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## Grammar and Grammar Teaching: Changing Perspectives

**Editor**  
**Dr. Vathana Fenn**

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### Hurdles and Openings in Enriching the Grammar of Technical English Students

**J. Anslin Jegu, M.A., M.Phil. and C. Viji, M.A., M.Phil.**

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#### Introduction

Thousands of graduates get their degrees every year without knowing how to sell their technical and innovative thoughts in the global market, because of their lack knowledge of the basics of grammar. Even a small mistake in transferring the data at work place spoils the relevance of the entire correspondence and causes major loss to the company and the concerned individual as well.

#### Context

Learning English language through grammar is a difficult task. Many complex procedures are involved in this process. In addition to the teachers, language learning process

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involves the use of well-designed instructional materials, effective methods, classroom environment, and tools for testing. Hence, when these factors are rightly executed, students learn the second language better to meet their professional and personal requirements. However, the priority given to these factors has been changing for various reasons including new models of learning and changing demands from learners to meet their job requirements. Content Based Instruction (CBI) is found these days helping students to learn their language more effectively.

## **Openings**

Content-Based Instruction (CBI) is a method that can successfully be implemented in the engineering colleges to enhance students' skills in grammar as well as other items. Binton (1989) says that content-Based Instruction is "the integration of a particular content (e.g ., math, science, social studies) with second language aims... It refers to the concurrent teaching of academic subject matter and second language skills" (174).

## **Content-Based Teaching Strategy**

Through Content-Based Instruction students acquire abilities in English language, not only to communicate, but also to use it as a tool to comprehend the subject matter. It also enables the students to explore their ideas that they have learned from their own other academic subjects using English language. Snow (2001) says: "Content Based Instruction (CBI) is designed to provide second-language learners instruction in content and language ... ; content is interpreted as the use of subject matter as a vehicle for second or foreign language teaching/learning " (257).

Krashen (1982) suggests: "In Content-Based Instruction, students can acquire the content area of the subject matter with comprehensible input, and simultaneously increase their language skills" (187). Hence, in order to accomplish the goal of improving language skills, Krashen unambiguously suggests that the focus of teaching should be on the authentic and meaningful input and not on the grammatical form. Thus, though the primary aim is to improve the grammatical standards of the students, the students develop their knowledge and skills in their chosen field during the course of the implementation of this method.

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## Two CBI Methods

Two methods are involved in the process of Content Based Instruction (CBI), namely, Language Based Model and Theme Based Model. As far as the Technical English students are concerned, the Language Based Model may be exploited.

Goodman (1986) and Smith (1971) argue that "Language is not learned from the part to the whole, but from the whole to the whole to the part, and all language functions interrelate" (247). Therefore, the students may be exposed to a holistic process to increase their language ability as well as the expression of their own content.

A good teacher can incorporate Content-Based Instruction to efficiently teach and expose academic subject matter as well as language skills to the students. Brinton, et al. (1989) identifies a number of advantages of Content-Based teaching. For instance, teachers can impart the knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, paragraph structure, interactive skills, and styles of writing, even as they teach the contents of various subjects.

## Background of the Study

There are two important steps in Content Based Instruction (CBI), namely, increasing the motivation and the interest of the students. Grabe and Stoller argue that "Motivation and interest are the prominent factors that in fact, support the students ... to learn complex skills (125).

Alexander and Jetton advocate the same view stating, "When students are motivated and interested in the material, they make greater connections between topics, elaborations with learning material" (214).

## Statement of the Problem

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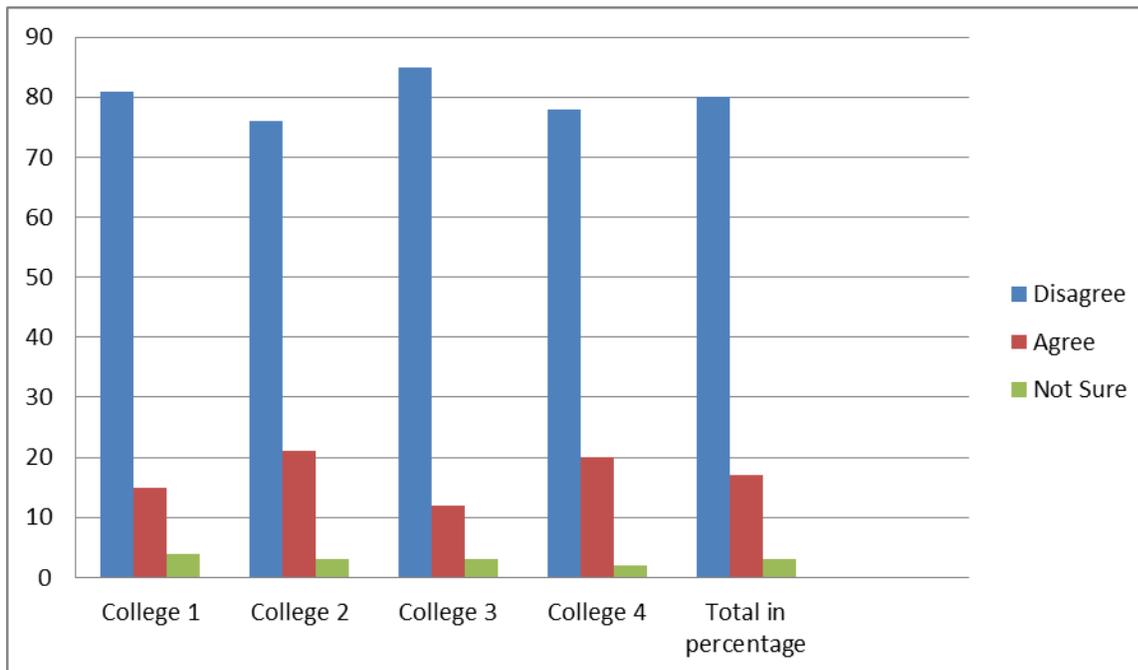
Even after learning English for twelve years, many students can neither speak nor write appropriate and correct English. They commit many errors of grammar. Even after their entrance in the engineering college, they do not seem to improve upon their language skills. Even the students who studied English through English medium commit a lot of mistakes in grammar whereas the first generation learners do not even write the word '*grammar*' with correct spelling. However, they may have more than average, better understanding of their other academic subjects such as Physics, Chemistry and Biology. Using Content Based Instruction (CBI) can help students using their skills and knowledge in other academic subjects to learn English.

### **The Study**

In order to identify the reasons for the inability of Technical English students to master appropriate English grammar rules, we studied the responses of 100 first-generation college-goers aged between 17 and 18 years. They were under graduates belonging to various disciplines of four Engineering Colleges in Tamil Nadu, South India. These first generation learners had their schooling in regional medium (Tamil) and at the time of our study they were into the first semester of their engineering programme which is offered through the medium of English. Since the teachers who teach academic subjects other than English do not focus on grammar and even other communication errors, students may be said to listen to English as a language and as a medium of communication through the teaching of their English language teachers for about 50 to 55 minutes when they were in schools.

A questionnaire consisting of four statements was given to the respondents and they were asked to tick the appropriate response from among three choices, viz., *agree*, *disagree*, and *not sure* based on their experience from schooling. The four statements were also given in their mother tongue, Tamil. Furthermore, for better comprehension, each statement was explained to the students in an objective manner. (1) The *concepts* given in my grammar books were closer to me; (2) I was able to *identify* with the same form of the grammar in the lessons; (3) The grammar which I learned in classes helped me in my socio, cultural and academic grounds during the language activities; and (4) My Technical English textbook made me to feel *comfortable* .

The feedback showed that there was no connection between grammar given in the workbook and the learning ability of first generation learners because, many gave negative responses to all the four statements presented to them. Hence, the workbook of the learners has not made any sort of impact in their personal and socio backgrounds. The responses of the learners are given in the following graph:



### Findings of the Study

The findings shown through the graph represent the impact of grammar in learning their English. From the above-mentioned responses, it is obvious that there is no special use of the grammar in their book. Hence, the overall percentage of learners who are not happy with the learning grammar is 80%, whereas, partly 17% learners are positive about their opinion on the usefulness of the grammar and 3% of the learners do not even properly understand the problems given in the questionnaire. It can be concluded that the grammar introduced in the grammar book did not help them in learning to speak or write error-free English.

### Conclusion

Hence, we may conclude that the grammar that has been prescribed for the first year Technical English students hasn't made any sort of positive impact in learning English. Therefore, the Content Based Instruction (CBI) be offered to overcome the hurdles to learn English language.

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J. Anslin Jegu, M.A., M.Phil.  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Agni College of Technology  
Chennai - 603 103  
Tamilnadu  
India  
[anslinjegu@gmail.com](mailto:anslinjegu@gmail.com)

C. Viji, M.A., M.Phil.  
Associate Professor  
Department of English  
Agni College of Technology  
Chennai - 603 103  
Tamilnadu  
India  
[vijichandramohan@gmail.com](mailto:vijichandramohan@gmail.com)

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