

GRAMMAR AS A BUILDING BLOCK OR A HINDRANCE IN ESL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT: *Present study addresses the role of grammar associating to ESL in Pakistani educational institutions. The study is also expected to define whether grammar teaching is helpful or not in the erudition of English language by analyzing the beliefs of teachers and students regarding the teaching of grammar as per the attitudes of these two important pillars of education system can affect the effectiveness of any learning, especially in ESL context. It also reports the difficulties faced by teachers in the teaching of grammar to ESL students and also those faced by students in the same scenario with the help of quantitative and qualitative analysis as the detailed statistical description was used to interpret the data.*

Key Words: *Grammar Learning And Teaching, ESL Learning, Learning Hindrance, Facilitating Agent.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of grammar is a controversial issue in ESL context where ESL instructor is somehow depicted as an "unattractive grammar mongers whose only pleasure in life is to point out the fault of others" (Baron, 1982, p.226). In current study, role of grammar in learning English language is observed from two sides of the coin: building block or hindrance. The research also aims to explore the views of teachers and learners about role of grammar in learning ESL. The way of teaching grammar to students is fundamental in making it either a building block or a hindrance. Conscious learning of grammar helps the students in learning English because conscious learning becomes learners' competence. But change doesn't happen overnight, language learning is a long and complex process so, it requires constant effort from teachers and learners in learning/teaching a language and grammar that play a decisive role in the accomplishment of this process. Disparity among teachers' and learners' perceptions opens new dimensions for learning grammar in ESL context.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

The objective of the current study is to explore the role of grammar in language teaching/learning and to examine the complexities of a cross-section of university English as second language instructors and their discernment about ESL learners' obscurities and problematic areas regarding grammatical system instruction. In this respect, it is intended to investigate if conscious learning of grammar helps the students in learning English and secondly

to observe if there exists any divergence in language instructors and students discernment about the complexities and difficulties encountered by them in learning grammar in ESL context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This part justifies the rationale for reviewing history of grammar teaching because it is a common belief that "history provides us perception" (Titone, 1968:2), furthermore, this historical review enables us to investigate and identify the current trends in ESL instruction. Conventionally, grammar is believed to be the boon of language teaching. Rutherford (1987) asserts that for centuries the education of grammar has recurrently been regarded identical with foreign language instruction. Existing outlook regarding grammar instruction and learning dates back to nineteenth-century philosophy of language education. It is supposed, for example, that a good deal of understanding of grammar directs to obvious philosophy while relieving scholarly line of work. Its vital status has never been argued on, nevertheless, numerous L2 researchers and instructors have been probing into the function of grammar for several precedent decades. In the context of grammar teaching Widdowson (1990: 86) believes that grammar acts not as a restraining nuisance rather as a therapeutic and energizing force that liberates learners from contextual dependence and merely lexical classification of authenticity and reality. As a common practice, lots of students and instructors consider grammar a multitude of margins regarding permissible and unacceptable structures in a given language application - 'a linguistic straitjacket' in Larsen- Freeman's words (2002: 103) - the notion of grammar as 'something that liberates rather than represses' is worth exploring.

Morelli (2003) is of the view that pupils presuppose that they are displaying an enhanced behavior towards grammar education in given state of affairs where enhanced linguistic execution comes from familiarity with traditional method grammar instruction. Elkilic and Akca (2008) illustrated optimistic and encouraging behavior of students learning English grammar at a primary EFL classroom towards grammar education. Though, more than half of subjects viewed their experience of grammar learning as enjoyable yet about 10% of them described their experience of having faced a number of obscurities in studying and practicing grammar. In this context of grammar teaching Borg (1999a, b) argues that countless language trainers have claimed students' prospects of traditional and overt grammar instruction. In this respect, Burgess and Etherington (2002:440-441) relate that most of the language instructor consider overt and direct instruction of grammar as preferential and favored by learners. For last fifty years or so, a shift in interest from methods of grammar instruction to the correspondence and involvement of students has been observed. Grammar has always maintained its status as an influential deflation and discouraging compel in the perspective of second language students. In the same connection, when it comes to level of motivation and learners achievement, grammar has always been discerned as a dilemma and an obstacle in the process of facilitating students to correspond effortlessly. It has been also been observed that many language instructors encounter that language learners repeatedly find rules of formal structures of a language tricky and intricate for

their supple application in language practice and use in real life situations. Learners may have a good deal of knowledge of grammar rules, but they find themselves incompetent of affecting and applying them in their actual exploitation of the language in real life situations. Burgess and Etherington (2002:442) have given reference to experience of numerous language teachers in this regard. Haudeck has stated that many learners face problem in comprehension of system of structures of grammar though taught rigorously in classroom (1996, cited in European Commission, 2006). Language trainers deem their learners perceiving system of grammatical formal structures quite effectively and experiencing no specific complexity in its application (Burgess & Etherington, 2002:444). Grammar teachers also admit the fact that language is not static rather it is a go-ahead vibrant. Its applications are always arbitrary, though not in key aspects. Morelli (2003:333-34) observes that, "Grammar can be taught traditionally or contextually, but students' assumptions should be measured by teachers in the decision-making process. Students need to feel confident that experts have met their requirements . . . and educators should be willing to consider the approaches and perceptions of students while making decisions about how to teach grammar".

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study was mainly Qualitative and Quantitative in design. The research instrument is questionnaire on which the participants were supposed to reply to statements on a five-point likert scale. The participants also provided background information on gender, age, recent institute name, residence and schooling background. The second instrument was interview which has been conducted from 10 ELT experts, who were the part of different educational institutions. The participants of the study were 100 students from two universities of Lahore, studying at the undergraduate level and aged around 20 years old. The rationale for conducting this research study at this level was that the students were still confronted with teacher-fronted classrooms whose primary focus is on teaching grammar. Therefore, investigating the attitudes of undergraduate students was supposed to provide the researchers with a representative sample of students' perspectives. The Quantitative section contained 15 items in order to explore ESL learners' beliefs about the teaching of grammar. These items covered a range of aspects of grammar instructions as building block or hindrance in English language learning scenario.

3.1. Procedure

As mentioned above, the data was collected from undergraduate students. The questionnaires were distributed among the respondents and they were requested to respond the statements in the closed-ended sections on the basis of their familiarity and experience of language class. The respondents were facilitated by researchers by answering to their queries or ambiguities they found in questionnaire. In order to explore the beliefs and expectations of ELT experts about grammar teaching as a building block or a hindrance, 10 ELT experts from multiple universities

were targeted. The interview was semi-structured and interviews were tape-recorded for better interpretation.

3.2. Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed in two phases: quantitative and qualitative. In the quantitative phase, the data drawn from the Likert scale type of questions was put into descriptive analysis. At the qualitative phase, the responses of ELT experts, generated on open-ended questions, were thematically analyzed.

3.3. Quantitative Analysis

The following section presents the findings emerging from the students' questionnaires.

The role of grammar as building block

Most of the students' responses consider that grammar helps them in learning English. More than two thirds (87%) agree that grammar teaching is like a framework for the rest of the language. Only (7%) disagree with this point (see Table 1.1 below).

Table 1.1
Grammar teaching helps the students in learning of English

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly disagree	3	3.0	3.0	3.0
Disagree	4	4.0	4.0	7.0
Neutral	6	6.0	6.0	13.0
Agree	46	46.0	46.0	59.0
Strongly Agree	41	41.0	41.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 1.1. Students' perception about the role of grammar as building block.

On the basis of the role of grammar teaching on the performance of the students, 79% are agreed with this positive contribution of grammar and support the function of grammar as a building block (see Table 1.2 below). Only 13% are negating this aspect of grammar.

Table 1.2**Grammar teaching affect the performance of the students**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly disagree	4	4.0	4.0	4.0
Disagree	11	11.0	11.0	15.0
Neutral	8	8.0	8.0	23.0
Agree	47	47.0	47.0	70.0
Strongly agree	30	30.0	30.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 1.2. Students' perception about the role of grammar as building block.

Majority of the respondents (67%) agree or strongly agree with the role of grammar in enhancing their reading skill and only(12%) disagree with it (see Table 1.3 below).

Table 1.3**Grammar teaching supports learners in reading**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly disagree	1	1.0	1.0	1.0
Disagree	11	11.0	11.0	12.0
Neutral	17	17.0	17.0	29.0
Agree	50	50.0	50.0	79.0
Strongly agree	21	21.0	21.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 1.3.Students' perception about the role of grammar as building block.

With regard to the fifth research question whether they like grammar teaching or not, 59% of the students are in strong favor of it as the results shown in Fig. 1.4 and only 16% are not willing to get grammar teaching.

Table 1.4
I like studying grammar

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly disagree	2	2.0	2.0	2.0
Disagree	14	14.0	14.0	16.0
Neutral	25	25.0	25.0	41.0
Agree	36	36.0	36.0	77.0
strongly agree	23	23.0	23.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 1.4. Students' perception about the role of grammar as a building block.

Again, two third(62%) of the respondents strongly favor the belief about the role of grammar as far as the required knowledge of target language is concerned. It suggests that, in the perception of students, grammar support as building block in language learning process. Only 19% are found against this view point (see Table 1.5 below).

Table 1.5
Good learners of English do know a lot about grammar

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid strongly disagree	3	3.0	3.0	3.0
disagree	16	16.0	16.0	19.0
neutral	19	19.0	19.0	38.0
agree	34	34.0	34.0	72.0
strongly agree	28	28.0	28.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 1.5. Students' perception about the role of grammar as a building block.

Knowledge of grammar helps a lot in effective communication as results in Fig.1.6 specify that 70% of the respondents agree or strongly agree with this point and only 16% of them do not favor this point.

Table 1.6**Knowledge of Grammar helpful in effective communication**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid strongly disagree	4	4.0	4.0	4.0
disagree	12	12.0	12.0	16.0
neutral	14	14.0	14.0	30.0
agree	43	43.0	43.0	73.0
strongly agree	27	27.0	27.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 1.6.Students' perception about the role of grammar as building block

More than half (52%) of the respondents admit the role of grammar teaching in the syntactic analysis of text but (24%) negate this role of grammar(see Fig. 1.7 below).

Table 1.7**When I read text in English language, I try to figure out grammar**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly disagree	6	6.0	6.0	6.0
disagree	18	18.0	18.0	24.0
neutral	24	24.0	24.0	48.0
agree	40	40.0	40.0	88.0
strongly agree	12	12.0	12.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 1.7.Students' perception about the role of grammar as building block

All the above mentioned statistical description strongly favor the role of grammar as building block.

The role of grammar as a hindrance . . .

With regard to 10 to 15 statement of research questionnaire that whether grammar teaching creates hindrance in English language learning or not, the respondents do not strongly favor the point and express their beliefs in the following part.

As the result in Fig. 2.1 shows that (57%) of the respondents disagree with this point but (25%) agree with this lacking element of grammar.

Table 2.1

I can communicate in English Language without Knowing the Grammar rules

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid strongly disagree	31	31.0	31.0	31.0
Disagree	26	26.0	26.0	57.0
Neutral	18	18.0	18.0	75.0
Agree	11	11.0	11.0	86.0
strongly agree	14	14.0	14.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 2.1.Students' perception about the role of grammar as hindrance

With regard to forgetting grammatical rules in communication, (55%) of the respondents strongly disagree or disagree with this point and(31%) of them agree with it(see Table 2.2 below).

Table 2.2

I often forget grammatical rules while communicating in English Language

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid strongly disagree	25	25.0	25.0	25.0
disagree	30	30.0	30.0	55.0
neutral	14	14.0	14.0	69.0
agree	21	21.0	21.0	90.0
strongly agree	10	10.0	10.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 2.2.Students' perception about the role of grammar as hindrance

With regard to the confusion in grammatical restrictions, 52% of the respondent disagree with it and only 26% of them agree with this false notion (see Table 2.3 below).

Table 2.3

I found myself confused while considering the grammatical restrictions in English language

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid strongly disagree	27	27.0	27.0	27.0
disagree	25	25.0	25.0	52.0
neutral	22	22.0	22.0	74.0
agree	18	18.0	18.0	92.0
strongly agree	8	8.0	8.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 2.3 Students' perception about the role of grammar as hindrance

With regard to another prompt about grammar as hindrance, (61%) of the participants disagree with this willingness and only (24%) of the respondent agree with this point (see Table 2.4 below).

Table 2.4

I am not willing to learn grammar

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly disagree	34	34.0	34.0	34.0
disagree	27	27.0	27.0	61.0
neutral	15	15.0	15.0	76.0
agree	16	16.0	16.0	92.0
strongly agree	8	8.0	8.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 2.4. Students' perception about the role of grammar as hindrance

With regard to this prompt as grammar teaching does not support in speaking English, 63% of the participants disagree with this notion and 25% of them agree with it (see Table 2.5 below).

Table 2.5**Grammar learning makes no difference for me in speaking English**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid strongly disagree	30	30.0	30.0	30.0
disagree	33	33.0	33.0	63.0
neutral	12	12.0	12.0	75.0
agree	11	11.0	11.0	86.0
strongly agree	14	14.0	14.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 2.5. Students' perception about the role of grammar as hindrance

On the whole, the statistical results do not support the belief about grammar as a hindrance.

3.4. Qualitative Analysis

In this section, in order to further explore the general beliefs and expectations about the role of grammar, the data is collected from ELT experts. The language of the interview was English.

In response to question that which belief about grammar teaching they preferred as EL teacher: grammar as building block or hindrance, almost all ELT experts came up with the same response with minor differences. They felt that grammar teaching was like building block because when teachers taught the reduction and expansion patterns of sentences to students while teaching English language, the students comprehended the pattern and learnt the language in the same sequence of applying expansion process with the help of adjuncts and adverbial phrases. So, with this, they developed the generative skill in the target language. They also liked grammar due to its relationship with other components of language, which is solely because a bundle of words cannot help to derive the exact meaning of the text. In order to acquire it, grammar was there to help them. Several experts also considered the way of teaching grammar and learning as a vital factor in making it as a building block or hindrance, as our students lack the natural environment or prior knowledge of target language so knowledge of grammar supported them in ESL context. They also commented on the importance of other factors such as; objectives of teaching, level of students, nature of learning and particular settings in tagging grammar as building block or hindrance.

Based on what discussed above, it can be seen that expert comments range from intrinsic to extrinsic reasons. Some relate the benefits of learning grammar to better understanding of a piece of text and some to use language for communicative purpose. To sum up, almost all experts

emphasize the integral role of grammar instructions and its contribution to other aspects of language. Regarding the second prompt that whether grammar should teach directly or in embedded situations the experts expressed varied views. Some of them reacted to the out of context teaching of grammar without relating the rules to some sentence based examples. They felt that this method of grammar instruction could not help them in the real world context. They supported it with the view that teaching grammar direct method is not harmful if the students are weak. Some others expressed that if the students had prior knowledge or basic knowledge of grammar, the teacher could ask them to infer the rules from some presented examples or by using movies, literature, dramas etc. According to these responses, the nature of grammar teaching varied on the basis of teaching objectives and learners' capacities.

Regarding the prescribed stage of learning, maximum experts supported the notion that it is based on competence as per Threshen idea: our conscious learning becomes our competence which is unconscious performance. Others also elaborated that grammar teaching at later stage became a part of fossilized errors which ELT experts tried endlessly without any fruitful results. Some expressed that it is not the matter of early stage or later rather how much grammar knowledge is required at a particular stage of learning. So, we can sum up that the crucial phenomenon of grammar teaching is not bound with the academic stages of the learners but with the proficiency skills of the students. If they learnt grammar at early stage, a time will come the same learning would become the competence while they will use the grammatical knowledge indirectly and unconsciously.

In response to the prompt that what does influence or restrict learners to learn grammar, most of the experts favored the motivational and said teaching elements were worth considering in influencing the learners to learn grammar. They expressed that it should be in case of teaching to teach the learners lightly and put them in the result oriented activities. They also shared that interaction between teachers and students and among students must be there in class for the sake of teaching of grammar. But if the situation was vice versa, this would only create restrictions for them in learning of grammar. So, we conclude that grammar as whole entity will create problem for them in learning language and restrict the potential of students.

When asked that do teachers and students' expectations vary with regard to grammar teaching in ELT context? This prompt derived multiple responses from experts; some related that in ESL context, grammar teaching was based on the expectations of teachers and teachers also expected from their students that they must be taught some portion of grammar. As it was based on expectations and expectations were varied from teacher to teacher, class to class and level to level. Students were heterogeneous; they did not come to you with your level so differences prevail regarding the expectations of teachers and students.

4. CONCLUSION

Generally speaking this study looked into how, both teachers' and students' perceptions with regard to grammar teaching in ESL context could be usefully analyzed and might have implications for language learning and teaching. It also highlights the importance of the way in which grammar teaching is conducted and suggests that the good or bad effects of any strategy are lying under the way you propagate it according to given context. So, it is necessary to take a deep and critical monitoring of the scenario which English teachers are experiencing and maintain their level of expectation, as examining of L2 teachers' beliefs and preferences cannot be disregarded in any teaching education program, since these are the foundation of it. Thus, study illustrates the importance of grammar learning and belief of students who assume that grammar improves their writing and reading skills but it becomes a hindrance when it is applied for fluency of their spoken skills in real life situations.

Implications

The findings of the current research highlight the following implications:

- Grammar should not be taught as an isolated entity.
- Grammar teaching should be embedded with authentic text of syllabus.
- Teachers should adopt moderate strategy towards grammatical errors of expressions of learners at early stage.
- The curriculum designers and authorities in Educational system must understand the difficulties faced by the students and the teachers and should facilitate them by providing sufficient guidance to the teachers with the help of documents like teachers guide. They should also help the teachers in planning their teaching activities according to their classroom needs which indirectly targeted the expectations of the learners.

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