

English Language – Challenges in Teaching Grammar

By

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The field of teaching English language has shifted through various modes and methods, in search of one that would serve best for all learners's. However, experiments from across different geographical contexts have shown that variables such as local situation, strategies adopted by teachers and learners, learning needs and style and many other variables have a tremendous impact on the teaching practices. Moreover, no particular method can guide us or lead us in analyzing the diverse aspects of language teaching – learning: such as designing of curriculum, specifying the syllabus, preparation of requisite materials, strategies of instructions, evaluation and techniques etc.

But there is one aspect which almost all English language teachers agree upon. When it comes to teaching English to any age group of learners, we know that there is no set formula for success in the classroom. It is upto the teacher to find out which strategy works best for him/her, their students and their goals. Throwing light on different aspects of English language like vocabulary, grammar and its functions, reading, listening, speaking and writing; this chapter focuses on teaching grammar and the various challenges which are faced during grammar teaching and learning.

English grammar learning and understanding is difficult for maximum number of learners. The most probable reason might be that, English is a language developed from numerous other languages. Moreover, the grammar rules are also complex, and almost all the rules have exceptions. Few have no particular logic, but have to be learnt, understood and applied. The most general factors influencing the perception of grammar is the fundamental difference between the mother tongue or the first language and English, though difficulties do exist with native speakers too.

The mother tongue or the first language is like an instinct which is triggered by birth and developed with experience of being exposed to it. A person cannot decide what his/her first language should be because it comes to him/her as an inheritance and legacy. The acquiring and learning process of the first language is very rapid. It comes into possession like a dynamic and abstract property, and moreover by the age of 6 years from birth one can acquire 100% efficiency in learning and understanding mother tongue. Learning mother tongue rarely needs any teaching or instruction.

Further, children and young adults having proficiency in their 1st language /mother tongue are most capable of learning any other language. Looking out from the point of view of learner's, their perception does not usually make much difference in learning the mother tongue but it makes a huge difference in the learning process of second language, contextually English. English language learners with introvert personality usually make slow progress when compared to learners having extrovert personality. Discussing specifically and in detail about learning English language the grammar part becomes more difficult to learn than other aspects of English.

Why is grammar so difficult to learn? Let us discuss. There are certain important and basic grammatical rules which need to be learnt for practising good communication skills in English Language. All the aspects of English communication i.e. Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening require effective knowledge of grammar. At advanced educational stages, English writing skills become more complicated which could develop the probability of facing more grammatical errors specially when communicating through letters, paragraphs, articles, reports and essays. Considering the simple definition of grammar it is a set of rules, or rather structural rules which include the structure and arrangement of words, sentences, phrases, clauses, idioms and whole texts. Let us consider the set of rules in detail.

1. The first word of every sentence should start with a capital letter.

2. The ending of every sentence should be with a full stop or a question mark or an exclamation mark.
3. Mandatory parts of sentence include a subject, verb and object.
4. The subject and verb should be interrelated in the sentence.
5. Either – or (or) neither – nor, should be used depending on the sentence, while using singular nouns.
6. Including the beginning of a sentence, proper nouns should be capitalized anywhere in the sentences.
7. Common nouns need to be capitalized only at the beginning of the sentences.
8. It should be noted that, the words its – it “a” s, and you’re – your are not the same.
10. The use of indefinite articles for countable nouns and definite articles with ‘specific countable and all uncountable nouns should be noted.
11. Grammar rule for use of article also tells us that “a” should be used for consonant sounds and “an” for vowel sounds.
12. To show possessions we should use apostrophes.
13. Passive voice is less preferred than active voice in English language.

It is a general observation that, the above mentioned set of rules and the general English grammar is known to most of the English language learners. Why is then the fear about grammar? Why is it that most of the learners go wrong grammatically? Why is it that most of the English language learners lose confidence while communicating in English? The answer to all the questions above is not about the rules and implication of these and other rules; but the fear is more about the exceptions to these rules. Exceptions are very difficult to remember. Added to that, are the psychological obstacles that are related to the human psyche’s misconceptions of learning the foreign language. Further there are a group of administrative, systemic and educational obstacles that include an imbalance in the programmes of preparing the English Language Teacher, the methods used in teaching the English Language, lack of co-operation and partnership. Also, there is a lack of expertise and scientific centers specialised in teaching the English Language at the local, regional and global levels.

English language learners often get become frustrated because no rule of English grammar or vocabulary is straight forward. Exceptions are always there. What are these exceptions and how do they become a major hindrance in effective learning of English? More often than not, these exceptions lead to many common mistakes observed in people speaking or writing English. Let us throw light on this aspect.

Category I : Tense – Verb Exceptions

a) Addition of Auxillary verbs

Generally, the present tense is used to talk about events that happen regularly.

Ex 1: I practice English reading every-day.

Ex 2: I eat lunch now.

The sentence in 1st example is correct but the 2nd sentence is wrong. The correct sentence is “ I am eating lunch now”. So the observation here is using present tense instead of present progressive is one of the difficult and confusing part of grammar learning. Further adding more emphasis to the statement, by putting an auxillary verb/helping verb adds to more confusion as seen in the following example. Ex: I do practice English reading everyday!

Such sentences, having the helping verb end with an exclamation; further demonstrate your fervent desire to learn English. Another common mistake which is done by learners, is to add the auxiliary to the conjugated form of the main verb as seen in the following example.

Ex : She does practices English reading everyday.

This sentence is wrong, because the 's' need not be included with the word practice.

b) Use of simple present tense

Simple present tense is used to talk about general truths and habits. Following examples are stated for reference.

Ex 1 : He is a boy.

Ex 2 : They learn new spellings everyday.

Ex 3 : Science teachers work hard.

But, the exception to this rule is when we are talking about future events that have been scheduled. Few examples to state this exception are mentioned henceforth.

Ex 1 : Classes start fall semester.

Ex 2 : We have spelling and grammar quizzes next Friday.

Ex 3 : Non-native speakers sit for IELTS every October.

In the above examples, the verb is in present tense, but the action happen's in future.

Category 2 : Exceptions of Adverbs and Adjectives

a) The 'ly' ending adverbs:-

If we look into the adverbs which are formed by adding a suffix 'ly' to some base words like gla, slow, foolish, nice etc, they become adverbs of manner. On a similar note if the same word is used s an adjective, most of the English grammar learners become confused and make mistakes. There are two categories of such words.

Category 1:

Root words which upon addition of 'ly' act as both as adjective and adverb without any change. Examples of such words can be; coward – cowardly, hour – hourly, week –weekly, year – yearly etc. Few examples of usage are cited below.

- Anita has arrived by an early flight.(adj)
- Suresh has come early.(adverb)
- There is an hourly change of lectures.(adj)
- The lectures change hourly.(adverb)
- The Hindu is a daily newspaper.(adj)
- The Hindu is published daily.(adverb)

Consider the averbs formed by adding 'ly' to an adjective – gladly, slowly, foolishly, nicely etc. These adverbs are usually adverbs of manner. But if an adjective itself ends with 'ly', we cannot normally change it into adverb. Most of the English grammar learners become confused at this juncture and make mistakes. Such words belong to two categories.

1. Words which act both as adjectives and adverbs, without any change – cowardly, daily, early, fortnightly, hourly, surely, nightly, only, weekly, yearly etc.

Examples are stated here:

- She has arrived by an early flight (adj)
- She has come Early.(adverb)
- There is an hourly change of classes(adj.)
- The classes change hourly.(adverb)
- The Statesman is a daily newspaper.(adj.)
- The Statesman is published daily.(adverb)

Category 2

Words which upon the addition of 'ly' to the root word are used only as adjective. For example – brother on addition of 'ly' becomes brotherly, and father, mother, god, good, home, love, woman and many other words also change accordingly. But these words are not used as adverbs, they are always used as adjective. Most of the English language learners are in a confused state here again, and the adjectives are used in an inappropriate manner. Few examples of usage are cited below:

- Ashutosh is a friendly boss.(adj)
- Jaya received us in a friendly manner(adverb)

Correct use of adjectives and Adverbs:-

The learner often commits a mistake in using adjective and adverb. When used, there are chances of the change of meaning. Such errors need to be avoided.

Let us consider few more examples:

- The stars became bright.(not brightly)
- This year good mangoes are rare.(not rarely)
- Aakash got angry.(not angrily)
- The coffee got bitter.(not bitterly)
- The offer is difficult though it appears simple.(not simply)

An important point to be pondered at this juncture is, what exactly is required in all the examples? Is it an adverb or an adjective or any other thing? The correct answer would be, the verbs 'become', 'seem' or any other related verb need an adjective, but not an adverb to complete the sentence and aptly convey the meaning. Verb in any case need not be modified, nor is there any need to add an adverb. But, again there is a little confusion for the learner. If the verbs like 'turn', 'grow' and 'appear' are used to convey a different meaning, they should be followed by an adverb. The rules and the exceptions to these rules often create ambiguity for learners of English language.

Few examples cited below are self-explanatory.

- The car suddenly appeared on the road.(not sudden)
- These shrubs have grown very quickly.(not quick)
- Radha came and left unexpectedly.(not unexpected)

In the above examples we find that the verbs 'appear', 'come to sight' or 'made visible'; verb 'grow' means increase in size and dimensions. Therefore we need to here an adverb not an adjective.

Category 3:-

In this category we shall look into the use of an adjective but not an adverb after the verbs like 'feel', 'sound', 'taste', 'smell', which explain and discuss about a quality experienced by one of the physical senses. Let us understand through few examples cited below.

- This paper feels smooth and soft.(not smoothly and softly)
- These pipes sound nice(not nicely)
- This apple tastes sour(not sourly)
- That Chrysanthemum smells sweet.(not sweetly)

While discussing above deviations of English grammar rules, we also need to understand and focus on the common errors in sentence making. The following issues should be taken care of to have a command over all the four skills of mastering of language ie. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Only when the exception rules of grammar are understood, grammar would probably be more simple and easy for all learners. For quick understanding few examples of types of wrong sentences along with corrections are given henceforth.

a) Dangling modifier:-

Dangling modifier is understood as a word or a phrase, that tries to modify something which is not clearly stated in the sentence.

Example – Wrong

“Not having worked hard enough, the expedition failed’. The phrase ‘not having worked hard enough’ is not giving us a clear idea about who really did not work hard enough? If we look at the sentence, it would actually mean that the expedition did not work hard, which doesn’t make any sense. The phrase “Not having worked hard enough” is a dangling modifier, because it is left hanging freely/dangling, not actually attached to some missing subject which it should actually modify. Care should be taken in actually placing the modifier correctly, by introducing the missing word in the sentence that the dangling modifier refers to.

Corrected sentence:-

“Since she did not work hard the expedition failed” OR

“The expedition failed because they did not work hard enough” OR

“Not having worked hard enough Atul did not succeed in the expedition”

b) Indistinct reference and use of This/That/Which:-

The use of pronouns ‘this’, ‘that’, or ‘which’ if used at correct position refer to extreme clarity of the sentence. But if the same pronoun is used vaguely, it leads to a huge confusion and ambiguity, giving an incorrect meaning of the sentence to the learner.

Example – Wrong

“Harika wants to start immediately and to make her 1st mega sale before the end of the year. As a result of this, Harika will probably become successful soon.”

The pronoun ‘this’ is left unexplained and its existence creates a major difficulty of understanding the meaning to the learner.

Corrected sentence:-

Harika wants to start immediately and to make her first mega sale before the end of the year. As a result of this attitude, she will probably become a successful entrepreneur. So, we need to understand from the above example that the pronoun ‘this’ must not refer to a general cause, reason, sentence or an idea, rather it must refer to the specific word.

c) Absence of parallel construction:-

When a learner wishes to exemplify his/her points, recommend few things some parallel construction is observed. But, again the meaning is not conveyed correctly due to lack of parallel construction. This can be understood with the following example.

Sentence :Wrong

The gentleman like meeting and talk to people.

Corrected sentence:-

The gentleman liked to meet and talk to people. OR

The gentleman liked meeting and talking to people.

As observed in the above example “and” which is seen in wrong example joins one gerund and one infinitive constructions; where as “and” in correct sentence joins parallel gerund constructions which express ideas of equal importance.

d) Needless shift of verb and tense

When expressing ideas, views, opinions, judgements the verb and tense of a sentence need to be consistent with each other. Sometimes the verb and tense are shifted needlessly as found in the following example.

Example : Wromg

“Ravi usually makes a realistic and responsible decisions although he frequently changed his mind”. (shift from present tense in main clause to pass tense in sub-ordinate clause.

Correct example:-

“Ravi usually makes responsible and realistic decisions although he frequently changes his mind.

e) Lack of subje verb agreement.

Depending on the case of the subject in a sentence ie.on whether its subject is in first, second or third person the verb must agree with the subject. Few examples are presented henceforth for reference.

Examples – wrong.

The cost of the new products were reasoanble.

There is a girl and a boy waiting to see me.

Everyone on the top three shop floors work for one company.

Bose speak Urdu fluently.

Correct examples.

The cost of the new products was reasonable.

There are a girl and a boy waiting to see me.

Everyone on the top three shop floors work for the company.

Bose speaks Urdu fluently.

f) Lack of noun pronoun agreement.

A pronoun must agree with its antecedent i.e. the noun which it refers to or which it replaces in terms of both number and gender. A singular antecedent requires a singular pronoun, whereas a plural antecedent requires a plural pronoun. Masculine and feminine antecedents require masculine and feminine pronouns respectively. Following examples will give a understanding of the above statement.

Example : Wrong

Shabnam does not usually make those kind of errors.

Neither the manager nor his favourite employee could do their work alone.

Examples : Correct

Shabnam does not usually make these kind of errors.

Neither the manager nor his favourite employees could do his work alone.

Though there are difficulties, ambiguities and confusion in usage of grammar correctly, there are certain strategies which can lead to minimising the errors and mistakes. Easy way of teaching grammar can be developed by the teachers, which can include more of activities than just rote teaching and learning. Use of digital platforms, quiz and discussions and interactive teaching learning classroom sessions can probably reduce the fear about English grammar and help the learner become more confident and efficient. Moreover, the teachers need to provide authentic materials in the teaching-learning activities because they are useful and helpful for the students to relate their own learning experiences to the language used by the native speaker of English.

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