

# Teaching Grammar at the Tertiary Level in the Context of Bangladesh

**Shaila Islam; Shahriar Parvin**

Department of English, BGMEA University of Fashion & Technology, Bangladesh

Email: [shailaislam23@gmail.com](mailto:shailaislam23@gmail.com); [shahriarbuft1@gmail.com](mailto:shahriarbuft1@gmail.com)

**DOI: 10.47760/cognizance.2023.v03i05.016**

## **Abstract:**

*Experience of teaching English in Bangladesh exhibits that grammar is the least interesting learning item in classes. Students are taught fixed grammatical rules as a compulsory subject from the primary to tertiary level of education as mentioned in the syllabus. As a result, learners of English remain quite weak in grammar; they cannot use appropriate structures of grammar in spoken or written English even though they have completed English language courses at various educational institutions. The paper gives an effort to investigate the reasons for students' failure in developing this linguistic skill of accuracy. To explore the subject matter of the study, small-scale data has been collected in the form of questionnaires and interviews both from the teachers and students of some renowned private universities in Bangladesh. The study tries to find out some probable solutions to improve the current level of learners in grammar. The study also identifies and examines that English teachers often face some challenges in teaching grammar namely lack of contextual interpretation of grammatical rules, rarely introduced new teaching methods, lack of experience, expectations of the students, lack of facilities, negative perceptions of the teaching of grammar and preparing grammar lessons. The researchers have put forward some pragmatic suggestions to overcome the existing barriers and challenges which will help the English language teacher to teach grammar according to the necessity of the students. The present study may serve as a good insight for other English lecturers and policymakers in overcoming the challenges regarding grammar teaching. The information have been collected from only a few private universities in Dhaka and Feni city. More in-depth study is essential to deal with the problems confidently.*

*Keywords: Grammar, Teaching Grammar, English Language, Tertiary level.*

## **I. Introduction**

English language is an essential way of instruction nowadays in every step of life. Not only in Bangladesh rather throughout the world, English is taught and learnt because of its international status. All languages have their own grammar and all languages share a few basic pattern. It helps learners understand language better. Without learning grammar, it is not possible to use a language appropriately and correctly. At every level of academic learning whether primary, secondary or tertiary, teaching grammar is a complex phenomenon yet language teachers try their level best to teach them but teaching grammar process is differing from teacher to teacher because they decide individually how to explain to their students with different grammatical rules and applications. In spite of working hard, the practice of teaching and learning grammar in Bangladesh seems to be quite nominal or ignoble. Students' mind-numbing attitude towards grammar, failure of huge number of students in achieving the expected skill in grammar even after passing secondary and higher secondary levels are the vivid evidence of that bitter reality (Ahmed, 2012). The purpose of the study is to investigate the following research questions:

1. What challenges have been faced the most by English teachers in teaching grammar at the tertiary level?
2. What are the possible ways to teach grammar effectively in Bangladesh?

## II. Review of Literature

### A. What is Grammar?

In linguistics, grammar is the set of structural rules governing the composition of clauses, phrases, and words in any given natural language. To define grammar, Islam (1997) writes that grammar is a set of rules of a specific language. Every language has some peculiarities. They are established by usage and grammar is a direction to such usage. Islam mentions Chomsky's words cited by Palmer (1971, p.3), "Grammar is seen as a device that..... specifies the finite set of well-formed sentences and assigns to each of them one or more structural description."

### B. Importance of Grammar

Klein suggests "Language is the medium through which, the child acquires the cultural, moral, religious and other values of society". Further, every language plays a crucial role in maintaining social relationships among the people of the same linguistic community and of the various cultures, customs, and beliefs. Grammar is an essential part of the language. Grammar is needed to use, to understand and to master a language. As Crystal (1995, p.119) writes, "To understand the linguistic dimension of our existence would be no mean achievement. And grammar is the fundamental organizing principle of the language. Our grammatical ability is extraordinary.....There is no limit to what we can say or write, get all of this potential is controlled by a finite number of rules. Nevertheless, our language can let us down, we encounter ambiguity, imprecision and unintelligible speech or writing. To deal with these problems, we need to put grammar under the microscope, and work out what went wrong."

### C. Different methods of grammar teaching

In the past, memorization-based techniques that relied on repetition slowly gave way to more creative methods. Today, we live in a society that prizes literacy and is willing to adapt to more effective methods to achieve the best results in teaching grammar. There are so many intricacies, obscure rules, and exceptions that it comes as no surprise that different generations of teachers have used various approaches to teaching grammar.

Aqel (2013) states GTM is one of the most important methods in grammar teaching, its main focus is on reading and translation. Through these two items, students can easily learn grammar (p.2470). Other researchers Praotor and Celce-Murcia (1979) mentioned GTM is about reading, translation and grammar, in class teachers emphasize those but pronunciation is missing. They also said there are very few communicative activities in the class (as cited in, Aqel, 2013, p.2470).

Next comes Direct Method that emerges in the mid to late nineteenth century. It claimed to be a natural method. According to Thornbury, the learners picked up the grammar in much the same way as children pick up the grammar of their mother tongue, simply by being immersed in language. Another method is Audio-lingual Method in which language is considered as a form of behavior to be learned through the formation of correct habits.

In the 1970s Communicative language teaching emerged with the development in the new science of sociolinguistics. Communicative competence consists of more than simply the knowledge of the rules of grammar. Thornbury suggests that explicit attention to grammar rules was not contrary to communicative practice. He also quoted Chomsky's claim that language was rule governed and this seemed to suggest that explicit rule-giving may have a place after all. By this time, CLT was being developed and Chomsky's belief was readily absorbed into it. Grammar rules appeared in course books at the expenses of communicative practice.

Komathi (2012) described task based to be a strong communicative approach and here students do many communicative activities such as "engaging, enjoyable, motivating" (sl.6). Teachers use lots of "linguistic form" and this meaning is cleared by the context. Teachers do not control students' language and in that case, they are fully free in terms of using language.

Komathi (2012) described task based to be a strong communicative approach and here students do many communicative activities such as "engaging, enjoyable, motivating" (sl.6). Teachers use lots of "linguistic form" and

this meaning is cleared by the context. Teachers do not control students' language and in that case, they are fully free in terms of using language.

Vila (n.d) said that deductive is following the basic pattern of presenting the structure and examples. Inductive is the opposite, it starts with the examples first (para.1-2). In addition Widodo (2006) said that deductive approach means the rules, principles, concepts and theories are presented first and it is called "rule driving learning" because in here teacher presents the grammar rules to the students' and students' practise all the rules (p.126). In another case inductive is "rule-discovery learning" (p.127) and here learners understand the structure through examples.

To find out the best way of grammar teaching, Ur (1996) presented some key terms in his book Grammar Practise activities; here he described the three patterns and these are presentation, practise, and production.

#### **D. A Brief Historical Background of teaching grammar in Bangladesh**

In Pakistan period English was taught and used as a second language in Bangladesh (previous East Pakistan). After Bangladesh got independence from Pakistan in 1971, English turned from second language to foreign language. In Pakistan period people were to use English for keeping officially record mainly, but after Bangladesh got independence there was no more mandatory official use of English. In recent times the demand of using English is huge as many national and international business organizations, educational institutions use English for all their internal as well as external communication and instruction. Either it is in work or education, English is a common means of, official and unofficial dealings. Here rises the need of changing strategy of ELT, because the purpose of using English has now been changed. Linguists found that the people who have already learned English to pass academic examination are not able to use English communicatively, where the first goal of learning English is now communication.

Islam (1997) describes the condition of teaching English grammar in Bangladesh saying that the teachers here use the grammar translation method of teaching and they rarely have the exposure to communicative approach of teaching. There is no contextual interpretation of grammatical rules. Some limited grammatical rules are taught in the classroom and students are asked to translate from Bengali to English and to write paragraph or to do other writing tasks. After learning grammar in this way, students can neither communicate in written nor in the spoken form of the language

Hence, this demand of situation or communicative need of English compelled the educational authority of Bangladesh (e. g ministry of education, NCTB) change the strategy and methodology of ELT in Bangladesh. Thus, with the begging of new millennium Bangladesh launched a new strategy or method in this arena by introducing CLT.

#### **E. What is the best ways of teaching grammar?**

Traditionally, teaching grammar includes following a grammar syllabus by explicitly presenting the rules of grammar, using grammar terminology.

Penny Ur (1991, p.83) says, "The aim of grammar practice is to get students to learn the structures so thoroughly that they will be able to produce them correctly on their own." He suggests that the teachers should help their students to make a „leap“ from form focused accuracy work to fluent and acceptable performance, by providing a „bridge“. A variety of practice can make them familiar with the structures in context, giving practice both in form and communicative meaning.

About the teaching of grammar in classroom Antony (1995) suggests some steps which a teacher should follow. After introducing the topics, a teacher can make them do an exercise in pairs, then discuss the answer in class. The teacher may, then, present the first aspect of grammatical focus using examples from the book, encouraging constant questions from the class. The next step can be to have students do the associated exercises in class in pairs, looking up the answers themselves in the answer key when they have finished discussing the results. Teacher can facilitate the task by wandering from pair to pair, making himself available for questions without instructing on the activity unless specifically asked. After the task has been completed, questions can be asked from the students regarding the exercise or problems can be focused which the teacher noticed during the pair work. Next point should be presented having allowed plenty of time for students to digest the material before moving on.

On top of the long debating issue of grammar teaching approaches, language instructors often find grammar as a challenging part of teaching English language subjects. Previous studies also highlighted the challenges regarding teaching grammar. In order to gain some knowledge of how students would like the teachers to take language classes, the researchers conducted a small-scale investigation. At this point, the researchers would like to draw attention to the survey and its outcomes.

### III. Research Methodology

This study is quantitative in nature. The main source of data was questionnaire survey. The survey was performed through a questionnaire and semi-interview among 25 university teachers who taught grammar at different private universities at Bangladesh. The locations of the universities are around and outside of capital Dhaka.

In order to find out the problems, a questionnaire was prepared and distributed among 80 students. Students were instructed to answer the questions as truthfully as possible without any intimidation. They were also asked to give their opinion about their expectations on how the grammar classes should be designed to benefit the students at tertiary level.

A short interview session was also arranged where one fixed open-ended question was asked to the teachers. After analyzing the findings gathered from the questionnaire survey the results were analyzed and tabulated to show consequence and then the result were converted into percentage.

### IV. Data Analysis

#### A. Data Collected from students:

1. Convenient process of learning English	To learn English language through grammar		To learn English language through communication	
	18%		83%	
2. Status of memorization in English Class	Yes	No	Sometimes	Never
	49%	0%	42%	11%
3. Way of increasing vocabulary	Through Memorization		Practicing new words in speaking and writing	
	0%		100%	
4. Medium of instruction whether in English or not	Yes	No	Sometimes	Never
	83%	0%	14%	4%
5. Focus on the translation of text	Yes	No	Sometimes	Never
	66%	11%	59%	0%
6. Scope of interaction in English	Yes	No	Sometimes	Never
	66%	7%	28%	0%
7. Use of role play in grammar class	Yes	No	Sometimes	Never
	66%	7%	29%	4%

8.Feedback is given by the teacher or not	Yes	No	Sometimes	Never
	97%	0%	3%	0%
9.Rigidity of teacher about mistakes	Yes	No	Sometimes	Never
	18%	52%	11%	21%
10. Emphasized skill	All four skills	Reading & Writing	Speaking & Listening	Others
	94%	6%	0%	0%

### B. Data collected from teachers:

1.Method followed by English teacher in grammar class	Grammar Translation Method	Task based Method	Direct Method	Communicative Language Teaching
	34%	34%	16%	16%
2. Preferred method by the ELT students	Grammar Translation Method	Task based Method	Direct Method	Communicative Language Teaching
	34%	0%	16%	50%
3. Preferred method by teacher to teach grammar	Teaching through structure		Teaching through example	
	34%		67%	
4. Rate of encouragement by the teacher to memorize the grammar rule	Yes		No	
	34%		67%	
5. Feedback from the students	Always	Frequently	Sometimes	Never
	84%	16%	0%	0%
6. Grammar exercise followed by teacher	Yes		No	
	100%		0%	
7. Focused skills for grammar class	Reading and Writing	Speaking and Listening	Both	
	50%	16%	34%	
8. Scope to express student's opinion	Yes		No	

	100%	0%
9. Use of role play or pair work for grammar teaching	Yes	No
	84%	16%

10. You know that feedback and correction are very important for grammar class. In this case, do you follow any significant way to give them good feedback and correction?

25 teachers pointed out 4 points. The major points are given below:

- i. In feedback sessions, I show them the mistakes and tell them how to correct them.
- ii. Before going to start the next lecture, I asked the lessons and provide the necessary correction.
- iii. I take some quick quiz tests and then show them their mistakes.
- iv. I asked questions based on the lecture and I make them correct if they make any mistake.

11. Do you give your students random sentences or outside textbook examples for better grammar understanding? Why?

Responses of the teachers pointed out 5 reasons which are given below:

- i. Yes, it will help to find out their understanding in a better way.
- ii. Yes, this practice can connect students better with real life examples.
- iii. It helps them to be focused and sincere, understand their depth about the topic, prepare them in future learning and keep them engaging in regular practice.

12. What are the most popular classroom activities used by the English teachers?

- i. Memorizing
- ii. Group and pair work
- iii. Asking question
- iv. Assignment
- v. Quiz
- vi. Class test

## V. Discussion

34% of the teachers use grammar-translation method to teach grammar and 34% prefer to use task based method though students feel much interest in communicative language teaching. As a medium of communication most of the English teachers use English but sometimes they mix Bangla with English. Teachers use to translate their lectures so that students can understand the rules of grammar properly. Finding shows that, most of the language teacher teach grammar through example instead of teaching through structure. A large number of teachers use outside textbook examples to make them understand the depth about the topic, prepare them in future learning and keep them engaging in regular practice.

From the finding it is clear that, a large number of teachers involve students in group work and pair work and they also ensure participation of the students by asking question about the target lessons. The finding also gives the information that, most of teachers use different kinds of material along with using textbook. Feedback session is also quiet common in grammar classes and in feedback session they ask students different questions; some of them take written test by arranging class taste and by giving assignment. Language teachers always give opportunity to the learners in interactions in English. Students feel comfortable to participate inside the classroom as teachers are not rigid about the mistakes committed by the learners. English teachers often completes classes by giving feedback through finding and correcting all the mistakes committed by the students.

It has been assumed that the language activities that the students perform at the tertiary level are mainly writing and grammar based. The four skills practice for improving English skill has been less attended. The findings of the present study also bear the same evidence.

The purpose of the study intends to investigate the challenges faced by the most English teachers in teaching grammar at tertiary level and how grammar should be taught by the instructors. Efforts have also been taken to sort out the answers of these research questions. In relation to the first question, the researcher found that a number challenges have been faced by most of the English teachers in teaching grammar at tertiary. Among these, selection of appropriate methods for effective teaching, use of traditional methods of teaching, students lack of interest to participate inside the classroom, lack of awareness among student and teachers about ensuring favorable classroom environment and unequal importance on four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). In order to find out the answer of second research question, the research has found some important points like using new techniques and approaches inside the classroom, focusing on the use of interesting teaching materials with the help of audio visual aids, ensuring participations from learners and teaching grammar by using other skills- reading, writing and listening.

#### VI. Recommendations

1. Students' spontaneous participation in the classroom should be given much attention. Focus should be given on active class participation of the students rather than on memorization. Teacher can add classroom participation as a part of their assessment process.
2. Students' fear of English as a foreign language should be removed through motivation and making the learners involved in the practical use of the target language. Teacher can apply different interesting tasks like dialogue practice, group discussion, and extempore speech test, apply engaging relevant writing situations to engage students in grammatical exercises to ensure spontaneous participation.
3. Teaching strategies should be changed according to learners' need. Teachers should not be limited into their exploration towards the classroom only on backward teaching strategies rather they should focus on technology-based teaching so that they can cope with new circumstances with confidence. The use of technology in language classrooms, therefore, is believed to enhance better language learning (María 2011; Aizan & Gunasegaran, 2013; Parvin & Salam, 2015).
4. In the assessment process, all four abilities should be given equal importance to reinforce grammar concept, and students should be given the opportunity to develop these four skills as an integral part of their grammar learning.
5. Above all, to gain the best results from teaching grammar, teachers must be patient, kind, and cooperative. She or he should have a friendly gesture and be approachable so that students can openly express their opinions.

#### VII. Conclusion

Grammar is a vast concept that no one can cover in a single day. The structure of grammar is consistent, although the process of teaching grammar varies from person to person. As it is a long-term process, grammar teachers must take varied approaches to teach grammar. According to the research above, memorization-based learning that relies on repetition gradually gave way to more creative methods in the past. However, in order to get the best outcomes in teaching grammar, teachers must be willing to adapt more effective approaches. Introducing new teaching approaches can work. Interesting classroom techniques should be promoted. Ultimately the experiences gathered from which classes become an invaluable asset for a language teacher.

---

## References

- [1]. Ahmed, Sofe. (2012). "English Language Teaching at Secondary School Level in Bangladesh: An Overview of the Implementation of Communicative Language Teaching Method", *i-manager's Journal on English language Teaching*, p-ISSN:2231-3338,e-ISSN:22490752.
- [2]. Islam, A.K.M. Waliul. (1997). "Should English Grammar be Taught in Bangladesh?" *Journal of the Institute of Modern Language* Vol : 1 No: 1, June. 24-25
- [3]. Klein, William. *Second language acquisition*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1986.
- [4]. Komathy, M. (2012). Task Based-Language-Teaching [Power point Slide]. Retrieved from <http://www.slideshare.net/ydahoneydewlovejesus92/task-based-languageteaching-k-om>
- [5]. Palmer, F. (1971). *Gramamr*. Oxford University Press.
- [6]. Crystal, D. (1995). *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* 88: 155-158: 191. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [7]. Aqel, I.M. (2013). The Effect of Using Grammar Translation Method on Acquiring English as a Foreign Language. *International Journal of Asian Social Science*, 3(12), 2469-2476.
- [8]. Ju, Y. (2010). A Study of the Teaching and Learning of English Grammar in the Chinese Junior Secondary School (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from [https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/25268/YaoxJu\\_master.pdf?sequence=1](https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/25268/YaoxJu_master.pdf?sequence=1)
- [9]. Singh, V., D. (2008) *Language Learning, Teaching and Testing A Companion*. New Delhi. CUP
- [10]. Thornbury, S. (1999) *How to Teach Grammar*. London: Longman.
- [11]. Antony, P. (1995). *System in English Grammar: An Introduction for Language Teachers VII*
- [12]. María, R. G. (2011). Usage of Multimedia Visual Aids in the English Language Classroom: A Case Study at Margarita Salas Secondary School (Majadahonda). Unpublished Master Thesis Complutense University of Madrid.
- [13]. Widodo, H.P. (2005). Approaches and Procedures for Teaching Grammar. *English Teaching: Practise and Critique*, 5(1). 122-141. Retrieved from <https://education.waikato.ac.nz/research/files/etpc/2006v5n1nar1.pdf>