

# A Grammarian's Funeral

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## A Prefatory Note

*Success does not consist in never making mistakes but in never making the same one a second time*—George Bernard Shaw  
Recently, I happened to inaugurate the annual session of the 14<sup>th</sup> International English Grammar Congress (IEGC), co-sponsored by the British Council and held in the south of India. I tried to share, in my inaugural address, some of my perceptions of and experiences in teaching grammar in India and abroad over the past four decades. I thought I could adapt my presentation and have it published as a paper for the benefit of a larger audience. I am glad and grateful that *IJRHuSS* volunteered to publish it.

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## 1. Introduction

Pedagogical irrelevance of modern linguistics to ELT cannot be overemphasized. No less a person than Noam Chomsky admits: "I am, frankly, rather skeptical about the significance, for the teaching languages, of such insights as attained in linguistics and psychology"<sup>2</sup>. In other words, 'a movement' (as in Chomsky's TG) or 'rankshifting' (as in Halliday's Systemics) will in no way fulfill the communicative needs of a vast majority of English teachers and learners in the ESL/EFL belt. That is not, however, to deny the overall influence of linguistics on ELT, including grammar teaching. Specifically, cognitive orientation or functional perspective in grammar teaching can of course be traced back to Linguistics. But, for pedagogical reasons, let me focus in this paper on classroom grammar, especially at the tertiary level with which I am primarily concerned.

I would, at the outset, like to highlight a major challenge to ESL teachers at the tertiary level for the consideration of IEGC (a forum whose major concern is grammar) or ELTAI (whose main focus is on teaching). The challenge is one of paradigm shift—children moving from the secondary to the tertiary level, from school to college. It is a challenge because in most schools, as we all know, the priorities are different. The schools must help a vast majority of children to leave school with good grades. So the approach and strategies are what they are. But, at the tertiary level,

if a teacher ventures to teach grammar differently, if his/her styles and strategies are different, most of the learners feel uncomfortable. They think the teacher bad—if not positively hostile. This uncomfortable feeling may be called 'cognitive dissonance,' to borrow a term from social psychology<sup>3</sup>. This situation, to reiterate, is highly challenging and calls for a dialogue and concerted action, for which the forum of IEGC (and its collaborators) or ELTAI should set the agenda soon. It would only be hypocritical to ignore it.

In the mean time, however, we could think of techniques and strategies to help ourselves to cope with the challenge. But, in this Post-methods era, -- comparable to or as a corollary of the Postmodern era - all available models of grammar, Traditional, Structuralist or Communicative, all Grand narratives, so to speak, seem to have lost their sway. Anyway, all grammars leak, as Edward Sapir once noted. Moreover, ground realities tend to vary from place to place and from time to time. Therefore we may have to have some kind of methodological eclecticism. We may, that is, draw on various methods and approaches and sometimes on robust common sense and battle with the situation.

Of course, there is large scope for our little interventions: grammar in context, an integrative strategy, inductive technique, reference skills in a grammar classroom, using examples from life and literature where appropriate, humour in the classroom, comparing English and L<sub>1</sub> grammar as necessary, using sheer common sense,

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teaching usage with grammar, etc. In testing, again, there must be scope for error-correction, cloze test, grammar quiz and games, etc. But there is nothing new about all this. Any pragmatic intervention, for that matter, should be welcome. What matters indeed is the 'right mix' which will have to be decided by experience and experiment.

But, before considering the various interventions, there is a caveat to be taken note of: An ESL/EFL grammar lesson cannot possibly be delivered in the vernacular. That explains why in EFL situations, in China and some Afro-Asian countries, for instance, they engage native speakers (of English) – not natives – to teach English, spending a huge lot of money. Alternatively, in some of these countries, they prefer competent Indian teachers to do the job. Where ever it is attempted to teach English Grammar through  $L_1$  (as is reportedly the case in a number of places in India in particular), the learners stand to lose. They may understand grammar, but will not be able to apply it. All that they will have ultimately – and unfortunately – is knowledge but not competency. That would be the disastrous end of unprincipled bilingualism in pedagogy and it will positively harm the learners. There will be products all around with paper qualifications and no competencies to back up. We must all beware of the reckoning. What is more, this kind of practice would eventually weaken the teacher's grip on the Target Language. However, healthy comparison, in the classroom, between  $L_1$  and TL does often help, like for example SOV/SVO contrast or active/passive comparison or this use of tenses.

It should be borne in mind that our aim is to teach competency, to not impart mere knowledge (of grammar). But when the teacher ventures to teach grammar through English, then again there will be the problem of cognitive dissonance, as noted earlier. Thus, it is apparently a Catch-22 situation for the Grammar teacher! As a viable solution, the methods, materials and strategies should indirectly motivate the ESL learners, engage their attention in the classroom and, above all, annihilate their consumer resistance. The solution and interventions that I venture to suggest here in this paper are largely backed up by my personal experience as a teacher and teacher-trainer for over forty years. They are all tentative and by no means dogmatic or, for that matter, exhaustive.

## 2. Grammar and Communication

Now, at this point, the concept 'Grammar' must be defined – if ad hoc – because the term may mean different things to different people. As used in this paper, it is functional and refers to grammar as needed and used by local ESL teachers

at the tertiary level- for classroom and academic purposes. As such it should include usage. There is, however, a difference between grammar and usage. Grammar has to do with correctness and usage with acceptability. Grammar is a virtual skeleton, if I may say so, and usage adds flesh and blood to it. To emphasize one, in the ESL context, leaving out the other will result in a skinny kind of English, which we often witness. More on this distinction later.

In all humility, I must admit that I am just a grammar teacher in the ESL/EFL world, not a grammarian or a 'grammarist,' (one who judges others for using poor grammar). However, I cannot help feeling apprehensive – maybe an occupational hazard – especially when I find an English teacher, particularly a grammar teacher, making mistakes or committing errors, in writing or speaking, unaware or unmindful of their fault. Faulty grammar may cause communication gaps, as we all know. Again, a high density of mistakes and errors will certainly retard flow of communication. Grammar can be a healthy check, especially in the ESL/EFL context. In other words, grammar can be a solution to some of our communication problems. It is by no means a problem by itself. It should be unfortunate if anyone thought otherwise. Grammar, then, should be every English teacher's concern, not just a grammarian's funeral!

## 3. Examples of Communication Gaps

By way of emphasizing the 'why' of grammar, a teacher may say something like this in general: Communication gaps may arise due to faulty grammar as illustrated below. Grammar, in the circumstances, can save the situation

### Tense

Interviewer: Where do you come from? [It means your place of birth or where you live]

Interviewee: I am coming from Madhapur. [instead of I come from...]

Interviewer: ??? [embarrassed/confused]

### Article

Guest (to another at dining table): Pass water (sic), please! [instead of 'Pass *the* water']

Guests around: !!!!!!! [embarrassed]

Interviewer: Well, your CV says that you were a footballer at college. Which position do you play?

Interviewee: I was left out of the team, sir. [instead of 'the left out of the team']

Interviewer: ?????? [amused / pained]

## Phrasal verbs

### Example 1

Professor: Where is Shyamala?

Student: She just passed away, Professor! [instead of *passed by*]

Professor (jokingly): Oh, what a pity! How did she die?

Student:?!?!?! [puzzled]

### Example 2

#### A French tourist's predicament:

Once a French tourist in England, about to get on a bus, heard a loud voice: "Watch out!"

So he turned round and tried to watch out. Just then a slipping suitcase came tumbling down and hit him right on his crown. In pain, he exclaimed: "English is a strange language. You say 'Watch out!' and mean 'Don't watch out!'"

## 4. Some Interventions

What follows is an illustration of various measures suggested. They were all, to reiterate, actually tried out during my teaching and mentoring career of over forty years and found to work. Of course most of them are well known and could be found – though not explicitly acknowledged here – in standard books of grammar like for example in Krishnaswamy or Raymond Murphy and some online. So, most readers must be familiar with measures.

## 5. Language in Context

A mechanical transformation, for instance, from active to passive and vice versa, as in the following (bad) example, does not seem to help:

Active: A mechanic repaired the machine.

Passive: The machine was repaired by a mechanic.

Anyway, where is the need for such a sentence in a real life context? Instead, if it is presented in a context as follows, the learners will understand and appreciate its communicative value:

Active: The cat (finally) killed the mouse. [as in a story of the smart cat]

Passive: The (poor little) mouse was (finally) killed by the cat. [as in a story of the poor little mouse]

Again, sometimes news headlines may make the lesson more down to earth and interesting:

### Examples

'New planet discovered'

'Indian scientist honoured'

Taught in this way, *voice* could become a learner's competency. Learners should also be specifically told that Voice, like most items of grammar, is a matter of choice, not just meant for scoring marks in a test. That is to say that the learners should be made to know, and feel, at every turn, the *why* of grammar.

Similarly, while teaching articles, a teacher can make it more meaningful by asking a question whether the article in a given context means 'one' or 'any' or 'some':

I want to buy a house. [one]

I want to buy a sari. [any]

There is a visitor for you. / I saw a cute pup in the park. [some]

## 6. Incidental Teaching

Incidental teaching is like extempore speech. It is of course planned, yet appears to be spontaneous. It will perhaps make a grammar lesson more interesting and useful as in this case:

Incidentally, students, the past tense can suggest politeness, as in the given example:

Student (to teacher): Could you help me, madam?

Student (to classmate): Can you help me, Manju?

If not told specifically, the students would think that 'you' is polite enough.

## 7. Grammar, Composition and Style

Grammar without composition is like a dietary supplement minus diet. Composition can be oral or written. To begin with, it may be very brief, a short exchange or just a couple of sentences. It should be reiterated that in a composition, simple English, like most grammar items, say, like active or passive, is a matter of choice, not a sign of weakness, as often misconstrued in the ESL/EFL context. It of course takes time and practice. There are famous people, native speakers or Indians, known for their simple English. For them, simple English is a matter of choice: Ernest Hemingway, Bernard Shaw, George Orwell, Mahatma Gandhi and Rt. Hon. Srinivasa Sastri, Ruskin Bond, to name just a few. What follows is a specimen of Hemingway's English.

## 8. Hemingway's Style

She won't die [in childbirth]. She's just having a bad time. The initial labor is usually protracted. She's only having a bad time. Afterward we'd say what a bad time and Catherine would say it wasn't really so bad. But what if she should die? She can't die. Yes, but what if she should die? She can't, I tell you. Don't be a fool. It's just a bad time. It's just nature giving her hell. .... It's only the first labor, which is almost always protracted. Yes, but what if she should die? She can't die. Why would she die? What reason is there for her to die? There's a just a child that has to be born, the by-product of good nights in Milan.

—from Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*

Mixing up of styles is a common violation nowadays—thanks particularly to the SMS culture. Here is an extract from an official letter for me from a reputed publishing house. It sounds downright rude because of the mixing up of styles, informal and formal:

“Hi Sir,

Thanks a lot for sharing your bank details. Will process your papers .....

The writer of this letter obviously thinks that ‘Sir’ is polite enough and will make up for mix up, if any, in the letter. She seems to be hardly aware the whole letter should be consistently formal. So the class may be asked to point out the mix up in a sample like this.

## 9. Grammar and Usage

Grammar is not all. Usage also matters. But usage cannot be codified like grammar. It is learnt rather than taught. In an ESL context, it could be learnt mostly from the dictionary.

A happy solution will, therefore, be to introduce the dictionary in the classroom. The more the learners dip into it, the better will be their usage. The teacher, however, will have to motivate. As a first step, s/he may say to the class with studied casualness that a number of words do not mean what they say and offer examples:

A *teller*, whether a human or machine, counts money, does not tell anything at all.

‘Untold’ often means immeasurable. A *Speaker* in a parliament hardly ever speaks. A mouse in a computer laboratory can be a help or hell! When the native speaker doesn't know what to say next, s/he may say, “Well, you know...”

In the same way, a number of words that sound like opposites are not antonyms at all, as in these examples:

‘Disappointment’ is not the opposite of ‘appointment.’ ‘Flammable’ and ‘inflammable’ are surprisingly synonymous, like ‘abashed’ and ‘unabashed.’ There is always confusion about ‘interested, uninterested and disinterested.’ A *restless* person is not the one who needs rest. *Distemper* has nothing to do with temper. A *running nose* cannot run. Similarly, *backside* is not the opposite of front side, but the part of the body you sit on.

Now an example of usage can be introduced:

‘My wife and I’... It is not \*I and my wife (sic). But Grammar police will not take cognizance of the offence. Incidentally, my wife likes this usage in particular!

**Abusage**—a comic example

Principal: Where is the pincushion?

Colleague: It is on your \*backside, madam.

Now, the teacher may ask the students to refer to the dictionary and find out the problem there. Or s/he may explain: The solicitous colleague only means *at the back*. S/he doesn't probably know that ‘backside’ means bottom, but the word is unmentionable in polite circles!

## 10. Collocation

Collocation is part of usage. It refers to a combination of words in a language, which happens very often and more frequently than would happen by chance. ‘Resounding success’ and ‘crying shame,’ for example, are English collocations. As collocation is part of English usage, Grammar may not help. The teacher may use an amusing anecdote to illustrate the point:

Once, when I barged into my good neighbour's house, I found him watching an English lesson (given in Tamil) on the TV. The virtual teacher was using the expression ‘straight bus’ (sic). Probably, he meant ‘direct bus.’ Watching my quizzical expression, my neighbour smiled and said, ‘Vetal’... (or some such thing), which I did not seem to understand.

Anyway, as the teacher may continue, the point is that ‘straight road’ is a collocation, but ‘straight bus’ (sic) is not, in the same way as ‘Welcome speech’ is a collocation and ‘Welcome address’ (sic) is not. A standard dictionary can be of great help or online sources like BNC or ANC—in the absence of native speaker.

The moral of the story is that a grammar teacher, for his/her part, will do well to encourage learners to use

the dictionary (in the grammar classroom and at home) as often as possible. Otherwise, 'Vetals' and their avatars might take over and do extensive and irreparable damage to learners through the media, which an IEGC or an ELTAI may not possibly be able to undo.

## 11. Teacher as the Cause of Cognitive Dissonance

Sometimes a grammar teacher may unwittingly cause cognitive dissonance. S/he may teach a grammar rule and then violate it- blissfully unaware. There cannot possibly be a greater harm a teacher can do/cause to learners than thus undo the effects of his/her own (grammar) lesson.

For instance, suppose that a teacher has just finished giving a lesson on inversion in Wh-questions with some examples:

Why are you excited?  
 Why is a bluebottle so-called?  
 Why was your kitten angry with you?  
 Etc.

But soon after, while marking attendance, s/he yells at a student: "Why you were absent yesterday?" In such a context, the students are sure to develop cognitive dissonance. They may perhaps conclude that when you are emotional, grammar doesn't matter. Or worse, they may think that grammar is just for examination, not for communication. So, what is the moral of this story?!

### Humour pays, as always 😊

Humour, as the discussion so far suggests, can spread cheer in a classroom as in life. There is always great scope for it in a grammar class. And it is free! So, a teacher may, for instance, ask puzzling questions like this:

Do you know that "verb" is a noun?

How can you look up words in a dictionary if you can't spell them?

Sometimes s/he may ask the learners to correct the mistakes or explain the humour as in the following examples:

Point out the rule violated in each case.

\* Verbs has to agree with their subjects.

\* And don't start a sentence with a conjunction.

\* Don't use no double negatives.

\* Contractions aren't always necessary and shouldn't be used to excess so don't.

\* Use words correctly, irregardless of how others use them.

\* No sentence fragments!

Point out the oddity in the jokes:

Pilot's note: Left inside main tyre almost needs replacement. Engineer's reply: Almost replaced left inside main tyre.

Pilot's note: Something loose in cockpit. Engineer's reply: Something tightened in cockpit.

At a zoo: Please do not feed the animals. If you have any suitable food, give it to the guard on duty (sic).

## 12. Integrative Approach: Grammar and Literature

Grammar can be helpful in understanding Literature and vice versa. Let us take, for example, the title of Browning's famous poem "A Grammarian's Funeral," which is the title of this paper too. The word "Funeral" refers of course to the funeral ceremony for the dead grammarian and, more significantly, to the grammarian's business, which nobody else could deal with. Thus, there is rich meaning in the title, which a grammar teacher can easily help learners to discover and enjoy.

For another example, here is a phrase from Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustom*, "...the mighty Rustom's son.." Now, the question is this: Is Rustom mighty or his brave son (Sohrab) or both? It is probably both. The adjective 'mighty' can qualify both the nouns in this case.

## 13. Limitations

Before I wind up, I must admit the limitations of this paper. Grammar is a vast area and not much could be discussed in a journal article, with the result that the discussion may look severely limited and sketchy. Remedial grammar, for example, is glaring omission. The suggestions, though mostly underwritten by experience, can neither be prescriptive nor exhaustive. However, in places the tone of presentation may be prescriptive, which is of course an occupational hazard! The discussion in places may give readers the impression that grammar is almost all. But grammar without fluency is unimaginable. And fluency of course lies well beyond the reach and range of grammar. Perhaps English across the curriculum and or outside the classroom may help.

## 14. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate the following points:

- Grammar is a solution, not a problem. If it still looks like a problem, my presentation is to blame!



- It is almost imperative to make the *why* of grammar explicit, which is also one way of motivating the learners.
- Humour can also be another motivating factor in a grammar classroom.
- The sole purpose of pedagogical grammar teaching is to promote grammatical competency.
- Many of the measures discussed in the paper must be familiar to the readers. But But what we do with what we know is that counts.
- Action Research will be a solution to many of the problems of grammar pedagogy, but that would call for another paper.

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