

## GRAMMAR: IS IT ESSENTIAL TO TEACH IT EXPLICITLY AT SECONDARY SCHOOLS ?

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### Abstract

*The article aims at discussing whether English **grammar** has to be taught at **secondary schools** in Indonesia. Internationally, whether grammar has to be taught has been controversial issues in second/foreign language teaching (SLT/FLT) at least for the last two decades. A few extremists have advocated that teaching grammar is not needed at all while a lot of language educators support the teaching of grammar. Some experts state that historically grammar has become central in SLT/FLT. Even one of them surprisingly claims that grammar is so important that she regards it as the fifth skill named **grammaring** after the other four: listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. In fact, the writer agrees to say that grammar is one of the skills that learners must acquire in learning English as a foreign language (EFL). However, it is not the fifth. It must become the first because **EFL learners** will not understand well what they are listening to or reading, or they will not be able to speak or write well in English without understanding or mastering its grammar first. Hence, grammar cannot be neglected in ELT at secondary schools in Indonesia. It must be taught **explicitly**, and there should be some specially-allocated time to teach it.*

**Key Terms:** *grammar, grammaring, secondary school, explicitly and EFL learner.*

### A. INTRODUCTION

Whatever language somebody is learning certainly deals with the language components such as sounds, vocabulary and grammar because none of the languages existing in the universe is without those components. No matter whether s/he is learning it as a first language (L1), as a second language (L2), or as a foreign language (FL), s/he cannot acquire it unless s/he is learning the three language components. Thus, the three language components must be taught.

However, in the English language teaching (ELT) in Indonesia, especially at secondary schools (junior and senior high schools including vocational schools), one of the language components, namely grammar, is neglected. It is almost never taught. If it is taught, it is not taught proportionally and explicitly. There is not any specially-allocated time to teach it explicitly. If it is taught, it is taught implicitly during teaching listening, speaking, reading, or writing. The EFL (English as a foreign language) learners are not given enough time to practice the grammar they are learning.

Therefore, most of EFL (English as a foreign language) learners do not have enough grammatical knowledge and skill while grammatical knowledge and skill plays an important role in developing the other four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. How can an EFL learner understand well what s/he is listening to or reading if s/he does not know the grammar of what s/he is listening to or reading, or the grammar of that is still vague to her/him.

Besides, the problem will become worse if s/he would like to speak or write. S/he knows what s/he is going to speak or write about, but s/he does not know how to say or to write it because s/he does not possess enough grammatical knowledge and skill to speak or write about it. For example, if s/he has to describe something or someone in spoken or written form, how can s/he perform it well? She does not have enough grammatical knowledge and

skill on the Simple Present Tense, a tense as a language feature, which s/he needs to describe something or someone. Moreover, if s/he has to talk about past events or write a recount or an expository text, the grammatical problem will certainly become much worse.

As a result, many of senior high school graduates studying at colleges or universities, especially English department, are very weak in grammar. If they have to speak or write in English in order to express their own ideas, they express them very badly (with broken English). It seems that their bad habit of grammar or their grammatical problem has been so cristalized that it is very difficult for them to speak or write with proper grammar. It needs a lot of time and efforts for them to master correct grammar.

In order to propose a solution to the grammatical problem the secondary school graduates probably face when they enter English Department at Colleges and Universities, here the writer would like to discuss about the importance of teaching grammar explicitly and properly beginning from junior high school.

## B. DISCUSSION

The writer thinks that he had better explain what it is meant by grammar, grammaring, secondary school, explicitly and EFL learners before talking about the importance of teaching grammar mentioned in the previous paragraph in order to prevent the readers from misunderstanding or misconception of the key terms available in this paper for different readers/listeners might have different conception of the same terms.

What it is meant by **grammar** is what Isyam (2001 and 2007) has tried to formulate based on the definitions proposed by some experts such as Werner (1985), Emmit (1992), Collerson (1995), Ur (2000), Thornbury(2001), Larsen-Freeman (2003), and Nunan (2003). The formulation says *that grammar is a set of definite rules to arrange words and other components to form correct sentences of a certain language which gives meanings to whoever uses the language, either in speaking or listening, or in writing, reading, or even in thinking.*

What is grammaring? **Grammaring** is the term introduced by Larsen-Freeman (2003) in her book entiteled *Teaching Languages from Grammar to Grammaring*, and what she means by it is the ability to use grammar structures accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately.

Next is **secondary school**. Secondary school is meant junior high school including islamic junior high school, senior high school including any vocational senior high school ( economic senior high school, technological senior high school, etc.) and islamic senior high school.

In addition, **EFL learner** is any learner who is learning at either one of the schools, mentioned above and at colleges and universities in Indonesia, where English is certainly taught as a (first) foreign language.

**Explicitly** means that grammar must be taught explicitly, and what the writer means by explicitly here is it must be taught clearly and firmly with specially-allocated time.

That the English language is taught as the first foreign language at secondary schools in Indonesia is not a question anymore. However, why English grammar is not taught explicitly with specially-allocated time is indeed a big question .

Learning L1, which is also called a native language or a mother tongue, goes through a natural process in which the children gradually acquire it. They learn the language subconsciously. It means they acquire sounds (pronunciation) and grammar without learning them consciously. The learning flows as water does. They are exposed to the language at home and/or outside most of the time during their waking hours.

Learning English as a second or foreign language (ESL or EFL) in natural settings is about the same as learning English as the first language (EL1) in a way that the learners learn

the first two skills (listening and speaking skills). Nevertheless, learning ESL or EFL in the classroom settings will be very different.

In learning ESL or EFL in the classroom settings, the learners learn the language consciously. They learn the sounds (pronunciation), vocabulary, and grammar of the language consciously and relatively at the same time through the processes of teaching and learning with enough language exercises and practice without which they will not have the ability to acquire the language. In this case, the ESL learners seem luckier than the EFL learners do because the former can practice speaking the language daily in the society in which they live.

On the other hand, when the latter want to practice the language daily in actual communication in the society where they live, it is impossible for them to do it so. Most of the time, they do exercises and practice using the language in artificial situations in the classrooms. Moreover, they learn to listen, speak, read and write in the language at relatively the same time.

In the learning process, the EFL learners potentially commit hundreds of thousands of language deviations, especially grammar, from the native adults' standard in speaking or writing, but these grammatical deviations gradually decrease and their speaking and writing abilities gradually increase through exercises, training and practicing, including direct or indirect correction by their peers and teachers/lecturers when they commit them. It is hoped the higher year they are at school or the higher level their school is, the more the deviations will decrease and the more their speaking and writing abilities will increase because their grammaring (ability) is hoped to increase earlier. If they still make deviations in oral communication, either in pronunciation or grammar, it would not matter much as long as what they communicate can be understood well by the people whom they speak to. These people would not remember the deviations because they might not pay much attention to them. Nevertheless, the deviations in grammar in written communication or written production, as in writing a text, either descriptive, recount, or expository, etc., are considered embarrassing because it could give an undesirable impression, for they can be detected easily and might matter to the readers who consider the writers rather weak in grammar and vocabulary.

In fact, it will be more embarrassing if the grammatical deviations are still relatively great in number, and they are committed by the EFL learners who are majoring in English, like the English Department students of colleges and universities in Indonesia, although they have been learning English for more than eight years (six years at secondary schools without learning grammar explicitly and properly, and two years at colleges and universities with a set of grammar courses).

Why do those EFL learners, whose major at colleges and universities is English, still commit grammatical deviations especially in their written production relatively great in number? There could be three factors that cause them as Isyam (2007) mentioned.

The first factor is the EFL learners themselves. Many of the learners might have had so low learning motivation that they did not learn and practice the grammatical items as well they should, and because of this condition they do not master the items to their learning capacity. As a result, they cannot practice or apply any grammatical item they learn in speaking and writing.

The second factor is the language, the English language, they learn. Some of the grammatical items can cause a lot of trouble to some of the EFL learners.

The third is the contexts of learning. Some of the teaching and learning processes or lectures possibly run improperly because of certain reasons.

Besides, this paper writer believes that there is another factor why the EFL learners with English major at colleges and universities still face grammatical problems after they

have learned grammar for about two years or more. The factor is the cristalized grammatical problems that they inherit from their English language learning at secondary schools in which grammar is almost never taught explicitly and properly with specially-allocated time.

Thus, to anticipate the inheritance of grammatical problems or deviations coommitted by the coming EFL learners of English major at colleges and universities, it is crucial that grammar be taught explicitly with specially-allocated time beginning from junior high schools. Larsenn-Freeman (2003: 150) mentions that teaching grammar explicitly can tap the learners' potential to learn.

Then, that is why the teaching of grammar is essential right beginning from junior high school even though a few extremists have advocated no teaching of grammar. On the other hand, a lot of language educators support the teaching of grammar (Brown, 1994:349) because according to Wilkins (1976), the mastery of the grammatical system of the target language is of central importance, and that grammar cannot be ignored or neglected based on the role it plays in listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (Long and Richards, 1987:279). Thus, Widdowson (1990) emphasizes that language learners cannot listen, speak, read, or write in the language they are leaming without knowing or mastering its grammar, or without grammaring (ability).

In addition, Nunan (1991: 149) asserts that there seems to be little or minor support for an approach in which all explicit grammatical instruction is eschewed or avoided. Moreover, this is in accordance with what Brown (1994:348-349) claims that no one can tell you that grammar is irrelevant, or grammar is no longer needed in ELT (the English language teaching) framework because according to him historically, grammar has been central. He further says that reason, balance, and the experience of the teachers in recent ELT tradition tell us that judicious attention to grammatical forms in the classroom is not only helpful, but it is also essential to a speedy learning process. This is supported by Kohonen, et. al (2001:62) who state that in spite of the clearly communicative goals, foreign language learning is guided by grammar learning, and the texts are constructed from the point of grammar progression.

Furthermore, to support the teaching of grammar, Larsen-Freeman (2003: 143) introduces the term grammaring which means the ability to use grammar structures accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately, and according to her grammar can be productively regarded as a fifth skill which is intimately interconnected with the other (four) skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).

Nevertheless, the writer/presenter of the paper is of the opinion that grammaring is the fifth skill is not true at all. It must be the first skill. How can an EFL learner listen and read with good comprehension without understanding the grammar used in the listening or reading texts, it is impossible all for him/her to speak or write well without grammaring (grammatical skill/ability, the term which the writer/presenter often used formerly).

## **B. CONCLUSION**

As a conclusion, that teaching grammar at secondary schools is not important is not true at all. That is true that a few language teaching experts extremely say that it is not necessary; in contrast, many others support that it is essential and even one of them regards it as the fifth skill with the term grammaring. Thus, whatever the reason is, the teaching of grammar cannot be avoided or eschewed because without teaching grammar it is not possible for many of the EFL learners to master English well, nor will it possible for them to communicate in the language well. Grammar and grammaring play important roles in the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Therefore, it is best that the authority at the Ministry of National Education realize how important teaching grammar at secondary schools is and allocate special time (it might

one(at least)/two teaching hour(s) out of four teaching hours allocated for English) to teach grammar explicitly and properly at secondary schools. Besides, each secondary English teacher had also better realize the importance of teaching grammar to his/her students and initiate to spend one teaching hour at least to teach English grammar. The last suggestion is that it is advisable for the teachers to increase and develop their grammatical knowledge and grammaring.

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