherited tradition of foreign language teaching, grammar was not viewed as descriptive or as a rule-governed creativity, but as something to be learned in a relatively abstract process. Language learning involved 'learning about language' rather than learning the language. It is widely assumed that one does not know the grammar of one's own language until it has been learned through formal instruction. The notion of 'grammar' is rooted in inherited assumption about language, in particular the idea that grammar can only be learned explicitly, that the learning of Latin grammar is a model for the learning of any grammar and that all languages have a finite set of formal rules which are fixed and unalterable for all time which constitute their grammar. There have been many attempts to answer the question, What is grammar? According to Close (1982: 13), "English grammar is chiefly a system of syntax that decides the order and patterns in which words are arranged in sentences." Crystal (1995) says it is "... that branch of the description of language which accounts for the way in which words combine to form sentences."

The view of grammar reflected in the definitions above is restricted to issues of grammatical form. This type of language description also gave rise to the notion of 'language as grammar'. Certainly, as far as language teaching and testing practices are concerned, this tradition (psychometric-structuralist) gave rise to the teaching and testing formal patterns of the language, emphasizing language structure by means of a discrete point single sentence format. Under the influence of a Chomskyan view of language, grammar was also held separate from considerations of language use.

By way of contrast, within the Hymesian model of communicative competence (interrelation between language and social context as the basis of his explanation of how language in use works), we observe grammar as a component essential to the appropriate use of language. An alternative and more comprehensive definition of grammar is provided by Bolinger (1977: 4) who gives a much clearer picture of what grammar may mean

Linguistic meaning covers a great deal more that reports of event in the real world.

It expresses, sometimes in very obvious ways, other times in ways that are hard

to ferret out, such things as what is the central part of the message, how we situate ourselves in the events we report, and many other things that make our messages not merely a recital of facts and comments about facts and situations.

This definition makes clear the complex nature of any communicative act. Grammar, described in Bolinger's terms, is concerned not only with how the message we are communicating is made up in terms of forms and structures (morphology and syntax), but also in terms of meaning. While traditional grammar asked the question "What do the forms mean?" now it should be "How are the meanings expressed?" Essentially this is where the changing role of grammar evolves.

A similar, but alternative view of describing grammar is that provided by Leech (1983: 152), within a pragmatic framework. He claims that any grammatical category may be analysed on three levels: syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic.

The most familiar level to linguistics is the syntactic: we can describe, for example, how to form negative sentences or clauses in English. The second level is the semantic: the level that is of sense rather than of force: here we consider, for example, the negative operator in relation to propositional logic. And the third level is the pragmatic . . ."

Leech (1983:4) also states that "grammar (the formal system of language) and pragmatics (the principles of language use) are complementary domains... . The nature of language cannot be understood without studying both these domains, and the interaction between them".

From the definitions above, it is clear that grammar rules are likely to have to extend beyond explanations of the use of forms in purely syntactic and semantic terms and to examine uses made in pragmatic terms.

Undoubtedly, grammar is an essential component of language. Linguists have been studying it for centuries, and it remains an object of learning for countless learners all over the world; it is an integral part of the language we use in everyday communication. Language without grammar would be chaotic and would certainly leave us seriously handicapped.

Many teachers worry about the status of grammar within the process of teaching and learning, whether they should teach it or not, and how this is best to be done. Ever since foreign language teaching began, there have been debates concerning the most effective and appropriate ways of enabling learners to acquire a system of rules that will enable them to use the language purposefully, appropriately, creatively and accurately. The view that communicative approach to language teaching and learning means that one does not have to bother about the grammar is wrong. What is true is the fact that communicative approach puts a different value on grammar. As language proficiency consists of the interaction of several components of language, such as (on a very simplified level) knowledge of language - competence, and the ability to use language - performance, according to Larsen-Freeman (1991), form, function and meaning are three interacting dimensions of language, and the classroom teacher must decide in which dimension the students are experiencing the greatest learning challenge at any given moment and respond with appropriate instruction. It has become clear 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 itself. Celce-Murcia (1992) states that grammar should be always taught with reference to meaning, social factors, or discourse. We must not go back to a situation where grammar predominates and learners go through endless series of meaningless exercises in order to learn correct forms.

The communicative approach, which originated in the mid 1970s, claims that the goal of second or foreign language instruction and that the syllabus of a language course should

not be organized around grammar but around subject matter, tasks, or semantic notions and pragmatic functions. The introduction of communicative approach has shifted the emphasis to language teaching, with the language being perceived as a tool for communication to be used in a purposeful and controlled manner. In other words, language instruction should be content-based, meaningful, contextualised, and discourse-based (rather than sentence-based). The new teaching methodology requires teaching and learning in contextualised, meaningful ways, where the students are interacting meaningfully in the target language. The teacher's role is primarily to facilitate language use and communication; it is only secondarily to provide feedback and correct learner errors.

While the aims of language teaching in schools have become more communicative and its content more practical, teachers appear to have lost none of their faith in the value of grammar teaching. They are more likely to talk about the balance between 'accuracy' and 'fluency'. With the introduction of content-based and notional-functional syllabi, the role of grammar has been devalued as an organising principle in many commercially available language teaching and learning texts. Since the overall aim in any (English) language education programme is to develop in learners the requisite language skills for effective and efficient communication, it appears that insufficient attention has been given to the development of grammatical competence for the generation of appropriate grammatical structures and lexicon required in the successful communication of ideas and intentions. When we say that someone 'knows a language', we mean that this person has acquired the ability to produce grammatically acceptable sentences in the target language, together with an ability to use these forms correctly as the occasion demands.

Nevertheless, existing research strongly suggests that some focus on form may well be necessary for many learners to achieve accuracy as well as fluency in their acquisition of a second or foreign language. It is claimed that a grammarless approach could lead to the development of a broken, ungrammatical form of the target language beyond which students rarely progress.

As teaching and testing are so closely interrelated, it is obvious that the development of different theories and approaches of language learning and teaching also affected the history of language testing. It is common to see the evolution of both language teaching and language testing. There has been a shift from analytical to integrative approach in both language teaching and language testing falling into three stages: grammar-translation, structural, and communicative approach. These three generations of language teaching are seen parallel to three generations of language testing. With this shift new ideas about language testing and new ways of evaluating the performance of language learners have emerged. There has been an apparent improvement in the content of language testing during the last three decades. While the traditional language description led to the teaching and learning of formal patterns of the language and the testing of language structures and vocabulary within a discrete-point single sentence format, the elaboration of communicative competence has had a considerable impact on language testing. Applied linguists claim that communicative language testing means not communicative testing of language, but the testing of communicative language. Thus, what distinguishes communicative language testing is the introduction of real-language input rather than some new methodology of testing.

As far as testing grammar is concerned, grammar has always been regarded as an important area for testing learner's language proficiency. It still occupies a prominent position and seems to be present in many school examinations and commercially available proficiency tests. There is no doubt that this is a category to be measured when investigating an individual's performance in a language. A better understanding of the construct of grammar is needed in order to improve the ways in which grammar is tested. Should we test language knowledge or language performance? Should we concentrate more on testing students' ability

to handle separate language elements (or language subskills), or should we focus on testing of integrated language skills? To what extent should the language components or the 'ingredients' of communication be tested, and to what extent should we test communication itself? "We know that grammar is not simply a formal network, but a communicative device which is 'functionally motivated' " (Batstone 1994: 11). What is of great importance is the extent to which the role of grammar has to play within communicative competence. The teacher's handbook by Hughes would seem to signal a definite wind change in grammar testing. He opens the short chapter on 'testing grammar and vocabulary' with the question "Can one justify the separate testing of grammar?" and then points out that "this would have seemed a very odd question. Control of grammatical structures was seen as the very core of language ability and it would have been unthinkable not to test it. But times have changed" (1989: 141).

The methods of testing grammar have, however, been rather limited. In test manuals over the last thirty years, the importance of explicit grammar testing is much diminished, as evidenced by the number of pages devoted to the testing of this particular trait. Nonetheless, grammar still figures as a central criterion in the analysis of written and spoken language. Although views about what grammar is, and the role of grammar in language use have changed, little attention has been given to innovate test designs for testing grammar within a communicative curriculum. Looking at commercially produced tests and available practice materials for tests, there has not much changed in them as there is not much that provides practice for testing communicative grammar communicatively. The testing of grammar continues to feature as a component of many school examinations and commercially available proficiency tests, as well as being the focus of class-based assessment. There is a common practice to test grammatical competence through decontextualised, isolated sentence formats and discrete-point items, which still seems to hold firm in the testing practice although various models of language proficiency have been proposed which advocate the measurement of the constituent parts of language proficiency communicatively. According to some experts, such type of test is non-communicative and context independent.

As a reaction against the traditional assessment of a candidate's use of grammatical items divorced from the context, an alternative approach for the assessment of grammar with the notion of contextualising items in a grammar test was introduced since testers pointed out that with isolated format there is a danger of testing an ability to do particular type of test rather than an ability to use the language. Other attempts to move away from discrete-point, decontextualised test items assessing grammatical competence include a variety of test formats. These tests measure grammatical competence within the framework of testing global language skills like speaking and writing, and listening and reading. There are views that a test of grammar has to be administered through some medium. Since most of grammar tests are in written form, the candidates have to read in order to be able to respond to the grammar test items. Thus, there is the question that to what extent do tests of grammar also test reading? These integrative tests are often used as instruments for measuring one's knowledge of 'the rules in use' in a specific context of communication. However, because of the nature of language in use a number of issues have been raised by testers as to what language to sample for assessment, and against what criteria performance on communicative language should be evaluated in order to ensure the generalisability of the results. Based on the assumption that grammar is central for effective and efficient communication, there have been attempts to describe the nature of instruments for testing grammar communicatively, which, however, does not seem to be adequately specified yet.

I agree that integrative tests of grammar are more communicative than decontextualised single sentence items, however, it is not clear what the nature of such integrative grammar test is like: for example, how is the trait of grammatical abilities assessed since the test by its

design will measure other traits as well. If there is not a specifically focused grammar subtest included in the test battery, it could reflect the conscious decision not to assess grammar explicitly, but it will be processed and used in responding to skill based tests such as reading and writing. Rea- Dickins (1997) says that “if we didn’t consider it necessary to test grammar as distinct from the mentioned skills, this would raise negative washback on teaching and further lack of respect for teaching of grammar. If grammar were eliminated from testing what effect would this have on teaching?”

It is a fact that in order to measure the 'rules in use', communicative grammar should be tested communicatively. Rea Dickins suggests that this can happen only if a candidate is engaged in a communicative act in contexts that allow for the creation of meaning. Therefore, she claims that the communicative testing of grammar requires a task-based approach, within which there are at least five factors that make a grammar test communicative (1991: 125):

- the **contextualisation** of test items: a test should not comprise a number of decontextualised single sentences
- the identification of a **communicative purpose** for the test activity
- the identification of an **audience** to whom the communication is addressed
- instructions to the test taker that focus on **meaning** rather than on form
- the opportunity for the test taker to create his/her own message and to **produce** grammatical responses as appropriate to a given context

If we closely examine the above criteria, it is possible to conclude that the main highlighted features could in fact characterise any task-based test that intends to measure communicative language ability, of which grammatical competence is one important integral part.

It is obvious that there is still a considerable discrepancy between the theory and practice in communicative grammar testing at our schools; grammar testing appears not to have kept pace with developments in other areas of language description and language teaching. Moreover, the teachers are not sure about which are the most appropriate ways of testing grammatical competence. One of the reasons why much grammar testing still reflects the best practice of the 1960s is that high reliabilities are appealing to educational decision makers. A second is that any move away from the objective decontextualised and decomposable approach to grammar testing raises certain difficulties. ‘Communicative’ testing (as indeed teaching) places greater demands on teachers, and challenges their competence in English. More open-ended writing tasks, through which grammar may be tested, require a new set of skills for test design, format, and item writing, with implications for more explicit marking schemes, appropriate design and application of different rating scales. The teachers prefer using well tried methods to avoid uncertainties about how to test grammar communicatively. It can be the result of constraints imposed by a syllabus, too. Where a syllabus and/or a textbook reflects an exclusive form focused approach to teaching grammar, it is no surprise that any grammar testing may be similarly restricted in focus and format.

To conclude, during the last three decades grammar has moved from a position of central importance in language teaching, to status of an outcast, and back to a position of renewed importance, but with some diminution when compared with the primacy it enjoyed in the 1970s and had enjoyed for so long before then. Grammar is now viewed as one of the components of communicative competence (Canale and Swain 1980; Hymes 1972), and thus it can no longer be viewed as a central, autonomous system to be taught and learned independent of meaning, social function, and discourse structure. Grammar along with lexis (and phonology for spoken discourse) are resources for creating meaning through text and for negotiating socially motivated communication. These resources need to be learned and taught;

however, when taught, they must be taught in a manner that is in agreement with grammar's new role. Finding effective ways to do this is the current challenge to ESL/EFL teachers.

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