

An Attitudinal Study on the Role of Grammar in the Communicative Approach to Second Language Teaching

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Abstract

There have been arguments and counter arguments among the ELT practitioners regarding the role of grammar in teaching English as a second language with the aim of developing communicative competence of the second language learners. This paper investigates the attitudes towards the role of grammar in communicative language teaching which aims broadly to apply the theoretical perspective of the Communicative Approach by making communicative competence the goal of language teaching and by acknowledging the interdependence of language and communication. The objective of this study is to provide valuable insight to the ELT practitioners regarding the place of grammar in the communicative approach. Firstly, the theoretical aspects of Grammar, the communicative approach to second language teaching and communicative competence put forward by different scholars in the field of second language teaching are discussed in detail. Secondly, the research methodology discusses the research tools and the number of respondents to collect data for this study. Finally, the data were collected and analyzed. The findings have revealed that teaching grammar plays a vital role in developing communicative competence of the second language learners. At the same time, the study has pointed out that teaching grammar is not only the aspect of second language and the sole focus of second language teaching. Instead, it should be taught along with the language skills to achieve the communicative competence of the second language learners.

Keywords: Grammar, Communicative Language Teaching, Communicative Competence, Second language skills, Second language teaching, Sri Lanka.

1. Introduction

There have been theories with opposing views among the ELT practitioners with regard to the role of teaching grammar in second language teaching and learning.

However, it is felt that there is a link between teaching grammar and achieving communicative competence with students learning English as a second language. It is necessary to investigate the attitudes of the ESL practitioners and students towards the role of grammar in Communicative Approach which aims to develop communicative competence of the second language learners because there is a tendency found among the ESL practitioners and learners that teaching and learning ESL mean the learning of grammar of that language. In contrast to this idea, Communicative Approach which focuses on the four components of the communicative competence emphasizes the fluency of the language rather than focusing much on the accuracy of the language. As a result, this causes an issue in relation to the role of grammar in the communicative approach to ESL teaching and learning processes. It should be noted at this point, that grammar is not only the aspect of language to be taught and learnt and should not be sole focus of teaching English.

There are two main aims to this paper. Firstly, in the theoretical part, it attempts to explain the link between teaching grammar and achieving communicative competence, thus highlighting the importance of teaching and learning grammar. The terms grammar and communicative competence are considered from different perspectives. Additionally, a number of arguments for and against the teaching of grammar are presented and investigated. Secondly, in the empirical part, it aims to investigate the attitude of the ESL practitioners and their students towards teaching grammar, namely their awareness of the term communicative competence and of what it includes, as well as the perceived role of grammar in the process of English language teaching. Finally, effort is made to suggest possible ways of making grammar beneficial towards achieving communicative competence.

1.1. Fluency versus Accuracy in Sri Lankan Context

Communicative competence is often considered as a subset of fluency, but is in fact not the same. A term first coined by Hymes (1966), communicative competence which is an alternative to Chomsky's (1965) linguistic competence, refers to the ability to make use of words and rules, the appropriacy of language, cohesion and coherence and communicative strategies to be understood (Canale and Swaine, 1980). That is, it is the ability to choose the right words and structures appropriately to suit the situation and context so as to communicate what we need to say effectively. The focal point here is the speaker's intended message and how well they are able to get their interlocutors to understand this message. Accuracy is a focus on the correctness of one's use of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation and important insofar as the message is not

miscommunicated. Fluency is important insofar as the speaker can be understood by their interlocutors.

Communicative competency is the correlation between fluency and accuracy and refers to the ability of a speaker to communicate effectively in the language; this ability is based on more than just grammatical knowledge and the concept is derived from the general desire of language learners to be able to communicate proficiently, not to use the language exactly.

To be able to communicate in the Target Language fluently means that the speaker is comfortable using the language and can be reasonably understood by other speakers of the Target Language. This does not necessarily mean that the speaker is free of errors in their communication, but that the errors they make do not obstruct the message. Accuracy refers to the correctness of the language being produced by the speaker. Just because a speaker focuses on accuracy does not mean they will be capable of producing effective communication.

In Sri Lanka, basically, accuracy is the ability to produce grammatically and lexically accurate English sentences, while fluency is the ability to produce language in a coherent, effortless way. In fact, a student who is more fluent than accurate can be more successful at communication than someone who is more accurate than fluent.

1.2.Role of Teaching Grammar

The role of grammar in the second language classroom is a heavily debated topic in the arena of second language teaching. Historically, there have been many shifts in the prevailing idea of grammar presentation from the history of methods of second language teaching. Traditionally, grammar played an essential role in second language teaching, often serving as the only activity in the second language classroom. In recent years, there has been a push for implicit grammar presentations focusing more heavily on the use of language for communication. A review of language-learning theories and current language acquisition research was performed to gain an awareness of how grammar should be taught. As it is understood that grammar plays an important role in expressing one's thoughts and ideas to others because grammar provides necessary structure patterns to form one's message in order to communicate meaningfully. One of the reasons to teach grammar is its capacity to make learners understand the existence of language, which intends to make linguistic production more practical to communicate very effectively.

1.3. Communicative Approach

Depending on the merits and demerits found in the succession of second language teaching methods such as Grammar Translation Method, Audio Lingual Method, Direct Method, etc. which failed to enable the learners to communicate in English for practical purposes, many second language practitioners have adopted the concept of Communicative Approach which focuses developing communicative competence of the learners. Communicative Approach originated in Britain in the 1960s in order to rectify the shortcomings of the earlier methods used for second language teaching. According to Widdowson (1990), he states that “Communicative Approach concentrates on getting learners to do things with language, to express concepts and to carry out communicative acts of various kinds. The content of a language course is now defined not in terms of forms, words and sentence patterns, but in terms of concepts, or notions, which such forms are used to express, and the communicative functions which they are used to perform, p. 159.”

Nunan (1991) introduces five features of Communicative Approach. They are:

- i. An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- ii. The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
- iii. The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the learning process itself.
- iv. An enhancement of the learners’ own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
- v. An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom.

According to Larsen-Freeman (2000), he observes the following points can be used to summarize Communicative Approach (p.129 – 134).

- i) The aim is to enable students to communicate in the language. To be able to do this, students need to possess the knowledge of the linguistic forms, as well as meanings and functions. This on its own, however, is insufficient. Learners also need to be aware of the social context and possible ways of negotiating the meaning with other speakers.
- ii) The teacher’s main role is that of the facilitator of communication through providing suitable situations in the classroom environment, and possibly a participant in a conversation, as well as an adviser.

- iii) The syllabus is mainly organized according to the functions of the language, as opposed to just grammatical items. Students are also introduced to the concepts of cohesion and coherence, thus catering for the discourse or suprasentential level of the language. Focus is on all four basic skills.
- iv) Typically used materials are authentic in order to provide meaningful resources to illustrate how language is used in real world. This increases the students' motivation, but it also requires careful planning as inadequately chosen material may have the opposite effect.

What is understood from the above views put forward by different scholars is that there is always a link between teaching language which must aim to make the learners act in the real language context in their day to day communication and teaching grammar through communicative approach focusing on the forms, meanings and functions of the language. The aim of language teaching must enable the learners to use the language in their various speech contexts and at the same time, grammar lays the foundation for generating utterances for effective communication.

1.4 Communicative Competence

The main conception of Communicative Approach is the idea of developing learners' communicative competence. The communicative competence here includes the knowledge of what to say and how to say it appropriately according to the situations, the interlocutors and their roles and purposes. As a result, Communicative Approach was promoted because of this kind of knowledge which was not included in the traditional grammatical and vocabulary teaching approaches. Hence, the rationale behind Communicative Approach is to develop learners' communicative competence in contrast to their grammatical competence.

The concept of communicative competence was originally developed in the early 1970s by the sociolinguist, Dell Hymes. It was further developed in the early 1980s by Canale and Swain. According to Canale (1983), communicative competence refers to "the underlying systems of knowledge and skill required for communication". Canale and Swain (1980) define communicative competence in terms of four components which link the linguistic system to the functional aspects of communication. They are as follows:

- i. grammatical competence – (ability to create grammatically correct utterances)

- ii. sociolinguistic competence -(ability to produce sociolinguistically appropriate utterances)
- iii. discourse competence – (ability to produce coherent and cohesive utterances)
- iv. strategic competence – (ability to solve communication problems as they arise).

2. Literature Review

Azar (2007) states that one of the reasons to teach grammar is its capacity to make learners understand the existence of language, which intends to make linguistic production more practical.

Savage (2010) states that Grammar teaching has various effects and functions. Grammar, the function of which is seen as a skill, needs to be considered in three ways: “grammar as an enabling skill, grammar as motivator, and grammar as a means to self-efficacy” In terms of enabling skills, learning correct structures in grammar helps the learners develop reading, writing, communication, and other skills. Without understanding correct grammatical structures, people are unable to communicate, convey meaning or understand through the pieces that they write, read, speak or listen. Learning the grammatical structures of a specific language may be acknowledged as a motivator and key to speaking and understanding that language.

Fotos (2001) defines that when grammar is taught as a method of achieving self-efficacy, it is obviously seen that grammar instruction may make learners aware of structures and notice the differences in those structures as learning takes place over time.

In addition to these ideas, Rutherford (1987) states that teaching grammar has been understood same as foreign language teaching and he demonstrates the effectiveness of grammar in language learning. This priority is re-emphasized by Radilova (1997) who notes that “Knowledge of grammar is the central area of the language system around which the other areas resolve; however important the other components of language may be in themselves, they are connected to each other through grammar.”

According to Ellis (2006),“Grammar teaching involves any instructional technique that draws learners’ attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps them either to understand it metalinguistically and / or process it in comprehension and / or production so that they can internalize it.” Therefore, in a way,

grammar teaching helps learners understand structures better and communicate in the target language effectively.

Richards and Rodgers (2001) emphasize that ‘the communicative language teaching focuses on the process of communication rather than mastery of language forms and leads to different role for learners from those found in more traditional second language classrooms’(p.166). Learners are thought to be active participants in the language classroom.

Larsen Freeman (2001) puts forwards his conventional and contemporary views on teaching grammar. Grammar is seen as a means of expressing meanings. It is not sufficient to define grammar only at morphological and syntactic levels, not even the meanings of sentences in isolation. Grammar is also influenced by pragmatic principles; it fulfills a certain role in conveying messages.

She further states that in grammar teaching, the “focus on forms” approach begins with teaching activities focused on structure and practice. Developmental skill activities follow the instruction of the target framework. However, in the focus on forms approach, the important thing for the learners is to know the grammatical rule for a specific formation. That is why most researchers are opposed to focus on forms instruction. Although a learner may know the grammatical rule very well, s/he may have difficulties in production (Larsen-Freeman, 2009).

Marianne Celce-Murcia and Sharon Hilles (in Larsen-Freeman 2000, p. 8) explain the link between grammar and one of three other aspects of language: social factors, semantic factors and discourse factors. Social factors take into account the speakers’ roles, their mutual relationship and the purpose of the communication. Semantic factors are linked to the meaning. while discourse factors concern topic continuity, word order, and the sequencing of new and old information.

It is pointed out that these three factors are in harmony within any language used naturally and therefore teaching any individual grammar point should be accompanied by matching it with one or more of the above aspects of language (social, semantic or discourse). In achieving to do so, the lessons will be more purposeful for the students.

From the above mentioned facts, it can be concluded that in foreign language teaching and learning, grammar and communicative competence do not and should not

exclude each other. Still, there are some possible myths about the relevance of teaching grammar to foreign language students.

A well-known figure in language teaching, Stephen Krashen (1982) distinguishes between learning and acquisition, the former being a conscious process, while the latter represents unconscious absorption of new information. His hypothesis is based on the fact that people learn their mother tongue without any formal grammar tuition and that the same should be applied to second and foreign language acquisition. He perceives grammar teaching in terms of focus on the forms of language as having little or no effect on language acquisition. It can be argued, though, that while learning/teaching and acquisition are not always simultaneous, it is indeed possible to achieve this.

3. Research Question

On the basis of different theoretical as well as empirical studies on the role of grammar in Communicative Approach to second language teaching, the following research question gets attention for the investigation of the role of grammar in CA. What is the attitude of the ESL practitioners and their students towards teaching grammar in the ESL classes in the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka and teaching grammar with a view of developing communicative competence?

3.1 Methodology

In order to carry out this study, the mixed method was used to collect data for the investigation of the role of grammar in CA. In order to collect data, a questionnaire which reflects the demography of the participants, the experience of ESL practitioners in teaching ESL using CA and of learners in learning ESL, the attitudinal views of ESL practitioners and the students on their level of English, views on developing communicative competence and perception of items to be learnt in developing communicative competence through teaching and learning grammar in ESL classes respectively, was prepared for the ESL practitioners and the students separately and distributed to them to collect data for the investigation of the research question.

The respondents of the study were the ESL practitioners and the undergraduates of the University of Jaffna. Twenty ESL practitioners and fifty students were included in this study.

3.2 Data Collection

The questionnaire was distributed to ESL practitioners and the undergraduates. They all keenly participated in the study and responded to the questions included in the

questionnaire. Therefore when considering the participation of the respondents, the response from them was 100%.

3.3 Data Analysis and Findings

While considering the demographical facts, the age of ESL practitioners fall within the range of 25 to 30 and over 30 years. The undergraduates were between the age of 21 to 25 years. The researcher maintained the gender balance in this study by distributing the questionnaire proportionately.

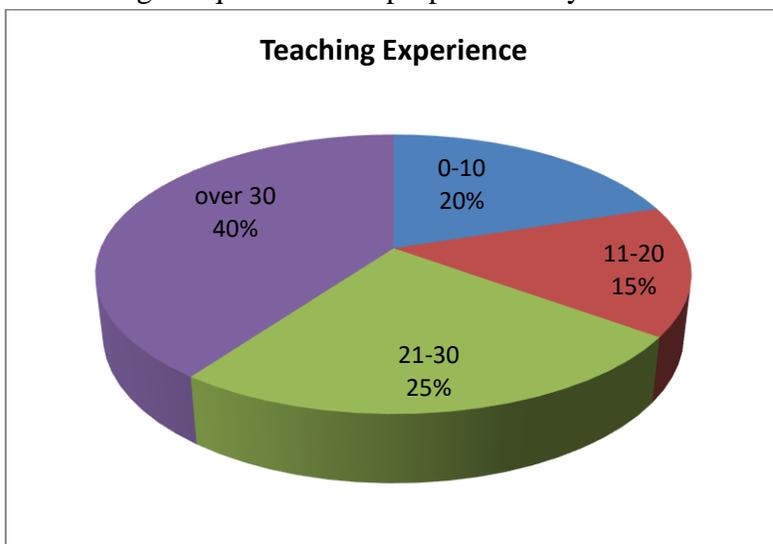


Fig. 1. Teaching experience of ESL practitioners

As it is seen in fig. 1, the teaching experience of the respondents varies on the number of years they taught English as a second language. The majority of the respondents fall within the range of over 30 years which is the 40%. Therefore their experience in ESL teaching can contribute to the present study in deciding the role of grammar. As they were familiar with the various teaching methods used in the past and being used in the present, they are found to be well aware about the communicative approach which demands the fluency rather than accuracy of the language.

Learning Experience of Undergraduates

All the undergraduates in this study has been learning ESL at primary, secondary and tertiary level for more than 13 years. It is the 100%. As a result, They are very familiar with the main objective of the language learning through Communicative Approach which is being implemented in teaching ESL at various educational institutions and the text books are designed based on this approach which focus developing the competency of ESL learners in day to day communication. Their

exposure in learning ESL has reflected their level of English which they achieved through out the years. It is shown in fig. 2.

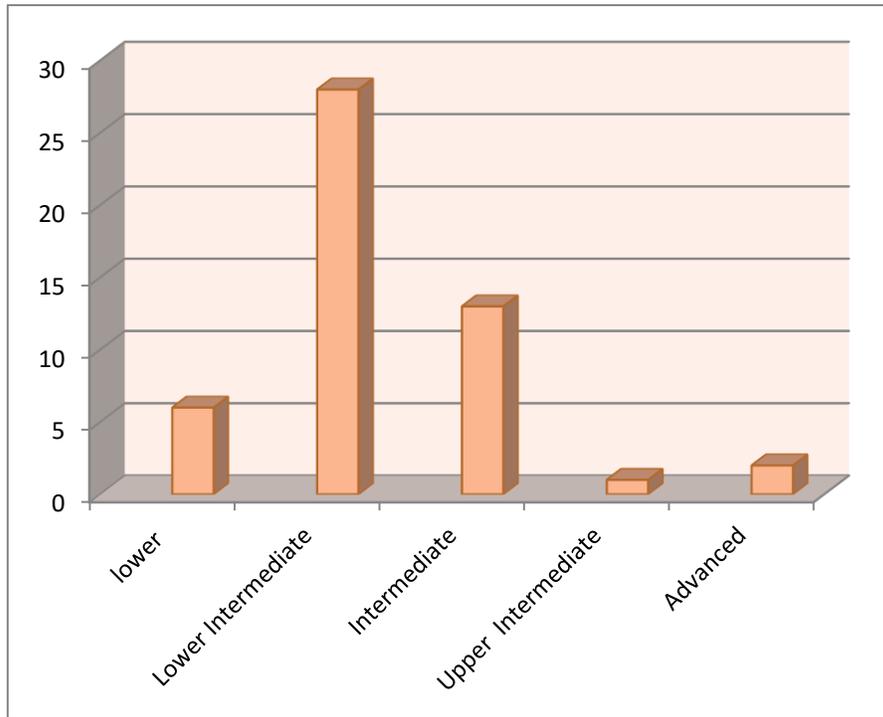


Fig. 2. The undergraduates' level of English

According to fig. 2, the undergraduates who are the respondents of this study are found to be in lower intermediate level. It should be noted that these respondents have learnt ESL in the classes where Communicative Approach was used by the ESL practitioners more than 13 years. But they could not achieve the expected level. This was proved from the discussion with the respondents who struggled to utter a single sentence in English. The discussion with the respondents revealed that they are aware of the communicative competence which demands the authentic communication in the social context and lack of grammatical knowledge to produce utterances, which are grammatically correct to convey the exact meaning of the utterance, is found to be the barrier in speaking as well as writing in the day to day communication.

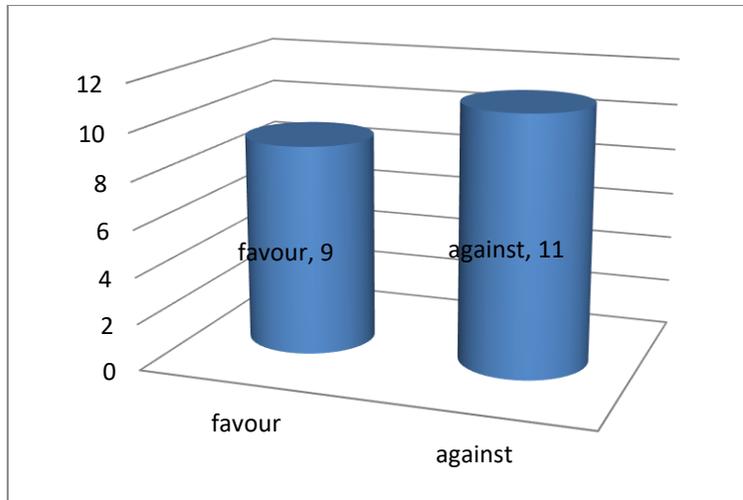


Fig. 3 The agreement with CA in ESL classes

The figure 3 shows the different views of the ESL practitioners with regard to the Communicative Approach which aims at the mastery of communicative competence. 9% of the respondents expressed their views in favour of Communicative Approach. They said that this approach provides enough room to practice ESL in the real life situation and focus on the fluency of the learners irrespective of their accuracy of the utterances. Learners can actively involve in the interactional environment. At the same time, 11% of the respondents are found to be against Communicative Approach. They said that the learners whom they taught are found to struggle with ESL especially in speaking and writing which demand more grammatical competence, as there is not much focus for teaching grammar. They further pointed out that the methods used in the past gave prominent place for grammar and as a result, the students were able to produce grammatically correct sentences and they lacked the fluency as a result of limited exposure available in the social context in which they live. The undergraduates under study also have expressed the same views their difficulty in achieving the competency in ESL.

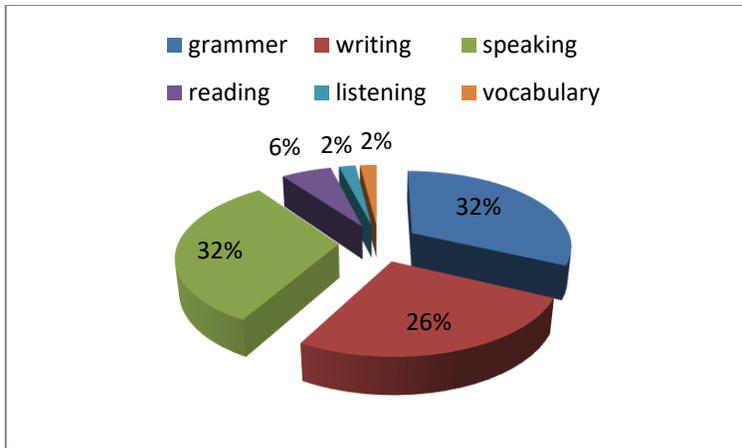


Fig. 4 Perception of undergraduates on the most important items of teaching which contribute to the communicative competence

The figure 4 shows the connection between the most important items which they like to learn to communicate effectively and the above discussions with ESL practitioners and undergraduates in the previous sections. 32% of the respondents reveal that the weightage for learning grammar should be given in ESL classes. They feel that this can lead to speaking and writing which demand the grammatical competence to a meaningful communication.

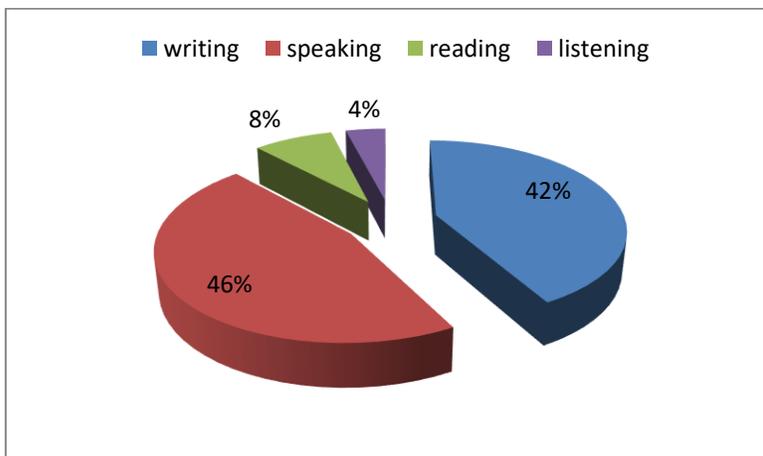


Fig. 5 The importance of grammar in language skills

In this section, the respondents were asked to rate the importance of grammar in language skills called as Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. The figure 5 confirms the importance of grammar with the previous discussion. Speaking and writing skills demand the grammatical knowledge which can contribute to the mastery of

utterances to convey the message to the listener meaningfully. It can also pave the way to form different sentence patterns which has different meaning in a social context.

4. Conclusion

The investigation of attitudes towards the role grammar in the Communicative Approach in teaching English as a second language has revealed valuable insights into the second language practitioners and ESL learners. This paper examined the attitudinal aspects of the ESL practitioners and the undergraduates under study in teaching grammar in the ESL classes along with other skills in an authentic context which paves the way to the mastery of communicative competence of the second language learners.

As far as the teaching experience of the ESL practitioners under study is concerned, they are found to be well aware of the various methods being used from the past to the present and to make comparisons of these methods used to teach ESL learners in the past and present. They agree that the learners taught using Communicative Approach which focuses much on fluency, are found to struggle with the mastery of utterances because of the less attention paid to teach grammatical components of the language. They also pointed out the limited exposure available to the English language in their social arena. As a result, they are unable to achieve the expected results from teaching through Communicative Approach. Classroom practices are inadequate because of the time factor.

At the same time, there is consensus found among the ESL practitioners and learners that teaching grammar might help to produce the utterances which are grammatically correct, and the communicative competence of the learners means the use of language in various contexts for meaningful communication. Teaching the productive skills such as speaking and writing, demands the grammatical competence of the learners. Both expressed their positive attitude towards teaching grammatical items along with other skills.

It should be noted that the undergraduates of this study are found to be in the lower intermediate level (see fig. 2) though they have been taught English for more than 13 years in a CLT context. They are unable to communicate in English because they lack the grammatical competence which is necessary for generating utterances. This raises the issue on the validity of Communicative Approach to second language teaching and provides foods for thought regarding the appropriateness Communicative Approach. They perceive that teaching grammar in the language classes is very much felt important.

At the same time, based on the findings revealed in this study, it could be claimed that teaching grammar in ESL classes is found to be inevitable because the communicative competence emphasizes the grammatical competence in order to generate utterances which are grammatically correct with the view of actual meaningful communication. Unlike the conventional views of methods which gave priority to teaching grammar in ESL classes, the ELT practitioners have to think of teaching grammar considering the form, meaning and use. This would enable the second language learners to achieve the communicative competence which the Communicative Approach demands.

5. Recommendations

Communicative Approach focuses on producing competent users of the language who can do things using the language. It is always the main objective of teaching ESL to the learners. However the appropriateness of this approach in the language classes which has learners with individual differences, raises an issue in making the learners speak the language fluently. This approach may be appropriate to the learners who come from the language background and have acquired certain amount of language with grammatical awareness due to the exposure available to them. But this cannot be for the learners who come from zero language background or never have exposure to second language. This causes problems to the ESL practitioners who employ Communicative Approach to teach ESL in the classes.

Having considered the above issues and the findings of the study, there is always a positive attitude towards teaching grammar in the language classes among the ESL practitioners and learners as well. They feel that a fair amount of grammatical competence is a prerequisite for the mastery of that language. Though the said approach emphasizes the fluency of the speakers of the language, it aims to develop the communicative competence of the learners who learn the language. Therefore teaching grammar can cause positive results in the language classes. The following recommendations are made by the researcher from this study.

1. Teaching grammar is not only the aspect of second language and the sole focus of second language teaching. Instead, it should be taught along with the language skills to achieve the communicative competence of the second language learners.
2. The results of some previous studies reveal that inductive grammar teaching seems more effective in terms of interaction and student feelings, there are also various findings supporting deductive teaching.

3. Considering the individual differences among the learners in a language class, ESL practitioners can make use of different methods and approaches familiar to them to take forward effective teaching and learning processes.
4. Teaching grammar must be done focusing form, meaning and functions of the language.
5. There is always a connection between teaching grammar and achieving communicative competence with learners learning English as a second language. Therefore teaching grammar along with other skills is inevitable and it can help the learners generate utterances appropriate to the speech context.

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