

# Teaching Grammar and Vocabulary to Enhance Critical Thinking Skills

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The present paper attempts to study and investigate the possibility of teaching grammar and vocabulary to enhance critical thinking skills effectively in the process of ESL undergraduate students acquiring English. The effect of teaching grammar and vocabulary on their writing skills and critical thinking skills is measured. To find out this effect, the researcher carried out a survey of 50 undergraduate students of B.A./B.Com. from two colleges affiliated to the University of Mumbai using a questionnaire. The collected data was analyzed. The results showed the positive effect of teaching these on the students. Students must acquire advanced vocabulary and grammatical mastery in order to develop higher order thinking skills.*

**Keywords:** *Second language learning; Critical thinking; ESL grammar; ESL vocabulary.*

## **Introduction**

Grammar is often associated with boredom and mechanical exercises. But the word grammar can be related to the word 'glamour'. It is a consciously learned and explicit set of rules and principles. We learn such a set when we learn a second language. Our mother tongue too has its own set of rules and principles. And when we speak our mother tongue, we do follow these rules, but we follow them quite unconsciously and so we feel that our mother tongue has no grammar whereas English has a lot of grammar.

The teaching of grammar is an essential aspect of the teaching/learning process of any second language. Grammar is important for the mental growth of a child and acts as

a means of disciplining the mind. Teachers often ask the question whether explicit grammar and vocabulary teaching is desirable at university level, and to what extent the academic study of language in a linguistics programme can assist its learners in their L2 acquisition and developing their critical thinking skills. It has been observed that grammar and vocabulary teaching is ignored at the tertiary level. Teachers assume that students already know the grammar rules by the time they reach the UG level. Therefore, they do not pay attention to grammar teaching and vocabulary building at that level.

## **Views against the teaching of grammar**

a) The usefulness and desirability of explicit

grammar instruction has been the subject of considerable debate. With the emergence of the communicative language teaching approach, in which the focus lies on fluency rather than on accuracy, explicit grammar teaching has sometimes been considered superfluous or even counter-productive.

b) Grammatical explanation in the classroom has relied on the assumption that rules which are learnt consciously can be converted into unconscious processes of comprehension and production. Some scholars have questioned whether academic knowledge ever converts into the ability to use the language in this way. Grammar does not exist in isolation from language; language is grammar.

Krashen (1985), however, has persistently denied that consciously learnt rules change into normal speech processes in the same way as grammar that is acquired unconsciously does. It means learnt grammar does not convert into acquired grammar that speech depends on. If Krashen's view is accepted, people who are taught by grammatical explanation can only produce language by laboriously checking each sentence against the relevant rules.

#### **Why grammar is essential for UG students**

Undergraduate students need educated vocabulary and grammatical competence of exceptional quality. Thinking skills fail unless they deploy a necessary system of right word use and right grammar. Students must acquire advanced vocabulary and grammatical precision in order to develop

higher order thinking. Students should necessarily be taught advanced English components to be able to comprehend academic English. Wrong vocabulary and incorrect usage can lead to wrong conclusions in critical as well as ordinary thinking process. Therefore, students need to learn accurate usage of words and grammar. Teachers have to play a crucial role in this process. The tasks given to students should be challenging and related to real life situations. Students should be assured that they can handle the rules confidently; this will make grammar teaching/learning process an exciting one.

- 1) The objective of teaching grammar to students should be to improve their receptive and productive language skills and to make them better users of the language. The grammar lesson should emerge out of the language material being used to develop the skills of reading as well as to form the basis of the grammar lesson.
- 2) Grammar provides the mental discipline of human thinking and allows us to understand the meaning of clarity. Grammar is a function of thought; the best structures of grammar are the natural structures of thought at their clearest.
- 3) Grammar is also an essential factor in the highest level of interpretation of literature. Great prose writers are adept at shifting grammar structures to make them consonant with the phenomena of the plot.
- 4) Prescriptive grammar instruction is appropriate. There are linguistic

standards in the professional world that students are expected to observe. Students must be prepared to meet such standards.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To investigate the effect of teaching grammar and vocabulary in enhancing the critical thinking skills of undergraduate students:
- To find out their ways of using English while thinking critically; and
- To find out their perceptions, attitudes and problems while learning these components.

### **The Study Questions**

1. How does the teaching of grammar and vocabulary enhance critical thinking in the process of acquiring English as a second language?
2. Does the explicit teaching of grammar and vocabulary promote students' motivation and active participation?
3. What are students' attitudes towards these components?

### **Hypotheses**

1. Teaching of grammar and vocabulary has great effect on developing the critical thinking skills of undergraduate students especially in urban areas.
2. Effective teaching of grammar and vocabulary improves students' acquisition of ESL.

### **Methodology**

A survey of 50 undergraduate students was conducted during Semester I of the

academic year 2014-2015. A questionnaire was designed and administered to these students in order to collect their responses. The questionnaire included questions about the effect of teaching grammar and vocabulary on the students' second language acquisition; their ability to think critically and express their views in writing; their attitudes and difficulties in this process. Both open-ended and close-ended questions were administered. Self-reporting was also done by the students. A very simple numerical analysis of the data collected was done.

### **Subjects**

The subjects of the study consisted of a sample of 50 undergraduate students (first/second year B.A./B.Com.) enrolled in two Mumbai suburban colleges (M.M.K. and Chetana) affiliated to the University of Mumbai. All of them had nearly the same level of English proficiency and they were in the age group of 18-19 years. The selection of these students was done randomly. It was assumed that these students had similar opportunities for learning English.

### **Results**

The students from both the colleges observed that grammar and vocabulary were not part of the syllabus. More emphasis was given to organizational behaviour, and internal and external communication, rather than on developing the critical thinking skills of the students. All of them felt that these components were more useful and important; they could promote their confidence in English.

There were, however, mixed responses to the questions related to their attitude towards the use of these components. Some of them felt that these components increased their confidence and motivation level. Some felt they became more creative by using them. Students with low level proficiency in English were afraid of such a type of instruction. They felt that if this became part of the assessment process then they might not be able to score well. The students surveyed also felt that they were not taught the rules in the classroom. Teachers assumed that they already knew the rules and that further instruction was a waste of time. Some students even felt that it was not necessary to acquire critical thinking skills and that they could survive without them.

### **Suggestions for Enhancing Critical Thinking**

- a) Group work wherein both gifted learners and learners with low level proficiency are part of the same group should be encouraged so that they feel motivated and healthy competition increases in the group. The importance of achieving accuracy in language should be explained to them.
- b) Direct instruction in vocabulary and grammar is a prerequisite to the highest fulfillment of curricular goals in language. If students have to think clearly in the medium of language, high-level intellectual components must be in place. Our thinking skills fail unless we have a necessary system of right word use and correct grammar.

- c) Thinking skills rest on mastery of vocabulary and grammar. Students can be exposed to grammar and vocabulary through reading and listening. Grammatical awareness needs to be developed through reading and writing.
- d) "In order to make choices among words, students must internalize a bank of words that provides choices. The acquisition of such a vocabulary base can (and must) occur through reading, especially in the classics that have strong vocabulary, through a deliberate vocabulary program of well-selected words, through the study of the Latin and Greek foundation of English and through the study of foreign languages that have strong English cognate connections, such as Latin and Spanish" (Thompson & Thompson, 1996, p.174).
- e) School systems that focus student reading on colloquial English titles cannot expect to increase students' vocabulary banks. It is clear that reading literature will not increase student vocabulary unless the selected literature contains words unknown to the students when they begin. There must be a degree of vocabulary discomfort for students.
- f) Undergraduate students need to select words for use very carefully. The criteria employed for choosing words include accuracy, tone aesthetics, precision, brevity, meter etc. High level word use of the kind necessary in critical thinking or academic writing involves more than the common task of finding a usable word that has approximately the right meaning. Having to search for a

particular target lexical item leads to an immediate disruption of the speaking or writing process.

- g) As far as vocabulary teaching is concerned, communicative language teaching approach advocates a focus on meaning in context and the belief has emerged that the meaning of words can better be picked up from reading than from the explicit teaching of new words.

### **Suggested Strategies for Building Vocabulary**

The teaching of four skills of English language – listening speaking, reading and writing – faces a common hindrance, i.e. lack of strong vocabulary. Vocabulary can be *ad hoc* (words important for a given text), *passive* (recognition vocabulary), or *active* (words required for regular use). The techniques which can be used for developing vocabulary are as follows:

- 1) Attention should be given to passive vocabulary because a learner should recognize the words on his/her encounter with them.
- 2) Prudent use of mother tongue in a class of English language is welcome. Mother tongue can be used to give equivalents of unfamiliar words.
- 3) Semantic grouping helps in retention of vocabulary. Words are easily learnt if they are organized into semantic groups, e.g. *shore, ocean, island*. Wide reading is the best way of increasing one's vocabulary.
- 4) Direct instruction is a popular method of enhancing vocabulary. Lists of words have to be studied deliberately for word power exercise.

- 5) Vocabulary becomes permanent only if it is transferred to writing, speaking and thinking. Learners should be encouraged in this direction.

- 6) One clear strategy for building an effective vocabulary bank is to concentrate on words that have a high profile in literature. This direct word study will have the concomitant effect of making it easier for students to read literature, which will then continue to reinforce and supplement the vocabulary they have learned.

- 7) Students must learn the Latin and Greek heritage that underlies English diction. Students who have learned the most common Latin and Greek stems in English will have an inestimable advantage. Each stem students learn will be found in many words. To know that *pre* means 'before' is to know part of the meaning of *previous, preordained, precedent* and dozens of other words.

### **Conclusion**

At the tertiary level students are expected to possess language skills and a certain degree of grammatical competence and vocabulary. Explicit instruction in grammar and vocabulary should be encouraged in order to make students think clearly. Higher order thinking can be achieved through this technique. Teachers should not assume that students would acquire grammar and vocabulary on their own. Systematic instruction is required in this area urgently. The main aim of any teaching/learning process is to make students critical thinkers and knowledge of grammar and vocabulary

will help in acquiring critical thinking skills.

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