

# Back to Basics: Emphasising Grammar in the ESL Classroom

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The information era is here and advances in technology have dramatically improved the way in which we can communicate electronically. Worldwide communication is now made possible with the explosion of the Internet. Given this scenario, the ability to communicate concisely and accurately has become even more crucial.

In the last 10-15 years, many language educationists have expressed concern over the declining mastery level of the English Language among undergraduates at our local universities. Time and again, we hear of graduates failing to secure jobs due to their weak communication skills and poor command of English. Many job advertisements usually have at least one of the following as part of their requirements:

- able to write and speak English fluently
- able to make effective presentations
- able to prepare/write reports
- able to communicate well

Indeed, we have great cause to worry as the advent of globalization requires our workforce to not only have the technical knowledge but also the much needed skill to communicate in the English Language—the lingua franca of business.

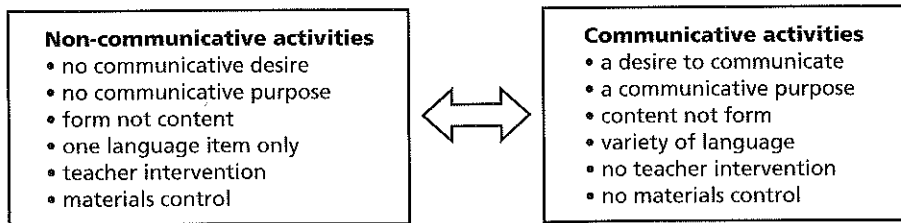
## Approaches and Methods

This paper would not be complete without touching on the various approaches and methods to language learning and teaching. As is well-known, the audio-lingual methodology, which owed its existence to the Behaviorist models of learning, reached its period of widespread use in the 1960s. There was heavy dependence on drills to form good learning habits; substitution is built into drills and learners play a reactive role by responding to stimuli. Chomsky (1966, cited in Richards & Rodgers, 1986), however, felt that much of human language use is not imitated behavior – sentences are not learned via imitation and repetition. Chomsky contended that sentences are generated from the learner's underlying competence. Thus the audio-lingual method which de-contextualised language and carried little communicative function came under severe attack.

There was a need to focus on communicative proficiency as opposed to the mere mastery of structures. In the 1970s, the efforts of the Council of Europe, and the writings of Wilkins, Widdowson, Candlin, Brumfit, Johnson and other applied linguists—which were based on the communicative approach to language teaching and rapid acceptance by British language teaching specialists and governments—gave prominence to the Communicative Approach/Communicative Language Teaching (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). With this method students are given lots of opportunity to use the language and typical activities center around real communication – accuracy is not as important as the

ability to perform the communicative task. The focus is on the content of what is written or said by the learner, rather than on a particular language form. As seen in Figure 1, Harmer (2001) succinctly illustrates the marked contrast between communicative activities and non-communicative activities. An activity in which learners have to go around asking questions with a communicative purpose with some language restriction would be nearer the right-hand end of the continuum, whereas a game which requires the use of only one language structure will come nearer the non-communicative end.

Figure 1: The communication continuum, Source: Harmer (2001)



In the 1970s and 1980s, a few other methods (commonly regarded as humanistic approaches) made a considerable impact on language teaching in the ESL classroom. Total Physical Response, developed by James Asher, involves gamelike movements and physical actions, thus creating a stress-free environment. Another humanistic approach is Community Language Learning, developed by Curran, wherein the teacher takes on the role of a counselor or a knower, and the student the role of a client. One of the most significant features of another humanistic approach, The Silent Way, is the behavior of the teacher who should remain silent as much as possible while the student is encouraged to produce as much language as possible. The use of color charts and cuisenaire rods was based on Caleb Gattegno's experience as an educational designer of reading and mathematics programs. Georgio Lozanov, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of physical surroundings and the atmosphere of the classroom, in Suggestopaedia: When students have confidence and feel relaxed, their affective filter is lowered and learning is enhanced.

In a nutshell, there have been radical changes in the approaches to the teaching of English as a second language. Indeed, with so many methods and approaches available, teachers often find it difficult to choose one that is right for their students.

### **What writing skills are undergraduates required to learn?**

I shall now turn to the skills that a typical undergraduate at a Malaysian university needs to acquire before he steps into the working world. Based on my experience in teaching writing courses, Malaysian undergraduates generally have to go through courses which will require them to learn how to write, inter alia, formal as well as informal reports, minutes of meetings, sales letters, letters of complaint, letters of adjustment, or letters of application for jobs and resumes. The ability to pen such documents is critical, as these students someday will venture into the workforce. But are our undergraduates ready? Based on my experience and those of my colleagues at various universities in Malaysia, many undergraduates are unable to compose simple sentences, let alone write sophisticated letters or reports.

I would now like to provide you some samples of undergraduates' writing quality, which will not surprise those who have worked with today's college and university students and graduates.

- Thank you for your carpets in delivering on 3 July. However three of the carpets in ten had damaged.
- We will prefer to have a replacement of those damaged carpets by held in them in our warehouse until we receive your instructions....  
/samples of Letter of Complaint  
[1st year student, local university]
- Restaurant environment is not satisfied.
- The paths are too narrow for people to pass. It block person if one walk in and another one person walk out.
- Almost 20% of the respondents were complaint about the poor management of the house keeping department. These respondents complaint about the lack of response to their required. When they make a phone-call service to clean their room, the house keeping staff was no responded.  
2<sup>nd</sup> year student (Business)
- These three scientists started to involve in rocketry.
- He then kept thinking about the problems about space vehicle design and inspired by the novels of Jules Verne.  
1<sup>st</sup> year student ( Science Faculty)

In a survey conducted recently to identify Malay students' areas of difficulty in terms of linguistic ability in writing academic essays, and capability in writing according to the constituents of the essays (in this case economics), it was found that grammar posed the greatest difficulty—and this disturbed and distracted the lecturer's understanding of the essays. In this survey, the lecturer revealed that his concern was economics, not the English language, but he said that it would be better if the students possessed a good mastery of writing skills so that they could discuss, explain and argue their points of discussion in their essays more effectively.

What about those who have graduated and started working? It is fair to say that the standard is not very much different. Take a look at the following examples:

- Refreshment will provide by eCCo.
- There are a prizes for the winners.
- A two learning hours will be given as a result of the above participation.  
[a Malaysian company]
- Mr X shall be provided drawing to Mr Y for request quotation from third party for comparison prices. The price and rate is yet to be confirmed.  
[Malaysian company with activities in India]

The English language proficiency level of many undergraduates today is very weak because the foundation has not been laid firmly. There seems to be insufficient emphasis on the rules of language usage and grammar. A frighteningly large number of our students are unable to string proper and correct sentences together, despite having studied the English language for thirteen years prior to entering universities! This is alarming. In fact, as far back as 1994, Awang Had Salleh lamented the fact that "the level of mastery of English among Malaysians is seen as falling below expectations." Even at that time, he felt strongly that "if the present state of affairs persists, we will be lagging behind... and our products will become less competitive in the world market" (Salleh, A. H. 1994). How then can our graduates compete at the international level? Do we just want to have graduates who can say a mere "Good morning" and "Thank you" when they attend international conferences?

What then is the solution? There are of course many measures that can be taken, but one of the main weapons available, I believe, is to place more emphasis on the teaching of English grammar—and this must begin in the primary school ESL classroom. In fact, many people employed in American corporations enroll in evening courses to acquire the rules of the English language that seemed insignificant to them before they joined the workforce (Ellison and McCormick, 2003). Indeed, the need to master the simple basics of English is recognized all around the world.

### **The Place of Grammar in the Malaysian ESL classroom**

There are, needless to say, numerous issues surrounding the teaching of grammar, and Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988) contend that the most controversial is whether to teach it at all. Swan and Walter (1997) ask "How important is grammar?" and respond this way:

Grammar is not the most important thing in the world, but if you make a lot of mistakes you may be more difficult to understand, and some people may look down on you or not take you seriously.

This paper seeks to underscore the importance of the knowledge of grammatical rules in the mastery of the English language. It is very difficult to use words unless one knows how they should be put together. In fact, even in the ambit of discourse analysis, Gee (1999) points out that it is often useful to ask specific questions about the grammar of a text as a way to generate ideas about how meanings are built in the text. Further, grammar is a tool that speakers and writers utilize to craft their sentences or texts for effective communication.

According to Harmer (2001), the communicative approach has sometimes been seen as having "eroded the explicit teaching of grammar with a consequent loss among students in accuracy in the pursuit of fluency." Having made the point that the Malaysian ESL teacher should focus on laying the foundation, it should be pointed out that the learning of grammar is one of the means of acquiring a thorough mastery of the language, but is not an end in itself. We should not feel guilty about focusing on virtually meaningless manipulations of language in the early stages because, in our quest, we will ultimately progress to incorporating activities or tasks that use the grammatical structures in meaningful ways. Hence, it is important to strike a balance – we need to ensure that students get the forms right, while practicing the language is such a way as to convey meanings in a real-world context.

### **Conclusion**

There is of course a plethora of measures that ESL teachers in Malaysian classrooms need to adopt in order to raise the proficiency level among of learners. In fact, we know that many factors—motivation, the learning environment, policies undertaken by the Government—can play a significant role in raising the standard of English in the country. Having said that, I firmly believe that by laying a strong foundation in the rules of the English Language, our students will gain more confidence and should be able to write and speak more effectively.

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