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GRAMMAR AS THE BASIS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING: FOUNDATIONS, FUNCTIONS, AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Inamova Dilfuza Ergashevna
English applied translation department, Translation faculty, Uzbekistan state university of world languages

ABSTRACT

Grammar is often described as the backbone of language. It provides the structural framework that supports communication, language comprehension, and production. This article explores the centrality of grammar in language learning, emphasizing its cognitive, functional, and pedagogical roles. It argues that a solid understanding of grammar is essential not only for linguistic accuracy but also for communicative competence, literacy development, and higher-order thinking skills.

KEYWORDS: grammar instruction, language learning, communicative competence, second language acquisition, grammar and literacy, grammar pedagogy, structural foundation.

Introduction

Grammar occupies a central position in the study and teaching of languages. It is the system by which words are arranged and modified to convey meaning. In the context of language learning, grammar is not merely a set of rules to memorize but a dynamic system that enables learners to construct meaning, express ideas, and interact effectively. As such, grammar serves as the foundation upon which all other language skills–listening, speaking, reading, and writing – are built (Ur, 2011).

The Nature and Function of Grammar

Grammar encompasses syntax (sentence structure), morphology (word formation), and parts of speech (nouns, verbs, etc.). It governs how words combine to create meaning. Without grammar, vocabulary remains disorganized and incoherent.

Grammar and Meaning-Making

Grammar allows speakers to express complex meanings such as:

- ✓ Time and tense (e.g., *She studied* vs. *She is studying*)
- ✓ Modality (e.g., *You must go* vs. *You might go*)
- ✓ Conditionality (e.g., *If it rains, we'll cancel the trip*)

These distinctions are crucial for clarity, precision, and appropriateness in communication (Thornbury, 1999).

Grammar and Language Comprehension

Studies in applied linguistics show that grammatical knowledge significantly supports reading comprehension and listening skills. Understanding grammatical structures helps learners decode sentence meaning and identify relationships between ideas (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

Grammar in Language Acquisition

Grammar plays a pivotal role in both **first** and **second language acquisition** as it forms the structural foundation for producing and understanding meaningful utterances. It encompasses the rules governing morphology (word formation), syntax (sentence structure), and sometimes even phonology and semantics, depending on the linguistic theory being applied.

First Language Acquisition

In first language (L1) acquisition, children acquire grammar naturally and implicitly through exposure and interaction. According to Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar (UG), humans are born with an innate capacity to acquire grammatical structures, which explains why children often form grammatically correct but novel sentences without formal instruction (Chomsky, 1965).

For example, a child may say *"I goed to the park"*—a grammatically incorrect form, but evidence of applying internalized grammatical rules (overgeneralization of the past tense). This suggests grammar is being acquired as part of a cognitive developmental process, not merely imitated.

Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

In SLA, grammar acquisition can occur both **explicitly** (through direct instruction) and **implicitly** (through exposure). Adult learners often rely more on explicit grammar knowledge, especially in formal educational contexts. However, Krashen (1982) distinguishes between "acquisition" (subconscious absorption of language rules) and "learning" (conscious knowledge of grammatical forms), emphasizing that meaningful communication is key for effective acquisition.

Key factors influencing grammatical development in SLA include:

- ➢ **Input Quality:** Exposure to grammatically rich input aids subconscious acquisition.
- ➢ **Noticing Hypothesis:** Schmidt (1990) argued that learners must consciously notice grammatical forms in input for learning to occur.
- ➢ **Affective Factors**: Motivation, anxiety, and attitude can influence grammar acquisition.

Instructional Implications

- ➢ **Form-Focused Instruction (FFI)** enhances grammatical accuracy when integrated into meaningful communication.
- ➢ Teaching grammar in context rather than isolation fosters deeper understanding and retention.
- ➢ A balance of **explicit grammar rules** and **communicative activities** supports both accuracy and fluency.

Research in second language acquisition (SLA) indicates that grammar plays a key role in the interlanguage development of learners.

Cognitive Role

Grammar instruction supports language processing and automatization. Learners internalize patterns that enable more fluent and spontaneous language use over time (Ellis, 2006).

Developmental Sequences

Language learners typically acquire grammatical structures in predictable stages. For example, mastery of the present continuous usually precedes mastery of the third person –s. Explicit grammar teaching helps accelerate this natural progression (Pienemann, 1998).

Grammar and Communicative Competence

According to Canale and Swain's (1980) model, communicative competence includes:

- ✓ Grammatical competence (knowledge of rules)
- ✓ Sociolinguistic competence (appropriate use)
- ✓ Discourse competence (cohesion and coherence)
- ✓ Strategic competence (repairing breakdowns)

Grammatical competence is the foundation upon which other communicative abilities are built. It ensures accuracy and intelligibility, enabling learners to participate meaningfully in conversations, academic discussions, and written communication (Brown, 2007).

Grammar in Educational Contexts

Grammar and Literacy

In first and second language education, grammar supports literacy by enhancing sentence construction, reading comprehension, and writing fluency. Grammar-based instruction improves learners' ability to produce coherent and sophisticated texts (Myhill & Watson, 2014).

Grammar and Academic Success

Academic English relies heavily on complex grammatical structures–passives, conditionals, relative clauses, and modals. Proficiency in grammar is thus crucial for success in academic writing, standardized testing, and higher education contexts (Schleppegrell, 2004).

Pedagogical Implications

Effective language teaching should not neglect grammar, but rather incorporate it in communicative, contextual, and meaningful ways. This includes:

- ✓ Explicit instruction with clear explanations and guided practice
- ✓ Task-based learning that embeds grammar in real-world communication
- ✓ Form-focused instruction that draws learners' attention to grammatical features without interrupting fluency (Larsen-Freeman, 2003)

A balanced grammar pedagogy–one that integrates form, meaning, and use–supports learners' overall language development.

Conclusion. Grammar is not a peripheral aspect of language learning; it is its structural core. It supports accurate communication, deepens comprehension, and enables creative language use. A strong grammatical foundation empowers learners to become confident, competent language users across a wide range of contexts. As such, grammar must be treated not just as a component of language education but as its essential foundation.

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