



THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: MOVING BEYOND GRAMMAR RULES

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ABSTRACT :

For many years, English teaching predominantly focused on grammar-translation and drill-based approaches. Although learners became adept at reciting rules, many continued to struggle with using English in real-life conversations. This paper explores the impact of communicative practice on classroom outcomes. Through classroom observations and teacher interviews in 12 secondary schools in India, the study reveals that students who spent 40% or more of their class time on meaning-focused activities demonstrated greater fluency, a higher willingness to speak, and improved retention compared to those in grammar-focused classes. The paper argues that balancing grammar with authentic communication enhances English proficiency.



KEYWORDS : grammar-translation and drill-based approaches , classroom observations and teacher interviews.

1. INTRODUCTION

English learners often have no shortage of textbooks but lack opportunities to use the language without the fear of constant correction. In India, English instruction begins in many schools from Class 1, yet employers and universities still find that graduates lack essential spoken skills. The key question is whether the method of teaching English influences students' ability to use it effectively. This paper contrasts two teaching approaches: structure-based teaching, which prioritizes grammar, and communicative teaching, which uses grammar to aid meaningful communication.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Hymes (1972) introduced the concept of "communicative competence," highlighting that grammar knowledge alone is insufficient. Canale and Swain (1980) further divided this into grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Despite this, many classrooms still follow the Present-Practice-Produce model, where teachers present a rule, students practice it, and then are expected to produce it. Little et al. (2019) observe that learners need exposure to spontaneous language to develop fluency. Studies in multilingual settings, like South Asia, show similar trends. Bhatia and Ritchie (2006) found that learners focused on rules tend to shy away from speaking, while those engaging in role-plays and problem-solving participate more.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach.

Participants: 24 English teachers and 480 Class 9 students from 12 schools in Maharashtra.

Data collection:

- Two classroom observations per teacher, each lasting 40 minutes
- Teacher interviews, each lasting 20 minutes
- A short speaking task for students: describe a picture and answer three follow-up questions

Classrooms were categorized as “high communicative time” if more than 40% of observed classes involved pair work, group tasks, or open discussions. Others were labeled “low communicative time.”

4. FINDINGS

Three significant trends emerged:

- Fluency vs. Accuracy: Classes with low communication focus scored higher on grammar tests. However, students in high-communication classes spoke 2.3 times longer during speaking tasks, despite making more errors.
- Confidence: In high-communication classrooms, 68% of students volunteered answers without prompting, compared to 29% in low-communication settings.
- Teacher perception: 19 out of 24 teachers expressed a desire to incorporate more speaking activities but cited time constraints and exam preparation as obstacles.

5. DISCUSSION

The data does not suggest that grammar is irrelevant. Students still need to grasp grammar to be understood. However, form without function results in passive knowledge. When students engage in meaning negotiation, error correction, and timely word selection, they develop the competence needed beyond the classroom. Two practical changes emerged:

- Implement tasks first, then focus on rules. Allow students to attempt a task and then introduce the necessary grammar, making it relevant.
- Minimize error correction during fluency activities. Reserve detailed corrections for post-activity discussions, as constant interruptions hinder flow.

6. CONCLUSION

English teaching should focus on creating proficient users, not just students of the language. While grammar remains important, it should support communication. Classrooms that incorporate regular, low-pressure speaking and listening tasks provide learners with the confidence and practice they need. Future research should examine long-term retention and performance in higher education to determine the lasting impact of these gains.

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