The Dire Need of English Grammar for ESL Learners of India

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Abstract

As Communicative competence and linguistic competence are inseparable components of a language, the alacrity and dexterity of grammatical competence for ESL learners in India has become the order of the day. Lack of grammatical competence has been putting the ESL learners on the doldrums as far as using English Language is concerned. With selecting structures judiciously and taking into consideration of learners' beliefs and expectations, grammar teaching help ESL learners improve their both linguistic and communicative competence. My heaps of experience over the years in teaching English language and literature to the teachers and learners have made me concentrate on the learners' perceptions and instructional strategies in grammar teaching and learning. With reference to the beliefs, attitude and knowledge, there has been a lot of compunction and laxity as far teachers and learners of the language concerned. There has been a conspicuous negligence on the part of the teachers and especially ESL learners in mastering the grammatical elements of English language. Hence, they have been badly equipped with innumerable blind spots and bottlenecks as far as learning of the second language i.e. English is concerned. As a result, in the globalised world, to communicate effectively they have been at loggerheads. Once in a blue moon, the very interest in learning the needful things is never termed as perfect practice. Gone are the days when one realizes the significance of the very saying 'practice makes man perfect'. Latterly, perfect practice makes man perfect. To the context, the very essence of grammar instruction in an ESL context has been latterly of utmost significance for students and teachers akin. A lot of research has been done on whether grammar should be taught in the classroom. Learning English has been a daunting task, particularly in these days when it has been considered the master key in international job market. Learners employ innumerable methods and involve various learning strategies and approaches to overcome the complexities of learning language. Many-a-people are of the opinion that grammar is a challenging task for ESL learners in the learning process. The paper highlights the importance of grammar for ESL learners in India.

Introduction

> *Grammar serves language; it has done and always will do. It has never been nor should ever be, the other way round.*
>
> **-Richard Palmer-The Good Grammar Guide**

Grammar is not a collection of hard and fast rules. It is more flexible and therefore more useful than that. Grammar gives us an account of the way in which a language is used by those who use it well.
As T.S.Eliot rightly says,

> *Clarity of thought is clarity of expression.*

A learner most of the times has a natural grammar design in the mind. The learner picks up chunks of language and not merely words in isolation. So there has been an established belief that all language users one or the other day use the framework of grammar rather unconsciously while speaking or writing.

One must understand the relationship between language and grammar. Language is a system of systems:

- It is a social activity.
- It is meaningful and purposeful.
- It is lively and dynamic.
- It is deep-rooted in culture and tradition.
- It is the combination of sounds/letters/forms/meanings and vice versa
- It is a set of habits
- It is a means of communication.
- It is a patterned human activity.
- It is a medium of literature.

Since working knowledge of grammar in English is imminent in instilling the much-needed confidence among the second language learners, the researcher felt the need of studying the significance of English grammar in teaching learning process for ESL learners in India. Of late, it is observed that wrong verb pattern of Indian speakers is hampering their speech and writing in English and causing unintelligibility.

Importance of English Language in the Current Scenario

For many years, English has been referred to as a global language: it has become the language of communication and technology, information, education and alike. Everybody seems to be learning English. English very soon will become the second language of all the people in the world. What experts say: by the year 2020, more than two billion people that's about one third of the world population will speak English as their second language. In case of not being well-equipped with the English language, one has always been in the danger of being excluded from what is going on in and around especially in the fields of education, business, software and in the world of technological advances. So far only two most important English's existed: they are American English and British English. In very near future, these two would be called as Native English and Majority English. Non-native English speakers have already out numbered the native speakers by four to one. Hence, especially in the era of knowledge, internet and technology, one must be well-versed with English language. The intelligibility of English language at personal and professional level has been imperative for the days to come.

Importance of English Grammar in Teaching Learning Process

Every language has its own special method of making words. The way in which words behave in a particular language is called grammar. The role played by grammar in any language is of prime significance. Grammar helps one to know how a language functions. If a person masters the grammar of the second language, to an extent, he can avoid the grammatical errors consciously. One can learn a language by his daily contact with exposition to the language. Grammar is a tool to build up one's own language without any misuse or mispresentation.

English grammar is a very essential tool to the second language learners of English. To the adult learners (above the age of 14), rules of the grammar must be taught in order to know the sentence patterns. For this, students have to construct more number of sentences with the proper grammatical features and make them become a fluent speaker or user of English. To all the learners, irrespective of the class or age, adequate practice must be provided.

While speaking or writing in a foreign language, one's use of words must obey the grammatical rules of the language concerned. The term 'grammar' in its broadest sense refers to the statements about the regularities of the language. In everyday use grammar evokes ideas about correctness of language elements. This view of grammar involves many value judgments about the acceptability of certain utterances. Language reflects culture, and it helps man for communication and gives a set of habits. Grammar can, therefore, be taken as a codification of observable characteristics of language body of speech.

According to the rule of nurture that Thornbury (2001) suggested in his theory called the rule of thumb, teaching doesn't always cause learning. Therefore, teachers have to provide right conditions for their students to help them learn the target language. While teachers are providing ideal learning conditions, they have to consider learners' beliefs and perceptions, as well. As Jean and Simard (2011) proposed "mismatched objectives may lead learners to perceive the teaching as deficient and teachers to perceive their students as unmotivated or uninterested." Obviously, this may cause irreparable damage on both teaching and learning processes. Basturkmen, Lowen, and Ellis (2004) defined the term "belief as the thoughts of what should be done, should be the case, and is preferable" for teaching. What is ignored until the first research on learners' beliefs by Horwitz in 1985 and 1988 is that learners have their own thoughts about what the lesson should be like. There is no doubt that if learners' beliefs cannot be realized and maintained during the teaching process, teaching again may not cause learning as Thornbury (2001) suggested.

Whether there is a match between learners and teachers' belief on language learning and whether teachers can understand the learners' expectations have been widely investigated since Horwitz's researches. Unfortunately, the results have indicated so far that teachers often fail to understand their learners' beliefs and expectation about learning. Feedback issue can be considered as a proof of the mismatched beliefs of students and teachers. It is found out that teachers do not always find beneficial to correct their learners' mistakes during communication, but it is found out that most of the adult EFL learners like being corrected for every single mistake that they do both in writing and speaking. Moreover, although some teachers who favor communicative approach in their lessons may not give importance to grammar teaching, their students may find grammar teaching quite necessary to acquire the target language as Schulz found out in 1996. The most important questions that need to be asked is that which side should make the decision, teachers or learners and what happens if there is never a match between what teachers provide and what learners want.

I believe that decisions about teaching must be made according to a mutual agreement of teachers and learners. Teachers should explain their own beliefs in advance and learn their learners' not only beliefs but also needs and expectations. It is certain that

teachers are the authority to determine the way the teaching progress but they need to persuade the learners with their expertise on the field and inform them in every step of language learning in order not to lose any learners during the teaching because of these mismatched beliefs.

Another issue to harm teaching process might be the content of teaching. Jean and Simard (2011) suggested that teachers should choose the grammar points to teach according to learners' need. According to them, "not all the structures are equally teachable and teachers should consider the urgency of modifying specific deficient aspects of learners' interlanguage." Also, I definitely agree with Jean and Simard (2011) that in order to avoid confusion, teachers should teach grammar prescriptively by focusing on the usage of the structures by native speakers. Have students memorize the rules which then turn out to be not quite right or are full of exceptions discourage learners and make them lose their faith in learning.

Although linguists and second language acquisition researchers are still discussing the necessity of grammar teaching, I believe that it is inessential to keep this argument going in terms of adult EFL learners. Since it is clear that the ability of mastering a language is directly connected with the mastering its grammar as Wang (2010) indicates. In other words communicative competence and linguistic competence are inseparable components of a language.

Findings

Data was collected through a questionnaire offered to 61 students enrolled in different schools and colleges who were studying English as second language. The participants were asked to rate the grammar topics that they had studied. This was done to determine the most common grammar problems faced by ESL learners and to provide recommendations to English grammar teachers. The responses to the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics. For the purpose of this study, the analysis focused on the grammar topics identified as 'Difficult' and 'Very difficult'. The questionnaire revealed the findings displayed in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Overall Percentages of the Grammar Topics Rated as 'Difficult' or 'Very Difficult'

Topic	Difficult	Very difficult
Past Perfect	5%	7%
Past Perfect Progressive	7%	8%
Past Modals	13%	8%
Reported Speech	16%	8%
Reported Speech (Commands)	13%	7%
Reported Speech (Yes/No Q)	11%	10%
Reported Speech (WH Q)	18%	7%
Passive	14%	8%
Stative Passive verbs	16%	5%
Causative Passive	13%	7%
Present Real Conditions	11%	7%
Past Real Conditions	11%	7%
Future Real Conditions	8%	10%

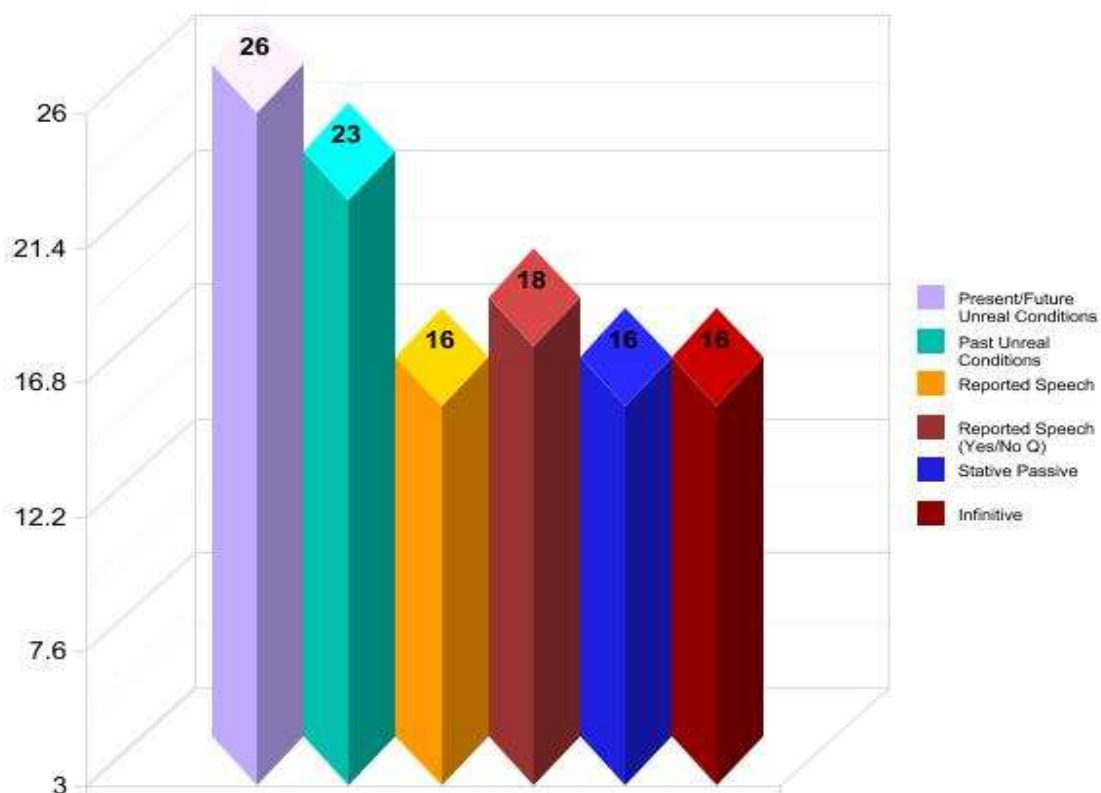|		
Present/Future Unreal Conditions	18%	26%
Past Unreal Conditions	21%	23%
Infinitive	16%	3%
Gerund	13%	5%

*Figure 1.*The most difficult grammar topics identified by the respondents

It can be seen from Figure 1 that *present/future unreal conditions*, *past unreal conditions*, and *reported speech (Yes/No questions)* were rated 'Difficult'. Figures 2 and 3 summarize the participants' responses to how often they apply the grammar topics listed on the questionnaire when they write essays and when they speak.
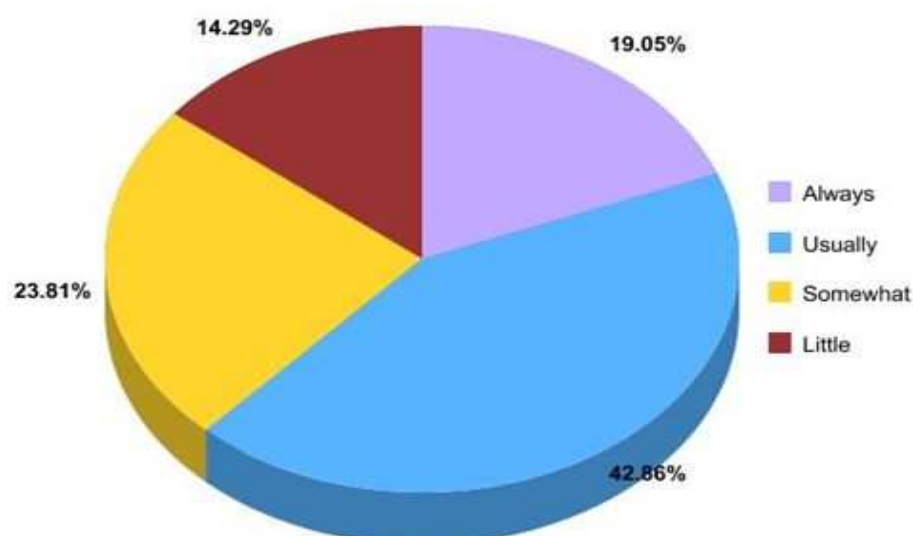
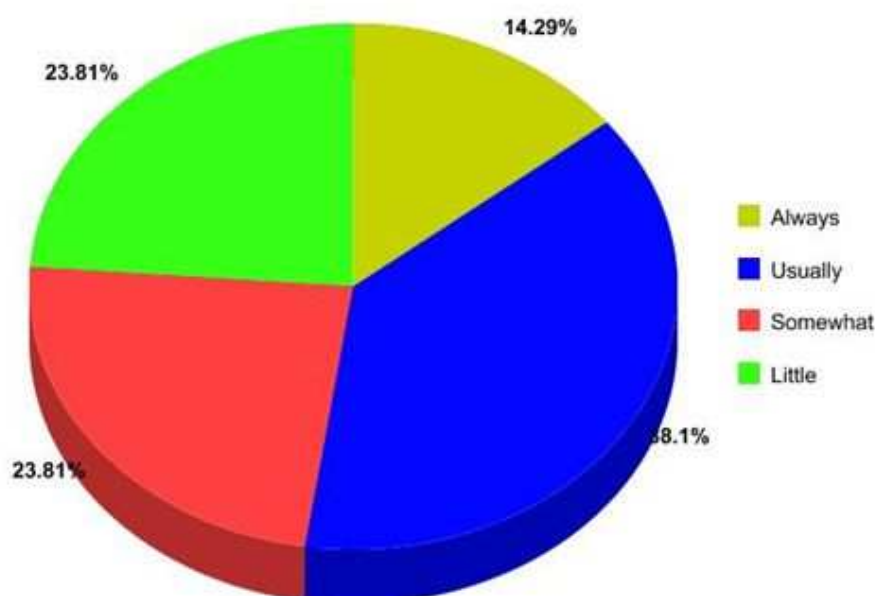*Figure 2*. The percentages of the use of grammar in essay writing

Figure 3.The percentages of the use of grammar in speaking

Discussion and implications

To conclude, this paper tried to gain some understanding of the grammar topics that ESL learners find challenging. The findings revealed that *unreal conditions*, *reported speech*, and *passive voice* were among the grammar topics that participants identified as difficult. The findings of this study might not be generalized because of some limitations. Other

grammatical points were not on the questionnaire such as prepositions and articles which may still pose some difficulties to even proficient EFL/ESL students. Moreover, students' responses to the questionnaire might not be enough to determine the most challenging English grammar topics because some respondents marked all the listed grammar topics as 'Very difficult'. Accordingly, for a future study, the researcher recommends the following. First, a random selection for the participants should be taken into consideration to yield more generalized findings. Second, core grammar topics such as articles, prepositions, and pronouns should be included as a part of the questionnaire. Finally, in addition to a questionnaire, another research instrument such as one-to-one interviews, students' writing samples, or a grammar test can be utilized. This would allow for more reliable results in order to compare, for example, the questionnaire responses to students' writing samples or answers in the one-to-one interview.

While teaching I realized that while learning English words may be easy due to a simple alphabetical system, English grammar can be extremely difficult. In Asian languages, there is no verb conjugation, no past/present tense, or prepositions. This summer, I worked with Telugu Medium Students for about 3 months. It was extremely taxing to explain the grammatical rules to them because in English, there are many exceptions to almost every rule. Many times I had to tell them that they simply had to memorize things, which was a little disheartening for them. It took a lot of explaining and many examples to help them understand the different tenses and how to use them. In English, there are so many- present, past, future, past participle, present progressive, etc...and also gerunds, which can act as nouns. Explaining the difference between these tenses was very hard, especially with the language barrier between them. I found that drawing out a timeline and giving examples with specific times worked the best. Also, when teaching ESL, one must constantly remind their students to use proper verb conjugation, and perhaps make a list of all the exceptions (ex: everyone/someone/everybody/somebody "is", NOT "are"). Using prepositions can also be very difficult for ESL students, so it is best to have a list of what each preposition is usually used for and practice fill in the blank ones (ex: "in December," "at 8:00 AM," "on September 5th," etc). Lastly, the most important requirement for teaching ESL is patience. The students spent 2 hour lessons with me daily after their 4 hour classes at an English school. However, they eventually left their class and only studied with me because their teacher was not very patient with them and rarely devoted one-on-one time to each student in the class. Communicating with a language barrier was difficult but manageable because we were both patient with each other and tried very hard to find different ways to explain things. If one way did not work, we both attempted another method to explain our points.

Conclusion

As all the teachers of English are aware of the fact that 'verb' is the most important part of the English sentence. A sentence in English is not complete without a verb and this feature is in sharp contrast with Telugu, in which thousands of complete sentences can be constructed without using a verb. Hence, there often has been a kind of proclivity observed as far as Telugu learners of English language are concerned i.e. constructing sentences without a verb or with incomplete verb forms. The use of incomplete verb forms also is due to the influence of the mother tongue that is Telugu. In Telugu, the

number and the tense are integrated into the main verb form and the inflection in the final part of the verb gives this indication. The dropping of the auxiliary verb by the Telugu speakers is solely due to the transfer of this mother tongue habit into the second language. As a result, sentences such as "He coming," and "He had came" are often constructed by them. With selecting structures wisely and taking into consideration of learners' beliefs and expectations, grammar teaching help ESL learners improve their both linguistic and communicative competence. Therefore, in order to steer the language, one should internalize the grammatical patterns existing at all linguistic levels of language. The internalization of grammatical rules happens covertly if a language is acquired as first language, and it happens overtly if a language is learnt as a second language. However, the internalization f grammatical rules is an imperative pre-requisite for any language learning process.

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