

IMPORTANCE OF GRAMMAR IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Abstract:

Languages are an inseparable part of verbal communication. They are the ‘codes’ used in the communication process where a sender ‘encodes’ the message and sends it to the receiver via a proper media and then the receiver ‘decodes’ it to understand the meaning and send a feedback. This completes the communication process. In order to communicate effectively, one needs to not just use but also understand and determine the language that is required to be used. This leads to put focus on the learning of languages competently and effectively.

Generally we as children start with our ‘native’ or ‘mother’ languages but we do not necessarily learn them. It is a process called language acquisition where we subconsciously acquire a specific language without any knowledge of its rules and regulations. Maybe at later stages of the education process, we actually get to learn the nuances but that doesn't make us any less proficient in practicing communication in our native language. But when it comes to other languages, sometimes quite effectively and ironically termed as ‘foreign’ languages, it is definitely the process of language learning that has to be undertaken. Language learning is completely different from acquisition. Here we are consciously plunged into the rules governing the basics that is the reading-writing and speaking of the particular language and are sometimes also made aware of its literary history.

In the case of ESL students, the need to an in depth language learning is all the more important and thus comes the importance of learning the grammar of the language. ‘Grammar’ can be broadly defined as a set of rules related to the structure and usage of the language. Hence one can neither write nor speak in any given language without learning its grammar.

In order to achieve a perfect teaching learning scenario, the teachers need to facilitate a proper balance of learning both grammar and communication so that any ESL student can achieve complete efficiency in not just the ‘acquired’ but also the ‘learned’ language.

Key Words: Communication, English, Grammar, Language, Learning.

Importance of Grammar in learning English as a second language

According to the Collins’ dictionary, language can be defined as, “a system of communication which consists of a set of sounds and written symbols used by the people of a particular country or region for talking or writing.” If we examine and inspect this definition carefully then we’ll be able to see that Language can be essentially of two types-spoken and written, very much similar

to communication. As a matter of fact, it can be rightly said that communication and language are inter dependent and the need to communicate or to share idea is what has given rise to language for man required a tool that would help the him to translate his thoughts and ideas into concrete, understandable messages. Language is essentially an abstract phenomenon but then an everlasting one. It has a cultural continuity and reference with the growth and development of human civilization. Man's endeavors in written and verbal communication have been made functional by the help and usage of language. Otherwise communication would have likely been redundant after a certain stage of development of civilization.

Samuel Johnson defined language as the “dress of thought.” We cannot help but agree with him because only thinking of an idea to be communicated to someone is not communication. The complete process of communication can only start to happen when our thoughts are garmented by language and then communicated to the intended receiver as that is the most important step for the process to begin with. It would not be wrong to say that; that is indeed the very reason why language is referred to as the ‘code’ of communication. While sending the thought or idea, the sender ‘encodes’ it with the help of language and sends it via the appropriate medium to the receiver who, in turn, ‘decodes’ the thought and on understanding the meaning imparted, sends a feedback to the sender. The feedback is again the thought of the receiver clothed in the garbs of language. And thus the process of communication goes on. One might argue that nonverbal communication is an important and major part of the everyday communication process functioning without the help of any language but even though nonverbal is a huge percentage of modern day communication, it is not the entire of it and can never be. Verbal and written communications are the two major pillars by which communication is defined and identified by all. These two forms are as old as the process of communication itself and their origin could be traced to the earliest pages of the human history. Example can be cited of the cuneiform writing originating in Sumer which is noted by language scientists and historians as the first known form of written language but spoken language precedes this by at least tens of thousands of years.

In order to talk about language, it is definitely necessary to put a certain amount of focus on the history of its origin, about how it came into existence. The said history is an oft debated topic with theories and counter theories proclaiming different types of origination. Where one theory puts language as to have appeared in its modern day final form as we have now, another says that it has a historic origin and thereby all the languages are connected in some way. The second theory seems plausible in more ways than one as some languages do have a common ancestor and originate from the same language family. The Indo-European family of languages is the most spoken one consisting of diverse languages such as English, Hindi, and Russian etc. So it will perhaps not be an exaggeration to say that the languages have their own parentage and siblings and share similar characteristics with each other. Such a brotherhood could also be then traced back to earlier languages of cave paintings or Egyptian hieroglyphics which were mainly symbolic and later alphabets could have easily been developed from those symbols implying the same meaning and it helped communication to flourish.

We humans need to understand, assimilate and use the languages in order to continue our communicative efforts and activities successfully. How does one do that? There are actually two processes for language adaptation and they are i) language learning and ii) language acquisition. These two processes are radically different from each other in the manner that language acquisition begins from our subconscious levels right from our childhood. All of us have our ‘mother language’ or ‘native language’ which we start learning from our family as it seeps into our subconscious and we do not necessarily learn it, but acquire it. Here we are not taught about the rules of grammar or the usage of it but still we do not falter to communicate in our mother

tongue. Later on when one is consciously into the education scenario that one might be taught of the nuances of his/her native language but the initiation definitely happens with acquisition.

Language learning on the other hand is a much different concept. The primary difference between the two is one begins at the subconscious and the other happens when one is fully conscious to take in the nuances of the language in its entirety. Here we are consciously taught and take in the rules and regulations governing the proper usage of the language so that we are able to carry out the three basic requirements in case of any language usage, the reading-writing and speaking phenomena without any glitch. Whenever we learn any second language, which sometimes one aptly refers to as a 'foreign' language the process we have to take is definitely language learning and not language acquisition.

The process of learning any language also involves learning its rules of usage as mentioned earlier. These are a set of rules that are based on the structural qualities of the language and govern its usages and they can be defined as the 'grammar' of that said language. The question that arises here is knowing the actual concept of 'grammar' and also knowing its importance in learning a language. . Every language that exists has its own grammar forms that in a way govern the language and ensure its proper functioning. This concept of grammar can be defined (apparently) as a set of rules based on the structure of any language that helps one in learning the proper usage and encompasses all the possible forms such as phrases, clauses, words, phonetics etc. As the languages evolved, so did their grammar. The development of grammar became essential with the advent of the written representations. One cannot present a language in its written format unless there are certain suitable rules governing how to go about it. Thus grammar becomes very essential.

But it would be entirely wrong to think that only the written representation of any language would need grammar. Correct usage and rules are equally important while speaking too. Verbal communication becomes faulty if it is not accentuated by proper grammar. Mispronunciation of words, misrepresentation of intended meaning in a communication format are errors that can readily occur if the speaker does not have a proper knowledge of grammar of the language used. In case of many ESL learners it so happens that they are not able to achieve a proper balance of excelling at both proper grammatical writing and communication. In today's age, majority have the feeling that communication is the key to success but it is only half the battle won. Proper written representation coupled with proper grammatical communication should be the actual target for any ESL learner.

Also studying grammar does not mean just studying or memorizing the rules to be an adept writer-speaker-listener of the language. What grammar also includes are the study of words or what is commonly termed as 'building a vocabulary.' For any kind of communication, one needs to have the proper set of words that can make the message clear and comprehensible to the audience or listener. If a speaker is at a loss of words while delivering a speech then the audience will surely have second thoughts about the authenticity of the speaker and his belief in his speech. In case of writing also, if one has to edit or rephrase one's write up a number of times then the actual essence of the matter is sure to get lost somewhere. Thus it is of immense importance to not just learn words, but to also know the proper usage of them at proper, required places and this can only be achieved by comprehensive grammar training. A person with a good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary can make any written or spoken content readable and interesting.

When students learn English as their 'second' language, we can very well say that the process employed is that of learning and not acquisition for they are not subconsciously acquiring but are consciously taking in the structural rules of usage in order to present the language completely and

effectively in both the written and verbal form. Here it is very important to focus on reading-writing and speaking in order to emerge as a complete and effective language user for lacking the expertise in any one form would surely result in a negative impression as well as yield negative results. There are many situations through which the students are examined and evaluated. They have to go through written and oral examinations, make formal presentations and also prepare themselves for the final scenario that is the job market which they need to face. In all these cases, having a strong grammatical knowledge to back them is very essential. It can be easily imagined that if one fails to make a good and lasting impression on the first attempt then that might necessarily mean the end and never result in a second attempt. A faulty resume cannot help a candidate secure a coveted job. Similarly, a faulty speech at an interview will also mean that the candidate will be shown the door. Thus it is very important for the learners to keep in mind the final outcome that they are aiming at.

The various courses of language learning that are offered now days either focus on being all communicative or are entirely grammar based. None of them serve the required purpose and any student of either of such courses only becomes a half learner and not a complete learner of the language. Such a course cannot help one to become a proficient language user. It is thus a responsibility of the teachers or instructors to form a course that would make any student an all-rounder of the language. Now the question that arises is what necessary steps are to be taken in order to construct such a course.

The ideal technique to be implemented while teaching grammar to ESL students is a topic that is open to various debates and considerations. Scientists, linguists, researchers and academicians have long been working on topics and propounding their theories to achieve an ideal set up. But the reality is that there is hardly any ideal. It usually depends totally upon the teacher to think of ways in which to impart the best possible lessons to her class. A class is always a heterogeneous body, so, the teacher has to be alert as to the needs of each and every pupil and cater to them accordingly. Rather than following any rule book or guided by any theory of academicians, a teacher would be able to have the best class if she and her students are attuned to each other in their pluses and minuses so that the pluses could be worked upon and the minuses could be corrected or avoided. The learners are each different and unique from one another. They might be united in their commonality of learning the language as their second one, but they are also radically different from each other in many aspects which are extremely important to be considered by the teacher in making an all-welcome classroom. The factors are:

Different style- the learning style of no two students is similar. So, trying to teach all the students in a similar fashion might not be a very good way of dealing with a class. Though a general set of rules or instructions need to be followed and applied to each student, special attention given to students separately and address them according to their needs is always a good idea.

Age- generally learners of one particular age group belong to particular batches or classes and there is not a very big age gap between them but in case there is or there is a difference in the age in which the learner starts his education then that could be a matter of concern and the teacher needs to give special attention to that because age is definitely a factor that helps in developing the mental makeup of an individual and therefore helps or hinders his/her learning abilities.

Proficiency- the proficiency with which one student takes in the subject or manages to learn it, varies from the others. It can never be the same with two or more. If one is about to attain 99%

of the lessons successfully, others might be at 97% or 98%. Thus, providing a general set of instructions to everyone or expecting the same results from everyone should not be something that a teacher can ask for. Rather he/she should be able to deal with 99% as well as 50% attainment and try to make sure that no one is lagging behind.

Educational background- this is one very important factor because educational background of a person influences the culture, values, ethics, subject learning ability and a lot of other important qualities thereby directly affecting the overall level of performance. This point cannot be avoided by any instructor while planning a class.

Generally teachers and linguists refer to two basic methods while teaching grammar to their students. They are:

i) **Deductive approach:** here the teacher himself or herself gives the students the set of rules to be learnt and used.

ii) **Inductive approach:** in this case, the teacher does not directly give the rules to the students but provides them with means of finding out, discovering and learning the rules by themselves. Comparing these two approaches, one might say that the second one needs to be given some more time as the students will be doing it almost entirely by themselves. In case of the first one, it makes it definitely easier when one is made aware of the rules. The next step that follows is to understand and apply them as required. But there is one thing that is common to both the approaches and that is the fact that the teacher himself/herself needs to understand the subject and its intricacies and also he/she needs to plan the lesson before execution. If the teacher is clear about the subject and the method of teaching then the learning and understanding of the subject becomes much easier to the students.

In most of the cases of the ESL students, because they come from a different background and accustomed to different ways teaching, probably more conventional, and for the very fact that the language is 'foreign' to them, they lack the basic grammatical skills and might not be able to grasp the language in its entirety from the beginning. Therefore, the role of the instructor becomes that of a facilitator as well, one who is able to facilitate the language learning to the maximum advantage of the students.

For this, some type of improvisation is necessary on the part of the teachers because normal conventional methods could be drab and uninteresting which the students might try to avoid. Also, simply memorizing the rules of the subject is not enough. This problem could be solved by using various creative grammar games, involving students in group activities, and/or giving tasks that will arouse their interest in the subject, as well as make them aware of the rules of usage.

What we can conclude from the above discussion is that the entire process has to be student-friendly. If the student or the learner does not feel at ease with the learning environment then by no means can one expect to reach the best possible results. Again, it follows from here that while making the process student friendly, it has to be kept in mind that of learners of English as a second language or even for that matter neither out of first language English learners but what one can easily become is a proper language user in the required fields of communication, written and verbal.

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