

## Grammar is the Heart and Basis of Language Teaching and Learning: English Grammar and Its Role in ELT

Dr. Mohammad Reza Afroogh., Ph.D

*ELT, Instructor and lecturer, Iran*

*\*Corresponding Author: Dr. Mohammad Reza Afroogh, ELT, Instructor and lecturer, Iran*

### ABSTRACT

Some people think that correct English grammar matters only to teachers and is of no real importance in daily life. This is certainly not true. Grammar, regardless of the country or the language, is the foundation for communication. When a message is relayed with the correct grammar, it is easier to understand the purpose and meaning of that message. In order to communicate, a learner should know the grammar of the language. It is important to be able to express yourself, but this should be done in a way that people find easy to understand. Both for the first language (L1) and for all additional languages (L2 or L3), grammatical knowledge plays a vital role in understanding texts (e.g. Grabe, 2005). However, little is known about the development and interaction of grammar and reading comprehension in beginning foreign language learning, especially with respect to children with a minority language background. In this study we try to reveal the role of grammar in English language teaching.

**Keywords:** Grammar, sentence structure, text, comprehension, reading

### INTRODUCTION

Grammar is the sound, structure, and meaning system of language. All languages have grammar, and each language has its own grammar. Regardless of the language to be learnt, successful reading comprehension is dependent on the grammar the reader knows, that is grammar plays a very important role in understanding texts, both for the first language (L1) and for the other languages (L2 or L3) (Grabe, 2005, p36). However, little is currently known about how grammar and reading comprehension for English as a foreign language develop and interact in a bilingual primary school context, especially with respect to minority language children who often have a migration background.

The role of grammar in L2 reading has not received much attention by researchers (Alderson, 1984, 2000; Urguhart & Weir, 1998; Nassaji, 2007; Shiotsu & Weir, 2007). On the one hand, this may be attributable to the very nature of reading as a receptive language skill for comprehending the messages of the texts. Thus, knowledge of structure was regarded to have less to do with comprehending a text than levels of other components such as vocabulary, background knowledge, and reading strategies. On the other hand, the 30-year long dominance of Communicative Language Teaching that puts

a near-exclusive emphasis on macro language skills and communicative functions has somewhat downgraded the need to address the issue of the role of grammar in L2 reading (Urguhart & Weir, 1998; Han & D'Angelo, 2009).

There are pros and cons as far as the role of grammar in reading comprehension is concerned. The Structural Deficit Hypothesis (SDH) attributes difficulties in the acquisition of reading to syntactic processing deficiencies (Stein, Cairns & Zurif, 1984; Bowey, 1986a, 1986b; Bentin, Deutsch and Liberman, 1990; Menyuk et al. 1991; Scarborough, 1991) The SDH claims that an absence of grammatical knowledge or lack of processing ability interferes with higher level text comprehension. It is also believed that syntactic awareness assists readers in accomplishing their reading comprehension tasks effectively. Koda (2005) pointed out that all difficulties L2 readers experience are attributable to inadequate linguistic knowledge.

### THE ACQUISITION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE GRAMMAR

Competences in many different areas have to develop when a foreign language is learned, such as phonetic, phonological, lexical, morphological, syntactic, discourse- pragmatic

as well as sociolinguistic skills. Although the learner's primary concern in the earliest stages of L2 acquisition may be the acquisition of the lexicon (Singleton, 2009), mastering the grammatical principles of the L2 is, of course, also essential for efficient communication in the language (Ellis, 2008).

As learning a new language entails the development of both receptive and productive language skills, a large body of research has been devoted to this relationship in grammar acquisition because, for early L1, it has repeatedly been claimed that comprehension<sup>4</sup> leads to production (although this asymmetry does not necessarily seem to apply to all areas, e.g., Szagun, 2006). However, once L1 has been acquired, it is assumed that a person who is able to produce a grammar structure is also able to comprehend it, and vice versa (Hendriks, deHoop, & Lamers, 2005; Hendriks & Koster, 2010). A similar comprehension/production asymmetry in early L2 acquisition has been proposed for a long time (e.g., Tasseva-Kurkchieva, 2008; Unsworth, 2007). The development of receptive L2 grammar knowledge, by contrast, is an area several researchers have declared an unexplored territory in SLA research (e.g., Ellis, 2008), possibly because the product of receptive language knowledge is much less accessible than 4 Following Buyl and Housen (2015), the terms *receptive grammar*, *grammatical comprehension* and *comprehension of grammar* will be used interchangeably.

(Anja K. Steinlen 422 productive knowledge (e.g., Peyer, Kaiser, & Berthele, 2006).

### **DEVELOPMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE READING COMPREHENSION**

Reading is generally defined as the ability to “understand, use, reflect on and engage with written texts to achieve their own goals, to develop their own knowledge and potential, and to participate in social life” (OECD, 2009, p. 23). Reading skills depend, inter alia, on the reading speed and thus to a large extent on the short term storage capacity of the reading person. Further determinants are background knowledge, lexical access, the presence of vocabulary and grammar, (reading) motivation and positive attitudes towards reading, as well as knowledge of textual features, reading strategies, and cognitive basic skills (e.g., OECD, 2009).

There are differences between the acquisition of reading skills in an L2 and an L1 because, unlike L1 reading, L2 reading involves two languages. This implies continuous interactions between the two languages and constant adjustments to accommodate the different demands of each language. For this reason, L2 reading is cross-linguistic and inherently more complex than L1 reading (see e.g., Koda, 2007). The following determinants for successful L2 reading skills have been identified: L1 reading skills (see above) and L2 language skills, such as L2 grammar and vocabulary knowledge, and the degree of automatization of L2 word recognition (see Frisch, 2013, for a review). L2 reading comprehension in bilingual schools has been assessed in many studies, in particular in Canada. In general, the results showed that children in immersion programs performed significantly better in L2 reading tests than comparable peers in mainstream foreign language programs and that they may even achieve scores similar to native monolingual children (see e.g., Genesee & Jared, 2008 for Canada, and Zaunbauer, Gebauer, & Möller, 2012 for Germany). In sum, the results of these studies clearly indicate the benefits of bilingual (immersion) programs for the development of L2 literacy skills.

### **THE IMPACT OF L2 GRAMMAR ON L2 READING COMPREHENSION**

Although grammar knowledge is a well-acknowledged component of reading comprehension in L1 and in L2 research (e.g., Bernhardt, 2000; Grabe, 2009; Jeon

*The development of English grammar and reading comprehension by majority and minority.* . 425 & Yamashita, 2014; Van Gelderen et al., 2004), its role in reading comprehension is not a common topic in second language reading research. As an instructional issue, the separation of grammar and reading may be due to the relative non-emphasis on grammar in communicative methods and in language-arts instruction, especially at the beginning level in early foreign language teaching (Grabe, 2009).

As yet the role of L2 grammar in L2 reading comprehension is not well understood. For example, some authors have claimed that fluent L2 readers do not make extensive use of grammar knowledge once they progress to a certain point, when top-down schema knowledge, inference, and contextual

knowledge play then more important roles in comprehension (e.g., Bernhardt, 2000; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). Other authors (particularly Grabe, 2005, 2009) argue in favor of a strong relation between grammar and reading in L2 acquisition, because, in their opinion, grammar knowledge, along with the associated processes of syntactic parsing, is a major foundation of fluent L2 reading, even at very advanced levels of L2 comprehension (see also Alderson, 1993; Van Gelderen et al., 2004). In a meta-analysis of L2 reading comprehension and its correlates, Jeon and Yamashita (2014) came to the conclusion that L2 grammar knowledge was indeed one of the three strongest correlates of L2 reading comprehension (apart from L2 vocabulary and L2 word decoding). Several explanations have been put forward to account for the discrepancies relating to the role of grammar in L2 reading comprehension (e.g., Akbari, 2014). First, as there is an overlap between the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, it is difficult to isolate the contribution made by grammar from that of vocabulary.

Secondly, different test formats measure different aspects of language ability. In reading comprehension studies, grammar knowledge has been tested in various task types, ranging from form-focused discrete-point grammar tests (e.g., Gascoigne, 2005) to gap activities (e.g., López, 2008). Thirdly, the formats of L2 reading comprehension tests have not been equivalent, ranging from cloze tests of texts to assessments comprising the word-, sentence and text level (see Steinlen, 2016). A small body of studies has examined the reversed relationship between L2 grammar and reading, that is, how L2 reading affects L2 grammar knowledge. In a study with English-speaking university students learning Spanish, Rodrigo, Krashen, and Gribbons (2004) showed that L2 reading activities had positive effects on L2 grammar. Specifically, L2 extensive reading (i.e., reading a large amount of text at a relatively faster speed with the focus on meaning, not language) combined with discussions in the L2 seems to affect L2 grammar knowledge more positively than extensive L2 reading only (see also Lee, Schaller, & Kim, 2015). Thus, better L2 grammar performance facilitates L2 reading comprehension, and more L2 reading activities in the classroom result in better L2 grammar performance in tests. However, as these studies

have only been conducted Anja K. Steinlen 426 with older L2 learners, there is a need to examine beginning L2 learners (in primary school) and learners for whom the target language is the L3 to better understand the relationship between grammar and reading in foreign language learning.

### **MOST COMMON ERRORS IN WRITTEN EXPRESSION**

First, let's cast a glance on this statistical analysis, and then we try to reveal some reasons of why we should learn grammatical points.

<b>Errors Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Word form	21%
Word choice	15%
Verbs	12%
Parallel structure	9%
Pronouns	7%
Singular/plural nouns	6%
Verbals (infinitives, gerunds, participles)	6%
Prepositions	6%
Articles	5%
Comparatives and superlatives	4%
Word order	4%
Conjunctions	2%
Redundancy	1%
Others types of errors	2%

- Based on Bruce Roger's analysis of 20 different exams that test takers were allowed to keep after Disclosed Test Admission.

### **REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD APPLY THE CORRECT GRAMMAR WHEN YOU SPEAK AND WRITE**

- Grammar rules can help learners develop the habit of thinking logically and clearly. After studying grammar, learners are able to become more accurate when using a language.
- Without good grammar, clear communication is impossible. Proper grammar keeps you from being misunderstood while expressing your thoughts and ideas.
- Grammar improves the development of fluency. When a person has learned grammar, it will be easier for that person to know how to organize and express the ideas in their mind without difficulty. As a result, they will be able to speak, read and write the language more fluently.

## Grammar is the Heart and Basis of Language Teaching and Learning: English Grammar and Its Role in ELT

- Many employers are immediately put off when they receive a cover letter for a job application that contains grammatical errors and is poorly written. Many employers will simply ignore this application and even delete it. It is therefore important to bear this in mind when applying for a job.
- When writing on behalf of your organization, it is important to use the correct grammar, as this can mean the difference between readers trusting your expertise or questioning your knowledge of the subject matter. If you can't write properly, you can't relay your subject matter with authority.
- A person with poor grammar skill can form a negative impression on others. First impressions can be lasting, and may hide the true judgment of character. Some people consider good grammar to be a mark of intelligence and education. Don't allow strangers to form a negative impression of you based on your poor communication skills.
- Writing and speaking correctly gives you the appearance of credibility. If you're attempting to build a reputation as an expert in your profession, correct use of grammar is extremely important.

### DIFFERENT WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR GRAMMAR

#### Read More in English

One way to improve your grammar is to read more in English. The more you read, the more you improve your grammar and vocabulary. It may be tiring and difficult to understand everything, but this is one step you cannot skip if you want to get better at grammar. Reading helps you to see how English works and how the grammar works. That knowledge can transfer to your writing. Find something you like to read, and then keep on reading. It doesn't matter what you read – books, magazine articles, or newspapers – as long as they are written in proper English. Try to read as many different genres (e.g. newspaper articles, academic journals, blogs, short-stories, etc.) as you can.

#### Listen More to English

Listening to others who use good English and watching television also helps. It works better if you watch what you are really interested in. Remember that the English spoken in America

is different from that spoken in England. Some parts of spelling and grammar are different between the two countries. In South Africa, we follow the British grammar and spelling rules.

#### Practice More

Make sure you work through all your grammar exercises in your course book regularly. To learn English grammar well, you will need to practice each grammar point until you can easily use it. Look for a book of grammar exercises that also has answers for additional practice. Online activities and quizzes can also help. Focus on one grammar point each time you study.

#### Write More in English

Try writing a daily journal in English. Any extra practice that you can get is going to help you.

Remember, try not to get discouraged. Learning English grammar and using it correctly takes a lot of time, effort, and practice. Be positive and proactive about practicing your grammar and you'll begin seeing more improvement.

### SOME HINTS AND SUGGESTIONS

A teacher should teach grammar using the same format to teach the Orton Gillingham Basic Language curriculum. Teaching one part of speech at a time (beginning with nouns), while applying the same structured, sequential, and cumulative nature of the Orton Gillingham Approach, will allow students to master the various grammatical concepts. Students with Dyslexia tend to be cluttered cognitively; therefore, it is important to assist them with creating a "mental file cabinet" to house all of their learned materials. When teaching grammar to those with Dyslexia, it is essential that you connect the new concepts with the already mastered concepts and help them to "file" them accordingly for easy retrieval. This method of teaching grammar to those with Dyslexia should be continued until all grammatical concepts have been mastered.

Though we are specifically addressing the importance of grammar in reading comprehension in this post, teaching grammar to those with Dyslexia explicitly is important because:

- It assists with comprehension skills
- It improves written expression
- It helps with cognitive organization & structure

## Grammar is the Heart and Basis of Language Teaching and Learning: English Grammar and Its Role in ELT

The order of presentation of grammatical concepts I would recommend is as follows:

**Nouns** – Person, place, thing, or idea (a magazine is a wonderful resource a student can use to begin naming nouns)... Ask student to categorize nouns. Have an assortment of noun cards mixed and have student sort & categorize the nouns.

- **Pronouns** – Pronouns take the place of nouns (PRO = for, pronouns are FOR nouns)
- **Simple Plurals** – The spelling rule of simply adding /s/ to a word
- **Action Verbs** – A word that shows action. What is the noun DOING? Create a word list using magazines or books. Use noun & verb word lists to create sentences. **MAKE THIS AN ORAL TASK INITIALLY.** Your student can then draw pictures that illustrate their new sentences. \*NOTE: Drawing is a very laborious task for some students with fine motor deficits, so this activity may be omitted for them. Perhaps mental imagery would work better for these students.
- **Sentences** – Every sentence contains a noun and a verb that expresses a complete thought. It is important to ask your student to speak in complete sentences & assist when necessary. Make certain your student has ample practice reading two-word sentences at this point. When performing sentence analysis, your student will label the parts of speech within a sentence. When looking at functional analysis, your student will identify the purpose in a sentence. Finally, sentence diagrams are a wonderful visual aid to enhance understanding.
- **Adjectives** – Adjectives paint images in our minds that describe the nouns in sentences. When teaching adjectives, ask your student to first write down his or her thoughts in simple form with words s/he is able to spell. S/he can then go back to the sentence and add adjectives to enhance creativity.
- **Adverbs** – Words that describe or modify verbs
- **Prepositions/Prepositional Phrases** – A preposition shows the following relationships among other words in a sentence:  
direction (to – “He walked to the store.”)  
time (at, on, in – “He will arrive at 2 o’clock.”)

agent (with – “He chopped the wood with an axe.”)

place (between, near, across)

manner (by – “By going the short route, you will save time.”)

measure (for – “She ran for two miles.”)

- **Miscellaneous** – Interjections, Conjunctions, Articles

Once again, when teaching grammar to those with Dyslexia it is important to understand they need to be taught using the following approach:

From PARTS to the WHOLE

- SIMPLE/CONCRETE to ABSTRACT/COMPLEX
- All pathways of the brain should be accessed simultaneously.
- Constant review of the materials is important while adding one new concept at a time. This helps the child with Dyslexia to see how the new concept fits in with the old concept to understand the big picture.

### CONCLUSION

The value of grammar teaching is important in English language teaching field. Grammar is the base of English language. It is not acquired naturally, but learning, it needs be instructed. Grammar operates at the sentence level and governs the syntax or word orders that are permissible in the language. It also works at the sub sentence level to govern International Education Studies May, 2009 187 such things as number and person agreement between subject and verb in a sentence. To grammar learning, some students may have a more analytical learning style than others, but if one hope to use English language accurately and fluently, it is necessary for him to receive grammar rules instruction. Grammar is not different from anything else; it is likely that students will learn at different rates.

In a short word, grammar teaching is necessary in English language teaching.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Braddock, R., Lloyd-Jones, R., & Schoer, L. (1963). *Research in Written Composition*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- [2] Calkins, L. M. (1980). "When Children Want to Punctuate." *Language Arts*, 57, 567D73.
- [3] Cooper, C. (1975). "Research Roundup: Oral and Written Composition." *English Journal*, 64, 72.

## Grammar is the Heart and Basis of Language Teaching and Learning: English Grammar and Its Role in ELT

- [4] Di Stefano, P. & Killion, J. (1984). "Assessing Writing Skills Through a Process Approach." *English Education*, 16 (4), 203D7.
- [5] Fangjie zhang. (1993). *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English with Chinese Translation*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, Oxford University Press.
- [6] Grabe, w, (2004), *Thr role of grammar in ELT*, Pearson, & Barr, 2004; Koda.
- [7] Guowen Huang. (2000). "Communicative Competence and Communicative Language teaching". *Foreign Language Teaching & Research in Basic Education*, 1, 30.
- [8] Harris, R. J. (1962). "An Experimental Inquiry into the Functions and Value of Formal Grammar in the Teaching of Written English to Children Aged Twelve to Fourteen." Ph.D. dissertation. University of London.
- [9] Hillocks, G., Jr. & Smith, M. (1991). "Grammar and Usage." In J. Flood, J. M. Jensen, D. Lapp & J. R. Squire (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts*. New York: Macmillan, 591D603.
- [10] Hillocks, G., Jr. (1986). "Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching." Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and the National Conference on Research in English.
- [11] Jian zhang. (2006). "Laying Equal Stress on Listening and Speaking with Top Priority to the Latter". *Computer-assisted Foreign Language Education*, 5, 56.
- [12] Larsen-Freeman,D. (1995). On the teaching and learning of grammar: Challenging the myths. In F.Eckman et al. (Eds), *Second language acquisition theory and pedagogy*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- [13] Mellon, J. C. (1969). "Transformational Sentence-Combining: A Method for Enhancing the Development of Syntactic Fluency in English Composition." NCTE Research Report No. 10. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- [14] National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association. (1996). *Standards for the English Language Arts*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- [15] Noguchi, R. R. (1991). *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- [16] O'Hare, F. (1973). *Sentence-Combining: Improving Student Writing Without Formal Grammar Instruction*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- [17] Pienemann, M. (1984). Psychological constraints on the teach ability of languages [A].
- [18] Scott, Thornbury. (2001). "Why Teach Grammar". *Foreign Language Teaching & Research in Basic Education*, 1, 51-54.
- [19] Scott,Thornbury. (2003). "Grammar as Process". *Foreign Language Teaching & Research in Basic Education*, 3, 48-49.
- [20] Shaughnessy, M. P. (1977). *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [21] Strong, W. (1986). *Creative Approaches to Sentence Combining*. Urbana, IL: ERIC and the National Council of Teachers of English.
- [22] *Studies in Second language acquisition*, 6, 186-214.
- [23] Weaver, C. (1998). *Lessons to Share on Teaching Grammar in Context*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

**Citation:** Dr. Mohammad Reza Afroogh., Ph.D. "Grammar is the Heart and Basis of Language Teaching and Learning: English Grammar and Its Role in ELT" *Annals of Language and Literature*, 3(1), 2019, pp. 6-11.

**Copyright:** © 2019 Mohammad Reza Afroogh. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.