

TEACHING GRAMMAR IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS IN THE AMPARA DISTRICT

AMM. Navaz¹ & FRF Sama²

^{1,2}Department of English Language Teaching
South Eastern University of Sri Lanka
navazseusl@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In the Sri Lankan context, long after the introduction of the Communicative Approach to language teaching, the tendency is to base the teaching of English on the teaching of grammar. Unarguably, grammar is an important component of language. However, there are many issues in relation to teaching and learning of it. Teachers adopt different methods to teach grammar which students are unaware of. The deductive and inductive approaches, also known as rule-driven and discovery approaches respectively, are the two popular ways most teachers use to teach grammar. This study investigated the perception of 15 English teachers who teach both secondary and tertiary levels and 80 students of tertiary level on teaching and learning grammar: the effectiveness of explicit teaching of it, and the specific sub-components of grammar which learners found difficult or easy to learn. Questionnaire surveys were followed by discussions with the sample. It was revealed that teachers like to teach grammar and students like to learn it. Both parties are aware of the importance of having a sound knowledge of grammar for language development. However, students feel that learning grammar in isolation is boring. Nevertheless, they are reluctant to do away with grammar lessons. It was revealed that majority of the teachers were completely unaware of grammar teaching approaches.

Key words: *deductive approach, explicit teaching, grammar, inductive approach, language development*

INTRODUCTION

Grammar means several things for several people. The concept Grammar usually brings a notion of certain areas of language, mainly parts of speech into the minds of ESL learners. Traditionally in Sri Lankan English classes, teaching of English means teaching of several tenses with a focus on parts of speech such verbs, nouns, etc. Lessons in schools rarely focus on students' production abilities such as speaking or writing, rather they were keen on mastering the grammar rules. But later this pattern was changed with the introduction of communicative approaches to teaching English where appropriate balance was maintained between different skills, mainly: reading, writing, grammar and



vocabulary skills. Nevertheless, listening and speaking skills were impossible to be focused within Sri Lankan English classes.

Our experience in the university has witnessed students' willingness to sit with lower ability groups in order to learn the basics of English. By the Basics students mean aspects of Grammar. Irrespective of students' language proficiency, we could notice, the tendency of several students is to prefer learning Grammar which they believe is necessary for developing the language. In contrast, studies report (e.g. Jean and Simard, 2011) learning and teaching grammar is boring. Even though generally ESL teachers and learners agree on the importance of teaching and learning grammar, there are differences in the way grammar should be taught. Arising from the principle of Grammar Translation Method (Richards and Rodgers, 2001), grammar was taught as a separate lesson with a heavy focus on grammar rules, using mother tongue. Ellis defines grammar teaching as:

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. (Ellis, 2006: 84)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grammar teaching is defined into two broad categories by Ellis (ibid): narrow definition and broad definition. The narrow definition elucidates that grammar teaching as the traditional grammar teaching (TGT) that involves "presentation and practice of discrete grammatical structures" (2006: 84). He further explains the broad definition of grammar teaching as the one that: "[...] 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" (2006: 84).

Learning a language basically means learning its grammar (Takala, 2016). In the process of learning, grammar occupies a central position (Greenbaum and Nelson, 2002). Hence, it has been a debate whether grammar should be taught through the explicit presentation of grammatical rules or through its use. ESL practitioners discuss about two possible ways of teaching grammar to students. One is inductive approach and other one is deductive approach (Thornbury, 1999). Takala (2016) explains the deductive approach as 'teachers might get their students involved with the new grammar topic by using leading questions and then introducing the topic of the day themselves' (2016: 18), while the deductive pattern is followed in the traditional grammar-translation method.

Takala further states that the latter approach is closely related to explicit teaching and the Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) model.

According to Nassaji and Fotos (2011: 4) the PPP model consists of a structured three-stage sequence for grammar instruction: a presentation stage, a practice stage, and a production stage. In the presentation stage, the new grammar rule or structure is introduced, usually through a text, a dialogue, or a story that includes the structure. In the practice stage, students are given various kinds of written and spoken exercises to repeat or reproduce the new forms. Then the production stage comes, where learners are encouraged to use the rules that they have learned in the presentation and practice stages, more freely and in more communicative activities.

Nassaji and Fotos (2011) explain the purpose of each stages. The purpose of the presentation stage is to help students become familiar with the new grammatical structure and keep it in their short-term memory, while the practice stage is to help students gain control of the knowledge introduced in the presentation stage and finally the aim of the practice stage is to fully master the new form by enabling learners to internalize the rules and use them automatically and spontaneously, which helps develop fluency. Nevertheless, Takala (2016) considers that although the PPP-model is a very popular lesson structure, teaching grammar does not have to consist of these three stages.

Being the focus on how students perceive learning grammar now we pay our attention to studies that deal with students' perception with regard to learning grammar. Pazaver and Wang (2009) investigated the impact of explicit instruction of grammar teaching among the foreign students in a Canadian university. They found that the participants, who are Non-Native Speakers of English, were in favour of grammar instruction and considered it was very important for a person to learn a new language. The study asserts that explicit grammar teaching is beneficial to learners despite the current movement toward a communicative approach to English language teaching.

Nabei (1995) studied perception of learning grammar among the Japanese students learning in American universities and found that Japanese students considered direct grammar instruction is not necessary for successful language learning. They were satisfied with the communicative instruction. This view that students did not like direct grammar instruction contrasts with the view expressed by Pazaver and Wang (2009) above. Takala (2016) also considers that the goal of teaching grammar should be a successful communication. Another view supports Nabei (1995) and Takala (2016) is of Sopin (2015) who studied the importance of form focused grammar instruction or explicit grammar instruction among the Libyan undergraduates. He found that even though students felt that direct or explicit grammar teaching was important at the

beginning stage, when their language proficiency improved they favoured communicative approaches.

Sadat (2017), as a result of his review on teaching grammar, concludes that language instructors should blend grammar teaching with Communicative Language Teaching in order to achieve both linguistics and communicative competence in the classroom. He further states that 'any language instructor should take into consideration some important questions such as what, how, when, and why should we teach grammar?' Also, teaching grammar will largely depend on the level of the learners, therefore a good teacher always teaches based on the levels of the learners' (2017: 6).

The foregoing brief review indicates that there are arguments for and against the direct teaching of grammar. Even though there is an agreement that learning grammar is favourable, the fact has not been empirically proven in our context. Despite the studies that investigate the students' perception regarding learning grammar are available in other contexts, in the South East Asian context such studies are rarely available. The English language teaching, being traditionally influenced by Grammar Translation Method and Audio Lingual Method in this part of the world, a study to investigate the students' perception of learning grammar seems important. Hence, this study was undertaken to investigate the following research questions.

1. What do the students perceive about the importance of learning English grammar at tertiary level?
2. What do the teachers perceive about teaching grammar?

METHODOLOGY

Student questionnaire, which was adopted from Vasiljeva (2007), was used to collect the data for this study. Initially, the student questionnaire was pre-tested with 4 students from the third year Arts students. After the pre-test a few changes to the questions were made. As samples for the study, 80 third year students from the Faculty of Arts & Culture were selected. In the third year there are 220 students divided into six groups. They have been grouped according to their ability level based on a placement test conducted at the beginning of their academic study. The students who participated in this study are in group 3 and 4, the average; 1 being top and 6 being the weakest. These students have already completed their two years of academic studies including 4 semesters of English classes. Each semester lasts for 13-15 weeks. English is taught as a compulsory 2 credit course for three years in the Faculties for the general degree.

These 80 students volunteered to answer the questionnaires. Of the 80, five students follow a special degree in TESL (Teaching English as Second Language). The questionnaires were in English and an instructor explained a few complicated questions to them in the mother tongue before they answered them. Within the scope of the study the views and perceptions of lecturers/instructors were not included.

In addition, 15 English teachers/instructors were interviewed individually using questionnaires and their views were also accommodated. Of the 15, 10 are from secondary level school teachers and 5 work at university as instructors.

The collected data were summarized and the data obtained from the interview were tabulated to explain the underlying reasons behind the interview questions.

Basic information about the surveyed students

When the students were asked at what age they started learning English, only 10 students stated that they have been learning English regularly from grade 3, while others stated that they did not have regular English classes from Grade 3. In Sri Lankan school system, English is taught from grade 3 to GCE A/L¹. Further, the majority of the students (93%) have learnt English from school and among them, 60% have learnt from tuitions too. Only a minority (10%) has got the assistance from friends and family to learn English.

Students' ability to identify grammar lessons

At school:

Students were asked whether they could differentiate learning grammar from learning English during their school studies. Forty students perceived that they could differentiate learning grammar from learning English. Of them, eighteen students mentioned that learning grammar was difficult compared to learning of other skills such as reading and listening.

At University:

Sixty-eight students said that they could differentiate learning grammar from learning English during university studies. Hence, all the students listed the grammar components they studied as they remembered. Students had marked more than one item in the list.

Table 1: Grammar components studied at university

Grammar components	No of students
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¹ Schools enroll students from grade 1 when children complete their 5 years of age. From grade 3 English is taught until GCE A/L (General Certificate in Education- Advanced Level), which is the pre-university entry examination conducted at the end of the school studies, that is after 13 years.

Tenses	48
Word class	40
Voices	18
Phrases	06
Clauses	16
Sentence structure	08
Preposition	06
Conjunction	08
Idioms	04
Vocabulary	02

Students' willingness to study grammar and its importance

Students also revealed their preference to study English grammar. Eighty-two (82%) percent of the surveyed students prefer to learn English grammar more often, while none reported 'rarely' or 'not at all', as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Preference to study English grammar

Yes, more often	70
Sometimes	10
Rarely	00
Not at all	00

Ninety-four (94%) percent of the students agreed that learning grammar is important while the rest did not answer this question. Students also believed that learning grammar helps them improve their language proficiency. The grammar lessons provide a knowledge of correct structural patterns needed to practise the language. They stated that knowledge of grammar is important to avoid the mistakes and improve the accuracy of language, mainly in speaking and writing. Also, seventy-eight of the surveyed students agreed that their English knowledge improves by way of studying grammar.

Moreover, the students' opinion regarding the importance of grammar knowledge to develop the language skills such as reading, writing, speaking and listening was found. Majority of the students are of the opinion that knowledge of grammar is important to develop all the language skills as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Importance of grammar knowledge to develop language skills

Skills	Yes	No	Partly Agree	I don't know
Reading	73	03	04	00
Writing	80	00	00	00
Speaking	73	02	05	00
Listening	67	03	10	00

As a follow-up students were also asked whether studying grammar helps improve their overall English proficiency and the majority agree/strongly agree with this claim, as shown in the figure 1.

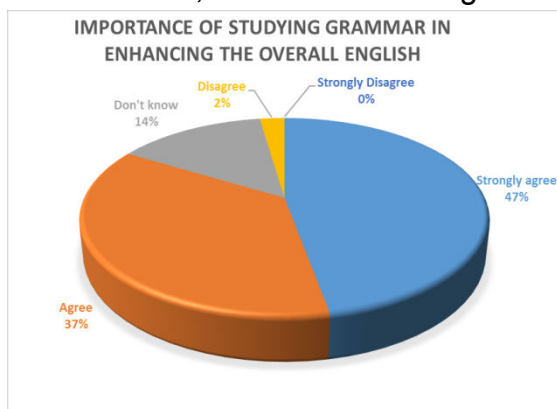


Figure 1: Importance of studying grammar

Self-assessment of students' grammar knowledge

Students were asked to rate their own grammar knowledge and also to indicate as to how they judge their grammar knowledge themselves. Table 4 indicates their self-assessment, while table 5 explains how they could judge themselves. Nearly 38% and 40% rated their grammar knowledge as average and satisfactory respectively, while the rest claimed themselves as poor.

Table 4: Self-assessment of students' grammar knowledge

Grammar knowledge	No of students
High	00
Average	30
Satisfactory	35
Poor	15
Very poor	00

Each student claimed that they assessed their grammar knowledge by the ways, as shown in table 5. Each of the way was marked from 'a' to 'e', where 'a' refers to the top reason, while 'e' is for a low reason. More than the average number of students (54%) considered that they could rate their grammar knowledge based on the marks they gained, followed by judging their own performance. Friends' feedback and others' opinion are the least cited reasons to assess self-rating.

Table 5: Ways of judging students' self-assessment

Ways	No of students who assessed their grammar knowledge by marking from 'a' to 'e'. 'a' for top 'e' for low (percentage in parenthesis)				
	a	b	c	d	e
Judging your own performance	25 (31%)	25 (31%)	18 (23%)	07 (9%)	05 (6%)
Evaluating by the marks you gain	44 (54%)	19 (24%)	15 (19%)	02 (3%)	00 (0%)
Teachers' comments	08 (9%)	22 (26%)	22 (26%)	18 (21%)	15 (18%)
Friends' feedback	04 (6%)	13 (16%)	21 (26%)	32 (40%)	10 (12%)
Others' opinion	00 (0%)	03 (3%)	05 (6%)	20 (26%)	52 (65%)

Further, sixty students reported that the grammar knowledge they gained in school is useful to their English learning in university but sixteen among them did not consider useful, while nine students claimed "Don't know".

Students' overall English proficiency

While table 4 presents the students' grammar knowledge as self-rated, the figure 2 elucidates the students' overall English proficiency. None of the students claimed that their English proficiency is very good. The majority of the students felt that they belonged to satisfactory, whereas a slightly less percentage claimed that their proficiency is average.

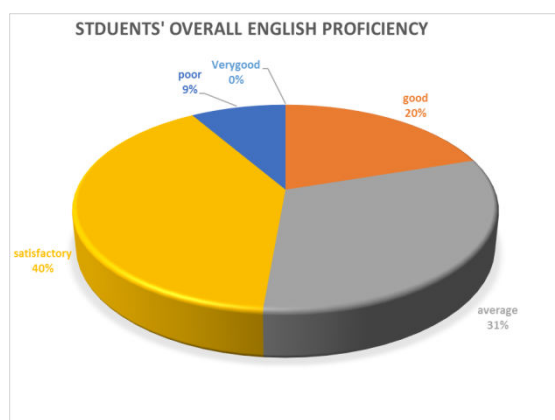


Figure 2: Students' overall English proficiency

In addition, nearly 50% of the surveyed students stated that learning grammar was easy, while the rest found it difficult. Of those students who felt that learning

grammar was difficult, nearly half preferred to skip learning from applying grammar rules if they find it hard.

Level of easiness/ difficulty of learning different grammar items

The table 6 below gives the description of students' perception of level of easiness or difficulty of learning particular grammar items where they rated from 1 to 5 (1- not at all difficult, 5 - extremely difficult).

Table 6: Level of easiness/ difficulty of learning different grammar items

Grammar features	No of students (Percentage in parenthesis)				
	1	2	3	4	5
Scale					
Present tense: simple & continuous	35 (44%)	28 (35%)	13 (17%)	02 (02%)	02 (02%)
Past tense: simple & continuous	27 (34%)	29 (36%)	18 (24%)	03 (04%)	02 (02%)
Past perfect tense	15 (19%)	20 (25%)	14 (18%)	16 (20%)	15 (18%)
Future tense: simple & continuous	31 (39%)	21 (26%)	13 (18%)	09 (10%)	06 (07%)
Active and passive voice	20 (24%)	10 (14%)	8 (11%)	16 (22%)	26 (29%)
Direct and indirect speech	06 (07%)	07 (09%)	14 (18%)	06 (07%)	47 (59%)
Present perfect tense*	06	00	00	00	01

* Additionally written by seven students and was not analyzed

Accordingly, majority of the students considered active and passive voice and direct and indirect speech are more difficult areas for learning, compared to present tense and past tense which were treated easy.

Ways of learning grammar rules

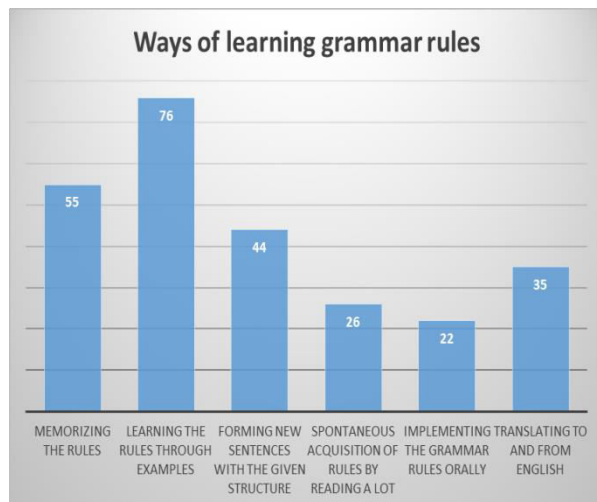


Figure 3: Different ways of learning grammar rules

Students were asked to mark the different ways of learning grammar rules (figure 3). In this question, the students were asked to mark more than one option. The majority stated that they learn grammar rules through studying examples about the grammar rules. Next to this, students selected memorizing the rules.

Purpose of studying English rules

The table (No. 7) below shows why the students study English grammar. Here also students could select more than one option. Students' selections were rank ordered. The reason 'passing the examination' was the least preferred option.

Table 7: Purpose of studying English rules

Purposes	No	Rank order
To get overall English proficiency	54	5
To get fluent in spoken and written English	60	3
To speak and write without errors	66	1
To be confident when communicating in English	62	2
Like to learn English grammar	56	4
Just for the sake of passing exam	20	6

In addition, 95% of the surveyed students had the opinion that studying English is very important while the rest considered important. In addition, students' views with regard to the factors that are important to know the English grammar is shown below in Table 8.

Table 8: Importance of studying grammar

Reasons for studying grammar	No
To know the rules	36
For applying the rules in writing	56
For the application of rules in spoken	52
For error-free communication/grammar	60
To identify the errors made grammatically	46
To communicate rather than having knowledge in grammar	46

Findings from the focus group discussions

Most of the findings mentioned above were supported by the data from the Focus Group Discussions. Nevertheless there was a divergence in the view only on an aspect. In the Focus Group Discussions students unanimously stated that they did not have a clear idea to identify teaching of grammar from teaching of other language skills at schools, whereas in the questionnaire survey 50 students reported that they could identify the difference at schools. Other than this difference, students confirmed their willingness to study grammar and are interested in learning it. Moreover, similar to the survey students claimed that their grammar knowledge is basic and average.

In addition, they expressed that learning grammar alone in classes would be boring. They wanted to study grammar lessons along with other modules. This view was supported by Zheng (2015) who concludes his study as follows:

Explicit grammar teaching pays too much attention to language forms, which makes that most students can make sentences grammatically accurate, but cannot communicate with simple English. Implicit grammar teaching classroom atmosphere is relatively active, which can provide more interaction between teachers and students through the interactive feedback, thus the output of students is more efficient and accurate. (2015: 559)

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

For this study 15 teachers/Instructors in English were interviewed, of them 10 come from secondary schools and the rest from university. Of those 10 teachers, 5 of them have more than 10 years of experience, while others have less than 5 years and the least one was only just over Teacyear of experience.

Benefits of teaching grammar

Teachers believed that by teaching grammar they themselves enhance their own grammatical competence. This knowledge enables them to write and speak more accurately with confidence. In addition, teachers get satisfaction as they could help the students write and speak more accurately. Teachers also believed that grammar and writing skills are inter-related where grammar is necessary for students' errorless writing. It helps the students enhance their language skills by understanding the structure and write and speak more accurately. Teachers considered grammar knowledge is important in developing language proficiency as it is connected with the four skills such as writing, speaking, listening and reading. Hence, grammar is important to master those skills accurately. Teachers also asserted that students should know the grammar rules as it is vital for communication as well as comprehension of the texts.

Ways of enhancing teachers' grammar knowledge

Teachers claimed that they use different grammar books in order to develop their grammar knowledge. Some of them use internet to have access to different grammar sites. They are also satisfied that the prescribed text books have adequate grammar knowledge.

Of those interviewed 15 English teachers/English Instructors, 8 of them have attended at-least a seminar/ workshop organized by the department of education and all of them are school teachers. The university instructors do not have any professional training in teaching grammar but two of them have more than 10 years of experience and they have educational qualification that are connected to language or linguistics.

Ways of teaching grammar

Teachers use different ways to teach their grammar lessons. They use the prescribed text books and self-prepared grammar lessons too. Some of them use presentations, group discussion and games.

Attitude towards teaching and learning grammar

All the interviewed teachers agreed that teaching grammar is important for students' language development. They have a positive attitude towards teaching grammar. They reported that students also liked to learn grammar but when the grammar is taught in lengthy lessons students feel boredom. Furthermore, teachers use various strategies to teach grammar like grouping the students for discussion, ask them to make presentations, conducting competitions, provide examples of grammar rules and ask them to write more similar structures, etc.

Teaching approaches

When the teachers were asked about any specific approaches they use when they teach grammar nearly 10 of them mentioned that they use communicative approach. The teaching traditionally based on the PPP model (Presentation, practice and production) in the case of teachers trained at training colleges and for those who studied an HNDE course it is 5E methods (engage, explore, explain, extend, and evaluate). The details of these methods are not discussed within the scope of this paper.

When they were asked if they knew deductive or inductive approaches they said they knew, but when they were asked to describe what they are they couldn't do it. These two approaches are described briefly in the literature review section. Both these approaches are used exclusively for teaching grammar (Thornbury, 1999). But the teachers are not aware of the technical aspects of these teaching approaches.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

At schools, students did not have a clear understanding between learning grammar and learning English. They treated both as learning English. But at the university the majority are now able to do so. In addition, they are able to remember the grammar areas taught to them.

At university, almost all the students wanted to study English grammar and they do treat them as important. Moreover, the students felt that grammar knowledge is important for developing language skills such as reading, writing, speaking and listening. Eighty (80%) percent of the students felt that their grammar knowledge is either average or poor. Students also evaluated that some areas of grammar are difficult to learn (i.e. direct/ indirect speech). They reported that they learnt grammar rules through memorizing grammar rules and studying examples. Students also believed that studying grammar rules would help them develop the language skills and the overall English proficiency. They also pointed out that learning grammar alone would be boring and it should be taught along with other skills (i.e. reading or writing).

Similarly interviewed teachers also reported that grammar is important for students' language development. They liked to teach grammar and reported that students also preferred to learn grammar. Similar to students' claim teachers also stated that students get bored when grammar is taught directly.

The outcome of the study indicated that students like to learn grammar continuously throughout their study but they do not want exclusive and explicit grammar lessons. They prefer to learn grammar along with other skills. Hence, it is the duty of the language lecturers/ instructors to teach grammar without making it boring to the students. Further this study did not make direct observation of grammar teaching in classes nor did it obtain an in-depth view of teachers. Therefore, a future study is needed to investigate the teaching of grammar, mainly to find the methods used in teaching grammar, their impact and also to find the constraints faced in teaching grammar.

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