

Grammar Teaching: A Case Study of a Pakistani School in Sultanate of Oman

Saadia Mesti

School of Education,
University of Leicester, Leicester, UK
Email: missmesti@yahoo.fr

Abstract

Grammar constitutes an essential element in the learning and teaching of any language. English as a foreign language is being taught in Pakistani government-run schools and in non-elitist private schools. The focal question in this paper centers on the several implications of the teaching process of grammatical concepts. The main aim of this research study is to find out the methods adopted in the teaching of grammar and whether these methods are updated with recent methods recommended in recent research on effective teaching and learning. The content analysis of books and review of teaching methods are used as methodological tools. The results suggest that the grammar teaching methods are outdated, the text material contains misleading explanations, and lack understanding of descriptive linguistic concepts on grammar. The core recommendation is that the grammar teaching methods and text material in question should be reviewed and updated with a more up-to-date material. The significance of the study lies in the fact that it will shade light on the teaching practices of grammar and review updated research on the teaching of grammar, which need consideration in teacher training programs and study material design.

Keywords: Grammar-translation method, grammar teaching, textbook contents, Pakistan

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Introduction

Grammar constitutes an essential element in the learning and the teaching of any language. It is, as Gabrielatos (2003) states, “a systematic attempt to describe language structure and use, based on the observations of informed language users” (p. 2). Foreign English language learners need to understand grammar clearly, and to master grammatical concepts, structures, and strategies. In many EFL classrooms in Pakistan, grammar instruction also includes the teaching “English language paragraph composition,” which does not permit students to understand deeply grammatical concepts. Another reason is related to outdated approaches and methodology, which use rote learning and insufficient engagement of learners in the process of learning (Qureshi & Shamim, 2009). Moreover, the locally designed grammar book (which is the only source used to teach grammar) contains misleading information, lacks updated research on descriptive grammar, and excludes context-based instructional activities. Finally, the learners focus on test scores rather than grasping foreign language usage. Besides all these concerns, teachers also lack the necessary training skills and expertise in ELT, including descriptive grammar (Berninger & Richards, 2002).

In Pakistan, English as a foreign language is being taught in Pakistani government-run schools and non-elitist private schools through the “Grammar Translation Method.” In this method students translate texts from the target language (L2) into the (L1), and then rote memorize the L2 grammar rules and sentences. In the syllabus, pedagogical grammar is instructed all the way, from primary to high school levels, through the traditional method of memorizing group of prescribed grammar rules and demonstrating those rules into a set of English and Urdu languages sentencesⁱ. Mirza (1999), Rehmani (2000), Rahman (2001), Warsi (2004), Shamim (2007), Naeem (2008), and Nomaan (2009), among others, have recognized the issues of teaching grammar in Pakistani government-run and non-elitist private schools. They have identified many problems in these schools, including large classes, the prescriptive nature of the courses, the use of inefficiently-planned grammar books, the absence of student participation in learning, inadequate assessment, and unskilled teachers.

The Pakistani School, which is the focus of this study, is in Nizwa Sultanate of Oman, and it reflects Pakistani non-elitist private schools quite wellⁱⁱ. The school follows grammar instruction from a locally designed book. Teaching grammar in the school occurs through a prescribed pedagogical method and unproductive classroom exercises, see Rahman (2001). The books are locally designed and have many failings, including misleading instructions, limited linguistic research contents, shortage of context-based content, and the lack of opportunities for learners to engage in the process of learning (see Idoshalieva, 2009).

The paper will analyze the locally designed grammar book used in 8th and 9th grades in the Nizwa School as a case study, with a particular focus on tenses. The analysis aims to highlight the weaknesses of this grammar book and its use in the classroom. It will compare the book to what grammar references books suggest about teaching tenses, such as Greenbaum and Quirk (2000), and Parrot (2004)ⁱⁱⁱ. After that, it will suggest ways that facilitate students' awareness of correct tenses concepts and patterns.

The rest of the paper consists of a literature review in Section two, Section three contains methodology, section 4 includes an analysis of learning material and instructions, and Section 5 covers conclusion and recommendations.

Literature Review

Recent research on effective instruction has demonstrated that explicit instruction is one of the tools available for teachers to raise learning, Archer, & Hughes (2010). Ellis (1994) has suggested that research into Second Language Acquisition (SLA) does not afford a uniform account of how instructions can best facilitate learning. Though both form and context are considered vital in English language learning and teaching, he indicates that there is complete agreement that the grammar-translation approach, already introduced above, has several disadvantages. Pinker (1994) made it clear that prescriptive grammar rules are psychologically unnatural. They are the legacy of the grammar of the 18th century, when people learn through a prescriptive version of grammar to feel they are cultivated. He comments, "To teach grammar through prescriptive rules is like building machines by designing them to obey rules" (p. 3).

Several authors; e.g., Moats, Foorman, & Taylor, (2006) in their study about ESL immigrants in America, have criticized the use of locally designed textbooks. They point out that the poorly designed materials, the limited contents, and poor instructions are some crucial obstacles to effective English language teaching. Batstone (1984) explains that the textbooks in most EFL settings tend to simplify language grammar and ignore complex parts of language structure. Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, (2003) reaffirm that grammar, which is a component of the English language, needs teaching methods which are not prescribed. The reason is that English has changed over time and has produced many English language varieties around the world that have many differences. Grammar is then "not about language form; it is a way of thinking through language" (Fromkin et al., 2003, p. 16). In a similar context, Denham and Lobeck (2010) argue that prescriptive grammar is only useful for school test requirements and does not describe how people use language in their daily lives. Denham and Lobeck (2010) add, "What we call English, then, is a continuum of language varieties rather than one language with a single set of grammatical rules." (p. 13).

In many EFL circumstances, the teaching does not focus on developing students' speaking skills. Teaching grammatical concepts as prescribed rules does not provide learners with the chance to experience the prescribed rules in daily life. The rules remain "manual language rules," (Svelberg, 2010, p. 201), which are useful only for the classroom and do not describe a language for broader use. Instruction in English needs to explain both spoken language and correct grammar in order to allow the balance for language use in communication, and academic maturity. Unfortunately, such features are found only in descriptive grammar reference books and are missing in most EFL grammar teaching backgrounds, a fact which is recognized by Brown (2001), Krieger (2005), and Ellis (2006).

Research Methodology

This research paper focuses on observation and Content analysis as research tools. Content analysis will target grammar books used in 8th and 9th grades, with emphasis on tenses. The study also reviews the existing methods of instruction about grammar teaching. The analysis aims to

highlight the strengths and weaknesses of these grammar books and its use in the classroom, comparing it to grammar teaching suggestions tenses in grammar references books such as Pinker (1994), Greenbaum and Quirk (2000) and Parrot (2004)^{iv}. The analysis will focus on students' awareness and engagement with them to correct tenses concepts and patterns. Research has demonstrated that a mixture of content analysis is one of the grounded methods which provide insight about the relevant material. Content analysis is a known technique of making replicable and valid inferences from the contents and texts and their use in any context.

Results and Analysis

Critical Review of the Textbook

Teaching English grammar in Pakistani School Nizwa is directly linked with the locally designed grammar textbook. The teachers make sure that their students learn the grammatical forms, generally a way at a time, and then assign exercises from the book to be done in class or as homework. The book aims to teach both grammar and English language essay composition. It is named "English Grammar and Composition," approved for 9th and 10th class, and written by Hashmi, Butt, and Chishty (1979).

As stated before, grammar is not taught separately to increase its understanding among learners. Instead, grammar is taught with English language essay composition. Many believe that the instruction of grammar should be done alone because its inclusion with any other area, can hamper grammar's understanding and reading comprehension (Fillmore & Snow, 2000). The book is also more than 30 years old and it is therefore out of touch with modern teaching methods in EFL, such as communicative exercises activities and activities that allow the learner to participate in the process of learning (see Nunan; 1998; Brown, 2001; Krieger, 2005 & Ellis, 2004).

The grammar points, including tenses, are explained in the textbook through rules that students have to learn by heart. After the teacher's explanation, students solve exercises at home and learn the rules for their monthly, and term tests. Shamim (1993) explains how a teacher teaches tenses in her classroom routine in a private school in Karachi:

"I use a table to teach tenses. In this way, they (students) understand better. It's like maths. For example, I teach present tense through brackets. I make them [students] draw these even in their copies (...) Then they do exercises – 10 to 12 sentences in class; then more sentences are given to do at home" (p. 193).

There are two tense sections in the book. The first section is dedicated to the translation of prescriptive rules about verb tenses from English to Urdu, and to the application of the rules into sentences^v. The second section focuses on instruction of English tenses, and is dedicated to learning grammatical rules by heart rule, and writing example sentences. Many criticisms of the book's contents are briefly outlined below.

First, in the second section of the book, there is a confusion between the terms "time" and "tense": "A verb that refers to the present time is said to be in the Present tense."^{vi} "A verb that refers to the past time is said to be in the Past tense."^{vii} "A verb that refers to the future time is said to be in the Future tense."^{viii} (Butt, Chishty, and Hashmi, 1979, pp. 161-166).

In these definitions; the writers of the book confuse time and tense. They refer to time as tense, whereas, in fact, time and tense are two distinct terms. Time is a semantic concept, "time refers to clock time in our physical world" (Bull, 1960, p. 68). Tense, however, refers to the verb format, as Marquez and Bowen (1977) say: "tense is a grammatical term referring to the form of the verb in relation to the meaning of the sentence" (p. 285).

Secondly, along with tense and time confusion, the book also suggests the presence of twelve tenses in the English language, thereby confusing three different elements: tense form, grammatical aspect, and modality. The first two features, tense and aspect, work as grammatical morphemes affixed to the verb to express essential times; present, past, and the future. The third feature, modality, represents the speaker's perspective (see Gabrielatos, 2003 and Smith, 2003). The English language has only two tenses, namely the present and the past. The future has not a fixed tense form. Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik (1972) state, "there is no obvious future tense form in English corresponding to the time/tense parallel for present and past" (p. 87). The future is expressed by the present continuous form of the verb (e.g., *the plane is leaving at 14:35*). It is also expressed by the use of "going to" (e.g., *It's going to rain*). The use of modal verbs and the infinitive can occur to express future tense (e.g., *we will leave soon*); see, for example, Gabrielatos (2003) and Parrot (2004).

The forms presented as 'Future tenses' in Hashmi, Butt, and Chishty's book are the combinations of "will" and "shall" with the present tense form, as illustrated from the following examples from the textbook:

"The future tense:

They will leave for London tomorrow.

I shall see him next Monday."

(Hashmi et al., 1979, p. 165)

Thus, the book fails to clearly describe the grammatical terminology of tenses. Students get confusion about English tenses, the expression of time, and also demonstrates. Moreover, such confusion occurs even among the teachers. Students "learn to write and read grammar rules without thoroughly understanding the syntactic rules, and semantic interpretations of such rules" as clearly indicated by Warsi (2004, p. 3). Such instruction only creates misconceptions about the language. A summary of the twelve tenses outlined in Butt, Chishty, and Hashmi's book, see Appendix C.

A third criticism of the textbook under question is its treatment of regular and irregular past tense forms. The book does not offer students the distinction between regular and irregular verbs past tense forms inflections. Still, instead the textbook demonstrates the standard and irregular verbs past tense forms in arbitrary examples, such as:

1/ he went to school.

2 / you solved the question.

3/ I brought a camera.

4/ we crossed the river.

5/ they stopped that car." (Hashmi, et al., 1979, p. 96)

Students do not know that “went”, and “brought” are the past tense forms of the irregular verbs “go” and “bring.” Students need to know that there is a distinction between regular verbs past tense format and irregular verbs past tense forms, which is easy to notice and understand. The regular verbs past tense form add the suffix “ed,” also named the allomorph ‘ed’ by Bybee and Slobin (1982), to the verb stem. Students need to know that “ed” is a suffix for regular verbs, so that, for example, the past tense form of the regular verbs: “cross,” “solve” and “stop” are “crossed,” “solved,” and “stopped”. Students also need to be taught variations, such as double consonant (*stop /stopped*), “i” required to replace “y” (*dry/dried*), etc.

As for irregular verbs, English contains about 180 irregular verbs that form their past tense in idiosyncratic ways. They are unpredictable, and they require what is named by Pinker (1994) “associative memory” (p. 4). That is to say, they need to be stored and learned because they do not require a calculating rule as regular verbs past tense form does. Many researchers, as Pinker (1994) and Parrot (2004), suggest helping students learn irregular verb past tense forms by putting them into lists of similar patterns. Bybee and Slobin (1982) have divided the irregular verbs past tense form into eight easy to understand classes, included in the appendix B.

Students need to know that the past tense forms of regular and irregular verbs do the same job, which is to demonstrate past tense. However, the complexity of irregular verb past tense variations need students to memorize them, as focused by Pinker.

The final weakness of the Butt, Chishty, and Hashmi textbook is about its addressing of tenses. It lacks communicative-based exercises and written exercises with open questions. Evidence (as in Nunan, 1998 & Krieger, 2005, for example) have demonstrated that it is vital to relate grammar constituents to context, which require communicative activities, such as conversations, debates, speeches, and songs. Moreover, students need to conduct class projects, which entail reading and listening activities about tenses in the texts. Other researchers state the importance of open questions, which allow for a wide range of acceptable answers rather than one fixed solution. These questions ensure students’ participation in learning through more interaction in the class, a fact which is recognized by Dillon (1988).

Analysis of the tenses activities in the book shows that the tenses section exercises encourage memorization, and the practices anticipate only one fixed answer. Such activities do not consider that students do not get any significant exposure to English outside the classroom. The practices do not enhance students’ participation in the class and do not encourage understanding abstract concepts such as tenses. Given that activities which aim to develop both form awareness and allow practice which encourages students to use language communicatively, the provision of complementary grammar workbooks seems to be a good option. This fact is recognized by Ellis (2004).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has the main goal to demonstrate that the textbook currently being used in Pakistani school Nizwa is outdated. The text contains misleading explanations, lacks understanding of descriptive linguistic research on grammar, and does not offer activities that relate grammar points to different contexts uses.

The findings have demonstrated that the teaching instruction of grammar boost rote-memorization. Students' active participation and activities that develop both form awareness and spoken language don't occur in the classroom.

The main recommendation is that the book in question should be replaced by a more up-to-date book, which includes recent teaching approaches. Therefore, a modern textbook, such as the Headway series (Soars & Soars, 2010), could be considered. Current books like Headway provide good, current grammar explanations, which facilitate students, learning. The grammar sections are part of every unit, but there are also useful summaries of grammar points, including the verb tenses, provided in a different area. The modern text includes a lot of additional material, including video and listening material, and gives useful suggestions to the teacher. As mentioned above, a supplementary grammar workbook, including dynamic exercises and open questions, should also be incorporated.

Finally, schools need to organize teacher training programs to help teachers know recent and research-based classroom instruction practices.

About the Author:

Saadia Mesti is an English language teacher. She has a master's degree in TESOL and Applied Linguistics from the University of Leicester, United Kingdom. Earlier, she worked as a lecture at the University of Buraimi, Sultanate of Oman. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0600-7302>

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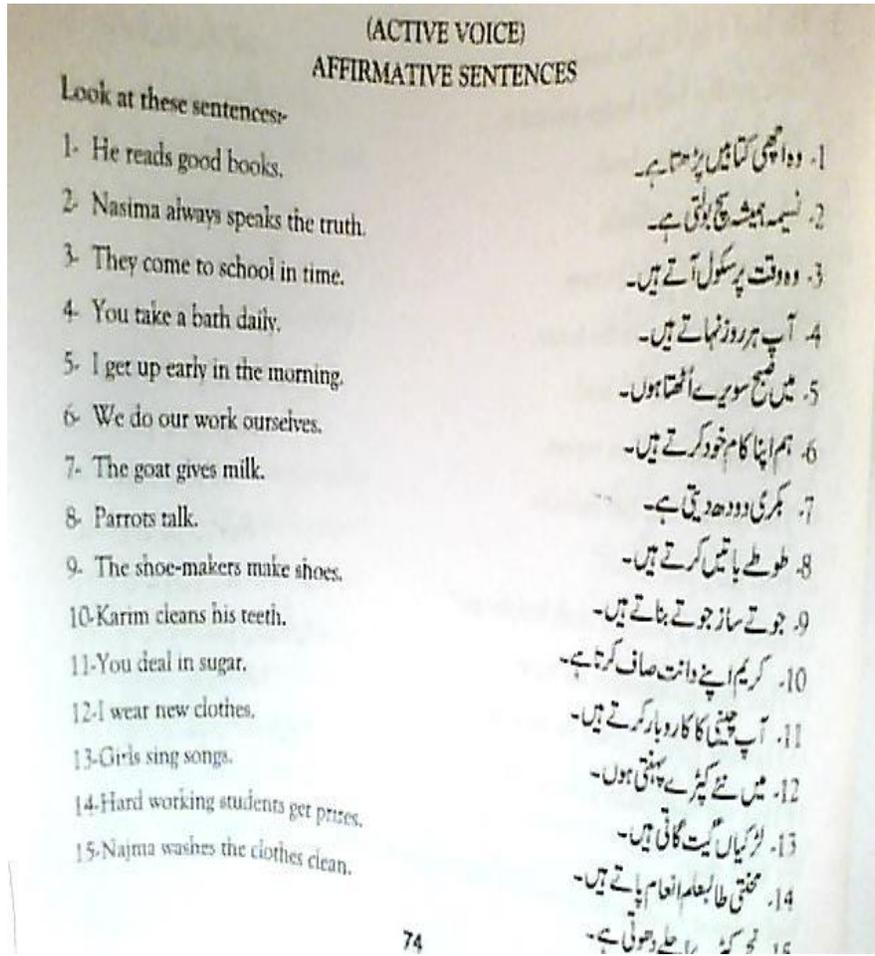
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Appendix A

English and Urdu sentences

Sample from the book under study which shows the illustration of Present Indefinite Tense into English and Urdu sentences:



Source, (Hashmi, et al., 1979, p. 74)

Appendix B

Irregular verbs past tense eight form

Bybee and Slobin (1982) divided the irregular verbs past tense form into eight easy to understand classes:

- Verbs that do not change in the past tense form: cut and hit.
- Verbs in which the final “d” change to “t”: send/sent, build/built.
- Verbs that undergo an internal vowel change and in which “t” or “d” is added to the final position: feel/felt, lose/lost, say/said, tell/told.
- Verbs that endure vowel change, deletion of the final consonant, and add a final “t”: bring/brought and catch/caught.

- e) Verbs whose internal vowel change and end in a “t” or “d”: find/found
- f) Verbs that accept a vowel change of “I” to “A” or “I” to “u”, e.g. sing/ sang, sting/stung.
- g) All other verbs that undergo an internal vowel change, e.g. give/ gave break/broke.
- h) All verbs that experience a vowel change and that end in a diphthong: blow/blew, fly/flew” (page: 268 and 269).

Appendix C

English language 12 tenses

Tenses	Present	Past	Future
INDEFENITE	I go. I do not go. Do I go?	I went. I did not go. Did I go?	I shall go. I shall not go. Shall I go?
CONTINUOUS	I am going. I am not going. Am I not going?	I was going. I was not going. Was I not going?	I shall be going. I shall not be going. Shall I be going?
PERFECT	I have gone. I have not gone. Have I gone?	I had gone. I had not gone. Had I gone?	I shall have gone. I shall not have gone. Shall I have gone?
PERFECT CONTINUOUS TENSE	I have been going. I have not been going. Have I been going?	I had been going. I had not been going Had I not been going?	I shall have been going. I shall not have been going.

			Shall I have been going?
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Source: Islam and Haq (2009, p. 38)

Endnotes

ⁱ A sample from the book under study which shows English and Urdu illustrated sentences is included into the appendix-A.

ⁱⁱ These schools use English as the language of instruction, but the teachers are not skilled in teaching subjects in English; see Rahman (2001).

ⁱⁱⁱ These books describe grammar points from an applied linguistics perspective.

^{iv} These books describe grammar points from an applied linguistics perspective.

^v Prescriptive translated tenses rules start in page 73 and in 143.

^{vi} Present tense is said to have four forms: The present indefinite tense, the present continuous tense, present perfect tense and present perfect continuous tense.

^{vii} Past tense is said to have four forms: The past indefinite tense, the past continuous tense, the past perfect tense and past perfect continuous tense.

^{viii} The Future tense is said to have four forms: The future indefinite tense, the future continuous tense, the future perfect tense and the future perfect continuous tense