

Grammar in the Teaching of English Language in the Nigerian ESL Context: A Focus on the Senior Secondary School (SSS) Curriculum

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Abstract: The Second Language status conferred on English in Nigeria and the official role it plays as not only the language of instruction but also a subject that determines the realization of the higher education dream of young Nigerians has placed huge demands on the teaching and learning of English in our multilingual nation. This paper assesses the place of grammar in ESL pedagogy with focus on the Senior Secondary School curriculum in English. The objectives are to explore the grammatical demands of the curriculum, the connection between students' knowledge of grammar and their performance in English and the factors that affect effective teaching and learning of grammar in an ESL context. The study reveals that the centrality of grammar in the meaning-making potential of language makes a sound knowledge of grammar pivotal to the teaching and learning of the four language skills which constitute the fulcrum of the English language curriculum. Thus, a shallow knowledge of grammar translates to the high rate of failure in English language exams. Factors that militate against effective teaching of grammar in Nigeria are exposure to wrong models, lack of qualified teachers of English, decontextualized teaching of grammar, poor awareness of a diverse repertoire of teaching methods, lack of methodological flexibility, among others. The study recommends that in view of the multifaceted nature of grammar and the uniqueness of learners, the teaching of grammar should be approached from a variety of teaching approaches depending on the job in hand to achieve communicative competence.

Key words: Grammar · Teaching · ESL · English Language · Senior Secondary School (SSS) · Curriculum

INTRODUCTION

The term 'grammar' is basically used in four different senses which makes it difficult to arrive at an all-embracing definition of the term. Tomori [1] captures these four senses as follows:

- The quality of the knowledge of language possessed by a speaker, as inferred from the nature of his utterances .
- A book embodying the morphological and syntactic rules of a particular language.
- The body of descriptive statements about the morphological and syntactic structures of a language.
- The body of prescriptive statements about usages that are considered acceptable and those that are considered unacceptable in a particular language (1).

The first underscores the popular belief in Generative Grammar that the native speaker of a language knows the grammar of his language intuitively, whether educated or otherwise. This knowledge gives him the innate ability to generate and understand an infinite number of novel sentences. However, a non-native speaker of a language, who often learns the rules deliberately in a formal setting, may not easily command this notable level of grammatical competence possessed by the native speaker. The second meaning entails that any book that presents the rules and conventions of a specific language can be entitled

“Grammar”; such books abound in different languages. The third sense of the word refers to the body of descriptive statements about the systemic interrelationships of structures within the language – that is the corpus of statements that describes the systems and patterns that operate in a specific language. Lastly, the fourth meaning borders on prescriptions regarding the acceptability or unacceptability of certain patterns of usages in a language, that is to say what is preferred and what is condemned by fluent users of the language. We often pass value judgments regarding a language user’s utterance as good or bad grammar. From the foregoing, the third and fourth senses of grammar encapsulate the relevant notions that fit into the concept of grammar explored in this paper. Thus, we attempt a working definition of grammar to guide this study: the body of descriptive and prescriptive statements about the rules of a language that provide the yardstick for measuring correct or incorrect usage.

The centrality of grammar in the meaning-making potential of a language is incontrovertible, thereby making grammar the hub of language. The emphasis on the importance of grammar in conveying meaning in an utterance has engaged the attention of many a linguist. Crystal and Davy [2] conceive of grammar as “the central part of a linguistic statement” (18). Similarly, Leech, Deuchar and Hoogenraad [3] think of grammar as a central part of language which relates sound and meaning. MacDonald and Asiyanbola [4] view grammar as “the structure of language, the machinery of language ...about the system of language, the way we combine words to produce meaning” (9) while Denham and Lobeck [5] submit that grammar is a “linguistic rule system that we use to produce and understand sentences. Webster [6] justifies the explication of meaning using a grammatical approach: “A grammar is that abstract stratum of coding between meaning and expression; it is a resource for making meaning. The grammar ‘transforms experience into meaning’; the grammar is itself ‘a theory of experience’” (5). These authors thus recognize that the words and sentences of a language are structured in accordance with the rules of language to guarantee their grammaticality and meaningfulness.

The English Language occupies a pride of place in Nigeria as second language due to the multiplicity of languages in the nation. By virtue of this enviable status, it builds a bridge across the communication barrier occasioned by the existence of multifarious native

languages as well as circumvents the danger of ethnic rivalry and chaos that may erupt if one of the indigenous languages is isolated and accorded an official language status. McArthur [7] confirms the above belief:

In Nigeria, English is official because as a colonial and post colonial second language, it has been ethnically neutral, generally accessible and acceptable ‘faute de mieux’ to many distinct regional communities, the foremost of whose languages are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (39).

English therefore performs a wide range of official roles as the language of education, media, politics, civil service, inter-ethnic communication, religion, law and diplomacy, science and technology.

Among these roles, the educational role deserves further elucidation. English serves as the medium of instruction from the upper primary level to the tertiary level of education in Nigeria. Remarkably, credit in English in Senior School Certificate Examinations is institutionalized as a *sine qua non* for admission into the university. Furthermore, every candidate sitting for the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examinations (UTME) must write the Use of English paper regardless of his choice of course and, having gained admission, must offer and pass English, under General Studies, as a prerequisite for graduation. Thus, every Nigerian student is saddled with an enigmatic challenge of optimal performance in the use of English, course of study notwithstanding (Ezekulie, 2011) [8]. Sadly, many Nigerian youths have botched their ambition of higher education due to their perennial failure in English. Even outside the school setting, proficiency in the use of English is perceived as a symbol of status in Nigeria as it paves the way for one to be ‘tagged’ educated. Thus, performance in spoken and written English often provides the parameter for evaluating a person’s level of education since qualifications are not inscribed on the holder’s forehead and cases abound where they were gotten by foul means.

The centrality of grammar in the realization of these lofty goals played by the English Language in the Nigerian ESL (English as a Second Language) context is indubitable. Buttressing this fact, Sogbesan [9] declares:

In a typical Nigerian situation where compliance with grammatical rules often determines the level of social acceptance, ability to merely communicate is not

sufficient. The rules must be obeyed. The grammar of a language provides the mental discipline needed to routinely construct and identify socially acceptable and communication- efficient language habits (3).

This observation underpins the fact that a sound knowledge of grammar is characteristic of proficiency in the applicable language. If this is true then, poor performance in English cannot be unconnected with poor performance in grammar. Grammar can therefore never be overemphasized in English Language teaching and learning as it plays a regulatory role in both cases. A teacher's construal of experience in a language class is regulated by the quality of knowledge of the language he possesses and can model while the learner's ability to understand what is being taught and to use the knowledge creatively in other linguistic situations is controlled by his understanding of how the language works. The foregoing justifies the need to examine the role of grammar in the teaching of English in the Nigerian second language context.

The Role of the Teaching of English Grammar in the Wider Context of the Teaching of English as a Second Language in Nigeria: Although grammar is not explicitly listed in the four language skills sought in the teaching of English Language viz. listening, speaking, reading and writing, performance in these four skills is implicitly hinged on the knowledge of grammar. Knowledge of grammatical structures enables a language user to process information derived from listening in order to decode the intended message. Similarly, a speaker needs to understand how the language works to be able to construct acceptable sentences in English. Furthermore, comprehension in reading is facilitated not only by the knowledge of vocabulary items in the text but also by a basic knowledge of the interrelationships that exist between certain elements of sentence. Writing also requires the ability to organize elements of language into larger units to form acceptable sequences. According to Boadi *et al.* [10], "the grammatical structure of a language systemizes what really happens when we speak or write (26)."

Lending credence to the foregoing premium placed on grammar in language teaching and learning, Asiyanbola [4] submits that grammar serves as a guide to reading and writing skills in English. He believes that learners need to recognize concepts such as morphemes,

various kinds of clauses and sentences as well as their interrelationship in a text before they can read and decode meaning and that even modern literacy involving viewing and manipulation of modern technology through the Internet requires knowledge of English grammar. This is because grammar involves a body of rules that serve as a monitor for the production and consumption of information. The inference to be drawn, therefore, is that poor knowledge of English grammar makes one an onlooker rather than an active participant in tapping and contributing to the plethora of information on the Internet, especially as every area of human endeavour is increasingly taking an 'e-' dimension.

Besides the formal teaching of English in schools, ESL learners are also exposed to other informal sources of learning the language which affect the formal teaching of English. For example, the practice of speaking English to children right from the cradle is increasingly becoming all the rage especially in urban areas. Oftentimes the adult users of the language whom these children are supposed to imitate are not good models of the language. Once the children are started off on a wrong footing, it becomes more difficult to stamp out the bad language habits that are already ingrained in them.

Jowitt [11] asserts that

... much of the English produced by students in school in Nigeria, even after many years of classroom teaching, is bound to contain many imperfections, including many fossilized errors which, as suggested above, have been largely learned outside the school. Difficult to eradicate, they are often carried over into the usage of tertiary-level students and even of graduates ... (5).

Similarly, with the explosion in the use of the social media, the problem faced by second language (L_2) users of English in Nigeria has extended its frontiers. This is evident in the "linguistic liberty" exhibited on social networking sites by youths who are prolific users of the new media. These student-users are undoubtedly exploiting as well as celebrating their linguistic freedom from their teachers' 'judgmental pens'. In this new, eccentric way of writing, the norms of English grammar are breached in an anything-goes fashion. This worrisome tendency often becomes deep-rooted in the users and is unconsciously transferred to formal speech and writing situations – a new practice often noticed in students'

class work, essays and examination scripts (Ezekulie and Nweke, 2014) [12]. Thus, the more serious efforts are being made by teachers to address L₂ learners' problems in English the more complicated and multifaceted they become.

The L₂ learner's problems described above are further aggravated by the dearth of qualified teachers in our schools. Some of the teachers themselves are either products of the wrong foundation painted above who are trying to wriggle out of their linguistic flaws or lack the requisite qualifications to teach a second language. Besides having to teach a second language, the position of English as the medium of instruction presents another enigmatic challenge as a teacher can, while teaching another subject, misapply the rules of language out of sheer ignorance; such poor models abound in our schools for young users and tyros to imitate. An exam question paper on Civic Education from a primary school in Airport Road Abuja went viral on the social media a few months back to typify the quality of English used by some teachers in teaching especially in private schools where proprietors often hire 'teachers' they can afford to pay – sometimes school leavers who could not further their education due to deficiencies in Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE). There was hardly any question on the paper that was devoid of serious grammatical aberrations. Questions 1, 2, 4 and 5 out of the ten questions in section A will suffice:

- The function of government is ___ (a) to providing social amenities for the people and protecting lives
- Our duties and obligation to government is to _____ (a) to paid for food (b) to paid our tax and respect obedience (c) to cause problem.
- Which month and date Nigeria celebrated children days
- The attitude to work and to encourages is _____ (a) discourage laziness (b) promote and rewards (c) punishment.

The horrible picture painted above speaks volumes about the plight of ESL learners of English in Nigeria, where a teacher, who is supposed to be an epitome of good usage constitutes a linguistic hazard to students. Eyesi [13] captures this ugly scenario aptly:

... in trying to offer what they (teachers) do not possess, they unwittingly create a hot bed for errors and many a time fertilize errors that would have been

on the verge of extinction. The result is that learners are pushed into the labyrinth of confusion and intractable difficulties (8).

The above necessitates that second language teachers be adequately prepared for the all-important task of teaching grammar.

The Place of Grammar in the Senior Secondary Education Curriculum: The need to examine specifically the place of grammar in the English language curriculum of senior secondary schools in Nigeria is predicated on the benchmark role of a credit pass in English Language in gaining admission into tertiary institutions and other serious national sectors. It can therefore be presumed that the position of grammar in this curriculum is indicative of the level of grammatical competence expected of an average Nigerian in the use of English for national and international communication and the attendant teaching demands on the ESL teacher.

Consequently, the English language is *primus interperes* among the core subjects in the Senior Secondary School Curriculum. The revised Curriculum strives to equip the student with an adequate range of words, sentences and sentence types, to enable the student communicate effectively in school and outside it. The way the curriculum is designed will ensure that the students can listen effectively to any speech or lecture, speak fluently and intelligibly, read materials of varying lengths and difficulty at all levels effectively and write logically with grammatically correct sentences (Federal Ministry of Education, 2007:4).

Evidently, each of the goals spelt out above is anchored in grammar. Analogously and more specifically, the place of grammar in the 2009-2015 Syllabus of West African Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations (WASSCE) underscores the role of grammar in an ESL context. The aims and objectives are that the candidates should demonstrate the ability to:

- (i) use correct English; (ii) write about incidents in English that are appropriate to specified audiences and situations; (iii) organize materials in paragraphs that are chronologically, spatially and logically coherent; (iv) control sentence structures accurately; (v) exhibit variety in the choice of sentence patterns; (vi) comply with the rules of grammar, spelling and

punctuation; (vii) comprehend written and spoken English; (viii) recognize implied meaning, tones and attitudes; (ix) use an acceptable pronunciation that can be comprehended by others. (x) isolate and summarize relevant information from set passages (Regulations and Syllabuses for WASSCE 2009-2015:203).

A cursory glance at the extract above reveals that besides items (viii) and (ix) the rest can only be achieved through proficiency in grammar. If this be the case, giving grammar a back seat in teaching English as a second language will totally defeat the well-defined aims and objectives of both the WAEC and NECO syllabuses and jeopardize the academic dreams of our children.

Empirically, Oisanwo (1990)[14] studies the performance of 242 WAEC candidates selected randomly from various centres in Nigeria in the WAEC English Language examinations to ascertain the grammatical demands of the paper and how it affects performance. The following major findings were recorded:

- The total mark for English paper 1 was 150 and out of this, sections which demanded the knowledge of grammar totaled up to 110marks, that is, 75% of the total.
- Paper 11 testing lexis and structure had a ratio of 45:55 in favour of structure.
- In the writing tasks performed in the examination, that is, essay writing, no candidate scored at least one mark out of ten in mechanical accuracy which assesses integrated grammar skills.
- In the section testing comprehension, as many as 178 candidates out of 242 scored zero in questions dealing with issues of grammar.
- All other candidates who scored marks close to the overall average were those who scored fairly good marks in sections assessing grammar. (52)

The deduction from the above research findings is that whether implicitly or explicitly stated in the syllabus, a Nigerian Senior School Certificate holder is expected to command an appreciable level of grammatical competence. Oisanwo [14] 's findings support Sogbesan [9]'s view that the ultimate desire of English Language teachers and curriculum designers is to inculcate and improve the linguistic abilities of English language learners, which requires that the various grammatical rules and processes be learnt and internalized. The author continues that "In

a non-native learning situation especially, the learner is expected to attain a certain level of grammatical competence which ensures that he can construct acceptable English sentences. To do this effectively, knowledge of how the language works is essential" (11).

In view of the foregoing, the current SSCE English language syllabus has made copious provisions for the teaching and learning of grammatical structures in line with Williams's view that the content of a language teaching syllabus is identifiable in the four language skills and structures and levels of language such as phonology, grammar and lexis (19). However, despite the elaborate provisions for the teaching of grammar in our schools and colleges the fact remains that the performance of students in English in Nigeria still leaves much to be desired.

The Methodology Questions in the Teaching of Grammar: Given that the poor performance of ESL students in English is implicitly or explicitly connected with poor knowledge of grammatical structures, the status quo raises serious methodological questions. What methodological considerations should guide the teaching of grammar in Nigerian schools? Should grammar be taught explicitly or implicitly?

The methodology questions have engaged the interest of many specialists in language education over the years. The need to arrive at an effective method of language teaching has led to the successive development of many teaching methods such as the Grammar-Translation method, Direct Method, Audio-Lingual Method, Functional-Notional Approach, Communicative Language Approach and a host of other innovative methods. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, but a brief insight into the position of grammar in the first two is instructive. The Grammar-Translation method is characterized by rote-memorization of vocabulary items with their native language equivalents, explicit statements and explanations of the rules of the target language for students to learn, learning by deduction, memorization of paradigm grammatical illustrations, a teacher-centered approach, teaching in native language, among others (Williams, 1990 & Larsen-Freeman 2013) [15], [16]. The pedagogic style presented above, an age-long method, is still being practiced in Nigeria today by many teachers of English, though all its features may not be in practice. The predominant trend is mostly the deductive pedagogic style in which rules are first presented by the teacher and subsequently exemplified. The major defect is that language is taught in an unnatural context without regard

to real-life communicative use of language. The result is that most language learners are taught about the language and not how to use the language in actual sense. Again, the teacher-centered pedagogy that characterizes the method robs learners of opportunities for creative and interactive use of language which are crucial to second language learning.

The Direct Method was developed to address the shortcomings of the Grammar-Translation Method. This method places emphasis on teaching students to communicate in real –life contexts in the target language. Grammar is taught inductively in which case learners are left to infer grammatical rules from examples given because rules are not explicitly presented. The strength of this method lies basically in enabling learners to learn in a natural process akin to the mother-tongue acquisition process. However, modeling the formal teaching of a language after the patterns of first language acquisition, which is done unconsciously and effortlessly, makes teaching highly unstructured and dependent on the teacher’s resourcefulness.

Other innovative approaches keep evolving to solve the methodology problem, but none has actually solved the problem completely. The reason presumably is that methodological implementation varies from context to context and should take into account the unique qualities and idiosyncrasies of the learners. Thus each method of teaching grammar should not be seen as a fixed recipe that a teacher must follow to ‘cook tasty meals’. The good thing about methodological diversity in language teaching is that it arms the teacher with a diverse repertoire of techniques to enable him to make informed choices that lead to the achievement of the set learning objectives. According to [16].

What makes a method successful for some teachers is their investment in it. This is one reason why the research based on methodological comparisons has often been so inconclusive. It sought to reduce teaching to the faithful following of pedagogic prescriptions – but teaching is much more than that (182).

It may therefore be ideal for teachers to adopt the features of the methods that suit their purpose in an eclectic fashion instead of just squeezing themselves perpetually into one pedagogic mould. This belief finds a parallel in Larsen-Freeman [16]’s view that “Language, learning, teaching are dynamic, fluid, mutable processes. There is nothing fixed about them” (186).

Addressing the second question regarding whether grammar should be taught explicitly or implicitly, we take a middle-course stance. Recalling the huge demands made on students in Senior School Certificate Examinations (SSCE), we make bold to say that restricting the teaching of grammar to an implicit pedagogic style in a bid to achieve communicative competence is ipso facto unrealistic in achieving the set goals of our ESL learners’ curriculum expectations. While we are not ruling out the importance of the implicit teaching of grammar, it should not escape attention that there are grammar topics that need explicit presentation, though not in isolation of context. This emphasis on contextual teaching has prompted Osisanwo [14] to advise that “... only teaching of grammar in context can lead us to the desired goal. Those who erroneously believe that there is a campaign against teaching of grammar in schools need to be told emphatically that the crusade is against the teaching of grammatical rules in isolation in class. Textbook writers and practicing classroom teachers have to bear this golden rule in mind” (57). Explicit teaching of grammar may often be necessary to summarize the salient lessons expected to be learnt. DeCarrico and Larsen-Freeman [17] believe that ‘students must notice what it is they are to learn’ (30). So in as much as the lesson should be presented in context some level of explicitness should not be ruled out and efforts should be made to avoid flooding the lesson with abstract explication of grammatical terminology.

CONCLUSION

In sum, while we advocate that grammar be taught in context to enable students to understand better how to use language in real-life situations, we strongly subscribe to the ‘it-depends’ philosophy of Larsen-Freeman. “There may be times when a pattern drill is appropriate, or giving a grammar rule, or an interactive task, or an activity which involves meaning negotiation, depending on the learning challenge or what the students are struggling with at the moment” (184-185). The author believes that ‘it depends’ statements make provision for the highly complex, interpretative, contingent knowledge that teachers ought to have in order to work efficiently. Given the foregoing, it behoves the teacher to exercise flexibility and sound judgment in teaching as the occasion demands.

It cannot be overemphasized that grammar is crucial to effective teaching and learning of English as a second language. The use of deviant structures and ill-formed sentences especially by adult users of English irritates the

linguistic wary and corrupts the English of young learners. Therefore, the ultimate goal of teaching and learning English as a Second language is to achieve national and international intelligibility and grammar is the key to achieving this noble goal. "To develop the needed competence and to ensure a high level of performance, one has to internalize the structure of the language to the point of automaticity" (Ubahakwe, 1979: 46) [18]. The teacher's role in this business is not to hijack the activities of the learner but to stimulate him in every possible way to activate his Language Acquisition Device (LAD).

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