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**To Teach or Not to Teach Grammar isn't the Question Any Longer -  
A Case for Consciousness-Raising Tasks**

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**Abstract**

The paper focuses on one of the major debates in language pedagogy: whether grammar is to be taught or not, and comes to a conclusion that though an over-emphasis on grammatical forms may prove to be a hindrance in the path of the development of a learner's ability to communicate fluently, not teaching grammar at all is not a viable option. In this context, the paper argues for an interesting contemporary option put forward by many methodologists, that of "Consciousness-raising" and tries to show how this can be integrated in the task-based approach to the teaching of grammar.

**Introduction**

The word "grammar" often conjures up in my mind the image of Tony Lumpkin, the character in Oliver Goldsmith's play *She Stoops to Conquer*, singing the following song:

*Let schoolmasters puzzle their brain  
With grammar, nonsense, and learning...*

Here Tony Lumpkin equates grammar with nonsense, and one wonders whether one could be so contemptuous of it. However, there is no gainsaying that linguists, teachers and methodologists and all those concerned with grammar and grammar pedagogy have been puzzling "their brain" trying to ascertain the meaning of grammar, its domain, its

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role in language learning and the methodologies that should be used in teaching it, or whether it should be taught at all.

### **Grammar in English Language Teaching: The Pendulum Swing**

There has always been a pendulum swing regarding whether grammar should be taught or not. Before the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the 1970's, for instance, grammar was in a position of domination in language education, with curriculums being organized around it. However, the supremacy of grammar was questioned when developments in the field of Sociolinguistics in the seventies challenged the traditionally established notions about the nature of language and language learning.

One of the primary reasons for the rejection of a narrow focus on grammatical forms and structures in language learning was the blurring of the notion of 'correctness' of language, thanks to the investigation of language varieties. Also, Chomsky's theory of linguistic competence was critiqued by Dell Hymes (1972) who believed that the former paid no attention to the importance of communication and cultural considerations. Hymes went on to put forward a broader concept of 'communicative competence', which drew attention to language use in social context.

No doubt these developments had a tremendous impact on language teaching, and one of the spin-offs was that these led some theorists, methodologists, teachers and syllabus designers to go overboard so much so that many started advocating a 'no grammar' approach in second and foreign language teaching and learning. An extreme position of this kind is exemplified by Newmark (1971) who pointed out that "the teaching of grammar is neither necessary nor sufficient for learning a second language. That it is not necessary is proved by the first language learner's success without it. That it is not sufficient is proved by the second language learner's lack of success".

### **Failure of Traditional Methods of Teaching Grammar: Reasons**

One wonders whether grammar per se can be blamed for the "lack of success" of the second language learners. The failure actually stems from the inadequacy of the methodologies that have traditionally been used to teach grammar, the methodologies which have failed to recognise the crucial distinction between teaching *about* language and teaching the *use* of language which in turn has led to a sort of an unbridgeable chasm between the true goal of language teaching and the means employed to achieve the goal.

The true goal of all second language teaching, as Rivers (1983:33) points out, and nobody would disagree with her, is "to produce students who can communicate about anything and everything in the second language, comprehending and creating at will novel utterances that conform to the grammatical system of the language (whether in speech or writing)".

What this entails is that we, as the teachers of English, should facilitate what Rivers (1983: 33) calls "free and unfettered language use, by providing our students with the linguistic means to create novel utterances through a carefully designed and presented

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program they can digest and enjoy”. But traditionally, the language teacher has been focusing primarily on the “means” only, failing to recognise the need to “encourage students to use these means immediately, frequently, and pleasurably to express meanings they themselves wish to communicate, at the level of expression of which they are capable.”

For instance, the language teacher traditionally has been teaching discrete points of grammar in separate lessons, focusing mainly on the formal features of the language at the expense of encouraging students to use the language. This could be regarded as, what Wilkins (1976) calls a ‘synthetic’ approach in which “different parts of the language are taught separately and step by step so that acquisition is a process of gradual accumulation of parts until the whole structure of language has been built up” (Wilkins 1976: 2).

This sort of an approach, perhaps, has its germ in the belief that the purpose of all teaching is to simplify learning and one way of doing that is to break down the contents into smaller parts and then present them in a sequential and graded manner. This ‘linear’ approach to language learning is explained well by Nunan (1996) where he likens it to the construction of a wall.

“The language wall”, Nunan points out, “is erected one linguistic ‘brick’ at a time. The easy grammatical bricks are laid at the bottom of the wall, and they provide a foundation for the more difficult ones. The task for the learner is to get the linguistic bricks in the right order: first the word bricks, and then the sentence bricks. If the bricks are not in the correct order, the wall will collapse under its own ungrammaticality”.

However, as Nunan (1996) points out, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research has shown that “learners do not learn one thing perfectly one at a time, but learn numerous things simultaneously (and imperfectly)”. He takes an “organic” approach, likening language development to “growing a garden”, pointing out that “the linguistic flowers will not all appear at the same time, nor will they all grow at the same rate. Some will even appear to wilt, for a time, before renewing their growth.”

Hence traditional language teaching has been found to be flawed on at least two counts: first, for treating language learning as a system of, to use Rutherford’s words, “accumulating structural entities” (Rutherford: 1987), and second, for neglecting language use.

This inconsistency between the goal of second language teaching on the one hand, and the views regarding second language learning and the instructional actions of the teachers teaching the second language on the other, has led to a great dissatisfaction in the pedagogical circles because the methodologies adopted have not been able to yield the hoped-for results. This dissatisfaction, perhaps, was at the root of such reaction against grammar teaching as we find in Newmark’s remarks.

### **The Rise of CLT and Grammar Teaching**

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The rise of CLT in the 1970's – the 'strong' version of which shunned grammar teaching altogether, believing that grammar would somehow take care of itself when the learners engaged themselves in communicative activities – also occasioned a reaction against grammar teaching.

This non-interventionist position with regard to grammar teaching was also given weight by Krashen's **Input Hypothesis** (1985) in which he claims that what is "necessary" and "sufficient" for second language acquisition is comprehensible input in the target language, thereby implying that grammar instruction is not required. This hypothesis of Krashen along with his 'monitor model', where he controversially distinguishes between the processes of 'acquisition and 'learning', have gone a long way in influencing the advocates of the 'strong' form of CLT.

### **Empirical Evidence in Favour of Grammar Teaching**

Though people have tried to show that explicit grammar teaching is the bane of second and foreign language teaching, numerous studies have proved it beyond doubt now that grammar-focused instruction is indeed required for increasing the proficiency of second and foreign language learners.

For instance, the detailed study of the French immersion programmes by Swain (1998) point to the fact that comprehensible input alone is not sufficient for second language acquisition. In these programmes, immersion students, many of whose mother tongue was English, received instruction in the classroom almost entirely through French (and hence the word "immersion") and thereby got extensive exposure in the target language. However, despite this, Swain found a profusion of non-targetlike features in the productive language skills of the immersion students.

As she points out, although the immersion students were able to get their meaning across in their second language, they often did so "with non-targetlike morphology and syntax" (Swain, 1998: 65).

Another study, conducted by Lightbown (cited in Devaki Reddy, 2006), points to the significance of grammar-focused instruction. Lightbown conducted an experiment with two groups of *English as a Second Language* (ESL) learners — one group received comprehensible input through listening and reading without any teacher intervention, and the other group had the guidance of a teacher and were also given ample opportunities for language production.

It was found that the group which had the guidance of a teacher, who made the students aware of the various grammatical structures in meaningful contexts, performed better than the other group. These studies and many other similar ones resolve one of the great dilemmas of language pedagogy: whether or not grammar teaching is required. Surely then grammar-focused instruction is a necessity.

### **Grammar Teaching Alright, but of What Kind?**

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Just because we think that grammar teaching is essential, are we justified in using the traditional grammatically structured syllabuses (which are still ubiquitous in India!)? The answer is a loud ‘No’, because these kinds of syllabus and the teaching which accompanies them do not produce communicative competence.

These are good enough only for presenting explicit rules and paradigms, providing as they do little or no scope for language learning activities in which communication among learners can occur. So between the two extremes – traditional grammar teaching in which grammar rules are presented as models to learners in a linear fashion on the one hand, and the “strong” version of CLT which neglects grammar teaching altogether on the other – is there a middle-ground position possible, a position where learners could be involved in communicative tasks with a focus on meaning while at the same time there would be an ample opportunity to focus on form as well?

### **Consciousness-raising: A Middle-ground Option**

The notion of ‘**Consciousness-raising**’ as proposed by Rutherford (1987) is an interesting contemporary middle-ground option whereby much of the technical grammatical jargon and formal analysis associated with traditional grammar teaching are avoided but at the same time, learners are made aware of which structures are ungrammatical or inappropriate by providing them with grammatical or appropriate counterparts.

It is perhaps pertinent to point out here that in an acquisition poor environment (vis-à-vis English) like ours where a supportive learning environment outside school is almost non-existent, it is important for us to provide adequate linguistic support to our students. This is important in order to stop pidginisation from occurring and also to prevent the fossilisation of certain erroneous forms.

Consciousness-raising can be considered to be, as Ellis (2002: 168) points out, “ an attempt to equip the learner with an understanding of a specific grammatical feature — to develop declarative rather than procedural knowledge of it.”

Ellis then describes the main characteristics of Consciousness-raising activities which include:

- i. “an attempt to *isolate* a specific linguistic feature for focused attention”,
- ii. providing the learners with “*data* which illustrate the targeted feature” or
- iii. supplying the learners with “an *explicit rule* describing or explaining the feature”,
- iv. expecting the learners to “utilise *intellectual effort* to understand the targeted feature”,
- v. clearing “misunderstanding or incomplete understanding of the grammatical structure” by providing “further data and description or explanation” which would lead to “*clarification*”, and
- vi. making the learners “articulate the rule describing the grammatical structure” although “this is not obligatory”.

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Ellis is, however, cautious in emphasizing that though “the main purpose of Consciousness-raising is to develop *explicit knowledge of grammar*.” This is not the same as “*metalingual knowledge*”.

Metalingual knowledge is, of course, a spin-off of the traditional, didactic, and transmissional style of grammar teaching which over-emphasises analysis of formal features and which entails the use of a lot of grammar terminology, in the maze of which the poor learners seem to get lost.

Ellis argues well for Consciousness-raising but he doesn't forget to point out that it “is not an alternative to communication activities, but a supplement” (2002: 174).

This realization is important because if we are to achieve our original goal, i.e., “to produce students who can communicate about anything and everything in the second language”, the focus has to be on communicative tasks. At the same time, however, we will have to ensure that focus on form is made an integral part of the communicative tasks so that accuracy is not sacrificed at the altar of fluency.

### **My Approach to Language Teaching**

My approach is centred on tasks, which are a useful way of cognitively involving the learners because here they learn by ‘doing’ something. However, when learners are set tasks in order that they attain communicative competence, grammar and vocabulary are not thrown away but the students are given opportunities to use grammatical forms intelligently in order to complete tasks successfully.

In one of my PGCTE practice teaching classes at EFL University, Hyderabad, in 2007, for instance, I intended to focus on the difference between the use of the modals *must* and *have (got) to* on the one hand, and *should* and *ought to* on the other. The difference that I had in mind was that between the ‘logical necessity’ meaning of *must* and *have (got) to* and the ‘tentative inference’ meaning of *should* and *ought to*. But instead of explicating the rules straightway, I gave the learners a few examples and tried to elicit responses from them regarding the difference in meaning in the following sentences:

1. He must be very rich.
2. He has (got) to be very rich.
3. He should be very rich.
4. He ought to be very rich.
5. He is very rich.

There were all kinds of response (some of them were, of course, accurate!), but wasn't I successful in involving the learners in doing something to learn that thing?

The learners were, infact, making that “intellectual effort” to understand the targeted feature which Ellis talked about. Together we then tried to work out a rule: one difference is that in the case of the first two sentences, the speaker seems to have confidence in the

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truth value of his or her statements although he or she is not absolutely certain, whereas in the case of the next two sentences the same confidence seems to be lacking – there seems to be a tentativeness in the speaker’s tone. In the last sentence, of course, the speaker is absolutely sure of what he or she is saying.

In this way, the targeted linguistic feature was raised to the ‘consciousness’ of the learners. But I wanted to create a communicative task, in which the learners would get an opportunity to use the linguistic feature for communication besides, of course, the other structures which were required. I divided the class which comprised twenty students into two groups.

The two groups were given a packet each, containing an object of which the other group was not aware. Hence there was a communication gap between the two groups. Now the task was that each group had to ask five questions to the other group regarding the objects inside the packets and then guess what the packets contained.

Obviously, no direct questions like “What is there inside the packet?” were allowed. Many responses from both the groups had sentences with *must* and *have (got) to* expressing ‘logical necessity’ while many others had *should* and *ought to* expressing ‘tentative inference’.

All the while I avoided taking an overtly instructional role, although I was always there, almost playing the role of group participant sometimes. The task was great fun to do and, therefore, I believe it was motivating. It could be said that this model of language teaching is an attractive one as it liberates people from the drudgery of traditional ‘transmission’ approach to language teaching and learning in which the learners, rather passively, acquire knowledge from the teacher.

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