

## Teaching Grammar to the Undergraduate Bangladeshi EFL Learners: A Rethinking

Md. Abul Kalam Azad\*  
Shamima Akter Shanta\*\*

### Abstract

*There are controversies about whether or not to teach grammar in language pedagogy. There are some applied linguists who hold the view that grammar teaching does little to the acquisition process of language; so formal instruction on grammar is not essential. On the other hand, some other linguists adopt the view that grammar teaching is beneficial to acquisition. This paper focuses on the fact that formal grammar instruction to Bangladeshi EFL learners especially the undergraduates is essential as they are expected to have accuracy as well as fluency in English for their academic and professional purposes. It is suggested that instead of teaching the whole of the grammar or some discrete items randomly, language teachers should focus on those areas in English grammar in which Bangladeshi EFL learners face problems and make frequent errors. This paper concludes with some considerations regarding the techniques that language instructors can apply in teaching grammar to the undergraduate Bangladeshi EFL learners.*

**Key words:** EFL, acquisition, explicit instruction, error analysis, focus on form, consciousness-raising, accuracy, formal grammar instruction.

### Introduction

Grammar teaching has always been an important issue in second and foreign language teaching. There has been considerable debate and discussion about its role in language teaching among the practitioners and theorists. Its role in different methods and approaches, therefore, has changed over time taking learners' needs into consideration. With the advent of communicative era, explicit grammar instruction has been put into question. But in recent years CLT and other communicatively-oriented programs such as immersion have been criticized as they fall short of developing high level of grammatical accuracy and error free production (Harley and Swain, 1984; Lightbown and Spada, 1990, cited in Yang and Lyster, 2010). CLT has also been criticized for its failure to produce the desired result especially in EFL contexts (Shahidullah, 2008). Consequently, a revival of interest in grammar teaching is seen in recent years though there is debate on when and how to teach grammar.

The present study addresses the issue of grammar teaching to the undergraduate Bangladeshi EFL learners. It argues that some formal grammar instruction is essential for this group of learners to develop accuracy in the target language. To validate the argument, a study was conducted by the

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\*Senior Lecturer, Department of English, ASA University Bangladesh

\*\*Lecturer, Department of English, ASA University Bangladesh

researchers on a small scale on the undergraduates studying in different disciplines in a private university in Bangladesh. The study, to some extent, sheds light on their accuracy in English. It also gives insights into the areas of English grammar in which they make frequent errors. However, due to the short duration of the language courses conducted at universities and the learners having some knowledge of English, teaching the whole or some randomly selected items is not much effective for them. Therefore, it is desirable to focus on those problematic areas in English grammar while giving instruction to the learners integrating form and meaning.

### **Grammar in Language Teaching: a review**

Ellis (2006:84) defines grammar teaching as “any instructional technique that draws learners’ attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps them either to understand it metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they can internalize it”

The role of grammar teaching in language pedagogy, however, is an issue of considerable debate among the linguists and practitioners. The historical background of grammar teaching shows that until 1967, there was no controversy regarding the role of grammar in language teaching. In fact, as Rutherford (1967) points out, for 2500 years the teaching of grammar had often been synonymous with foreign language teaching. With the advent of communicative approach in the 1970s, the role of grammar has been challenged.

Anthropological linguists in the U.S. (Hymes, 1972) and functional linguists in Britain (Halliday, 1973) viewed language as an instrument of communication. They claimed that communication with people is the goal of learning a second/foreign language. So, the focus should be on meaning, not on the grammatical forms in developing the communicative ability of the learners.

Some other linguists such as Krashen & Terrell (1983) suggest excluding grammar instruction from the language classroom as they feel that it does not facilitate language acquisition. Acquisition underlies both second language (L2) and first language (L1) and if L1 learners do not need formal instruction to acquire L1, neither should L2 learners (Krashen, 1981).

Krashen (1985) also asserts that consciously learned-grammar can only function as monitoring instead of productive ability and grammar knowledge should be acquired subconsciously and naturally through direct exposure to language in use.

Proponents of this philosophy later advocated that error correction is unnecessary because too much correction of error can make the learners less confident and vulnerable; rather if the students are exposed to the more complex, rich and meaningful input in the target language they will be self corrected and will acquire the target language automatically (Celce-Murcia, 1991).

So, it may appear from the views presented here that formal grammar instruction is not helpful to the acquisition process of language; rather it can be detrimental to language learning.

However, the current research in SLA has led to a reconsideration of the role of grammar in language pedagogy. Researchers through various studies have demonstrated how formal instruction on grammar can have a positive effect on learner's acquisition of language.

White (1987) claims that some grammatical features cannot be acquired simply by exposing learners to comprehensible input and thus formal instruction is necessary. Larsen-Freeman, 1995 (cited in Sugiharto, 2005) points out that even if grammar is acquired naturally, it does not necessarily follow that it should not be taught. Instruction can enhance the acquisition of grammar and help speed up the process.

Formal grammar instruction helps the acquisition process through noticing the structure of the input language exposed to them (Schmidt, 1990). This conscious noticing will help them in monitoring the speaker's own utterances and in their own production as well as the deeper understanding of target language.

Schmidt (1990) suggests that some grammar structures can benefit instruction any time they are taught and influence the learners in the sequence of development of linguistic proficiency. According to a teachability hypothesis of second language acquisition (Pieneman, 1984, cited in Fotos, 1998: 305), "If grammar teaching can be given when the learner is ready to progress to next stage, such instruction could speed up the learners' progress."

Grammar knowledge also offers the means for potentially unlimited linguistic creativity (Thornbury, 1999). Learners can produce new sentences as they need it for regular communication instead of creating some chunks of the language. As it's not possible to learn the unlimited speech in the target language, the learners can learn the process i.e. certain pattern through which they can produce the unlimited speech needed for necessary purposes.

On the other hand, students or learners in any grammarless approach may produce some broken, ungrammatical and pidginized form of the target language (Higgs and Clifford, 1982, cited in Celce-Murcia, 1991). Consequently, there is a possibility for the students of being fossilized.

Thornbury (2001: 33) asserts, "A focus exclusively on meaning may not be enough to trigger the reorganization of the learner's internal grammar. Simply communicating with each other in pairs and groups is unlikely to push learners into uncharted territory. Students can get very good at communicating using only minimal resources. What is required, as well as the meaning-focus, is a form-focus, a focus on the language itself, on the medium and not just the message."

Ellis (2002) states that learning a language in a natural setting (i.e. without formal instruction) does not guarantee the acquisition of grammatical competence as L2 adult learners often fail to achieve high level of accuracy.

So, now there is much evidence that grammar teaching is helpful rather than detrimental to language learning. It is reflected in the words of Ellis (2006: 86) “there is now convincing indirect and direct evidence to support the teaching of grammar”.

### **Necessity of Grammar Teaching to the Undergraduates: Some practical considerations**

English is now the most important foreign language studied in primary, secondary and higher secondary levels as a compulsory subject in Bangladesh. Yet students’ proficiency level in English is not satisfactory though they “study English as a foreign language as a compulsory subject in the primary, secondary and higher secondary levels of education for twelve years and spend approximately 1600 contact hours with teachers for learning English” (Sultana 2003:116). The situation has not changed much even after the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in secondary and higher secondary levels of education. CLT is claimed to be followed in the schools and colleges; the focus of which is to make learners able to communicate in English with each other. So grammar instruction is not given much importance though some grammar instruction is included in the curriculum of secondary level in recent years. It is worthy of mention here that Bengali is the medium of instruction in schools and colleges except the English medium schools. So, the students study English as a compulsory subject to pass the examinations rather using it as a tool for learning the language.

When these learners reach university level, they face problems to study their majors as English is used as the medium of instruction in all disciplines of private universities and many disciplines of public universities. They are required to read and write in English, to listen to the lectures delivered in English and to make presentations. In the examinations, the students need to write the answers in English. So, they are required to possess certain level of accuracy for their better academic result. Moreover, even after completing graduation, when they seek a job or get a job, certain level of accuracy in writing and speaking is needed for their professional purposes.

Due to their lack of accuracy in English, the learners fall behind in both academic and professional life. Many of them have serious problems in grammar and vocabulary. They lack knowledge of basic sentence structures, which is not desirable from the undergraduates. This is evident in a study conducted by the researchers on the writings of the first year undergraduates studying in different disciplines namely BBA, English, Law, and Pharmacy at a private university. All of them have 12 years English education at schools and colleges and share the same L1, Bengali. All of them were asked to write a free composition on “Your best friend”. The same topic was given to all students in order to get less variation and to evaluate their performance properly. The topic was chosen keeping in mind that responses were spontaneous and data input could easily be obtained. Some of the specimens of the errors produced by the learners are provided here:

*My best friend name is Monir. He live in a Bogra. My best friend mind is very nice and beautiful. He will read in a govt. Azizul Haq Collage, Bogra. I am so lucky than prayoud fill of my best*

*friend. My best friend face to face talk at fast school life . . . my best friend work you mind, knowledge, so fulfill. Monir aim of life he is a banker.*

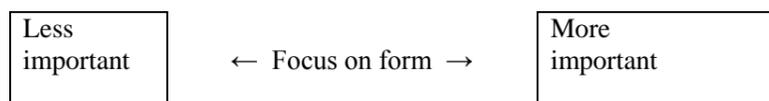
*Best friend is a important things for every man life. He is all time known for his other friend life story. Best friends choice is the very important. We are all time choice a good friend. Many men said that, "one good friend change for other friend". . . He all time help my many work.*

*My have a best friend Tisha. She come from Darus Salam and academy Norththon College . . . her future plans will banker.*

*My friend name is Md. Milon . . . His mother hause-waife . . . We wers readly in the some school.*

These examples indicate that the learners have very poor knowledge regarding sentence formation in English. With this poor knowledge in English, they can hardly cope up with the courses they are studying in the undergraduate program. On the other hand, language courses offered to the learners in the early semesters to improve their English language proficiency through fully CLT based approach may not produce desired result in improving the language ability of the learners with such serious errors mentioned above. This necessitates some explicit instruction on grammar to be imparted to them so that they become aware of the errors they are making in their writing or speaking in the target language.

Another important factor that can be considered is why we should focus on the undergraduate Bangladeshi EFL learners to teach grammar. Undergraduate Bangladeshi EFL learners are literate young adults and are at the pre-intermediate or intermediate level of proficiency in English. They have the cognitive ability to comprehend, analyze, and internalize the complex system of language. So, this group of learners is suitable for formal grammar instruction to improve their accuracy. Ellis (2006: 102) suggests that "grammar is best taught to learners who have already acquired some ability to use the language (i.e. intermediate level) rather than to complete beginners". Moreover, the undergraduates need to concentrate at this level on productive skills, i.e. writing and speaking. Their future needs can also be taken into consideration. In future, the learners will function as an academic, a diplomat or a business executive. A considerable degree of accuracy is highly needed for the purposes. Celce-Murcia's (1991) strategy based on learner and instructional variables can be helpful here. The learner variables comprise age, proficiency level and educational background of the learners. The instructional variables include skill, register and use. A grid on the basis of these six variables presented by Celce-Murcia (1991) is given below:



## Learner variables

Age	Children	Adolescents	Adults
Proficiency level	Beginning	Intermediate	Advanced
Educational background	Pre-literate, no formal education	Semiliterate, some formal education	Literate, well educated

## Instructional variables

Skill	Listening, reading	Speaking	Writing
Register	Informal	Consultative	Formal
Need/use	Survival communication	Vocational	Professional

Figure 1: Variables that determine the importance of grammar

(from “Grammar Pedagogy in Second and Foreign Language Teaching” by Celce-Murica, 1991. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(3), p.465)

Celce-Murcia (1991) suggests that such a grid is helpful for the teacher to decide whether they should focus on form or not. “The more the teacher identifies on the left side of the grid, the less important it is to focus on form; the more factors the teacher identifies on the right, the more important the grammatical focus” (Celce-Murica, 1991: 465).

If we look at the target group, i.e. undergraduate Bangladeshi EFL learners, we find that the factors on the right side of the grid are associated with this group. They are educated young adults who completed secondary and higher secondary education. So, they are not the beginners, rather pre-intermediate or intermediate learners in term of proficiency in English. They need to focus more on writing and speaking skills in their academic as well as professional life. Therefore, it can be asserted that grammar instruction is more important for the undergraduate learners studying different subjects at private and public universities in the country as the fact that they need a reasonable degree of grammatical accuracy cannot be denied.

### Selection of Grammatical items for the Undergraduates

An important question which can be raised here is whether we should teach the whole or some selection of the grammar to the undergraduate Bangladeshi EFL learners. Here, two important issues can be taken into consideration. First, the learners have 12 years schooling and have studied English from grade one to twelve as a compulsory subject. Second, the language courses conducted by the universities are for a short period of time ranging from four months to twelve months. So, teaching the whole of the grammar is neither necessary nor viable; rather some selection is needed.

Now the question is upon which selection should be based on. Ellis (2006: 89) proposes to “base selection on the known errors produced by learners” after analyzing the problems associated with different approaches to the selection of grammatical items. Language instructors can also focus on those grammar items in which Bangladeshi undergraduate students face problems and make errors. The problematic items can be selected easily by carrying out an error analysis. In error analysis, errors made by learners are observed, analyzed and classified to reveal something of the system operating within the learners (Brown, 2000). This analysis may also reveal to what extent the undergraduate learners need instruction on grammar.

The study presented here conducted by the researchers gives a clear picture of the problematic areas in which Bangladeshi EFL undergraduates make errors. 10 students of BBA, 15 students of Law, 5 students of Pharmacy and 13 students of English were the subjects of the study. The subjects were randomly selected from the first semester students of the respective departments. The scripts of the students were carefully checked and errors in different areas of English grammar were identified. 5 scripts out of 43 scripts contained so many errors that it was difficult to identify the pattern of grammatical problem. So, these were not included in the following table showing the number of errors. The errors were then classified and categorized manually. The errors fall into two primary categories: grammatical and lexical errors. As the study focused on the grammar, the following table shows only grammatical errors.

**Table 1: Errors in the writings of the undergraduates of different departments of a university**

Grammatical Category	Number of errors				Total
	BBA	Law	Pharmacy	English	
Tense	18	22	6	13	59
Third person singular -s	5	24	3	26	58
Preposition	7	8	11	11	37
Sentence structure	8	10	3	11	32
Wrong word	6	9	6	10	31
Article	6	5	2	1	14
Number	2	4	2	6	14
Case	1	8	2	1	12
Others (voice, degree, infinitives, word class)	4	3	2	3	12

The following graph shows the percentage distribution of the errors. Here the total number of errors in each grammatical category is multiplied by 100 and then they are divided by the total number of errors in all the grammatical categories.

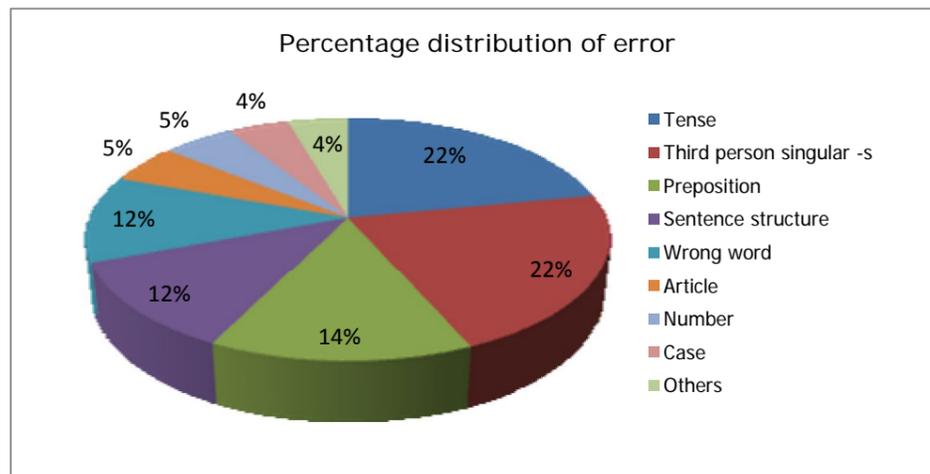


Figure 2: Percentage distribution of errors

From the data it is found that students made frequent errors in the use of tense, third person singular-s, appropriate prepositions, forming sentences, use of correct word, article, number and case. Other types of errors in the area of voice, word class, degrees of adjectives, and infinitives were also detected in the writings of the students but they were less frequent. To have a proper idea about the pattern of their errors, some examples are given as they were found in the writings of the subjects:

**Tense:**

- a. *Salma reading Stamford University.*
- b. *We are see after one year and two year but we are communicate with each other from mobile phone.*
- c. *I did knew him from class 9.*

**Third person singular-s:**

- a. *She live in hostel.*
- b. *A real friend give us best company.*
- c. *She always understand me.*

**Preposition:**

- a. *He got scholarship class five and class eaight.*
- b. *Now she is study on university with me.*
- c. *A friend is he /she who is with us all the moments good or bad.*

## Sentence structure:

- a. *She home district Shariatpur.*
- b. *In my life she was my best friend and still I alive Because friends forever.*
- c. *She stopped me and understanding about elaborately the matter.*

## Wrong Word:

- a) *She is honest and truthfulness.*
- b) *This feeling is staying from the beginning of human.*
- c) *Nobody helped me to stop cry.*

## Article:

- a. *Salma is not a my friend.*
- b. *I am a student of an university.*
- c. *Friends give us a best company.*

## Number:

- a. *All friends is not best friend.*
- b. *Jerry has a many positive quality to be my friend.*
- c. *I have many friend in my life.*

## Case

- a. *My friend name is Sanjida Sultana.*
- b. *She is my childhood's friend.*
- c. *She abides by her parents advice.*

It is important to mention that the errors found in the free composition of the students can be categorized as global and local errors (Burt and Kasparsky, 1972, cited in Brown, 2000). Global errors cannot be ignored as they hinder communication and comprehension of the message. Such errors, for example, shown in the category of sentence formation, require more attention and corrective feedback. At the same time local errors detected in the writings should be addressed for attaining accuracy.

The study on the errors will help the teachers to identify the pattern of errors made by the learners and in addressing those errors and giving feedback, the teachers can probe into the possible causes of the errors and provide required instruction.

**Grammar Instruction to the Undergraduates**

Now it is evident that some formal instruction on grammar is essential for the undergraduates in the context of Bangladesh. Now, the question which is very relevant here is how the language teachers can teach grammar to the learners at this level. Very often it is found that grammar is taught in the way of Grammar Translation Method which has been discredited on a number of grounds. As grammar is taught through presenting discrete grammatical items in an isolated

manner, learners often fail to transfer their grammatical knowledge to attain competence in language. Since the goal of language learning is to attain communicative competence, this form of grammar teaching will not be of much help to the Bangladeshi undergraduates. On the other hand, purely communicative-oriented pedagogy is inadequate for the learners because of its failure to promote high level of grammatical accuracy. The teachers can, therefore, explore ways in which form and meaning can be integrated to facilitate language learning and teaching.

To this end, some explicit grammar instruction for Bangladeshi learners can be helpful as they don't have much exposure to the target language. English is hardly used outside the classroom and daily communication in the country. This makes it difficult for them to notice and observe the structures in the natural communication. Therefore, giving formal instructions before the communicative activities and feedback afterwards can be an effective technique to instill the knowledge of form as well as meaning.

Besides, explicit grammar instruction especially to the EFL learners will be helpful in two ways as mentioned by Scheffler and Cinciata (2011). First, simple metalinguistic descriptions can be helpful for the learners for better comprehension of the input through noticing some of the formal L2 features taught to them. Second, as better understanding of grammatical rules facilitates the learners' grammatical output, it, to a great extent, contributes to a sense of "security, confidence, and achievement" in the learners (Scheffler and Cinciata, 2011: 22).

Consciousness-raising (Sharwood Smith, 1981, Rutherford, 1987) can be another technique which can be adopted to teach grammar to the Bangladeshi undergraduates. Grammatical consciousness-raising holds grammar as its central role which enables the learners to observe ungrammatical structures and provides them with their correct corresponding items. The main objective of it is the promotion of the techniques that facilitate making inferences about the rules and principles, by concentrating the learners' attention on the target structures. In a study conducted by Fotos and Ellis (1991) it was found that both direct (i.e. by means of grammar explanation) and indirect (i.e. by means of C-R tasks to judge the grammaticality of sentences) consciousness-raising resulted in significant gains in understanding the target structure. Through consciousness-raising activities, undergraduate learners can be exposed to the grammatical and ungrammatical sentences to become aware of the correct forms.

It is important to mention here that only focusing on grammar may not be effective for the undergraduate learners to achieve proficiency in English. So, grammar instruction should be incorporated within communicative activities in such a way that learners can focus on the form as well as meaning.

### **Conclusion**

The paper through reviews on grammar teaching focuses on some of the important issues in the field and argues that grammar teaching to the EFL learners is essential. However, we don't advocate to a return to the grammar teaching as it was in Grammar Translation Method. Rather form-focused instructions to grammar teaching which are compatible with the current teaching methodology should be provided to the learners. Moreover, the proficiency level of the learners and their purpose of using the language should be taken into consideration while giving instructions on grammar. As the undergraduates have the cognitive skill required to grasp different aspects of the grammar and are expected to have accuracy as well as fluency in the target language, some explicit instruction on grammar should be provided to them. However, teaching the whole of the grammar is not viable for them and this fact necessitates some selection which can be made by carrying out an error analysis. The teachers can carry out this study at the beginning of the course or program so that they can select the items in which their students need special care and attention. The analysis will help the teachers to know the pitfalls of the learners and design the lesson plans and provide the learners instructions. In teaching grammar, the teachers can give some explicit instructions to the learners but the instructions should be integrated within the communicative activities. In giving explicit instruction, they can follow techniques such as consciousness-raising or focus on form or any other technique which might be feasible in the particular context to develop learners' proficiency in English. The success of different techniques on grammar instruction to promote accuracy in the Bangladeshi undergraduate learners is yet a subject of further research.

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