

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF GRAMMAR TEACHING FOR ESP STUDENTS**

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***Abstract:** Should grammar become an objective in itself or should it only be an instrument assisting the teacher in attaining other objectives? The question receives a lot of varied answers when it is asked in relation to general English courses as well as in conjunction with ESP courses.*

***Key words:** grammar teaching, key role, instrument.*

Grammar teaching continues to be one of the most controversial aspects of the whole process of language teaching. Exactly how much time should a teacher dedicate to teaching grammatical issues? The attitude to grammar teaching and its key role in the mastery of any language differs from one teacher to another. The value of grammar instruction is supported by some theorists and rejected by others. Here are a number of recent statements on the subject:

„There is no doubt that a knowledge – implicit or explicit – of grammatical rules is essential for the mastery of a language.” (Penny Ur, a teacher trainer, and author of Grammar Practice Activities)

„The effects of grammar teaching .....appear to be peripheral and fragile.” (Stephen Krashen, an influential, if controversial, applied linguist)

„A sound knowledge of grammar is essential if pupils are going to use English creatively.” (Tom Hutchinson, a coursebook writer)

„Grammar is not very important: The majority of languages have a very complex grammar. English has little grammar and consequently it is not very important to understand it.” (From the publicity of a London language school)

„Grammar is not the basis of language acquisition, and the balance of linguistic research clearly invalidates any view to the contrary.” (Michael Lewis, a popular writer on teaching methods)

It is generally agreed upon that knowing a language means much more than knowing its grammar. If this is true for general English acquisition, then there is no doubt that focusing on teaching grammar during an ESP course should not be a top priority for any ESP teacher. Communicative goals constitute the focus of attention for ESP teachers and the ability to use specialized vocabulary and grammar correctly represents what is called communicative competence.

ESP learners are often reluctant to learn useless, boring grammatical items and this reluctance is more often than not fed by their past failure to get to master them. But what they are expected to understand and accept from the very beginning of the English course is that grammar is something they cannot do without. Mastery of the specialized vocabulary and the ability to naturally use it in almost any context go hand in hand with solid knowledge of grammar.

### **Grammar syllabuses**

At this level, the decision as to what to teach and in what order usually belongs to the teacher. He/She is free to organise his/her own syllabus and in order to complete this task teachers will take two criteria into account: frequency and usefulness. Teachers should never ignore the future practical contexts in which many of the present learners will be operating. In other words, nobody expects non-philological graduates to possess extended theoretical knowledge of grammatical issues. Less complex issues usually come before the more complex ones. Complex items are made up of several elements, for instance, the continuous aspect of each tense. This accounts for the students' ease in learning the simple aspect of each tense and their difficulty in learning the continuous aspect.

Besides complexity, another criterion to be taken into consideration by teachers while grading their ESP syllabus is learnability, which „was traditionally measured by its complexity: the more simple, the more learnable.” (Thornbury, 1999: 10) It is obvious from the very beginning of the English course that the students' needs in the future will be different. Some of them may need spoken English to be able to understand their interlocutors who may be native or non-native speakers of English and, in their turn, to be understood by them. In their case, stress should be laid on strategies of developing communicative skills, but also on regional and idiomatic speech. Some other students may, on the contrary, need written English in their future careers, which will force the teacher to focus more on features characteristic of written language. If, for instance, passive constructions are unlikely to be indispensable for the first category of learners, they do prove to be so for the second category. The trouble with this separation of needs is that it is impracticable because of the actual impossibility of separating students into groups according to their distinct needs. Hence, most teachers construct „a core grammar that will be useful to all learners, whatever their needs.” (Thornbury, 1999: 9)

A third factor that might be decisive for the grading of grammatical items in a grammatical syllabus designed for ESP learners is teachability. Thus, prepositions and conjunctions, though frequently occurring in any specialized text,

never come first or among the first grammatical issues taught during an ESP course because their meaning proves hard to demonstrate.

### **Methods of teaching grammar during an ESP course**

The architects of language teaching methods have come up with several methods of approaching the issue of language teaching. The role of teaching grammar has been seen as more or less decisive for the process of language acquisition.

1. Grammar-Translation is one of the oldest methods used by teachers all over the world. It involved two steps: stating the grammar rule, a stage which most learners found boring and sometimes too demanding and a second stage at which they were given exercises involving translation into and out of the mother tongue.
2. The Direct Method, considered by most theorists a natural method, used to lay stress on oral skills, minimizing explicit grammar teaching. Learners were encouraged to pick up grammar just like „children pick up the grammar of their mother tongue, simply by being immersed in language.” (Thornbury, 1999:21)
3. Audiolingualism was a method which rejected the first method even more forcefully than the Direct Method. According to the supporters of this method, language should be taught „through the formation of correct habits”. (Thornbury, 1999: 21) Teachers adopting this method strove to eliminate rules and to bring the process of language acquisition as close as possible to the conditions of first language acquisition. In this context, explicit rule giving was given little importance.
4. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) represents a method which backed up the idea that communicative competence was not limited to knowing grammar rules.
5. The post-communicative turn shows clearly that a well-educated person cannot be said to be equipped with communicative proficiency if he/she has not been taught grammar thoroughly. Today it is argued that „pointing out features of the grammatical system is a form of consciousness-raising. It may not lead directly and instantly to the acquisition of the item in question. But it

may nevertheless trigger a train of mental processes that in time will result in accurate and appropriate production. (Thornbury, 1999: 24) To sum it up, without becoming the very goal of teaching, grammar should be undoubtedly incorporated in the process of language learning. Receiving less time and energy from ESP teachers, grammar should not be absent from an ESP course.

### **Basic principles for grammar teaching in ESP classes**

Since it has been concluded that grammar teaching should not represent an objective in itself for any ESP teacher, it is worth pointing out that, when it is dealt with, this activity should be as efficient as possible. In other words, grammar should be short and permanently adapted to the students' already acquired knowledge. The teacher's explanations of the grammar rules should be kept as simple and as clear as possible. If students are given too much information in too short a time, they will feel assailed with information they cannot digest. In other words, students can't be expected to get to master too complex knowledge which is far beyond their interests and their power of assimilation. A good method for teachers would be to rely more on examples than on the mere formulation of rules. Non-philological students do not possess rich grammar terminology and, consequently, they do not understand many of the concepts involved. On the other hand, the time dedicated to the formulation of rules and to their subsequent explanations presupposes no student involvement and interaction. Although giving rules is sometimes time-saving, most ESP students are more inclined to remember examples than rules. Kept to a minimum, rules should respect, according to Michael Swan, author of teachers' and students' grammars, the following criteria:

- a. Truth:** Rules should be true. While truthfulness may need to be compromised in the interests of clarity and simplicity, the rule must bear some resemblance to the reality it is describing.
- b. Limitation:** Rules should show clearly what the limits are on the use of a given word.
- c. Clarity:** Rules should be clear. Lack of clarity is often caused by ambiguity or obscure terminology.
- d. Simplicity:** Rules should be simple. Lack of simplicity is caused by overburdening the rule with sub-categories and sub-sub-categories in order to cover all possible instances and account for all possible exceptions.
- e. Familiarity:** An explanation should try to make use of concepts already familiar to the learner. Few learners have specialized knowledge of grammar, although they may well be familiar with some basic terminology

used to describe the grammar of their own language (e.g. conditional, infinitive, gerund).

- f. Relevance:** A rule should only answer those questions that the student needs answered.

In conclusion, the goal of any second language course, be it general or for special purposes, aims to help learners become competent speakers and their ability to interact with other members of the society cannot be limited to simple rules of the language or to grammatical and semantic well-formedness.

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