Reducing Monitor Overuse through Implicit Grammar Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The present article is an attempt to place communicative approach of teaching grammar as a solution to monitor overuse that has been identified as a great challenge to the acquisition of communicative competency. Beginning with a diachronic analysis of the place of grammar in ESL syllabus, the paper proceeds through Krashen's linguistic postulates that shook the very foundation of ELT pedagogies with a special emphasis on the monitor hypothesis that endeavored to redefine the place of grammar in an ELT curriculum. How the theory and practice of communicative approach addresses the key issues that Krashen puts forward, forms the core of the present enquiry.

The place of teaching grammar in an ESL context has always been a matter of debate. It was generally believed that teaching of grammar explicitly would improve the command of the language and hence there evolved a descriptive linguistic pedagogy. The objective behind this explicit mode of teaching grammar was to ensure accuracy in each utterance. The eighteenth century temper of correctness encouraged the teaching of grammar for the purpose of correcting errors. Having originated from the Greek and Latin systems of language teaching, the English Language Teaching tradition had beeninclined towards following the grammar translation method till the second quarter of the 20th century. Its idiosyncratic characteristic of incorporating a descriptive aspect of grammar in the design of the curriculum has left a considerable influence even upon the present day ELT scenario. It is no wonder that a layman's concept of grammar is still based on the eight parts of speech.

This historic linguistic convention that preferred to view language as a unique relational structure, described syntax in terms of taxonomy of a wide range of constituents each of which belongs to a specific grammatical category and serves specific grammatical functions. C. C. Fries' attempt to analyze the structure of English into four form classes and fifteen groups of functional words which gained much popularity because of its apparent objectivity

and precision can be seen as an attempt to bring about advancement in this tradition. A paradigm shift from words to patterns was witnessed with the publication of A. S.Hornby's *Guide to patterns and Usages in English*. Nelson Brooks also lays stress on this pattern practice:

> Analysis is important in its proper sphere, but analogy is used instead through pattern practice to produce a control of language structure without the time and effort required for grammatical explanations…. Since every speaking person has mastered his own language through imitation and analogy without benefit of analysis it stands to reason that something of this ability will aid him in the learning of another language. Pattern practice permits this ability to function. (Brooks, 1960, p. 146-147)

The pedagogy of teaching grammar which marked an evolution from form to function was another reform strengthened by Michael Halliday's functional grammar, which identified three major functions such as ideational or experiential, interpersonal and textual, upon which Frank R Palmer built his epoch making studies.

A diachronic analysis of the place of grammar in ESL pedagogies shows that the need for teaching grammar was neitherrejected nor underestimated ever in the history of ELT. But it can be observed that little attempt was made to relate grammar to the development of other language skills that learners must develop in order to use the language in real life situations. As decades passed, there were claims that a conscious study of the grammatical rules of a language will only slow down or hamper one's ability to master the target language. Jim Scrivener records the change in the very perception of teaching grammar as follows:

> Learning rules in a grammar book by heart is probably not 'learning grammar'. Similarly reciting grammar rules by heart may not be 'understanding grammar'. Even doing tests and exercises may not necessarily be 'learning grammar'. There is actually no hard evidence that any of these things lead to people being able to use grammar accurately and fluently in speech. These things are only useful if there is some way that students can transfer this studied knowledge into a living ability to use the language. The information is not in itself of much use. (Scrivener, 2005, p.253)

P. Gurrey also strongly felt that there was an urgent need for a more realistic study of language in schools. For this he claimed it was necessary to make the teaching of grammar such as it would help students,

> to express themselves more clearly, more exactly, more vividly and it should train them to understand what they hear and read more accurately more completely and more appreciatively. (Gurrey, 1961)

D. A.Wilkins while proposing his 'notional' syllabus as a modification of the grammatical syllabus says:

> It is taken to be axiomatic that the

acquisition of the grammatical system of a language remains the most important element in language learning. The grammar is the means through which creativity is ultimately achieved and an inadequate knowledge of the grammar would lead to a serious limitation on the capacity for communication. (Wilkins, 1976, p.66)

It was in contrast to the taxonomic approach of grammar that Noam Chomsky developed his generative grammar. Though it was of little importance in actual classroom transactions, his revolutionary ideas, on both the nature of language and language acquisition brought about a complete change in the role of teaching grammar.The place of grammar in the instruction of ESL is clearly defined by Chomsky by pointing out that it must be recognized that one does not learn the grammatical structure of a second language through "explanation and instruction" beyond the most rudimentary elements, for the simple reason that no one has enough explicit knowledge about this structure to provide explanation and instruction (Chomsky N., 1968).

At certain points, it is observed that the place of grammar in an ESL curriculum remains a riddle to linguists like M.Canale and Merril Swain:

It seems an appropriate conclusion to draw... that focus of grammatical competence in the classroom is not a sufficient condition for the development of the communicative competence. It would be inappropriate, however, to conclude ... that the development of grammatical competence is irrelevant or unnecessary for the development of communicative competence. (Canale and Swain, 1980, p.17)

Penny Ur also voices the same concern:

Most people agree that knowledge of a language means, knowing grammar; but this knowledge may be intuitive and it is not necessarily true that grammatical structures need to be taught as such or that formal rules need to be learnt(Ur,2000,p.77)

As the need for reform in the realm of teaching grammar was at its height,Stephen Krashen's observations and conclusions revolutionized the ELT scenario. The postulates that he put forward evoked a succession of linguistic debates that reallocated the space and expanse of grammar in ESL curriculum. Krashen himself sees it unfair to thrust complex linguistic formulas upon learners who are unable to understand even simpler messages in the Second Language (Krashen, 1982). Following this, it has been observed that too much attention on teaching grammatical rules believing that metalinguistic knowledge can contribute to linguistic competence and thereby enhance communicative performance,may turn out to be a hindrance in the acquisition of the target language.Krashen in his argument for Monitor Theory uses the term 'grammar' as a "synonym for conscious learning". He outlines certain conditions, within which the 'monitor' may be used, but claims that

situations where all three conditions are satisfied are very rare, the exception being a grammar test. He concludes "It is therefore difficult to apply conscious learning to performance successfully" (Krashen, 1981,p.3).

A year later, trying to define the "place of grammar"Krashen asserts:

> Conscious learning has two possible roles in the second language teaching program. First it can be used with some profit as a monitor... second use for grammar is as subject matter... (sometimes called "linguistics")... neither role is essential, neither is the central part of the pedagogical program, but both have their functions. (Krashen, 1982, p.89)

When Krashen puts forth his theory of the monitor model, he defined acquisition as a subconscious activity similar to the acquisition of a native language by children in which overt teaching or error correction is not effective. It is quite obvious that monitor starts functioning when the learner focuses on form. Krashen points out that the learner's attempt to apply the conscious rules to their output during oral conversation can literally affect the flow of speech.

Krashen identifies the 'wrong' ways of learning grammar as the crucial cause behind the incompetent monitor use that impedes the internalization of linguistic skills. He never ignores the chances of rules getting misinterpreted and transformed, to be impediment to communicative competence. He observes:

> In effect, both teachers and students are deceiving themselves. They believe that it is the subject matter itself, the study of grammar, that is responsible for the students' progress in second language acquisition, but in reality their progress is coming from the medium and not the message. Any subject matter that held their interest would do just as well, so far as second language acquisition is concerned, so long as it required extensive use of the target language (Krashen, 1982, p.120).

Krashen prefers to call the "feel for correctness", a by-product of acquisition. He tries to explain the evolution of the 'feel for correctness' by juxtaposing the inductive and deductive approaches of learning.

> When the goal is inductive learning, the focus is on form and the learner attempts to analyse formal aspects of the data presented. When the goal is acquisition, the acquirer attempts to understand the message contained in the input. Also, the "rule" developed by the two processes is different. An inductively- learned rule is a conscious mental representation of a linguistic generalisation – an acquired rule is not conscious, but is manifested by a "feel" for correctness. (Krashen, 1982, p.114).

While discussing the feel for correctness, the Error Correction strategy also demands attention. The Second Language Acquisition Theory maintains that error correction is not of use for acquisition. Acquisition

occurs, according to the Input Hypothesis, when acquirers understand input for its meaning, not when they produce output and focus on form (Krashen, 1982).

The 'wrong' pattern of teaching grammar mentioned by Krashen can also be remedied by consciously avoiding the practice of teaching descriptive rules of grammar transacted with a pedantic terminology which has nothing to do with the actual purpose of learning English. Why should a learner be able to distinguish between a demonstrative pronoun and an interrogative pronoun if he does not want to get a Masters in Linguistics?

Memorising grammatical rules just as mathematical formulae are learnt by heart will definitely place the Affective Filter high. Hence the anxiety regardingteaching/ learning grammatical rules as well as their appropriate use in the production of actual utterance is to be ruled out in order to ensure communicative competency.

It is at this juncture that the relevance of a communicative approach of teaching English as a second language is unfolded. Communicative language teaching developed with a recognition and awareness that any kind of language learning involves the learning of the basic structural principles of the target language. But it is of no use if the learner fails to apply them in the production of actual discourse. The theory of the communicative approach laid its emphasis on the centrality of meaning in acts of communication rather than on form, 'use' rather than on 'usage'.

Communicative approach does not advocate that grammatical competence is irrelevant or unnecessary, but that it should not be overly emphasized. In methodology it calls for an increase in communication activities in the classroom involving the learner to interact in the language so that he actually uses it. A new syllabus based on this approach, with its focus on knowing how to carry out very specific tasks in the target language, helps teachers to replace grammar with memorized phrases.

In the communicative approach, real language in real situations is used at the transactional level. The classroom activities that aim at replicating the process of communication allow learners to rehearse the forms of the target language within a communicative framework.The information gap exercises enhance the communicative competence. Norm oriented exercises are replaced with goal oriented and criterion oriented activities. Thus a paradigm shift from grammatical competence to communicative competence is effected in the communicative approach.

Wilkins developed the category of communicative functions and the semantic-grammatical category when he was a part of the Council of Europe to develop a language teaching system based on the communicative language teaching theory. While elaborating his notional syllabus, Wilkins wanted to overcome the limitations of grammatical and situational approaches which were in their experimental stage.

The communicational teaching project put

forward by N.S. Prabhu, based on the premise that form is best learnt when the learners' attention is on meaning, also substantiates this view. He proposes to teach language through communication rather than teaching for communication. He advocates for a communicative pressure. Eric Hawkins' observation is also worth mentioning in this context:

> The evidence seems to show beyond doubt that though it is by communicative use in real 'speech acts' that the new language 'sticks' in the learner's mind, insight into pattern is an equal partner with communicative use in what language teachers now see as the dual process of acquisition /learning. Grammar, approached as a voyage of discovery into the patterns of language rather than the learning of prescriptive rules, is no longer a bogey word. (Hawkins, 1984, p.154)

Thus the communicative approach with all its endeavours to bring its focus on meaning rather than on form, contributes to 'acquisition' rather than to conscious 'learning' that hampers actual linguistic production and thereby adversely affecting communicative competence. By providing replicas of real life situations during the transactional level, this approach reduces the chances of anxiety and at the same time enhances communicative pressure which progressively reinforces the learners to come up with the desirable linguistic output. Hence it can be concluded that both in theory and practice, communicative approach offers a solution to monitor

overuse.

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