

CHALLENGES OF TEACHING GRAMMAR AT TERTIARY LEVEL: LEARNING FROM ENGLISH LECTURERS' INSIGHTS

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Abstract

In the teaching of English as a second language, grammar is considered as one of the significant skills to master. However, with more attention given to other language skills, grammar is seen as the least important skill and is often taught incidentally through other skills without any proper assessment to gauge students' understanding of it. The present study highlights the challenges experienced by English lecturers in teaching grammar at undergraduate level. 15 English lecturers from a university were involved in the study as participants. They were interviewed and the data gained from the interview were transcribed and analyzed. Findings show that they faced six main challenges in teaching grammar namely lack of experience, expectations of the students, lack of facilities, negative perceptions on the teaching of grammar and preparing grammar lessons. Thus, the present study may serve as a good insight for other English lecturers as well as policy makers in overcoming the challenges.

Keywords: challenges, grammar, university students, English lecturers

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Learning grammar has been part of language skills since grammar is a fundamental feature of a language. If learners fail to understand the rules of grammar, they will fail to communicate effectively in that language. At every level of learning institution, the teaching of grammar is always perceived as the most difficult skill to teach (Brindley, 1984; Baron, 1982) and the most boring skill to learn (Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011; Leki 1995; Schulz, 2001). Therefore, if there is any mention of grammar in classroom, it would cause students to have moments of anxiety. To overcome this, language instructors have to do their best to make grammar teaching as “non-threatening, imaginative and useful activity within the English curriculum” (Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011, p.14).

Contradicting to current practices which treat grammar as less important, grammar was perceived as more important than other language skills especially for L2 learners (Widodo, 2006). This is because without good knowledge of grammar, development of learners' language will not take place. Grammar teaching practises sentence patterns, in which learners are taught rules of language. Grammatical rules enable learners to understand and apply sentence patterns accordingly (Ur, 1999). The teaching of grammar should centralize students' attention on understanding how grammatical items or sentence patterns are

correctly used. In other words, the teaching of grammar should comprise language structure or sentence patterns, meaning and use.

While some researchers believe that the ill-defined guideline of teaching grammar as being the main challenge of teaching grammar (Azman & Goh, 2004; Siti Rohani, 2007), some other researchers believe that inculcating grammar in the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is the main challenge (Juan & Jing, 2010; Puspalata, Sathiyaperba & Angelina, 2011). In Malaysia, most of the studies done on challenges of teaching and learning grammar focused more on the primary and secondary schools and not at undergraduate level (e.g: Mahendran, 2010; Wickham, 2009). Therefore, the study intends to investigate the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by English lecturers in teaching grammar?
2. What challenges has been faced the most by English lecturers in teaching grammar?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Previously, the teaching of grammar was traditionally dominated by grammar-translation method, where the learners' mother tongue is used and seen as important in explaining the meaning of target language. This was done by translating the target language into the native languages. An example of this was highlighted by Larsen-Freeman (2000) and Richards and Rodgers (2001) who claim that grammar-translation method requires learners to learn grammar rules and vocabulary of the target language. After that, learners are provided with the explanation of grammar rules in their mother tongue. Next, they will be given examples, are told to memorize them, and then are asked to apply the rules to other examples.

Since the introduction of English language teaching, grammar is perceived as a component that could complement other language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Grammar plays an important part in grasping and producing spoken language because learning grammar is considered fundamental in acquiring the correct utterances of the language (Corder, 1988; Widodo, 2004). As for reading, grammar enables learners to understand interrelationship of sentences within a paragraph, a passage and a text. Apart from that, applying grammar rules also allows the learners to organize their ideas into comprehensible sentences so that successful communication can be achieved through a written form. In the case of vocabulary, grammar gives learners some pathways on how some lexical items should be combined into a sentence so that they can form meaningful and communicative statements or expressions. This is supported by Doff (2000) who believes that learning grammar enables students to express meanings in the form of phrases, clauses and sentences. Hence, the functions that grammar plays in the four language skills and vocabulary cannot be undermined as it really helps to establish communicative tasks (Long and Richards, 1987).

Grammar is seen as a fundamental part of language learning. When learners are exposed to grammar, they are indirectly taught the use of language. Previous studies show that the teaching of grammar is important for L2 learners in enhancing their language learning (Thornbury, 1999). However, the issue of the best approach of teaching grammar has been debated for more than four decades among scholars in the field of second language acquisition (Ellis, 2001). Language instructors (English teachers and lecturers) were also found to hold different views on grammar teaching. Some of them believe that comprehension of grammar takes place when it is taught incidentally – focus on form (Hassan, 2013; Uysal & Bardakci, 2014) while some researchers managed to prove the success of teaching grammar explicitly which focuses on forms (Klapper & Rees, 2003).

On top of the long debating issue of grammar teaching approaches, language instructors often find grammar as a challenging part in teaching English language subject. Previous studies also highlighted the

challenges of teaching grammar in primary school (Sekelj & Riga, 2011), secondary school (Akinbode, 2008; Krutićová, 2015; Pontarolo, 2015) as well as higher learning institutions (Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011; Kao, 1998). Generally, one of the main challenges comes from students with regard to their proficiency (Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011; Mishra, 2010).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study applies a qualitative research method as the interrogative approach in which the data were obtained through a semi-structured interview. The interviews were first transcribed before the analysis was done. As soon as the process of transcribing had been done, the data were tabulated in a table. The findings of the interview were used to answer both research questions.

3.2 Participants

In the study, 15 English lecturers from a university served as participants. They had different background in regards to the teaching of English at tertiary level. Four of them were male lecturers while the remaining 11 were female lecturers. Seven of them had background of Teaching of English as a Second language (TESL) while 8 of them had background in Linguistics only and were not exposed to teaching. Nine of them had obtained their master's degree while 6 of them held bachelor degree and were pursuing their studies. Their years of teaching experience also varied; 5 of them had less than 5 years of teaching experience, 2 of them with 5 to 9 years of experience, 3 of them with 10-14 years of experience, 2 of them with 15-19 years of experience and 3 of them had more than 20 years of teaching experience.

3.3 Research Tool

Semi-structured interview was chosen as the only research tool of the study. The strength of this type of research tool is the interviewer can prepare questions ahead of time and this makes the interviewer appear competent during the interview (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). It also offers participants the freedom to express their views in their own terms. In the present study, the participants were asked 10 questions based on their own experience in teaching grammar. The questions were adopted from Borg (1998) and Pazaver and Wang (2009).

4.0 FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 What are the challenges faced by English lecturers in teaching grammar?

In answering the first research question, the data gained were categorized into 6 different challenges; experience, students, facilities, perceptions, expectations and lessons.

4.1.1 Experience

The first theme is Students. One of the English lecturers claimed that she didn't know the students' needs while two of them believed that correcting students' mistakes is also a challenge as they do not know precisely when they should correct the students' mistakes especially in speaking class. Three of the English lecturers said that having students with low proficiency is also a challenge while two more English lecturers claimed that their students had negative attitudes towards grammar.

Some of them believed that having a low proficiency or weak students is a challenge in teaching grammar. "... I just find teaching grammar is a problem because students tend to be weak in that area. Having these

weak students is quite difficult for me” (Respondent 9). Another respondent (Respondent 8) shares quite similar view on this. “I do (like teaching grammar), it’s just hard to do so especially when I have some weak students in my class.” Groves (2013) noted that it is a norm to have weak students in class, but English lecturers should not feel anxious or easily given up to the situation. There are a lot of activities which can be done to attract them or in other words to make the lessons more meaningful. Jamali (1994) and Nayyer (2013) believe that games are helpful when it comes to learning grammar. By having games English lecturers can kill two birds with one stone; make the lesson fun and the most importantly, make the students learn the lessons meaningfully.

There were also English lecturers who did not know their students’ needs as they had never asked them. They just gauged the students’ preference by observing how students respond to the activities conducted in class. As pointed out by Respondent 15, for example, “I’m not sure (of my students’ preferences). But I think it depends on the students. There was one time when I taught this particular group of students using songs, and they really liked it...” As pointed out by Azar (2007), English lecturers need to know the students’ needs and at the same time achieve the main objective in grammar lessons.

Findings also show that students have high expectations on teachers in using ICT facilities. Not only will the use of ICT makes the lesson fun, it helps in motivating the students to learn the grammar as well (Arnell, 2012)). Almost all English lecturers agreed that their students prefer fun learning instead of traditional teaching method. Respondent 7, for example, believed that students enjoyed more lessons with ICT. “...there was one semester where I got a class in the computer lab, so I used ICT. I could see that my students really enjoyed themselves.” Respondent 9 shared almost the same view, but added that “Lower proficiency students prefer fun learning like grammar songs and videos which can be downloaded from the internet. Also, interactive grammar exercises.” Another respond is “Definitely they would want things which are fun for them” (Respondent 10). The findings somehow contradict Burgess and Etherington’s study (2002) which claims that students prefer traditional teaching method when it comes to grammar as they feel insecure. They also added that traditional style of teaching seems easier to be grasped by students.

4.1.2 Students

The second theme is Experience. Four of the English lecturers claimed that they lack experience and it makes it difficult to teach grammar while three of them teach grammar through trial and error process as they were not taught ways of teaching grammar. Eight respondents were not TESL graduates and they were also not taught techniques of teaching grammar. Therefore, this has become a disadvantage for them compared to those with TESL background. What most of them did was teaching based on observation and experiences which they had gained so far. “I teach (grammar) based on my observation when I was an undergraduate. I don’t practise anything that I didn’t like what my teachers did in class...” (Respondent 4). Respondent 12 also shares the same experience, “I don’t really have a formal teacher training experiences as I took linguistics and not TESL. So, basically I just learn through observation.” Having exposed to methodologies of teaching grammar is not really a challenge as there are always rooms for learning. It is just a bonus. Munir (2009) stated that there were some English lecturers who were exposed to this method and still having problems in applying grammatical rules. Hence, English lecturers must be able to apply the grammar rules first before learn to teach them. This is in line with Respondent 13’s opinion, “There is no excuse for English teacher making grammatical mistakes”. The lack of experience also made three English lecturers practise ‘trial and error’ in their teaching. “... I also practise a ‘trial and error’ in teaching as I was not taught proper strategies” (Respondent 12). The similar practice is done by Respondent 4 and 5 as they did not have any exposure on the teaching of grammar as well.

4.1.3 Facilities

In terms of facilities, two English lecturers stated that even though they have enough facilities, most of them are not working well. Perceptions of the teachers can also be a challenge in which the English lecturers have to change their negative stigma on grammar. Four of the English lecturers believed that grammar is the hardest part of teaching job while two of them did not enjoy teaching grammar.

Sufficient facilities are crucial to aid making grammar lesson more meaningful. Enough exposure of the target language helps learner to learn the language better (Ana & Ratminingsih, 2012). However, more than half of the English lecturers claimed that their institutions do not provide enough facilities. “Not really. For many semesters, sometimes we just have one class with a computer and an LCD projector. Sometimes, for the whole semester we didn’t get a class equipped with ICT facilities” (Respondent 8). Respondent 11 gave quite similar insight, “Not really (Institution providing sufficient facilities). Of course I don’t get as much as I want, but I understand the difficulties of having to provide for every class. I think so far, it is not too bad. I cannot say it is really sufficient. I always believe that we need to make do with what we have”. As a result, they would go back to the traditional method of teaching and learning. Respondent 3 stated that “... the Makmal Bahasa is not open 24/7. I have to book it first. So, if it is fully booked, I have to go back to chalk-and-talk.”

There were two respondents who agreed that their institutions provide sufficient facilities for teaching and learning process, but it is not efficient. Respondent 6, for example, “some classes are not equipped with ICT facilities and even though there are some classes which are equipped with those facilities, they are not working very well”. Another respond was, “My institution does provide us, but it is not efficient. Sometimes, the projector is working, but the PC is not” (Respondent 7). Without enough facilities provided, students will not be exposed to one language input, which is from the English lecturers. “I’d say that we lack a lot of facilities especially in terms of audio equipment. Language is about input and output. So, you need input. The instructor is one input but they need some other examples. So, if they provided us with speakers in classroom, we can give students more examples of the language in real life” (Respondent 14). There is no doubt that the teaching and learning process could be done with the chalk-and-talk method (Hassan, 2013; Normazidah, Koo & Hazita, 2012), but the lesson might be perceived as boring. Students nowadays would appreciate lessons which involve more use of ICT facilities or at least presentation slides (Hiew, 2012).

4.1.4 Perceptions

Teachers’ perceptions play a significant role and can be a great challenge to English lecturers. Based on the interview session, it was found that the perceptions the English lecturers have are more to the grammar teaching itself and not so much on the students or the lessons. Wong and Barrea-Marlys (2012) noted that having a negative perception on language teaching may demotivate not only the English lecturers but the students also have to bear the consequences as a result of the English lecturers’ perceptions. In this study, it was found that four English lecturers had negative perceptions on grammar by saying that grammar is the hardest part of the job, while two of them stated that they did not enjoy the teaching of grammar.

Respondent 1 shared her view, “... if it comes to explaining the rules, and when students are confused with the rules, it is difficult for me to explain and make the students understand the rules”. Respondent 6 gave almost the same insight, “This (teaching grammar) is the hardest part of the job, indeed. It is extremely challenging to bridge the gap of their theoretical understanding of grammar to the practical usage of grammar. So, it’d be the hardest part of the job.” From both excerpts, both respondents agreed that the teaching of grammar is difficult if it involves explaining rules to students. Respondent 8 had the same stance and believed the reasons for some teachers to practise drillings “... as for teaching English as

a second language or foreign language, it (teaching of grammar) is the hardest part of the job because if the students are not interested with the language, they cannot be bothered by the rules. I think, that's why my teachers used drillings when I was in school as it is important for the students to remember the rules".

4.1.5 Expectations of the English lecturers

The next category is expectations of the English lecturers. Three of the English lecturers had high expectations on their students in learning grammar as they believed the students had learnt a lot when they were in school. Two of them, on the other hand, had expectations on the condition of the classroom to be cosy and comfortable for the students to learn. In terms of the grammar lesson, three English lecturers claimed that it was a challenge for them to create lessons which can cater various kinds of students' needs. Three English lecturers also believed that grammar lessons consume more time than other language skills.

Previous studies on grammar instructions have investigated expectations of students on grammar lessons are more than the teachers' expectations (see Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011; Azman & Goh, 2010; Myhill, Jones & Watson, 2013). This study found that, even though the number is low, there were three English lecturers who found that expectations are some of the challenges they have to face in grammar teaching. The main expectation does not lie on the students so much as they have higher expectations on the conditions of the classroom. Respondent 6 and Respondent 13, for example, believed that classrooms should be equipped with ICT facilities in making the process of teaching and learning run smoothly. As for the expectations on students, English lecturers sometimes expect the students to already master grammar as they have been learning it in schools. As Respondent 7 highlighted, "It (the teaching of grammar) can be frustrating at times because you have been teaching the same thing for so many years, and you have to face students who are still easily confused by the basic grammar. And I would ask myself what they have been learning in schools".

4.1.6 Lessons

Coming out with grammar lessons might be more difficult than what some people thought. As Azar (2007) highlighted, the lessons have to balance in fulfilling the students' needs and at the same time achieving the objectives. Respondent 14 believed that "...it (the teaching of grammar) is very challenging because I need to prepare grammar lessons that can interest the students and at the same time effective". To do this, Respondent 2 suggested that "...we have to come out with new approaches, new activities depending on their level and their locality. For example, if you are teaching in FELDA area, avoid using 'polar bears' compared to tigers. Comprehension on tigers is more preferable than comprehension on polar bears or igloo". He also added, "I will adjust my teaching method according to their level of proficiency".

Another point on the lesson is that teaching of grammar consumes time as it is not easy to make students grasp the input in an hour or two. This view is shared by Respondent 5, Respondent 7 and Respondent 15. They claimed that there are other language skills to be covered as well and focusing too much on grammar lessons is going to consume time of learning other skills. English lecturers, therefore, must be able to find good resources and materials to achieve this objective (Al-Mekhlafi & Nagaratnam, 2011; Azar, 2007).

4.2 What challenges has been faced the most by English lecturers in teaching grammar?

Table 4.1 Challenges faced by English lecturers in teaching grammar

Challenges	Frequency	Total
Students		
Not knowing students' needs	1	16
Correcting students' mistakes	2	
Students' proficiency is low	3	
Students' negative attitude towards grammar	2	
Students' expectations	8	
Experience		
Not exposed to teaching strategies	8	15
Lack of experience	4	
Trial and error	3	
Facilities		
Insufficient	8	10
Not working well	2	
Perceptions		
Grammar as the hardest part of teaching	4	6
Not enjoying grammar	2	
Expectation		
The condition of the classroom	2	5
High expectations on students	3	
Lessons		
Creating lessons that suit students' needs	3	6
Time consuming	3	

Table 4.1 presents the challenges faced by English lecturers in teaching grammar. The challenges were grouped according to different themes in which the challenges relate strongly with; experience, students, facilities, perception, expectation and grammar lessons. Three challenges share the highest frequency which is 8; not exposed to teaching strategies, expectations of students (who prefer fun ways of teaching grammar) and insufficient facilities in the classroom. It can also be seen that the lecturers' view on students is the highest among other categories.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, there are some recommendations that can be made which include:

- i. giving at least an intensive course to English lecturers who do not possess qualification in the Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL). This is important as they need to be exposed to the methodology of teaching English language which includes teaching of grammar. The

- course would be fruitful to them in overcoming issues which regard to teaching English in classroom.
- ii. providing better facilities for classroom. In the era of technology today, having up-to-date technology in classroom is very important since students are more exposed to this in their daily lives. The use of technology in language classroom therefore, is believed to enhance better language learning (María 2011; Aizan & Gunasegaran, 2013; Parvin & Salam, 2015).
 - iii. assessing students' proficiency prior to the first lecture. Often the first week of class is filled with ice-breaking activities. Hence, it is advisable for English lecturers to gauge students' proficiency through a placement test. This could be insightful for them in overcoming problems which might occur later in the classroom (Mishra, 2010).

6.0 CONCLUSION

Grammar overall, is a challenging language skill. Even experienced English lecturers may face difficulties in explaining grammar to students. This can be the result of different students' needs in learning. Hence, it is crucial for English lecturers to figure out their students' proficiency and issues in learning English grammar.

As the findings suggest, the participants agree that students and lack of experience as the main challenges of teaching grammar. However, the researcher believes that more challenges can be explored if more participants are involved. Therefore, English lecturers or language instructors should find a more strategic method in teaching the skill. A good mastery of grammar ensures students' ability to master other language skills especially writing.

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