

INTRODUCING LINGUISTIC GRAMMAR: A PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

English language is the most important language today due to extensive range of purposes for which it is used. Especially at the university level, it is the medium of instructions and, generation and dissemination of knowledge. However, a considerable amount of our undergraduates still find it difficult to use English at the required level and the analysis of English grammar relevant to this observation in a pedagogical perspective is of applied linguistic significance. Therefore, this conceptual paper intends to compare and contrast the most popular grammar variety among the undergraduates, Prescriptive Grammar with Linguistic Grammar toward the development of English language competence among the undergraduates based on the exploration of the phenomenon of undergraduate English language learning while referring to prevailing literature for recognizing concepts and connections relating to the phenomenon.

Keywords: Adult Language Learning, Linguistic Grammar, Morphology, Prescriptive Grammar, Syntax

Introduction

Though language is a biological endowment, human beings do not have a language at birth as they are not born with a language. However, they are born with the inherent ability to learn a language. Chomsky (1975, as cited in Wolfgang, 1994) wrote that, in natural language learning, any normal human child who is exposed even to the mostly inadequate and often defective language (linguistic data) learns his mother tongue immediately after birth in a very shorter period of time; one and half years. In psycholinguistics, this period is frequently referred to as the Critical Age for language acquisition. According to John (2007), it is generally accepted that, unless a language is acquired by this time, language will not be acquired at all or at least not with the fully mastery of its resources.

Hence, learning a language is the unconscious mastery of the linguistic system or the grammatical system of a particular language. As a result, the child gets the ability to produce even the highly grammatically complex sentences with no effort even at the early childhood. He does not feel the rules of his language, comfortably uses them but finds it very difficult to explain them to another (Randolph et al., 2010). When the child

gets more opportunities to practice, his grammatical system is further developed, and becomes activated and, this makes him feel linguistically confident and this has much relevancy even to the process of second language learning.

Further, in relation to second language learning, Crystal in 2004 (as cited in Geoffrey, Margaret and Robert, 2006) adds that learning grammar is an integral part as it is the structural foundation for the ability of the language learners to express their ideas. In a broader sense, in today's educational context, grammar, though it had been a top of marginal interest, beloved by few, hated by many and ignored by most in the past, is considered as the fundamental to the ability of the learners to generate and develop new thoughts, ideas and concepts and is of pedagogical significance that can no longer be ignored.

It is also observed that there are greater linguistic similarities in terms of elements of grammar in a language sample (English) produced by a child at the primary level and an adult in academic studies except few variations in pronunciation. It suggests that the child who learnt a language immediately after birth has collected new content/lexical words into the inbuilt grammatical system through the formal or informal exposure to education which may have ultimately led him to get the knowledge/content of a particular subject and the develop new thoughts and concepts. The informal noun /dʒəʊ/ (water in Sinhala) at infancy may be replaced by the formal noun, H₂O and the word order 'The car is under the chair' at secondary childhood by 'The specimen is under the microscope' conveniently at the secondary science classes, for example.

However, English is not the mother tongue for most of our undergraduates. Though they have to study in English medium, most of them have not been adequately exposed to the Critical Age of language acquisition (English) in early stages of language learning within the family background or given the opportunities to use it at the primary level or to study few subjects in English at the secondary level. Therefore, most of our undergraduates do not have an inbuilt grammatical system for English or their inbuilt grammatical system has been adequately developed.

At the same time, most of our undergraduates have attempted to learn English as a second language since the lower grades. In most of such attempts, too much emphasis is given on grammar and sometimes grammar is taught or learn similar to that of learning a subject. Widdowson in 1990 (as cited in Diane and Freeman, 2009) writes that students may know the rules of linguistic usage, but be unable to use the language. Chastain in 1988 (as cited in Diane and Freeman 2009) adds that sometimes, language learning is limited to understanding the target language and as a result, English is translated into Mother tongue and vice versa for comprehension under the Classical Method / the Grammar Translation Method and this method was originally used to teach classical languages: Latin and Greek in England to enable the learners to read and understand literature written in target language for social prestige but not to teach language for communication. Hence, most of the attempts taken by undergraduates to master English

are in fine contrast to theories of language acquisition and learning and have not practically supported them to overcome the second language barrier. Further, most of the undergraduates have not received the regular continuous exposure to English which is essential for second language acquisition. When teachers change year after year, the students are handed down from one teacher to other. As a result, learners are sometimes exposed to a number of language learning methods which have fundamental differences and contrasts. When teachers observe that the learners are unable to use English, they assume the learners do not have sufficient knowledge of grammar and they start teaching them grammar.

Hence, learning English for most of the undergraduates throughout the primary and secondary stages has been full of experiments and little attention has been paid on the psycholinguistic realities pertaining to language acquisition. Therefore, most of the methods and approaches used by our undergraduates to learn English are in fine contrast to the theories of language acquisition and as a result, most of our graduates have not unconsciously mastered the grammatical system of English language.

As a result, the undergraduates with this inbuilt grammatical system use English with much convenience throughout the academic years while further developing the language skills and others remain the same.

However, there are undergraduates who are still learning English grammar with the intention of mastering English language. Yet, it is noted that, there are several varieties of grammar and each type of grammar is to be learnt and taught with a unique purpose.

Aim of the Paper

This conceptual paper intends to compare and contrast the most popular grammar variety among the undergraduates, Prescriptive Grammar with Linguistic Grammar toward the development of English language competence among our undergraduates.

Methods

This conceptual paper is based on the exploration of the phenomenon of undergraduate English language learning while referring to prevailing literature for recognizing concepts and connections relating to the phenomenon. So, the researcher used narrative description tool to analyze the secondary sources.

Literature Review and Conceptual Analysis

Grammar is central to teaching and learning language. Grammar is the structural foundation of language which consists of word order rules and the rules relating to the internal structure of them. To be more precise, according to Randolph et al. (2010), grammar is Syntax (the arrangement of words) and that aspect of Morphology (forms of words related to the arrangement of words). A sentence is a meaningful combination of

words which have or do not have the forms which mutually define each other. Therefore, the rules of grammar are very much essential for the language learners to master a language.

Though it is generally referred to as Grammar, linguists have identified about fifteen types of grammar, for example Comparative Grammar, Generative Grammar, Mental Grammar, Performance Grammar, Reference Grammar, Theoretical, Transformational Grammar, Universal Grammar, etc. (Analyzing Language, 2016) which describe and analyse the structure of language with a unique scholarly purpose. Hence, understanding the correct variety of Grammar is essential for both teachers and learners. One such basic distinction among the varieties of grammar is the difference between Prescriptive Grammar (usage grammar) and Linguistic (descriptive) Grammar.

Both these varieties of grammar are concerned with rules but in different ways. Specialists in descriptive grammar such as theoretical and applied linguists examine the rules or patterns that underlie the use of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences in a linguistic/scientific point of view. In contrast, prescriptive grammarians such as native speakers and native language teachers enforce rules about what they believe to be the correct uses of language. But, the emphasis on accuracy or perfection at the initial stages of language learning may hinder the process as learning a language is a skill to be developed through stress-free continuous engagement.

Though the term grammar is a convenient term, it is a highly complex system. It is not easy even for native speakers of a particular language to understand what grammar is and how it really works within the linguistic system. All the grammatical constituents in a sentence mutually define each other and any part of it cannot be properly explained or taught in abstraction from the whole. A word becomes a noun as it in the noun position created by other words in the sentence with the characteristic form of a noun having the nominal/noun meaning. Linguistic grammarians best describe the grammatical system of English as cyclic rather than linear (Randolph et al., 2010). Further, Geoffrey, Margart and Robert (2006) argue that, for most of the teachers have not studied linguistics and, they find it difficult to seriously engage with the intellectual content of grammar which is often identified as to be extremely analytic and difficult in the way mathematics is expected to be. Yet, most of our teachers have given much emphasis on grammar and grammar lessons are included in the text books from primary to the tertiary level. Crystal (2006) writes that usage manuals are not solutions to the underlying issue of getting linguistic support in a systematic manner in language learning. In such attempts learners feel that learning a language is too easy and as a result they either become lazy or feel that their intelligence and precision suffer.

It further describes that the learners whose linguistic/grammatical system is not adequately developed or inbuilt do not get any sense of grammar though we teach them 'nouns' for example. When the learners are engaged in this tedious process of learning English through grammar for years without having any sign of developing their ability to

use English as a language, it is natural that they get fed up and frustrated with learning English and are forced to believe that they are still unable to use English as their grammar knowledge is poor. Here, the situation is metaphorically similar to teaching mechanical engineering to a person who is desired to learn the driving skill. This is against even the theories of applied linguistics regarding second language teaching. Wilkins in 1976 (as cited in Diane and Freeman, 2009) emphasizes that being able to communicate requires one's ability to use a language rather than one's knowledge of a language. This approach is in contrast to the process of natural language learning. It should not be misunderstood that grammar should not be taught or learnt, but grammar has a sense only for the ones who have the ability to use the particular language.

In general, learners get the meaning of what is being heard or read through a psycholinguistic analysis of the perceived linguistic data. Therefore, most of our undergraduates whose grammatical system is not inbuilt or not adequately developed find it difficult to comfortably engage in English medium studies.

In this backdrop, prescriptive grammarians/ usage grammarians advocate with maximum authority and severity, and given plausibility by the claim that their rules help people to be clear, precise and correct in using English. So, they give hard and fast rules about what is right (or granted) and what is wrong (or not granted), often with advice about what not to say but with little explanation, according to (Prescriptive Grammar, 2016). Prescriptive grammar includes the stuff of high school English teachers who teach grammar as a subject component to the students who already use the particular language similar to learning Sinhala grammar by Sinhalese students for O/L Examination. Though these grammarians emphasize much on grammar, they have found a very limited number of rules though English language has thousands of grammar rules operate in its grammatical system. Further, people have used language long before there were linguists/grammarians to uncover the rules, record them and prescribe them on the learners.

Sidney and Randolph (2005) argue that there is no an academy of the English language to say that one set of regulations to be considered 'authoritative'. Instead, evaluations are made by self-appointed authorities who, reflecting varying judgments of acceptability and appropriateness, often disagree. They also add that as life, as everything, language is also subject to change and also moves on, but there are people who are still worried about this. Highlighting the negative impact of Prescriptive Grammar, Crystal (2006) stresses that this notion of right and wrong has already made millions feel linguistically inferior all over the world and their inferiority complex is reinforced by the smuggle who stares out at them. As a result, generations of schoolchildren would be taught this variety of grammar, and confused by them in their attempt to teach English as this variety of grammar does not allow the learners to acquire language by making mistakes while observing how language really works but forces them to accept how it should be. Learners who attempt to learn English under this school, as majority of our undergraduates, believe that they will never be able to use English until they learn all the

rules of the language perfect which is linguistically impossible. So, our undergraduates are reluctant to use English as they feel linguistically inferior.

By contrast, Descriptive or linguistic grammarians draw scientific generalizations on language. They describe each and every language element within a sentence in a cyclic process. This provides opportunities for the language learners to get a clear idea about how language works from the word level to the paragraph level. However, this grammar variety is not popular among most of our undergraduates. Through this grammar variety, undergraduates get the opportunity to improve English even through subject matters. This analysis is similar to the observation of a nut of a particular motor engine spare part when connected to the engine and the engine in its ideal run. To be more precise, the goal of the linguistic grammarian is not simply to introduce adjectives as a lesson and next guide the students to fill in the blanks and memorize them but to create and maintain a teaching learning process in which an objective, non-judgmental description of an adjective is made referring to finite hierarchal units of finite and infinite lexis: phrases, clauses, sentences and paragraphs emphasizing mutual relationships; syntax and that of morphology while developing the language skills through a successful teaching learning process. The intent of this grammar variety is to have a microscopic study over any language sample and posit explanations for the facts of real language use in a broader sense with no assumption of correctness or appropriateness at the initial stages of language learning. There is no doubt that, linguistic grammar may bring many advantages for adult language learners, our undergraduates who possess analytical and scholarly skills.

Conclusion

Enabling the undergraduates to use English for both academic and professional purposes is of greater significance. Yet, there are undergraduates who still find it difficult to use English though they are competent with analytical and mathematical skills. As such this paper intends to develop a discussion over the analytical and mathematical aspects of grammar referring to linguistic grammar relating to the undergraduate/adult language learning.

This is not an area which has been subjected to previous discussions. Therefore, it is expected that this discussion will set a new direction for future multidisciplinary research.

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