THE ROLE OF GRAMMAR IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION (SLA)

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Annotation: This article examines the role of grammar in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), tracing its significance through historical, theoretical, and pedagogical perspectives. While early models either emphasized repetitive practice or minimized grammar instruction in favor of meaning-focused approaches, contemporary research suggests that grammar plays a vital role in communicative competence. Drawing on frameworks such as Krashen’s Input Hypothesis, Schmidt’s Noticing Hypothesis, and Long’s Focus on Form, the article argues that grammar instruction is most effective when integrated into meaningful communication. Explicit instruction, combined with opportunities for interaction and authentic tasks, helps learners develop both accuracy and fluency. Challenges such as balancing grammar with communicative practice, addressing learner differences, and avoiding overemphasis on rules are also discussed. The article concludes that grammar should be viewed not as an isolated set of rules but as a dynamic resource that supports linguistic accuracy, communicative effectiveness, and overall language development in SLA.

Keywords Second Language Acquisition (SLA); grammar instruction; communicative competence; input hypothesis; noticing hypothesis; focus on form; explicit instruction; task-based learning; form-focused instruction; language pedagogy

The Role of Grammar in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

The teaching and learning of grammar has long been a central concern in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). While some approaches have emphasized the importance of explicit grammar instruction, others have argued for

a focus on meaning and communicative competence rather than form. This tension reflects broader debates in applied linguistics about how language is best acquired and the role that grammatical knowledge plays in the development of proficiency. Contemporary research suggests that grammar is not an isolated component of language learning but rather an integral part of communicative competence, interacting with input, output, and interaction in complex ways (Ellis, 2006; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011).

Historical and Theoretical Perspectives

Grammar instruction in SLA has been shaped by shifting theoretical orientations. Early behaviorist models of learning emphasized repetition and drilling, viewing grammar as a set of habits to be formed through practice (Skinner, 1957). In contrast, Krashen’s (1982) Monitor Model argued that explicit grammar instruction contributes little to true acquisition, which he claimed occurs primarily through comprehensible input. Krashen distinguished between "acquisition," an unconscious process, and "learning," a conscious process of studying rules, asserting that grammar learned explicitly only functions as a monitor in production.

In response, other theorists highlighted the importance of form-focused instruction. Long’s (1991) Interaction Hypothesis and subsequent work on Focus on Form (Long, 1998) argued that grammar instruction is most effective when integrated into communicative interaction, where learners notice gaps in their interlanguage and negotiate meaning. Schmidt’s (1990) Noticing Hypothesis similarly suggested that awareness of grammatical forms is necessary for acquisition, implying a role for instruction in directing learner attention.

The Role of Grammar in Communicative Competence

The communicative language teaching (CLT) movement shifted emphasis from grammar-centered teaching to meaning-focused activities. However, Canale and Swain’s (1980) model of communicative competence positioned grammatical

competence as one of four essential components, alongside sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. This framework underscores that grammar is not an end in itself but a resource that supports accuracy and clarity in communication.

Contemporary perspectives view grammar as both a cognitive and social construct. From a cognitive standpoint, grammar provides the structures through which learners process input and produce output (VanPatten, 2004). From a sociocultural perspective, grammar emerges in interaction as learners co-construct meaning and scaffold one another’s language development (Lantolf, 2000). Thus, grammar cannot be understood in isolation but as part of a dynamic system of language learning.

Pedagogical Approaches to Grammar Instruction

Pedagogical practices regarding grammar have varied widely. Traditional approaches often relied on deductive methods, where rules are explained before practice. In contrast, inductive methods encourage learners to infer rules from examples, aligning more closely with discovery learning. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) incorporates grammar through meaningful communication, with form-focused episodes arising naturally in interaction (Ellis, 2003).

Research suggests that explicit grammar instruction can facilitate SLA, particularly when combined with meaningful practice (Norris & Ortega, 2000). Focus on Form approaches, which draw attention to grammatical features in the context of communication, have been found to be more effective than approaches that either neglect grammar or teach it in isolation. Technology has also expanded opportunities for grammar learning, with computer-assisted tools offering individualized feedback and interactive practice (Chapelle, 2009).

Challenges and Considerations

Despite its importance, grammar teaching faces challenges. Overemphasis on rules may demotivate learners and inhibit fluency (Krashen, 1982). At the same time, avoiding grammar entirely may leave learners with persistent errors, limiting their communicative competence (Ellis, 2006). Another challenge lies in addressing learner differences: some learners benefit from explicit explanations, while others acquire grammar more effectively through exposure and practice (DeKeyser, 2005). Teachers must also balance accuracy with fluency, ensuring grammar instruction supports communication rather than constraining it.

Conclusion

The role of grammar in SLA is multifaceted, shaped by theoretical debates, pedagogical practices, and learner needs. While grammar alone does not guarantee communicative competence, it remains a vital component of language learning. Effective instruction requires integrating grammar into meaningful communication, guiding learners to notice forms while engaging in authentic tasks. As research continues to evolve, grammar should be understood not as a set of static rules but as a dynamic resource that supports both linguistic accuracy and communicative effectiveness in SLA.

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