To Teach or Not to Teach Grammar: a Controversy?

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Abstract

With the advent of the Communicative Approach in ELT, grammar has been marginalized as the focus has shifted from accuracy to communicative competence. Yet an obvious decline in written proficiency has been noticed due basically to poor grammar. If a high written proficiency is required at the academic level, could this be achieved without grammar instruction in the foreign language? This paper will investigate this issue by addressing the following questions: To Teach or Not to Teach Grammar: a Controversy?

In fact the ebb and flow of the attitudes for or against grammar teaching have been influenced by the changes in language teaching methods and approaches. For grammar proponents, it may be inconceivable to teach a foreign language without teaching its grammar. But for grammar opponents, it can be argued that one can learn a foreign language without learning its grammar. The latter view a foreign language as a skill to be acquired through use not through grammar rules.

This paper will discuss these different attitudes and focus on the importance of grammar in view of the latest ELT approaches.

Key terms: the Communicative Approach, communicative competence, language teaching methods, English as a foreign language.

Introduction

From grammar translation to the communicative approach, to grammar in use and functional grammar, grammar teaching has ebbed and flowed going from banning its explicit teaching, to teaching it as a communicative tool, to teaching it explicitly in an instructional way.

These fluctuating attitudes, have been influenced by the changing ELT methods, trends and approaches. Those who defend grammar teaching (GT) think it is inconceivable to teach a foreign language without teaching its grammar, the sentence structure, parts of speech etc. But for those who oppose GT, their attitudes stem from a feeling of disillusion or non-achievement when they are faced with the number of grammar mistakes students make when they speak and more particularly when they write. ESL teachers often put GT into question because they notice a huge gap between what the students learn in grammar and how this is translated in use. In many cases learners can perform well in grammar, if grammar is tested separately, but poorly in writing where they would make those very errors they have been taught to avoid.

In the same vein, it can be argued that ESL learners can pick up grammar unconsciously if they are often exposed to English. Take for instance the case of immigrants who become very fluent in a foreign country just by exposure to native speakers, or natives who pick up a

foreign language only through close contact with tourists in some developing countries where tourism is a key economic sector.

The issue in the present study, though, is not addressed to amateurs but to professionals. The teaching of grammar is not intended to be a simple tool for everyday communication, but an important component of language competence to be acquired by students who need to achieve a high level of proficiency and accuracy. More precisely, the target students in this paper are Arab undergraduates learning English, most of whom are likely to become English professionals. The aim is to analyse the recent trends in view of the latest ELT approaches and particularly to the changing directions in the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching (CLT), which is now being revisited.

In the first part of this study, the controversial question, to teach or not to teach grammar, will be briefly reported by discussing the different views from renowned theorists.

The second part will analyze the views and attitudes regarding GT from current ESL instructors. For this purpose a questionnaire was distributed to a significant number of ESL teachers from different institutions. The findings will be compared to the views discussed in part one.

The third part will shed light on the current situation by examining the position of the most recent ELT trends with regard GT.

To Teach or Not to Teach Grammar: Proponents and Opponents.

The main arguments for and against grammar oscillate in tune with different ELT fashions.

The major arguments against GT articulate around three axes.

First, the failure to bridge the gap between what is learnt and what is put in practice. Many ESL teachers are faced with the unfortunate fact that students can perform well in a grammar test but in their writing they would commit those same mistakes they have been trained to avoid.

Second, the strong influence of the communicative approach for the last two decades together with Krashen's Acquisition Theory (1981) and the Direct Method have largely eclipsed explicit GT as the focus shifted from form to meaning and from correctness to communication competence.

Third, Lewis' Lexical Approach Theory (1993) has put more stress on vocabulary and lexical chunks than on formal grammar and proved to be quite effective in specific situations and for special purposes.

The major arguments for teaching grammar came precisely as a criticism to the above mentioned approaches.

First, the failure to put in practice what is learnt in theory is to be expected in any learning process. Learning a second language, especially in a low-exposure situation, is very difficult,

and it is very common to realize that whatever teachers do, few learners will achieve high proficiency.

Secondly, Krashen's theory and all its descendants have not proved satisfactory. If L2 can be acquired as L1 in a natural way by full immersion in and exposure to the target language, this is an exception rather than the rule. In addition, this is very difficult to achieve in a real context as most ESL learners have limited exposure to authentic English outside the classroom.

Finally, the Lexical Approach, which suggests to teach ' chunks' rather than grammar, has many limitations as well. There are hundreds of chunks in English; learning enough of these to be able to use them in an appropriate situation is rather hard to achieve. It would be much easier and faster to acquire some grammar for putting together comprehensible phrases that will serve learners later to improve their proficiency.

What do ESL instructors think?

To delve deeper into this controversial debate and have more views about to teach or not to teach grammar, this study was conducted on ESL teachers at tertiary level. An electronic questionnaire was sent to 55 ESL teachers from two institutions: the Arab Open University with its seven branches: Oman, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. In addition, the questionnaire was sent to ESL teachers at Sultane Qabous University Oman.

The participants are 65% non-native speakers and 35% native speakers. They are instructors from three different levels:

- 50% teach foundation level. This is a lower to upper intermediate course to reinforce the learners' English proficiency before they start their specialization or credit courses.
- 28% teach post-foundation- ESP courses
- 22% advanced credit courses.

Study findings and analysis

Question 1: For or Against GT

Are you for or against grammar teaching (GT) at tertiary level?
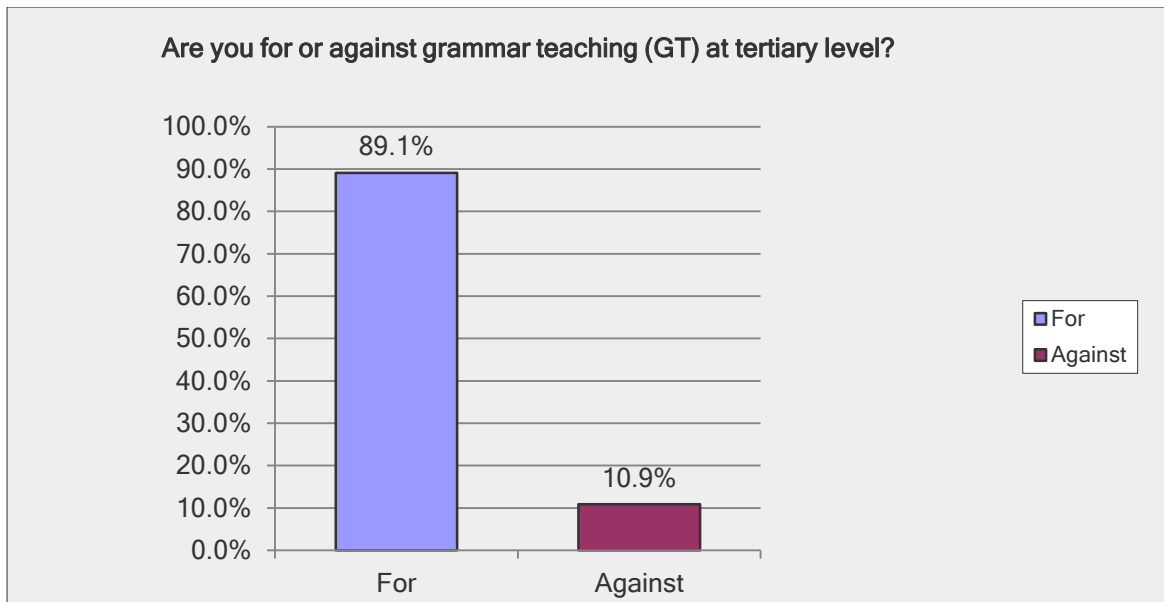
From the table above there is compelling evidence that a vast majority of teachers are in favour of teaching grammar.Among the few who are against it, it can be noted that most of them are native speakers. This is quite expected as non-native speakers are usually more keen on GT than native speakers. Non- native speakers tend to shape their students the way they themselves were taught English, and particularly how important GT was in helping them acquire a high level of proficiency. This point of view is supported by the answers to the following question:

Question 2: does grammar teaching help to improve proficiency?

Did you personally find GT useful to achieve your English proficiency?
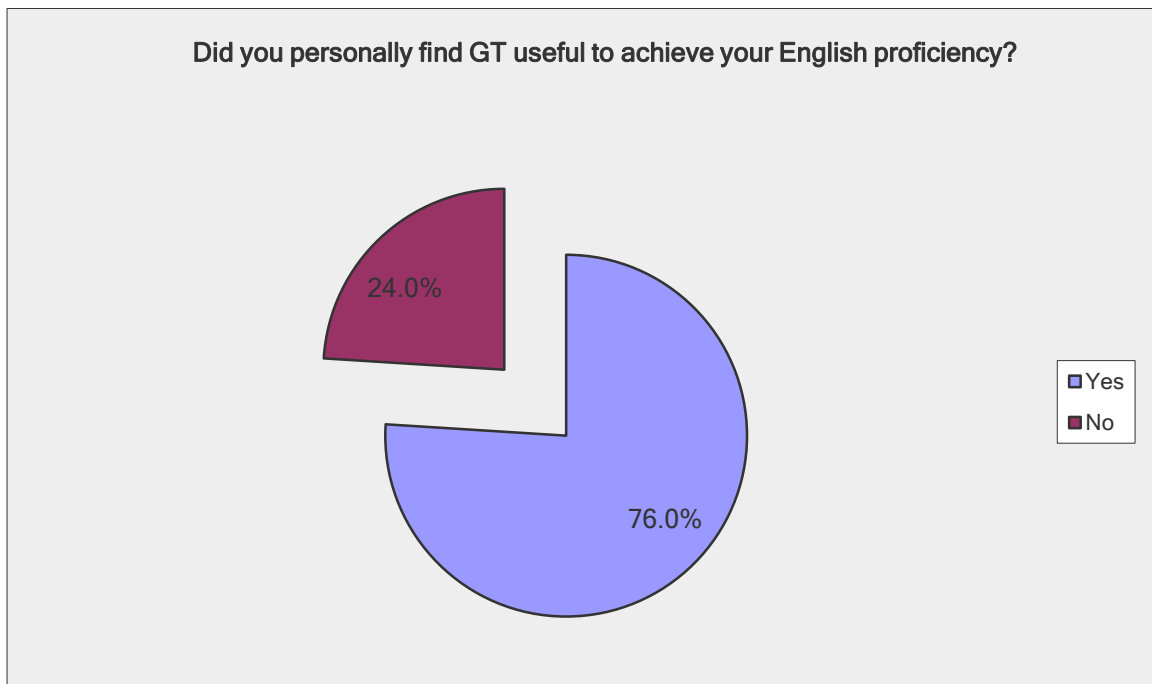
Native speakers have been more strongly influenced by the Natural Method and other related approaches. "To be cynical, some native-speaking teachers have found the downgrading of

grammar extremely convenient…the Direct Method and all its descendants absolved them the need to learn anything about the grammar of their students' language; now they don't even need to know about the grammar of their *own* language" Szymborska (2006).

Question 3: is GT an error-killer?
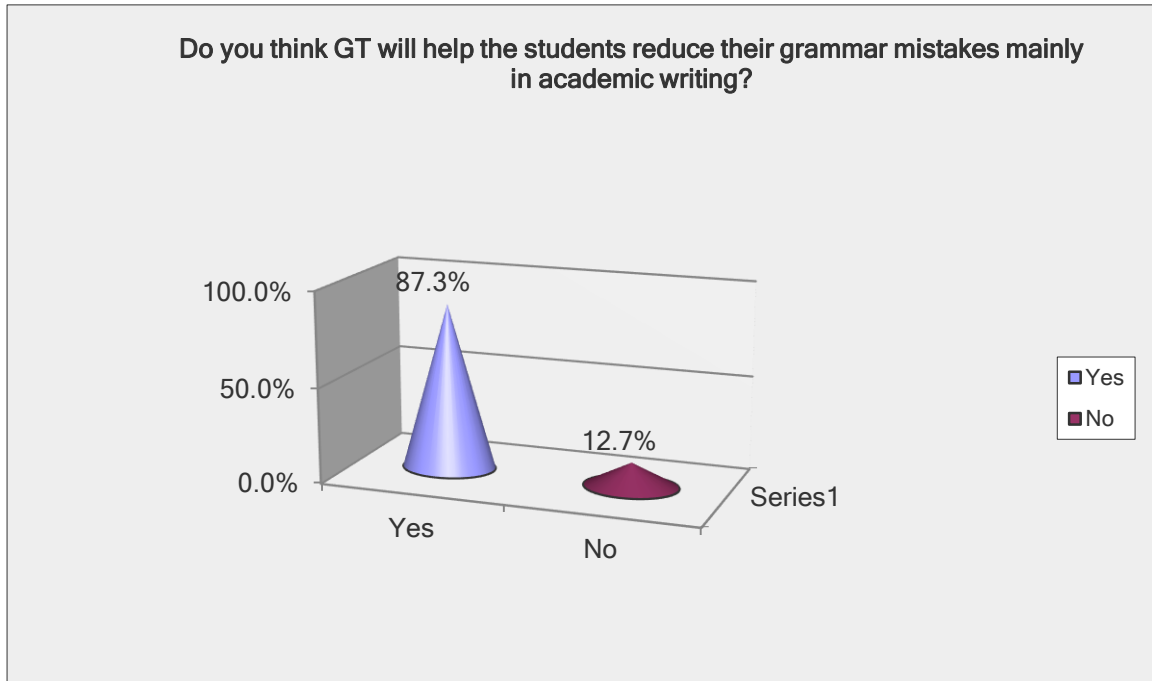
This table demonstrates clearly that a significant number of ESL teachers still believe that GT can reduce grammatical errors in a written text.

Another related question was asked to see if any ESL teacher has ever managed to find a radical remedy to reduce the recurrence of the subject /verb agreement error in simple present third person singular.

Question 4: grammar and the recurrent subject/ verb agreement error.

Did you ever manage to reduce/eradicate this recurrent ESL error: like * My brother have a nice car?
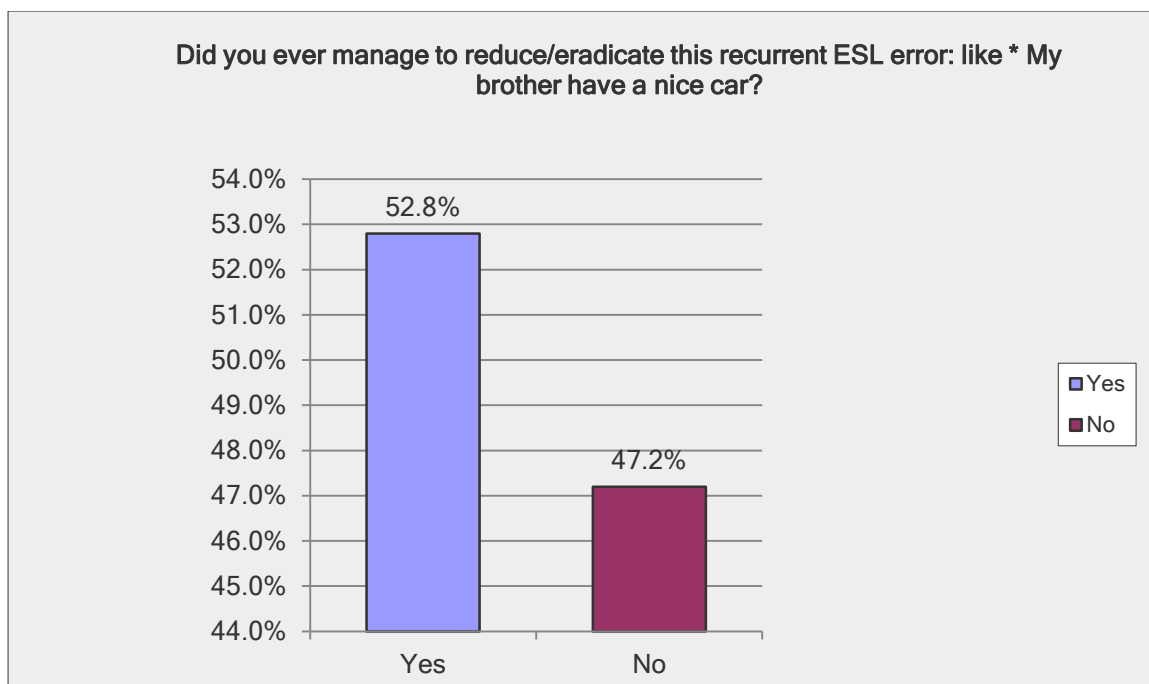
Most ESL teachers are struggling with what seems to be a fossilized error: the subject verb agreement in the simple present third person singular. This is clearly seen in the table above where those who manage to 'kick the habit' are only 10% higher than those who are still trying.

Apart from the bi-polar yes/no question, an open- ended question was added: If yes, please explain how? The feedback received was very informative and ran the gamut from those who lost hope to those who had limited success and those who actually managed to 'de-bug the virus'. The most important comments are reported below

- The majority- 50%- think that the best way is through repetition, drills, reinforcement and practice
- Twenty per cent believe that peer-correction, self –editing and proof reading can be effective.
- Three teachers -10%- think that this is a fossilized error and any effort to reduce its recurrence will be a waste of time." A fossil never comes back to life'' they state.'' No method will ever work" they add. This attitude is based on the disillusioning feeling that students can perform well on a grammar test, but once out of it they soon forget about those very mistakes they have been trained to avoid. This, indeed, is one of the strongest attitude against GT.

My own response to this is that the 's' error is quite normal and quite expected for two main reasons. First, making errors is part of the learning process: we learn by trial and error. Second, according to the error analysis principle, this error, like the wrong use of the dummy 'do' in questions or negative statements, represents one of the thorny aspect of English Grammar. Errors usually occur due to two main factors: interference from the mother tongue or the complexity of the foreign language; these are called developmental errors which occur
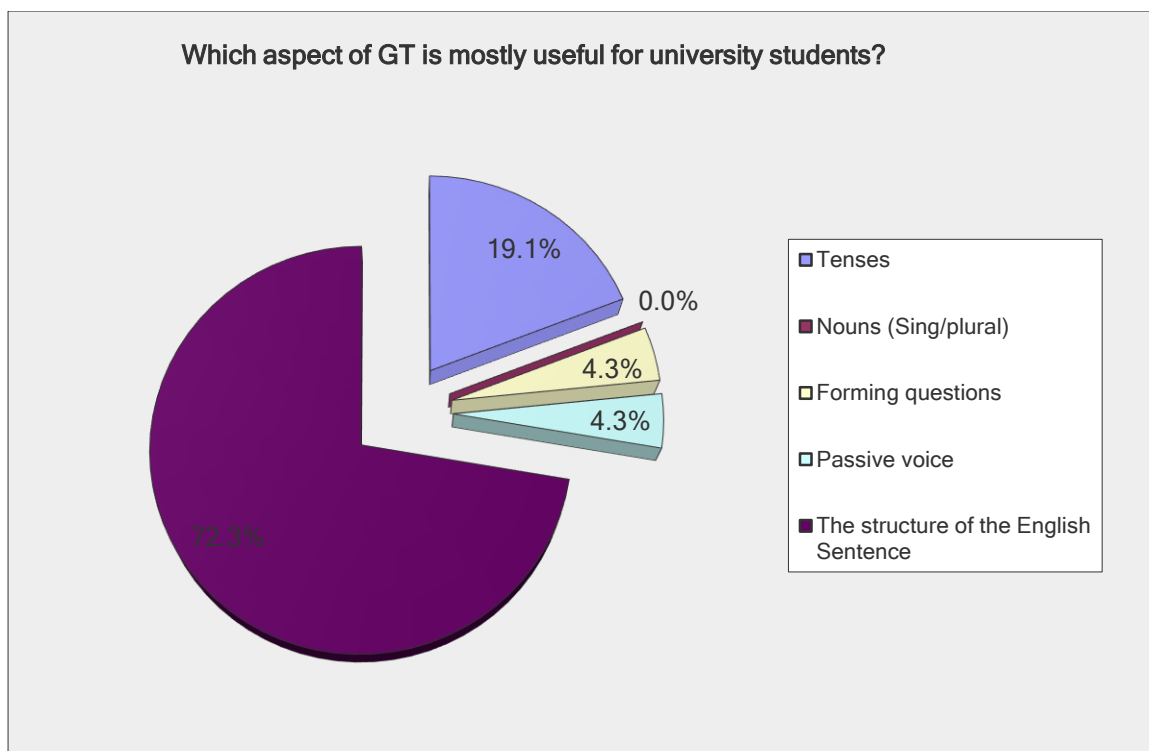
either because of ignorance of the grammatical rule or because the rule is known but, as usual, not put into practice. Actually, research on this specific *global* error- made by the biggest majority of ESL learners- is rather scarce: it is a generally recognized error, but why most ESL learner produce it has not been sufficiently investigated. Most ESL learners can clearly understand the 's' added to plural nouns but find it hard to comprehend why we put 's' to a singular verb. This is my own presumed interpretation; further research on that matter can indeed be more enlightening.

Only two teachers among the participants tried more drastic ways to get rid of the error and claimed to have reached success. One of them suggests presenting a yellow card every time it happens to be like a warning, students will understand what it means and try to avoid it. The second teacher suggests penalizing any student who makes more than five mistakes of this type by giving a zero in a written essay. This teacher believes that this is the only way and even if it looked too strict at the beginning and raised the students' protests, it yielded its fruit in the long run.

While I am not in favour of 'learning through punishment', I believe that this could arguably be the only really effective way. But I have some reservations about that: this method might not work in all contexts as it might dramatically affect the students' failing rate. Too much focus on language errors is not equally perceived in different ESL learning environments and is the object of diverse ELT theories, particularly on error correction. The 3rd person singular 's' error might be accepted by some ESL teachers because it does not impede comprehension. Yet this particular mistake will distinguish a good from a mediocre achiever and is very negatively looked upon when it occurs in a job interview or on a CV. So ignoring or minimizing it, can be quite harmful.

The only mid-way solution proposed by one teacher is to make the students rewrite the essay paying attention to this particular mistake, then rewarding this student by giving extra marks if all 3rd person 's' errors have been corrected.

Question 5: which grammar to teach?

Which aspect of GT is mostly useful for university students?

- Tenses — 19.1%
- Nouns (Sing/plural) — 0.0%
- Forming questions — 4.3%
- Passive voice — 4.3%
- The structure of the English Sentence — 72.3%

The vast majority- 74%- think that the structure of the English sentence is the most useful.
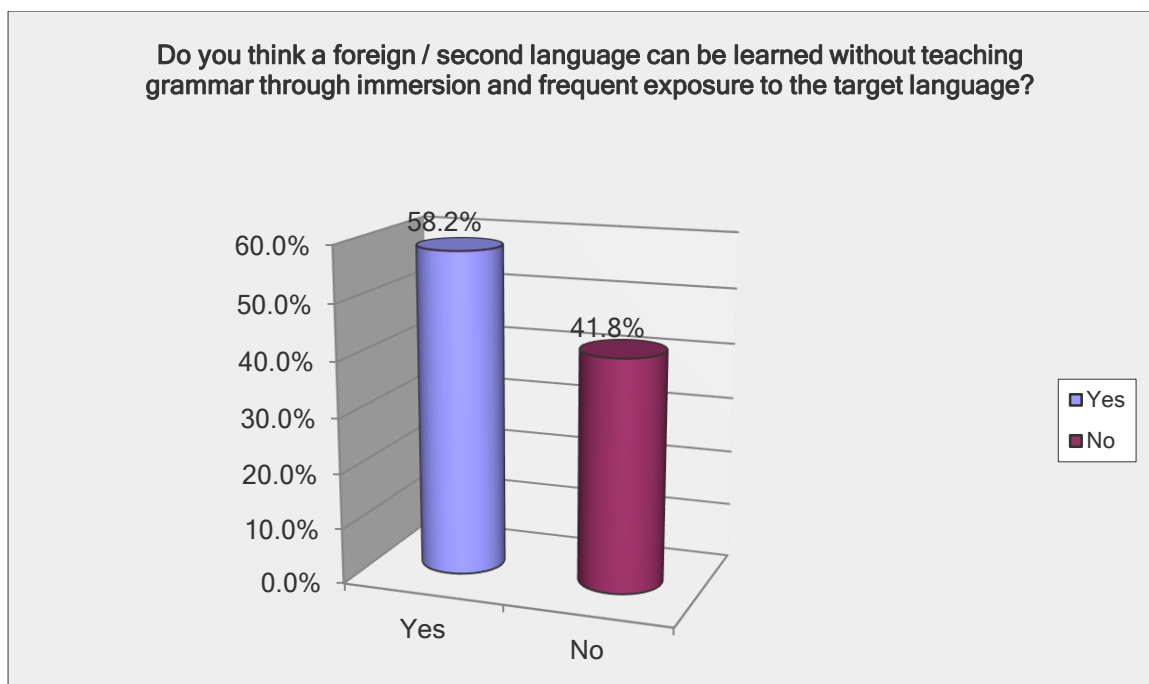
This is quite normal as one of the most important ESL goals is to make students write accurate error-free English. The question of what grammar to teach is crucial and depends on many factors, mainly on learners' needs and interests. To teach grammar for, say, cabin crew people, differs widely from teaching grammar to undergraduate students. The former will need, a lot of practice on forming questions and formulating polite expressions, the latter on the grammar of academic English , which is basically the simple present for descriptive and argumentative essays and simple past for narrative discourse. One might wonder why we should teach the reported speech to these two categories of learners. The reported speech is useful in news English register or fiction but hardly used in another register discourse.

Does this mean that we should only teach the grammar that the target learners need?

This question is quite complex to answer. It can be argued that learning in any field is always comprehensive at the beginning and narrows down later. This can be applied to grammar: ESL learners should be aware of all the rules that govern the language in the early stages of language learning. At a more advanced level, the choice of what grammar to teach should become more selective and match the learners' specific learning outcomes.

Not focusing on one aspect of grammar does not mean ignoring it. A recent trend in GT is the conscious raising awareness method where the learners' attention is drawn to particular grammatical forms to be used in particular contexts.

Question 6: Conscious vs unconscious grammar learning

Do you think a foreign / second language can be learned without teaching grammar through immersion and frequent exposure to the target language?

This table indicates that a good number of ESL instructors-58%- still believe in the unconscious learning of grammar. This finding is a proof that Krashen's Theory of Language Acquisition is still influencing ELT methodologies.

Another important percentage, however, 41%, do not agree with this principle. When asked to explain why if the answer is 'no', the participants wrote very pertinent comments which articulate around three major axes.

1. **Importance of grammar in ELT.**

Quite a few ESL teachers think that grammar is the building block of any language and it is therefore essential in language learning. Learners need to see patterns and follow them. Even if grammar is picked up through immersion, GT simplifies and provides points of reference. GT allows students to go beyond the fossilization plateau often reached by unconscious grammar learners who will not be able to recognize and correct their errors.

2. **Accuracy vs fluency**

The bulk of the participants who have reservations about acquiring grammar through immersion believe that this method is only effective for immediate oral communication or colloquial purposes. At the academic level, GT becomes essential to achieve the accuracy required for academic writing purposes.

3. **Limitations of the full immersion principle**

Learning through exposure and immersion method has short-lived, as it proved to be more *idealistic* than *realistic*. If some ESL learners manage 'to pick up grammar as it goes by', these are exceptional cases. Moreover, exposing all ESL learners to English speaking environment can hardly be achieved in many ESL contexts where exposure to real English and to native speakers is very limited.

Question 7: Do grammar mistakes matter?

Do you think grammar mistakes do not matter as far as the message is understood?
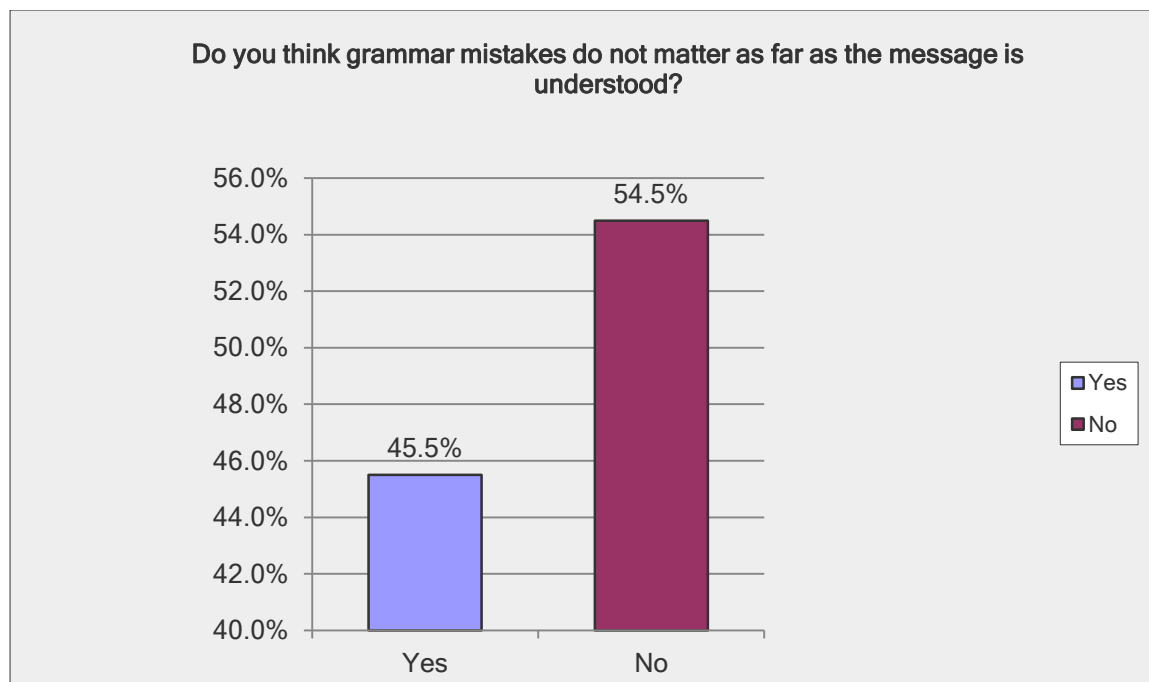
This table shows that teachers who believe that grammatical mistakes matter outnumber those who think they do not. '*Litel misteak is not mestak'* is the object of a great debate. Under the influence of the communicative approach where the focus is more on effective oral communication, error correction is commonly criticized and grammar mistakes are tolerated as far as they do not impede comprehension. However, when the focus is on written accuracy, if those small mistakes are ignored they might either become fossilized or generate more serious mistakes that would hamper understanding and affect the coherence of a written text.

The above argument is clearly expressed in the open answer to the question above where the participants were asked to justify their answer. The general tendency is indeed, that small mistakes may be accepted in given situations and purposes. If, however, the target is written accuracy, grammar mistakes may disrupt or undermine the message. In addition, any ESL learner especially in writing will be judged on his/her good grammar when seeking a job.

The current debate result : Grammar revival

It has become evident now, as we can see in this study, that the general tendency is, indeed, to teach grammar. In addition to the results from the above study, current research, since the turn of 21st century, shows that there is a strong return to instructional GT as Thornbury (1999) asserts "If grammar ever went away, it's only for a short time and not very far". An article from *The Guardian*, 18 September 2012 reads " Time to stop avoiding grammar rules…explicit teaching of grammar rules leads to better learning and to unconscious knowledge, and this knowledge lasts over time". Hussein and Fotos (2004) state:" recent research has demonstrated that there is a

need for formal grammar instruction for learners to attain high level of accuracy. This has led to the resurgence of grammar teaching".

Main reasons for this revival

1. **Fluency vs. Accuracy**

For decades the influential CLT approach has eclipsed grammar in favour of communicative competence. The result is a focus on *fluency* more than on *accuracy*. Consequently, learners are able to communicate verbally but cannot write properly, which can be a serious impediment to university students for whom formal academic writing is a significant requirement.

2. **Unconscious vs. Instructional learning**

The short comings of Krashen's Theory and the Natural Approach have put into great doubt the effectiveness of unconscious learning. There is sound evidence now that without raising attention to L2 grammar rules, the learner cannot go beyond the level of basic communication. Therefore, grammar is now being revisited with a focus on *form* and *conscious raising* (Nina & Gardner 2005). This current approach advocates the theory that learning is enhanced when the learner's attention is directed to the features of the grammatical system.

Hussein and Fotos (2004) mentioned that extensive research conducted on learning outcomes in French immersion programs showed that "despite substantial long-term exposure to meaningful input, the learners did not achieve accuracy in certain grammatical forms. Thus, communicative language teaching by itself was found to be inadequate".

On the same note, Ellis (2002) showed that current research is strongly in favour of a provision for instructional grammar forms and recommends a combination of form- focused instruction and meaningful communication. The notion of *awareness* has been illustrated by Ellis (2001) as allowing learners to consciously 'notice' formal properties of the language to be able to form an explicit representation of the target form and thereby to develop explicit knowledge.

3. A balance between form and meaning

Spada and Tomita (2010) conducted a meta-analysis on target grammatical features in 41 studies to investigate the effects of explicit and implicit instruction. The results indicate larger effect sizes for explicit over implicit instruction for simple and complex features. The study also suggests that explicit instruction positively contributes to a learner's controlled knowledge and spontaneous use of both simple and complex forms.

The authors conclude from the findings that meaning- based instruction that includes attention to form is more effective than instruction which focuses exclusively on form (like the traditional audio-lingual method), or instruction which focuses exclusively on meaning (like the functional communicative approach).Consequently, the new ELT/ESL trends are now reshaping or revisiting the CLT approach to grammar teaching by advocating a content-based method that combines both meaning with explicit form instruction.

Conclusion

Putting grammar teaching into question is due to the swinging attitudes towards GT which have marked different ELT theoretical methodologies since the 1970s. A heavily grammar-oriented approach   led to a sense of disillusionment: 'He can recite a long list of irregular verbs but he cannot ask a simple question'. The rise of the communicative meaning -centred approach shifted the focus from written accuracy to spoken fluency and, consequently, marginalized and minimized grammar. Krashen's Theory of Acquisition and the Natural Approach rejected explicit teaching of grammar on the belief that language and grammar can be acquired unconsciously.

However, current research in ELT and ESL methodologies have proven that the above approaches are falling from grace and we are witnessing a strong return to GT. As shown from the findings of this study and in light of recent literature to teach or not to teach grammar is no longer a controversy. The question, therefore, is no longer to teach or not to teach grammar but indeed to teach grammar in an explicit way. Now the crucial problem is: *how to teach grammar and what aspects of grammar to teach.*

 GT is still worrying many ESL teachers who are unsure of " how much importance they should give to grammar, what grammar they should teach, and how they should teach it" Szymborska (2006). The heart of the matter is indeed *how* to teach grammar effectively. Is there a miraculous method that would work in every situation? Recent research demonstrates that it is unrealistic to think of a most effective method despite the abounding literature on that subjec. "Grammar can be taught in many ways- there is no 'best' way that suits all grammar points" Gardner (2008)

 As to *what* grammar to teach, the answer is complex and depends on many factors like students' specific needs, the purpose of GT, students' level and abilities. To cite but a few examples: a focus on question pattern formation is very useful for learners who will be involved in oral interaction like travel agents, salespeople etc. while an emphasis on reported speech will be instrumental for news reporters.

Now that grammar is back, we should give it its due place in ESL curriculum. The most important thing, whichever approach or method is adopted, is to make GT always innovative and enjoyable. It is utopic to think that GT will eradicate all errors and it is an illusion to believe that one method can be perfect. Proficiency in ESL or any foreign language is very hard to achieve. But if a procedure does not guarantee full success, is there enough reason to abandon it? To quote Szymborska (2006) again" planting seeds may not guarantee that they will grow; but not planting them is scarcely a superior strategy".

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