



## TEACHING GRAMMAR TO ENGINEERING STUDENTS: EXPLORING SOME GOOD PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

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### ABSTRACT

English Language Teaching over the years has undergone many changes. With the focus shifting to communicative competence and learning centred approach, English courses have become more needs oriented. This change, however, is not visible in every English language course. Some courses are yet to reflect the communicative value of language teaching. They look like courses on grammar where the focus is on teaching the form and not on the communicative use of English. The situation becomes more complicated when such courses are introduced to learners studying specialized courses like engineering, law, management, etc. This paper investigates the need to teach grammar to the engineering students in the context of the communicative use of English. For this purpose engineering students and teachers of three state level engineering colleges of Guwahati affiliated to two different universities were approached. The paper also explores some teaching techniques that could be more effective in the teaching of grammar to engineering students and thus maximize learner participation in the class. For this purpose, the paper illustrates a few tasks that were done with students of a national level technical institute situated in Guwahati.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, communicative competence, English for Specific Purposes, pedagogy

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of teaching English to engineering students, the role of grammar in their English curriculum and how to teach it are issues that need to be investigated very seriously. Engineering students come with a very specific set of English language needs, and the same may be true for students studying other specialized courses like hotel management, law, etc. Teaching grammar to these students may become a challenging job for various reasons. First, there is this danger of putting too much emphasis on teaching grammar. As a

result, the course may turn into a grammar course and the real needs of the students, that is, performing communicative tasks successfully in their target field may not get addressed.

The general perception is that English is not considered as an integral part of engineering education, though proficiency in English for engineering students and engineers is considered to be extremely important. It is taught as a subject in its own right. The English paper included in the engineering curriculum (if it is included) is not meant to meet the English language needs like speaking

well in interviews, writing technical reports, participating in group discussions, etc. Engineering students usually show less motivation in learning English compared to the other domain subjects. This is a direct consequence of years of studying English courses that do not take into account their real needs. In such a scenario, teaching grammar, whether inductively or deductively, with too much focus on form and structure may affect their motivation. Exploring the possible ways in which grammar can be taught in a relevant manner to them is another challenge that the English teacher faces. Thus, the problem may be twofold: which grammar items to teach and how to deal with the pedagogical issues related to grammar.

A close study of some of the English syllabuses taught in engineering courses reveal that grammar forms a core part of the syllabus. Here it is important to stress that whether grammar should be taught and to what degree are issues that can be decided based on the needs of the learners only. However, emphasis on teaching the form and ignoring the communicative value of language will defeat the very purpose of teaching English for communication. This paper investigated whether teaching grammar in its present form has been effective in meeting the needs of the engineering students or not. It also explored some pedagogical practices that might help the teacher in maximizing learner participation in the English classroom of engineering students. For this purpose around hundred students and five English teachers from three engineering colleges in Guwahati were selected as participants. Information about importance of grammar and how relevant grammar is to their needs was collected through a series of unstructured and semi structured interviews.

In addition to this, as an illustration of some good pedagogical practices to deal with grammar, the case of a national level technical institute situated in Guwahati has been discussed in the paper. The researcher was a part of the needs analysis and course designing process for this institute. The course was designed with the objective of developing the English language proficiency of the students who find it difficult to carry out their academic activities as they lack

competence in English as in engineering English is extensively used for almost all academic and occupational purposes.

## 2. Aims and objectives

The paper aims to analyse the importance of grammar teaching in some engineering colleges of Gauhati university. The other objectives of this paper are to:

- explore the various ways in which grammar can be taught to engineering students with more effective results
- discuss the various challenges faced by the teacher while teaching grammar to engineering students and analyse the possible reasons

## 3. Literature Review

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) while tracing the developments in ESP over the years referred to the stage on register analysis. The main principle that operated at this stage was to teach learners those language forms that were more frequently found in their specialist fields. ESP, however, has undergone a lot of change since then and the focus has also shifted from register analysis to a learning centred approach that focuses on an understanding the processes involved in learning a language. Thus, once we identify what the learners need, we then need to find out what would motivate the learners to learn what they need to learn. This principle should be the basic principle of teaching English to engineering students which we will discuss further in the paper.

Widdowson (1979) discussed the problem of students who in spite of receiving several years of formal teaching in English remain incompetent in using the language for communicative purposes. This happens mostly in developing countries. Widdowson believed that the problem was with the approach which made use of situations to practice structures. The approach taught learners to compose sentences. The problem as pointed out by Widdowson is that learners do not learn how to communicate by acquiring the ability to compose sentences. As an illustration of the argument, Widdowson referred to an English course for science students. It is not necessary that such a course should include linguistic forms like present tense

and the passive in scientific discourse. Instead such a course should include those communicative acts that the scientist must perform: generalizing, classifying, defining, etc.

#### **4. Methodology**

##### **4.1 Participants**

Learners and teachers of three engineering colleges of Gauhati University were approached for this study. In order to examine some more effective ways of dealing with grammar, learners of a national level technical institute and the resource persons teaching there were also approached. Some of the other sources that were used to collect information for this purpose are: assignments and classroom observations

##### **4.2 Research tools**

The participants were approached through structured and unstructured interviews. Informal discussions were also held with them. The questions in the interviews were based on some predetermined categories like: teaching methodology, importance of grammar, etc. in addition, some written documents of the students submitted as assignments were also analysed. The ability to use correct sentences with minimal grammatical errors and the ability to express their thoughts clearly were as tools to examine the assignments. A few English classes were also observed to understand learner behavior and the methodology adopted in the class by the teacher.

The researcher was responsible for designing a course on English language proficiency for one of these institutes and was responsible for collecting information about learner needs and evaluation of the course. The experience of designing the course and evaluating the course thereafter was used for to explore effective methods in the teaching of English to engineering and technical students.

##### **4.3 Data analysis**

The data collection exercise was qualitative in nature. Based on the information collected from the structured and unstructured interviews information was sorted and conclusions were drawn. The needs analysis done by the researcher for designing a English proficiency course for engineering students and subsequent evaluation of

the course was also used to draw conclusions on the study.

#### **5. Findings**

##### **5.1 Responses of the participants**

The data indicated that majority of the learners desired a syllabus that could enable them to use English more effectively for a variety of communicative purposes. They were not in favour of a grammatically based syllabus. It was found that most of the learners found grammar teaching redundant in the present form. The learners said that grammar is important and they need to polish their grammar. However, they did not find grammar relevant in its present form.

Teachers said that they hardly got time to teach grammar. Moreover, the students did not show much interest in learning grammar. The teachers held remedial classes from time to time. In those classes they made the learners practice the forms, which was again a repetition of what they had already learnt in school and at the 10+2 level. Majority of the teachers, however, were of the opinion that the grammar component was not helping the learners develop their competence in English. It is to be noted here that most of the teachers were not aware of the best possible method to deal with grammar.

##### **5.2 Analysis of written documents**

Some written documents like leave applications and class assignments were examined. It was noticed that the learners made mistakes at various levels:

- Subject-verb agreement
- Tense
- Capitalization and punctuation
- Sentence composition,
- Coherence, etc.

##### **5.3 Classroom observations**

In one of the classes the teacher discussed passive form with the learners. The interaction patterns in the class were mostly teacher to whole class or teacher to student. The teacher began by writing a sentence in the active form on the board. She asked the class to write the passive form of that sentence. The sentence was picked up from science texts. The teacher held a brief discussion on active and passive forms and gave them exercises to do. It

was more of repeating the same exercises or making them do those exercises more efficiently. The exercises were not contextualized in the sense that the communicative value of that exercise could be understood. Similar transactions in the class were observed in the other classroom observation sessions. Referring to Widdowson's example (section 2), we find that giving them a short scientific text which contained a formal structure and making them practice that form will not enable to use that form for communicative purposes.

## 6. Discussion

It was revealed in the study that learners usually assume grammar to be repetition of the same grammar that they have learnt in school. English at the tertiary level definitely need to focus on enabling the learners to manipulate the language to communicate effectively for various purposes which may be academic, occupational or social. Adult and advanced learners usually do not want to study the same grammar over and over again (Allen and Widdowson, 1979). The focus at this level should be to activate the knowledge about grammar rules that they acquire over the years and enable them to use them to study scientific concepts and processes. This is not to endorse the view that during the initial years of schooling English teaching and learning should concentrate on giving knowledge about the rules of grammar. Learners at every level should be taught the communicative use of English and not simply the rules of grammar. In fact one of the glaring problems affecting higher education is that learners at the tertiary level often come with deficiencies in English and consequently face difficulties in dealing with the demands that the course puts on them.

In order to get into the root of the problem we will have to look at the syllabus, the instructional materials, the teaching methodology and the evaluation system, which are interrelated, very carefully. The syllabus most of the time is prepared without much needs analysis. However, the problem may also lie with the teaching methodology. Grammar is often taught as a fast forward version of what the learners already learn in school and higher secondary. That way grammar teaching becomes redundant.

If we begin from the stage of syllabus design, listing grammar points in the syllabus is not enough. We identify the grammar points to be taught and arrange them in the syllabus along with the other skills. In fact every language skill should be thematically arranged with the theme being relevant for students belonging to different branches of engineering.

Now coming to the pedagogical aspect of grammar, grammar cannot be taught in isolation. In other words, the focus cannot be in teaching the form only through isolated sentences. Next, grammar should not be taught as a fast forward version of the school grammar where it is a mere repetition of what they already know, or test how much they remember. Adult learners should be encouraged to apply their knowledge of grammar in meaningful contexts. Grammar should be viewed as an area of language that needs to be developed along with the other language skills. We need to approach it holistically along with the four language skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing, not to forget vocabulary. In the next section we present an illustration of the various points discussed in this section by taking the case of few English classes held in a technical institute in Guwahati.

### 6.1 Challenges for the teacher and some good pedagogical practices

The first day of the class included an exercise on present tense. The learners were asked to think of their daily activities. Some of the learners spoke about their daily activities in front of the teacher and the whole class. Then an exercise which included the day to day activities of two people was given to them. They were required to fill in the verb forms in the appropriate tense.

One interesting aspect of this class was the views expressed by the learners after the class. Some of them wanted to know what other grammar points would be discussed in the class. The resource person could understand that the learners who wanted to know about the grammar points to be discussed were heavily influenced by the traditional method of teaching grammar and were convinced that teaching grammatical rules explicitly is important in order to develop their English proficiency.

The resource persons decided to explain the learners the non traditional method of teaching English. They explained the purpose of the kinds of tasks that were done in the class and the reason for not teaching grammatical rules explicitly. The resource persons, in consultation with the course designers, made another change in the tasks. Most of the tasks were arranged thematically. For example, one of the themes was *Interesting facts*. The learners were first given a few statistical figures about the United States of America. The sentences were in the passive. For example,

*Approximately 200 people were killed in road accidents in 2009.*

Then the learners were asked to work in pairs and make a list of some interesting statistics about India that they knew. The next activity was to share their notes with the class. Then they were asked to read a text that discussed some statistical figures about the use of *Facebook* in different countries around the world. The text contained many sentences in the passive form. They were required to answer some questions on the text. Next, they were given a scientific text that discussed a scientific process. They were required to write down the process in steps using the passive form. These activities were followed by some other activities like each student interviewing another student about other interesting facts related to the field of science and technology that he or she was aware of and make notes on them.

The modified version was a much more successful exercise than the earlier one. The activities helped learners use English in the following ways:

1. The activities were thematically arranged and the learners were expected to speak, listen, read and write in the same task through a chain of activities.
2. They practised the form (passive) in a context.
3. Learners skimmed a text and extracted information from the text and made a list of the information in the form of sentences (writing a scientific process in steps).

Before doing the task the resource persons discussed the purpose of applying the new

methodology of teaching with the learners. They were made to understand how doing tasks of that kind eventually helped them in developing their English language proficiency.

The amount of discussion that the teacher wants to have with the learners on the methodology depends on how receptive the learners are about the new approach.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper discussed the importance of teaching grammar to engineering students in a way that is most relevant to their needs. It also explored the various pedagogical aspects of teaching grammar in the context of teaching the communicative use of language.

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