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FROM GRAMMAR TO COMMUNICATION: SHIFTING PARADIGMS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING.

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Abstract

English Language Teaching (ELT) has witnessed significant paradigm shifts over the last century, moving from traditional grammar-based approaches to communicative and learner-centered methodologies. While grammar has historically been the foundation of language instruction, it has often resulted in learners with high structural knowledge but limited communicative competence. The emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and digital innovations has redefined the goals of ELT, placing communication, fluency, and contextual language use at the core of pedagogy. This paper explores the historical trajectory of grammar-oriented approaches, the rise of communicative paradigms, and their implications for contemporary English teaching and learning. It argues for an integrated approach that balances grammatical accuracy with communicative fluency, reflecting both the global role of English and the diverse learning contexts of the 21st century. By examining theoretical frameworks, classroom practices, and emerging trends, the paper highlights the need for a re-imagined pedagogy that prepares learners for real-world communication while maintaining linguistic accuracy.

Keywords: English language teaching, grammar, communication, communicative competence, language pedagogy

Introduction

The teaching of English as a second or foreign language has evolved through multiple methodological shifts, reflecting changes in linguistic theory, educational philosophy, and societal needs. For centuries, language teaching emphasized grammar, viewing language as a system of rules to be mastered before meaningful communication could occur (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The grammar-translation method, for instance, prioritized accuracy, translation exercises, and explicit rule memorization but did little to enhance learners' ability to use the language effectively in real-life contexts.

The late 20th century witnessed a profound change in language pedagogy with the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT),

which placed communication at the heart of instruction (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972). The focus shifted from form to function, from linguistic competence to communicative competence, thereby redefining what it means to "know" a language. Today, in the era of globalization, digitalization, and rapid technological change, English has become not only a subject of study but also a tool for global interaction, cultural exchange, and academic advancement (Crystal, 2012; Kohn, 2021).

Despite these developments, debates persist. Should grammar be relegated to the background in favor of fluency, or does communication suffer when accuracy is neglected? The question remains particularly relevant in contexts where English functions as a second or foreign language and where examinations continue to

test structural knowledge rather than communicative ability (Nguyen, 2020; Damanhour & Al-Said, 2023). This paper addresses these tensions by analyzing the paradigm shift from grammar to communication in English teaching, its challenges, and its implications for future pedagogy.

The Grammar-Focused Tradition in English Language Teaching

Historical Roots of Grammar-Oriented Approaches

The earliest formalized methods of language teaching, particularly the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), treated grammar as the central component of instruction. Originating in the teaching of Latin and Greek, GTM emphasized memorization of rules, translation of texts, and structural analysis (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). In this approach, language was perceived as a written code, and learners' success was measured by their ability to manipulate grammatical forms accurately.

In the mid-20th century, the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) emerged, influenced by behaviorist psychology and structural linguistics. While moving beyond translation, ALM still placed grammar at its core, focusing on drilling sentence patterns and forming correct habits through repetition (Skinner, 1957; Fries, 1945). Both GTM and ALM sought to produce accuracy before fluency, prioritizing structural competence over communicative use.

Benefits of Grammar-Centered Approaches

Despite their limitations, grammar-based methods offered certain strengths. They provided learners with explicit knowledge of linguistic rules, which remains essential for academic and professional contexts requiring precise communication. They also allowed teachers to exercise clear control over classroom instruction, particularly in large classes or exam-oriented education systems (Ellis, 2006).

Limitations of the Grammar-Oriented Tradition
However, overemphasis on grammar often

resulted in learners who could recite rules but struggled to engage in authentic communication. Studies consistently showed that grammar-based instruction alone failed to develop speaking fluency, listening comprehension, or pragmatic skills (Savignon, 2018). Moreover, the teacher-centered and form-focused classroom environment discouraged learner autonomy and creativity. As English became increasingly necessary for intercultural communication, these limitations exposed the inadequacy of grammar-only models.

The Emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Theoretical Foundations

The dissatisfaction with grammar-focused teaching in the mid-20th century gave rise to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which redefined the goals of language education. Hymes' (1972) concept of communicative competence broadened the scope of linguistic knowledge beyond grammar, emphasizing the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts. Canale and Swain (1980) further refined this concept, identifying four key components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence.

This new framework challenged the traditional view that mastery of grammar was sufficient for effective communication. Instead, it highlighted the interdependence of accuracy and fluency, meaning and form, and context and function.

Principles of CLT

CLT is characterized by learner-centeredness, real-life communication, and the integration of the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Richards, 2006). Its key principles include:

Authentic communication: Activities reflect real-world purposes, such as role plays, discussions, and problem-solving tasks.

Fluency over accuracy: While grammatical correctness remains important, the primary goal

is meaningful interaction.

Task-based learning: Students engage in communicative tasks that require negotiation of meaning.

Integration of skills: Language is taught holistically rather than in isolated units.

Global Adoption and Classroom Practices

By the late 20th century, CLT had become the dominant paradigm in language teaching across the globe. Its adaptability to diverse contexts allowed it to shape curriculum design, textbook development, and teacher training programs (Littlewood, 2014). For example, in many Asian and African classrooms, teachers introduced communicative tasks alongside traditional grammar exercises to align with both international standards and local examination requirements (Nguyen, 2020; Tagoe & Dampson, 2022).

Shifting Paradigms in English Language Teaching From Accuracy to Fluency

One of the defining features of the paradigm shift in ELT is the movement from prioritizing accuracy to valuing fluency. While accuracy remains crucial for formal communication, fluency reflects a learner's ability to participate in spontaneous conversation without being hindered by grammatical hesitation (Savignon, 2018). The shift reflects a growing recognition that language is primarily a tool for interaction rather than a set of prescriptive rules.

The Functional-Notional Syllabus

Another hallmark of this paradigm shift was the development of the functional-notional syllabus in the 1970s. This approach organized content around communicative functions (e.g., requesting, apologizing, persuading) and notions (e.g., time, quantity, location) rather than grammatical categories (Wilkins, 1976). It emphasized what learners could do with the language rather than what rules they could recite.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

TBLT emerged as an extension of CLT, emphasizing real-world tasks as the unit of

instruction. Learners engage in tasks such as planning a trip, writing an email, or debating an issue, which foster communicative competence in authentic contexts (Ellis, 2009). Unlike traditional grammar exercises, tasks encourage learners to focus on meaning, negotiate language, and acquire grammar implicitly through use.

Integration of Grammar in Communicative Contexts

Importantly, the shift from grammar to communication does not eliminate grammar but repositions it. Grammar is taught in context, supporting learners' communicative goals rather than dominating the syllabus. Research suggests that integrating explicit grammar instruction with communicative activities leads to better long-term retention and more effective communication (Nassaji & Fotos, 2017).

Contemporary Approaches and Digital Influences

Technology-Enhanced Communicative Learning. The 21st century has introduced new dimensions to ELT through digital innovations. Technology has become an enabler of communicative pedagogy, with platforms such as Zoom, Google Classroom, and learning management systems allowing synchronous and asynchronous interaction. Virtual classrooms support real-time discussions, collaborative projects, and global peer exchanges (Kohn, 2021).

Social media platforms like WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram are increasingly used for informal language practice, creating authentic opportunities for communication beyond the classroom (Warschauer, 2020). These platforms encourage learners to use English in multimodal ways—combining text, images, and voice recordings—which align with 21st-century digital literacies.

Artificial Intelligence and Adaptive Learning

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has also begun reshaping language learning. AI-powered applications such as Duolingo, Grammarly, and ChatGPT offer personalized, communicative

practice that adapts to learner needs (Dwivedi et al., 2023). These tools provide immediate feedback, support collaborative writing, and simulate authentic conversation. Importantly, AI-driven platforms balance grammar support with fluency-building exercises, bridging the traditional divide between form and function.

21st-Century Skills and Communicative Competence

Contemporary approaches to ELT increasingly align with the broader educational goal of developing 21st-century skills: collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and communication (OECD, 2018). English language classrooms now emphasize project-based learning, group discussions, and intercultural competence, preparing learners for global citizenship.

Implications for English Language Teachers

Rethinking Teacher Roles

The paradigm shift from grammar to communication requires teachers to transition from being the sole authority in the classroom to facilitators of learning. In communicative classrooms, teachers guide interaction, design meaningful tasks, and create opportunities for authentic communication (Richards, 2015). This shift challenges traditional practices where teachers dominated talk time and dictated knowledge transmission.

Teacher Training and Professional Development

Many teachers, particularly in non-native contexts, were trained in grammar-oriented traditions. Consequently, they may lack the skills and confidence to implement communicative approaches effectively (Nguyen, 2020). Continuous professional development is therefore essential, focusing on:

Integrating communicative tasks with explicit grammar instruction.

Managing large, exam-oriented classrooms while promoting communication.

Using technology and digital tools to enhance communicative practice.

Workshops, peer collaboration, and reflective teaching practices can help teachers align with modern pedagogical expectations (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Classroom Strategies

Effective communicative teaching requires a balance of fluency and accuracy. Teachers can adopt strategies such as:

Using role plays and simulations to practice real-life conversations.

Encouraging group and pair work for collaborative meaning-making.

Applying the “focus on form” approach, where grammar is taught reactively during communicative tasks (Long, 1991).

Incorporating digital tools like Padlet, Flipgrid, or Kahoot for interactive engagement.

Challenges and Criticisms of the Communicative Approach

Overemphasis on Fluency

One of the main criticisms of CLT is its tendency to prioritize fluency at the expense of accuracy. Learners may become confident communicators but develop fossilized errors if grammatical form is insufficiently emphasized (Ellis, 2009).

Cultural and Contextual Constraints

In many contexts, communicative methods conflict with local educational cultures that value teacher authority, grammar-based exams, and rote learning (Littlewood, 2014). For instance, in many African and Asian classrooms, CLT may be seen as impractical due to large class sizes, limited resources, or curriculum demands (Tagoe & Dampson, 2022).

Curriculum and Assessment Challenges

Examination systems often test discrete grammar points rather than communicative ability, creating a mismatch between what is taught and what is assessed. Teachers under exam pressure may revert to grammar drills even when curricula emphasize communication (Nguyen, 2020).

Teacher Preparedness

Implementing CLT requires high proficiency in English and advanced pedagogical skills. Many teachers, especially in under-resourced contexts, struggle with low language proficiency and lack access to training, limiting their ability to facilitate communicative classrooms effectively (Rahman, 2021).

Toward an Integrated Model of Grammar and Communication Bridging the Divide

While the paradigm shift highlights the inadequacies of grammar-only teaching, a wholesale rejection of grammar instruction is neither practical nor desirable. Contemporary scholarship advocates for integration—where grammar is taught in service of communication rather than as an isolated goal (Nassaji & Fotos, 2017).

Pedagogical Models

Integrated models combine explicit grammar instruction with communicative practice. For example:

Focus on Form (FonF): Teachers address grammar when it arises naturally in communicative contexts (Long, 1991). Teachers address grammar when it arises naturally in communicative contexts (Long, 1991).

Task-Supported Language Teaching (TSLT):

Tasks are designed to elicit structures learners need to communicate effectively (Ellis, 2009)

Blended Learning Models: Digital platforms provide grammar tutorials while class time focuses on communicative activities (Kohn, 2021).

Case Practices

Classrooms adopting integrated models often show improved outcomes. Learners benefit from explicit grammar explanations for clarity while simultaneously practicing in authentic contexts. For instance, a writing class may begin with a mini-lesson on cohesive devices, followed by peer-review activities requiring their application in collaborative essays (Rahman, 2021).

Future-Oriented Pedagogy

As English continues to function as a global lingua franca, integrated models ensure learners achieve both accuracy and fluency. They also align with broader educational goals of preparing students for intercultural communication, digital interaction, and professional environments (OECD, 2018).

Conclusion

The evolution of English Language Teaching (ELT) from grammar-focused traditions to communicative paradigms reflects a broader shift in educational philosophy and global communication needs. While grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods provided learners with structural accuracy, they failed to equip them for real-world interaction. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) responded to these gaps by emphasizing communicative competence, fluency, and learner-centered pedagogies.

However, challenges remain, particularly in contexts where cultural norms, examination systems, and teacher training continue to privilege grammar. Overemphasis on fluency without adequate grammar support also risks fossilized errors and limited academic precision. As a result, a balanced, integrated approach is essential—one that situates grammar instruction within communicative contexts and leverages digital tools, AI, and task-based practices to prepare learners for 21st-century communication.

Ultimately, the paradigm shift from grammar to communication should not be seen as a replacement but as an expansion of language pedagogy. Grammar and communication are complementary, not contradictory. Effective English language education in the modern era must harmonize accuracy with fluency, ensuring learners can use the language correctly, appropriately, and confidently in diverse global contexts.

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