A Retrospective Research on the Place of Grammar for the Future of Language Education

Dönercan Dönük

Mersin University, Turkey

Abstract

This study aims to focus on the issue of grammar represented in each method or approach by referring to the resources of the time such as course books, teaching materials, supplementary books and dictionaries. Additionally, by relying on the findings on a scientific basis, the research intends to make futuristic projections for the methodology and means through which grammar should be treated in the future for a safe and accurate language practice.

Keywords: *grammar teaching, retrospective research, futuristic projections*

1. Introduction

It is a fact that the mode of English instruction has followed various paths throughout time, for it has been handled with a wide range of approaches, methods and techniques. Naturally, this inevitable change can be traced back to the theories in the psychology of human learning, which also influenced the theories in language teaching. As an extension to this shift, the curriculum, the course books and the related materials designed to meet the learner needs in line with each methodology have displayed a range of forms, and, needless to say, they keep changing every passing day. English has been exposed to various methodological approaches of instruction, which can be followed from the curriculum, the teaching methodology of the time, and the material designed to meet the learner needs.

As the basic component of language teaching, grammar acts as an agent which has been affected most by the changes in the forms of language instruction. Despite being the backbone of a language, grammar has undergone a great deal of controversy as for its place in education due to the fact that each teaching methodology deals with it from a different perspective, attaching importance to it at varying extents; thus, placing it into practice with a variety of options. However, it can be seen that there has not been a stable attitude towards its place in English, for each teaching methodology assigns a relative value to its significance and the instructional fashion to handle it shows variation from approach to approach. Although the grammar related research [1][2][3][4] highlights its integration into the language classrooms, the place and role of grammar in EFL settings has changed course very often. Therefore, while some proponents suggest the incorporation of grammar into language teaching, some state that grammar should be a separate entity and it should be taught and tested individually as an extension of behaviourism. In addition to this concern, the fashion in the mode of delivery, either implicit or explicit, and the amount of linguistic input to be supplied to the conscious mind of the learner have led to a clash of heads.

This retrospective study aims to have a closer look at the issue of grammar represented in each method or approach by referring to the resources of the time such as course books, teaching materials, supplementary books and dictionaries. The data to be compiled from a great deal of resources available for the researcher are intended to serve for the description of the language teaching modes as they changed over time by comparing and contrasting the place of grammar in the three basic phases of human learning; namely, structuralism, cognitivism and constructivism. Additionally, by relying on the findings on a scientific basis, the research intends to make futuristic projections for the methodology and means through which grammar should be treated in the future for a safe and accurate language practice.

2. Definitions of Grammar Throughout Time

Since human communication started to convey meaning through grammar, this crucial element of the language has been on the agenda of the people involved in language education. Thus, the way grammar is handled in different phases through time could be a compass to understand its significance in the accurate communication if one does not wish to interact like Tarzan and Jane. The occasional definitions this study includes intend to display the evolving features of grammar in the time

line. In this sense, Robins [5] mentions an early grammar by Dionysius, (BC) who emphasized the connection between grammar and literature, identified and defined eight parts of speech in Greek. As a comment on this grammar, Odlin [6] states that Dionysius's work was regarded to be one of the first pedagogical grammars. This view can be interpreted as a signal for the emergence of the concern for an accurate language and the necessity to teach grammar as a lesson. Besides, Cobbett [7], addressing to his son through letters, accommodates the way grammar was considered in his time with the following sentences:

Grammar, as I observed to you before, teaches us how to make use of words; that is to say, it teaches us how to make use of them in the proper manner, as I used to teach you how to sow and plant the beds in the garden; for you could have thrown about seeds and stuck in plants of some sort or other, in some way or other, without any teaching of mine; and so can anybody, without rules or instructions, put masses of words upon paper; but to be able to choose the words which ought to be employed, and to place them where they ought to be placed, we must become acquainted with certain principles and rules; and these principles and rules constitute what is called grammar (Letter II: Lines 5-17).

When the earlier versions of the definition of grammar are considered, one should not overlook the description on the Three Meanings of Grammar made by W. Nelson Francis in 1954 (as cited in Hartwell, [7]:

The first thing we mean by "grammar" is "the set of formal patterns in which the words of a language are arranged in order to convey larger meanings." It is not necessary that we be able to discuss these patterns self-consciously in order to be able to use them. In fact, all speakers of a language above the age of five or six know how to use its complex forms of organization with considerable skill; in this sense of the word -call it "Grammar l"-they are thoroughly familiar with its grammar.

The second meaning of "grammar"-call it "Grammar 2"-is "the branch of linguistic science which is concerned with the description, analysis, and formulization of formal language patterns." Just as gravity was in full operation before Newton's apple fell, so grammar in the first sense was in full operation before anyone formulated the first rule that began the history of grammar as a study.

The third sense in which people use the word "grammar" is "linguistic etiquette." This we may call "Grammar 3." The word in this sense is often coupled with a derogatory adjective: we say that the expression "he ain't here" is "bad grammar."... (p. 109).

Besides, the evolution of the view towards grammar can be traced back throughout time, and it can be seen that it is of utmost importance to ask the following questions as proposed by Hartwell [7]:

1.Why is the grammar issue so important? Why has it been the dominant focus of   composition research for the last seventy-five years?

2. What definitions of the word *grammar* are needed to articulate the grammar issue intelligibly?

3. What do findings in cognate disciplines suggest about the value of formal grammar instruction?

4. What is our theory of language, and what does it predict about the value of formal instruction? (p. 108)

As a comparatively recent research finding, Bowen and Marks [8] point to the different answers of a group of teachers to the question, "What is grammar?", and it is stated that almost all of the descriptions include one specific word: 'rule(s)'.Regardless of the time, it can be seen that grammar is mainly based on "rules" that govern the accuracy of linguistic production.

3. Grammar Yesterday- Today- Tomorrow

Human learning has been on the agenda of the fundamental schools of thought in psychology, and the basic principles and philosophy of these approaches such as behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism have been adopted by language teaching methodology. As true human interaction depends on the exploitation of correct grammar, "rules" are the milestones of linguistic output. Since the mid 19th century, many approaches and methods have been introduced to the world of education. While the earlier of these methods heavily relied on direct grammar instruction, those depending on the theory of naturalistic principles proposed anchoring grammar to the unconscious mind of the learners. However, the unchanging fact is that, grammar has always existed, and this can be observed in the content of the coursebooks, multimedia, flashcards, task based materials, games, dictionaries including the information about lexical bundles, collocating word forms as well as in countless resources.

Nowadays, we can see the input of grammar in different sources in diverse forms. Language teaching methodology is based upon more eclectic ways, including new dimensions such as self-directed learning, autonomous learning, discovery learning, etc. Digital materials provided by Web 2.0 tools, materials created by AI (Artificial Intelligence) and the rich natural linguistic data learners are exposed to as internet addicts offer a wide range of linguistic flood for extracurricular learning. In

addition, the wonder-child of this era, the Corpus [8] acts as a tool for the revival of grammar in language teaching. Unlike traditional grammar books, which include grammar based on human intuition, not real language portions, Corpus offers a large amount of information. O'Keefe et al.[9] remark that as a Corpus strategy, it is possible to create a lexico-grammar profile by looking at the concordance lines, which makes it possible to obtain the collocation forms, prepositions, idioms, and all the other possible linguistic variations. Moreover, the autonomous application of concordances, DDL (Data Driven Learning), as defined by Johns and King [10] is "the use in the classroom of computer generated concordances to get students to explore regularities of patterning in the target language, and the development of activities and exercises based on concordance output". In addition, thanks to word count lists and frequency as well as KWIC (Key Word In Context) display authentic discourse for the learners. Many EFL teachers find integrating corpus-based activities a challenging practice; therefore, while some teachers avoid using corpora, others hesitate, for they cannot give up imitating their teachers and use more traditional ways. However, this is a perfect meal on the plate of the teachers; all they need is the willingness to taste it.

As for the future, it should not be a challenge to project on the place of grammar in the next-coming times Looking from the perspective of the popularity and practicality of short forms of communication(e.g. emojis, acronyms, signs, short texts, e-mails and work-life genres,etc.) grammar may seem to occupy an old-fashioned, redundant position in the human interaction. It should be borne in mind that all these short forms actually refer to sentence that includes a structure just as when you see a no parking sign, you interpret it as "you must not park here". It is debatable whether we can do without grammar, or not, and it is well worth making the effort for learning other things. However, the nuance missed between "a little" and "very little", for example, may easily lead to a miscommunication (Even the choice made in the previous sentence for "may" and "might" changes the course of "your perception" of possibility as high and low).

In the future, there might be a recycling, which consumes the philosophy of the past with a slight, magical touch of technology. As long as we can merge technology and language teaching methodology, which has been applied and tested, a unique learning experience could be achieved.

Conclusion

To put it all in a nutshell, we need grammar for a true, flawless, and direct channel to the addressee's mind. On the other hand, the ideal mode of delivery (inductive and implicit) should be watched by the practitioners. Needless to say, technology will keep leaving its traces on the human learning. However, digital learning will need to be reshaped so that teaching and learning within formal schooling could be based on a curriculum. For this to realize, it is the responsibility of the people involved in education to systematize the learning of all forms through the digital world, to channel the learner to the platforms where language learning is treated as a unique experience, not the language that is picked, but the language that has its own way.

References

[1]   Weaver, C. "Teaching grammar in context", Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Heinemann, 1996.
[2]   Nassaji, H. & Fotos, S. "Current developments in research on the teaching of grammar", Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 24, 126-145, 2004.
[3]   Borg, S. "Teacher cognition and language education: Research and practice", London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006.
[4]   Borg, S. & Burns, A. "Integrating grammar in adult TESOL classrooms", Applied Linguistics, 29, 456-482, 2008.
[5]   Fotos, S. "Traditional and grammar translation methods for second language teaching" In E. Hinkel (Eds.) Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning (pp. 653-670). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005.
[6]   Cobbett, W. "A grammar of the English language in a series of letters", Published by Cobbett, printed by Mills, Jowett, and Mills, 1819.
[7]   Hartwell, P., "Grammar, grammars, and the teaching of grammar", College English, 47(2), 105-127, 1985.
[8]   Bowen, T. & Marks, J., "Inside Teaching" Oxford : Heinemann ELT, 1994.
[9]   O'keeffe, A.,McCarthy, M., & Carter, R., "From corpus to classroom: Language use and language teaching", Cambridge University Press, 2007.
[10]   Johns, T. & King, P. (Eds.), "Classroom concordancing", Special Issue of ELR Journal 4, University of Birmingham: Centre for English Language Studies, 1991.