



# International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation.

## How Should Grammar Be Viewed in L2 Communicative Language Teaching?

**Vo Thi Anh Dao**

University of Finance-Marketing, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

\* Corresponding Author: **Vo Thi Anh Dao**

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### Article Info

**ISSN (online):** 2582-7138

**Volume:** 05

**Issue:** 05

**September-October 2024**

**Received:** 02-07-2024

**Accepted:** 04-08-2024

**Page No:** 09-13

### Abstract

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) involves learners in real-life communication to enhance their communicative skills. Learning becomes more effective, and students are more engaged when teachers create opportunities that align with their needs. This paper aims to focus on the role of grammar and grammar instruction in second language teaching over the past several decades, presented chronologically. It examines the current state of second language teaching, emphasizing the concept of grammar in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and highlights the distinctions between CLT and other approaches regarding grammar. It also explores future trends in language education. Finally, it summarizes overall trends in grammar teaching and discusses the prospects of English language instruction in the near future in the conclusion.

**Keywords:** communicative language teaching, grammar, language teaching

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### 1. Introduction

The history of language teaching methodology has seen shifts in second language teaching approaches over the years due to differing viewpoints and beliefs of linguists and educators aiming to find the best ways for L2 learners to communicate in the target language (Larsen-Freeman, 2015) <sup>[10]</sup>. Language teaching is dynamic, with no fixed methods (Larsen-Freeman, 2015) <sup>[10]</sup>. Historically, the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) was used to help students understand target language literature and became the foundation for language teaching globally. However, as language learning goals evolved to focus on the target language, a trend toward more inductive and productive learning emerged.

Among the methods opposing GTM, the Audio-Lingual Method was dominant. This method, influenced by behaviorism, viewed language as a set of patterns to be learned through habit formation (Ward, 2003, p. 120) <sup>[20]</sup>. Although it prioritized spoken language, there was still a focus on form and structure. When Noam Chomsky challenged the idea that language was acquired through habit formation, the field experienced methodological diversity in the 1970s and early 1980s, with innovative methods such as the Silent Way and Community Language Learning emerging.

To meet the goal that language learning should focus on practical use and international communication, a shift occurred from a linguistic structure-centered approach to a Communicative Approach in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) became dominant for over two decades (Cowan, 2008, p. 33) <sup>[3]</sup> and continues to lead language methodology. Given English's role in global communication, finding the most effective teaching methods remains a priority. The role of grammar has evolved but remains essential because it is considered key to understanding and using the language to communicate (Cowan, 2008, p. 3) <sup>[3]</sup>.

### 2. Historical background

#### Traditional grammar

The teaching of grammar is believed to have begun 4,000 years ago during the Classical Age (500 BC to 300 AD). Initially, Greek was taught with a focus on form, distinguishing grammatical categories of nouns and verbs to paraphrase written texts (Fotos, p.654).

Centuries later, the formal study of Latin and Greek played a vital role in language teaching, particularly in the 16th and 17th centuries. At that time, learning a second language primarily involved grammar analysis and translation, dividing the target language into eight parts of speech: nouns, verbs, participles, articles, pronouns, prepositions, adverbs, and conjunctions. In other words, learning a language meant studying these categories in written texts and mastering translation rules (Hinkel & Fotos, 2002) <sup>[7]</sup>.

However, 18th-century grammarians turned their attention to English (Hinkel & Fotos, 2002) <sup>[7]</sup>, and other “modern” languages began to enter the European school curriculum, taught using the same categories and procedures as Latin. By the 19th century, this approach became the standard for learning foreign languages, with textbooks designed based on grammatical points. Each grammatical point was listed, rules were explained, and illustrated with sample sentences. This approach, known as the Grammar-Translation Method, dominated European and foreign language teaching for several decades. The goal was to read literature in the target language through translation, making it essential for students to master grammar rules and structures (Larsen-Freeman, 2015) <sup>[10]</sup>. Grammar was taught deductively and explicitly, with rules presented and practiced through translation exercises, prioritizing accuracy. Thus, traditional grammar held a significant position in language teaching and learning, playing a key role in acquiring literary skills in the target language during the Classical Method's heyday.

#### **From Structural view to Functional view**

However, the prescriptive rules of grammar made little sense when applied to modern language communication (Ward, 2003) <sup>[20]</sup>. This resulted in “contrived” and “artificial” sentences (Fotos, 2004, p.633) <sup>[14]</sup> like “The philosopher pulled the lower jaw of the hen.” With advancements in technology and transportation, and the increasing need for communication across diverse backgrounds, language teaching methods evolved beyond traditional approaches.

Consequently, methods prioritizing real-life use emerged, such as the Direct Method, Natural Method, and Conversational Method. The Direct Method was introduced to the United States as the Natural Approach in 1869 and is still considered effective for adult learners. In these approaches, grammar is presented inductively and practiced in communicative contexts (Fotos, 2004) <sup>[14]</sup>.

Another oral-based approach, grounded in linguistics and psychology, was developed by Charles Fries, who emphasized grammar as the starting point in language teaching. This approach focused on oral drilling of basic sentence patterns until mastery was achieved (Nagaraj, 1996) <sup>[13]</sup>. Known as the Structural-Oral-Situational method, it combined elements of the Direct Method, Oral Approach, and Audiolingual Method. Later, principles from Skinner's behaviorist view were incorporated (Larsen-Freeman, 2015) <sup>[10]</sup>.

The Oral-Situational Approach emerged in the UK in the 1920s, and the Audiolingual Approach was introduced to the US during World War II (Fotos, 2004) <sup>[14]</sup>. These methods viewed language as patterns to be learned through habits, prioritizing spoken language over written (Ward, 2003) <sup>[20]</sup>. The Audio-Lingual approach emphasized pattern practice to form habits, enabling communication through memorized dialogues (Lado, 1964) <sup>[9]</sup>.

Despite its importance, grammar was taught separately from

real-life contexts. Errors were minimized as the native language was seen as interfering with acquisition. In summary, grammar played a significant role, taught inductively through examples and drills rather than rule memorization, but lacked connection to practical language use.

As behaviorism and linguistic structuralism lost favor in the 1960s, cognitive code learning began to emerge. Cognitive theory suggested that for learning to occur, learners must understand what they are learning and have a conscious mental representation of it before practicing. Among the cognitivists, Noam Chomsky, with his transformational-generative grammar theory, rejected the structuralist focus on observable language patterns. He proposed a Language Acquisition Device or Universal Grammar containing principles governing all human languages. Chomsky viewed language as a generative process innately existing in the human brain, based on syntax, which consisted of surface structure (generative grammar) and deep structure (internal grammar) (Hinkel & Fotos, 2002) <sup>[7]</sup>.

Although a Universal Grammar approach was never fully developed, the influence of structural linguistics, with its focus on surface form, was largely overturned in 1957. Moreover, according to Celce-Murcia (as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2015) <sup>[10]</sup>, the Cognitive Approach was established with an emphasis on cognition. In this approach, learners were seen as more active, engaging in the learning process to discover grammar rules of the target language. Both deductive and inductive grammar were developed as interest grew in applying this method in language teaching in the early 1970s. However, no specific language teaching method was directly developed from the Cognitive Approach. Instead, a number of “innovative methods” emerged (Larsen-Freeman, 2015) <sup>[10]</sup>.

By the end of the structural view, grammar was perceived as more “internalized” and “generative,” rather than derived from sentence patterns, but it wasn't applied as an innovation in second language teaching. Consequently, the functional “bridge” between language use and linguistic form played a key role in the next phase of English Language Teaching (ELT) after 1970, focusing on communication.

### **3. Developments and the Current State of the Art**

#### **From Functional view to Interactional view**

The goal of most language teaching methods is to enable communication. However, the decline of the Grammar-Translation and Audio lingual methods showed that educators were not achieving this effectively. Chomsky's cognitive theory with transformational-generative grammar is sometimes referenced for organizing materials around a grammatical syllabus, allowing for meaningful practice and language use (Richards & Rogers, 2014) <sup>[15]</sup>.

Alternative methods like Total Physical Response and the Silent Way initially attracted interest but did not gain widespread acceptance. This led to the emergence of the Communicative Approach, seen as a new insight in second language teaching, appearing when global language teaching was ready for a paradigm shift (Richards & Rogers, 2014) <sup>[15]</sup>. This shift moved from form-based to meaning-based approaches and toward an eclectic approach from rigid methods (Nagaraj, 1996; Al Asmari, 2015) <sup>[13, 2]</sup>.

By the early 1970s, British linguist Halliday, working within systemic or functional linguistics, demonstrated language use patterns beyond the sentence level. In America, Hymes

proposed “communicative competence,” distinct from Chomsky’s linguistic competence. Widows identified “usage” and “use” to differentiate language as a formal system from its use in communicative events. In Europe, Wilkins’ functional-notional syllabuses outlined how learners could be taught language functions and notions, leading to discourse-based pedagogical grammar (Wesche & Skehan, 2005, p.209) [21]. These developments became the foundation of the Communicative Approach.

The goal of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is to develop Hymes’ communicative competence, which includes grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence, and to teach the four skills (Richards & Rogers, 2014) [15]. Language is seen as a system for expressing meaning. Communicative competence involves knowledge of forms, meanings, and functions (Larsen-Freeman, 2015) [10]. While fluency and focus on meaning sometimes overshadow grammatical accuracy, Savignon (1993) [17] asserted that attention to form is essential for communication. She emphasized that communication requires structure (grammar), shared assumptions about language, and cooperation in negotiating meaning.

In addition to CLT, there are two more approaches that prioritize communication: content-based instruction and task-based instruction. In these approaches, students “use English to learn it” rather than “learn to use English” (Howatt & Smith, 2014) [8]. This addresses some of CLT’s shortcomings.

Content-based instruction has been widely used since the 1980s in settings like ESP, EOP, and immersion programs. It is now commonly applied in university foreign language programs, business, and vocational courses in EFL contexts (Richards & Rogers, 2014) [15].

A task-based approach provides learners with a natural context for language use. While completing tasks, students have abundant opportunities for interaction. This interaction facilitates language acquisition as students engage in problem-solving and negotiation tasks. According to Prabhu (as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2015) [10], there are three types of tasks: (1) *Information-gap activities*: Involve exchanging information among participants to complete a task; (2) *Opinion activities*: Require students to express personal preferences, feelings, or attitudes; (3) *Reasoning-gap activities*: Require students to derive new information based on what they have been given.

Tasks can be designed by teachers to meet the needs of both students and educators. Zhao (2011) [22] concluded that task-based instruction could be seen as a more comprehensive version of CLT. Versions of task-based instruction with a clear focus on form may show continued progress in promoting accuracy, complexity, and fluency.

Learners are active participants engaging in social and cultural practices, making content-based instruction more progressive. It integrates language learning with other content, often academic subjects (Larsen-Freeman, 2015) [10]. This approach exposes learners to various inputs, enhancing their understanding of knowledge. It provides motivation for language learning, a naturalistic context including social and pragmatic dimensions, and opportunities for form-focused activities.

Content-based instruction uses integrated skills. Topic or theme-based courses form a good basis for this approach. Oral language responds to what students read and write. Grammar is seen as part of other skills and can be presented

through content-based instruction. Form is best taught within communicative activities, making content-based instruction attractive for its simultaneous content and language development and emphasis on academic language skills (Richards & Rogers, 2014) [15].

Another approach in this stream is Cooperative Language Learning. According to Richards and Rogers (2014) [15], it maximizes cooperative activities involving pairs and small groups. The goal is to teach lexical items, language structures, and communicative functions through interactive tasks. The interactionist hypothesis claims that second language learning occurs through conversational interaction. Discussion groups, group work, and pair work change the classroom pace and increase student participation. This approach focuses on social skills, teaching language for academic and social purposes.

### The current State of The Art

Nowadays, as English has grown beyond its roots in English-speaking countries to become an international language, there’s a rising demand for authentic English communication. However, we still know little about how speakers and writers actually use grammatical features, and systematic patterns of use in English remain to be pursued. The terms “spoken grammar” and “written grammar” in the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English offer new insights into authentic English usage, and it’s now recommended that spoken grammar be taught in English as a foreign language. When Vietnam adopted a “market-oriented economy” following the 1986 Reform, the role of foreign languages, especially English, in national development became more prominent (Do, 1999) [4]. Since then, English has rapidly developed in both schools and society to meet the demand of learners. It’s now a compulsory subject in secondary and high schools, and universities require foreign language proficiency, mainly in English, for graduation. Additionally, many universities require students of all majors to take English courses. Post-graduation education and faculty positions also require foreign language proficiency. There is a significant demand for English to communicate globally and access technological achievements.

However, despite English’s importance in this new social context, English language teaching in Vietnam has not yet met the demand for competent English speakers due to its low quality. Although new teacher training programs, supported by the British Council and other educational organizations, focus on CLT, there has been little improvement in teaching methods. Vietnamese teachers express interest in new methodologies during training courses, but often revert to traditional methods focused on grammatical structure and reading (Tran, 2006) [19]. Many students learn English solely to pass national examinations, lacking a clear communicative need. They require sufficient grammar and vocabulary knowledge to pass grammar-based, norm-referenced exams. Final English exams and classroom tests exclude listening and speaking skills. The rigid, outdated testing and assessment system, governed by the Ministry of Training and Education, further hinders successful language teaching. As a result, teachers emphasize language knowledge over use, form over function, and receptive skills over productive skills. Teachers may not fully understand the key principles and benefits of CLT in classroom practice. Although CLT is part of Vietnam’s curriculum, its effectiveness remains unrealized. Most Vietnamese students fail to achieve



language proficiency after years of study. In a context where English is learned primarily for future use, it's crucial to balance instruction, correction, and communication.

Lightbown & Spada, N. Argue that classes focused solely on form or meaning are less effective than those incorporating meaning with some focus on form and corrective feedback. How should grammar be treated in CLT to enhance language acquisition in Vietnam's socio-cultural and pedagogical contexts? The answer lies with all stakeholders: administrators, syllabus designers, teacher-trainers, and teachers themselves.

#### 4. Future language education

English is becoming a global language due to socio-economic, cultural, and technological changes since the 1950s. It serves as the language of international communication, commerce, trade, media, and pop culture. Consequently, English is called English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), English as an International Language (EIL), and is categorized into inner, outer, and expanding circles. This has created a strong desire to learn it.

Language teaching methods for English have evolved over time. Although there is no single quick and effective approach, English continues to gain global interest, driven by integration and globalization for a better world. Language teaching should meet modern demands, emphasizing language proficiency and communicative competence. Therefore, grammar, a key to understanding a language, should focus on practicality. Teaching English will address the challenges teachers face, balancing grammar form and function.

#### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, teaching grammar has evolved through several main paradigms. In the traditional approach, grammar was central to teaching, seen as crucial for accessing foreign language literature. Deductive application of explicit rules was common, but these prescriptive rules made little sense in communication.

In the structural grammar phase, as the demand for using English to communicate increased, oral skills were prioritized. Language was viewed as a set of patterns to be turned into habits. Although grammar was introduced through examples and drills, it remained isolated from real-life contexts. By the end of this phase, grammar was theoretically divided into generative and internal grammar, but this wasn't practically applied in second language teaching.

In the functional grammar stage, with a growing societal need for communication, social interaction and collaboration among students were emphasized. While focus on meaning was preferred, some attention to grammar was necessary to enhance grammatical competence—one of the four dimensions of communicative competence. Grammar became integral to language acquisition and was no longer isolated from other competencies in communicative contexts. The integration of grammar teaching into second language acquisition has been somewhat realized, but systematic grammar instruction is needed to accelerate learning.

As English becomes increasingly important in globalization, practical language skills will be essential to meet the needs of a culturally diverse society. Language teaching is dynamic, with methodology varying by context. There's no single best method for classroom implementation. The role of grammar in second language acquisition cannot be neglected, as it is

key to understanding and communication. Teachers must decide which approaches are most beneficial to achieve language teaching goals, ensuring learners attain second language competence.

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