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## UNIT 15 TEACHING GRAMMAR-I

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### Structure

- 15.0 Objectives
- 15.1 Introduction
- 15.2 What is Grammar?
- 15.3 Why Study Grammar?
- 15.4 Approaches to Teaching Grammar
- 15.5 Current Trends in Teaching Grammar
- 15.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 15.7 Key Words
- 15.8 Suggested Readings
- 15.9 Answers

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### 15.0 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- Understand the place of grammar in the teaching of a language
- Understand the different meanings of the word 'Grammar' as used in different contexts
- What is involved in grammar teaching
- Become familiar with current trends in teaching grammar
- Organize grammar teaching in a systematic and meaningful manner in the classroom.

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### 15.1 INTRODUCTION

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What is grammar? Is there only one grammar? Is it compulsory that we should teach grammar? If so, how should we go about it? If not, why not? What is the role of grammar in language teaching? These are some of the questions that worry every English teacher.

The ultimate aim of every language learner is to acquire the ability to speak and write the language correctly. In order to do this, s/he requires knowledge of grammar in some form or the other. Hence any course in language teaching assigns an important role to grammar. As teachers of English we need to know:

- a) What is grammar?
- b) How should we teach grammar?

There are a handful of people who are fascinated by the magic of grammar, But most of us generally feel 'bored' with it; nor do we have any pleasant recollections of our grammar classes – either as teachers or as learners. We would rather teach 'poetry' than 'grammar'.

This unit will help you to examine some of the prevailing misconceptions in grammar teaching and enable you to make your grammar classes livelier and more interesting. We do hope, that at the end of this unit, you would have developed a balanced attitude to grammar.

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3. Grammar' also refers to the rules for correct use of language, which may be prescribed for its users; for example words beginning with a vowel sound are preceded by 'an' whereas words beginning with a consonant sound are preceded by 'a'. Text books on grammar written by Wren and Martin, or Nesfield consist of such rules, which prescribe what learners should/should not do. Hence they are also referred to as prescriptive grammars. In contrast to this, Grammars of the G2 type merely 'describe' the facts of the language. Hence they are known as descriptive grammars. Let us call this third type Grammar 3 or G3.
4. According to modern linguistics there is a fourth meaning for the term 'grammar' - 'Grammar' is regarded as the innate capacity which all human beings possess; it allows them to acquire language. In this sense grammar is a property of the human brain, rather than that of any language. This may be termed Grammar 4 or G4.

**What is Grammatical?**

Consider the following dialogues:

- a)
  - i) Who's there?
  - ii) It's me!
- b)
  - i) Would you like some coffee?
  - ii) No, coffee has been drunk by me.

Traditional grammar teachers, brought up on the Wren and Martin tradition would say that *It's me* is wrong; the correct form is *It's I*. With regard to (b) they would happily accept *Coffee has been drunk by me* as correct, being the passive transformation of *I have drunk coffee*. However we notice that almost every native speaker uses *It's me* and hardly any native speaker used *Coffee has been drunk by me*. Does this mean that native speakers are often ungrammatical? Not at all. In fact, grammar is described as the set of conventions used by native speakers. Hence we add another dimension to language - that of **appropriacy** - a (ii) is appropriate but b(ii) is inappropriate even though it is grammatically correct. To cite another example, traditional grammarians approve of *Whom did you see?* This shows that one cannot be too rigid regarding grammatical correctness, since language keeps changing.

**Check Your Progress 2**

1. Summarise the four meanings of Grammar in the table below:

Type	Meaning

To which type of grammar would you attribute the following statement:

- i) Every human child acquires a language but no animal does so.
- ii) In English, a sentence should not end with a preposition.
- iii) There are no articles in Tamil.
- iv) I know that it is wrong to say *I didn't went there*. **I'm** sorry I can't explain why it is wrong.

Discuss whether the following sentences are grammatical and appropriate:

- i) Everyone gave their share.
- ii) Grammar is the most wonderful subject on earth
- iii) Where you are going?
- iv) We gave no one nothing.
- v) Did you visit the Taj?  
Yes, the Taj has been visited by me.

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### 15.3 WHY STUDY GRAMMAR?

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Traditional teachers of English considered grammar as an integral part of the language curriculum. They felt that it was not possible for a learner to speak or write English correctly if s/he did not know the grammar of English. Hence students were taught all about articles, prepositions, conditional clauses, etc.

In the early years of the Communicative Approach it was felt that a knowledge of grammar may not be necessary for one to communicate in a language. As evidence, they cite the example of a child acquiring its first language. The child is able to speak the language grammatically by the age of five, even though no one has taught him/her the grammar of the language. So they argue that a second language learner can also acquire a language without learning grammar.

The other arguments they gave against the teaching of grammar were:

- Much input produces little output. What is learnt is not applied.
- Grammatical analysis breaks up the unity of thought by its focus on detail and fails to relate the details to the whole.
- Grammatical rules may be thoroughly understood and learned and yet not applied in practice.
- The best way of imparting even grammatical competence is through use and not usage.

In recent years there has been a re-thinking about grammar teaching. While as a reaction to the Structural Approach, the learners in a communicative classroom were expected not 'puzzle their heads with grammar', it is being increasingly accepted that "language learning is essentially learning how grammar functions in the achievement of meaning." (Widdowson:1990:97). But instead of isolated sentences which were mostly used for drill and practice in the Structural Approach, the emphasis is now on providing suitable contexts to make the "learners realize the communicative value of grammar in the very achievement of meaning."

In other words, the focus has moved away from the teachers covering grammar to the learners discovering grammar. Learners are first exposed to a new language in a comprehensible context, so that they are able to understand its function and meaning. Only then is their attention turned to examining the grammatical forms that have been used to convey that meaning. The discussion of grammar is explicit, but it is the learners who do most of the discussing or working out of rules, with guidance from the teacher.

What should English teachers do then? Should they teach grammar or not? We feel that grammar has an important place in the English curriculum and it has to be taught, for the following reasons:

- 'Because it is there. We are constantly curious about the world we live in, and wish to understand it and master it. Grammar is no different from any



marks in the grammar section of the paper. But when they speak or write they are likely to forget the rules they have learned and commit numerous mistakes. Hence they will not be able to communicate effectively in English, outside the classroom.

b) Practice of common grammatical patterns

In this approach students are not taught the rules of grammar; they are merely asked to practice the structures of language. They are given substitution tables which drill them in the correct use of structures. It is thus impossible for them to come out with an ungrammatical sentence. (e.g.)

Look at the substitution table given below. How many sentences can a learner generate from this table?

My friend	wants	a new camera
Rajesh	has	an exercising cycle
Pushpa	needs	a large basket

Such drilling helps students to become familiar with the basic sentence patterns in English. However, it does not tell them when to use these patterns. There is also the danger that they may mechanically repeat the sentences without understanding the grammatical rules involved.

c) Providing opportunities to use English in realistic situations

In this approach, the teacher is not concerned with teaching grammar – either in the form of rules or drills. His/her major objective is to create opportunities for the learners to communicate in English. It is believed that by engaging in the process of communication, the students will implicitly master the rules of grammar. Hence, the more opportunities learners get for communication, the better their proficiency.

The difference between the first and third approaches could be represented as follows;

Approach (a): Grammar \_\_\_\_\_ Communication  
We learn grammar rules now so that we will be able to communicate later

Approach (c): Communication \_\_\_\_\_ Communication  
Implicit understanding of grammar. Learners are given opportunities to engage in the process of communication; this will enable them to acquire the proficiency to communicate (which includes grammatical competence as well).

These two approaches represent two extremes – the one focusing totally on grammar and the other completely on communication, to the exclusion of grammar.

d) Discovery Techniques

There is yet another approach which makes use of discovery techniques. Here the students are given examples of language and told to find out how they work – to discover the grammar rules rather than be told about them. Students can be asked to look at some sentences and say how the meaning is expressed and what the differences are between the sentences. As the students puzzle through the information and solve the problem in front of them, they find out how grammar is 'used in the text and are actually acquiring a grammar rule. The advantages of this approach are clear. By involving the students' reasoning processes in the task of grammar acquisition, we make sure that they are concentrating fully, using their cognitive powers. We are also ensuring that our approach is more student-centered: it's not just the teacher telling the students what the grammar is. They are actually discovering information for themselves.

We now outline a practical way of following a rather eclectic approach suggested by Celce Murcia and Hilles.

According to them a grammar lesson consists of four parts:

**1. Presentation**

The teacher selects a grammar structure relevant to student needs and introduces it. The teacher could present the structure (e.g.) the passive in a natural context.

She could then elicit the rule for forming the passive.

**2. Focused Practice**

In this stage, students get practice in the use of the Passive, through various exercises, (e.g.) filling in passive forms of verbs in the continuous paragraph. After they finish the exercise, the teacher gives them the correct answers and also discusses their errors.

**3. Communicative Practice**

Now, the learner engages in communicative activities to practice the structure that has been learnt. These activities are similar to communication in real life. There is a genuine information gap as in real life contexts. As in real life the learners have the choice i.e., the freedom to say what they want. They also get feedback from their peers regarding the effectiveness of their communication.

**4. Teacher feedback and correction**

Although it has been listed last, feedback and correction actually form an integral part of all the three stages above. The teacher should not merely point out the error and correct it; instead s/he should provide a cognitive challenge to the learners and provide them opportunities to discover their own mistakes.

The approach of Celce Murcia and Hilles, attempts a compromise among the approaches discussed earlier.

**Check Your Progress 4**

1. Four approaches to grammar have been presented in this section, Which do you prefer? Why?

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2. Look through grammar books (both traditional and modern) and try to find a sample exercise for each of the four approaches.

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3. Choose any area of grammar and prepare a lesson plan for teaching it, based on the plan of Celce Murcia and Hilles.

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## 15.5 CURRENT TRENDS IN TEACHING GRAMMAR

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The teaching of grammar has undergone a sea-change in recent times. If a grammar teacher in the year 1900 happens to visit a grammar class today, s/he may not recognize that it is a grammar class. We shall briefly outline the basic principles followed today:

a) **Teach grammar for communication – not grammar for its own sake**

Our aim in teaching is to help learners to communicate effectively. We are not interested in producing grammarians. As we pointed out earlier, students may be very good in grammar when they do isolated exercises on grammar; but they often fumble and commit mistakes when they attempt to speak or write independently.

We want our learners to acquire knowledge of language and not knowledge about language. It is not necessary for them to know what a noun or a verb is; they can still communicate without such knowledge. Hence let us not frighten our learners with excessive use of grammatical labels. An analogy might help you to understand this better. If you want to learn driving, it is not necessary for you to know everything about each part of the car. That is a mechanic's duty. You can still drive a car without knowing, for example, what the different parts of the engine are. Similarly you can still speak/write a language without an explicit knowledge about grammar.

b) **Teach grammar as discourse – not isolated sentences**

The traditional grammar books present numerous exercises, which consist of isolated sentences, unconnected with each other. This is artificial and unrealistic. In real life we always speak/write in continuous stretches of language (known as discourse). If our language classes should help our learners to communicate effectively in real life, then we should also give them practice in the use of continuous discourse.

c) **Teach grammar in context**

Most of our time-tables allocate a separate period for grammar. We select a particular area of grammar and teach the various aspects. Most often students feel bored with this, because they do not understand its relevance to real life contexts. They are often puzzled and confused. After all, what is the difference between saying "I ate a mango" and "A mango was eaten by me", when they both mean the same thing? A little more planning will make the class more interesting. For example, passives may be taught through the context of laboratory reports or newspaper reports where the agent is not important. The present continuous tense may be presented in the context of running commentaries for cricket, tennis, etc.

d) **Make grammar learning fun**

Interactive games for grammar are very popular now. They motivate learners and help them to shed inhibitions. Games also help learners to practice the relevant structures without even being conscious of the fact that they are learning grammar. We shall give you many ideas on grammar games in the next unit.

e) **Focus** on fluency first and accuracy later

We, English teachers, on the whole, feel very possessive about English grammar. If anyone makes a grammatical mistake (whoever it may be), we have to point it out immediately, otherwise our conscience troubles us! But we should think of the effect of such correction on our learners who are just beginning to struggle to communicate. The moment we point out a mistake, they feel humiliated and inhibited. They feel it is better not to speak, rather than speak ungrammatically. Hence it is advisable to pretend to ignore their mistakes in the early stages of learning or point it out as a whole class activity. **After** they gain some fluency and confidence, we could slowly begin to emphasize the need for accuracy.

Check Your Progress 5

1. Think of another analogy to bring out the difference between knowledge of and knowledge about something.

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2. Write dialogue which you could use as a starting point for teaching 'if clauses.

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3. Choose any four areas of grammar. Now identify the contexts where they are likely to be used frequently.

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4. Discuss the concept of fluency vs. accuracy with your learners and colleagues. Do you find any difference in their views? .

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**15.6 LET US SUM UP**

In this unit we addressed the following concepts about grammar:

- Grammar is a theory of language. It consists of a set of rules which combine words and sentences.
• The words 'grammar' is understood in four different ways:
a. G1 the total mechanism of the language, which enables its users to communicate with each other.

- b. G2 a formal analysis and description of what a native speaker knows intuitively.
- c. G3 prescriptive rules for correct use of language.
- d. G4 the capacity that all human beings possess, which enable them to acquire language.
- It is not enough if sentences are grammatical; they should also be appropriate.
- There are four major approaches to teaching grammar:
  - a. Formal explanation of grammatical rules.
  - b. Practice of common grammatical patterns.
  - c. Providing opportunities for students to use English in realistic situations.
  - d. Using discovery methods which help students frame their own rules.
- The four parts of a grammar lesson are: Presentation; Focused Practice; Communicative Practice; Teacher feedback and Correction.
- Recent trends in grammar teaching are:
  - Don't teach grammar for its own sake; Instead,
    - a. Teach grammar for communication.
    - b. Teach grammar as discourse – not isolated sentences.
    - c. Teach grammar in context.
    - d. Make grammar fun.
    - e. Focus on fluency first, accuracy later.
    - f. Let children discover the rules of grammar for themselves.

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### 15.7 KEY WORDS

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appropriacy:	when producing an utterance, a speaker needs to know what is grammatical, and also what is suitable (appropriate) for that particular situation.
descriptive grammar:	a grammar which describes how a language is actually spoken or written, and does not prescribe how it ought to be spoken or written.
fluency vs accuracy:	fluency refers to the ability to produce spoken and written language with ease. I-However, it may be pointed out that the vocabulary, grammar and intonation need not be perfect,  Accuracy, in contrast, refers to the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences, but may not include the ability to speak or write fluently.
prescriptive grammar:	Pedagogical grammar which states rules for the most correct usage. Prescriptive grammars are often based not on descriptions of actual usage but on the grammarian's view of what is best.

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### 15.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Frank, C. & Rinovoluceri, Mario (1983): *Grammar in Action*, Oxford; Pergamon Press.

Makey, Sandra L. (1985): *Teaching Grammar*, Oxford; Pergamon Institute of English.

Rinvoluceri, Mario (1984): *Grammar Games*, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press,

Ur. Penny (1988): *Grammar Practice Activities*, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press.

Wright, Andrew, Betteridge, David & Buckby, Michael (1984): *Games for Language Learning*, Cambridge; Cambridge University Press.

*Channel 1 - 10*(1990); Madras; Orient Longman.

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## 15.9 ANSWERS

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### Check Your Progress 1

Open ended.

### Check Your Progress 2

1.    Type    Meaning  
      G1     - Total mechanism of a language  
      G2     - Formal analysis and description of a language  
      G3     - Rules for correct use of a language.  
      G4     - The innate capacity of human beings.
2.    i. G4 ii. G3 iii. G2 iv. G1
3.    i.     Not grammatical, but appropriate.  
      ii.    Both grammatical and appropriate.  
      iii.   Ungrammatical; appropriate in India.  
      iv.    Ungrammatical; appropriate in a dialect.  
      v.     Grammatical; inappropriate.

### Check Your Progress 3

Structuralist Approach – Language Learning was considered to be habit formation. Drills, teaching particular grammatical points were given for practice with the hope that the children would master that particular item and be able to use it subsequently.

Communicative Approach – It is felt that children did not benefit from the knowledge of grammar, because they are not able to transfer this knowledge for communicative purposes. Grammar teaching merely incidental.

Post communicative - Discovery of the grammar rules by the children important – Grammar practice in communicative situations.

### Check Your Progress 4

Open Ended

### Check Your Progress 5

1.    Swimming
2.    Open-ended
3.    (e.g.) Past tense: Narration of stories  
      Present tense: Universal truths  
      Future tense: Weather Forecasts  
      Modals-may/can: Permission
4.    Open ended