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Research Article

INVESTIGATING THE PROBLEMS FACED BY SUDANESE SECONDARY LEVEL TEACHERS IN TEACHING GRAMMAR

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English grammar involves the identification of two types of challenges that encounter teachers; those which face the teachers at the global level of the profession and those which face them at local level in terms of classroom practices. The purpose of this study is to highlight these problems and obtain the views of the teachers on them. The Population of this study comprises 100 English language teachers from different schools; governmental and private. The data has been collected through a questionnaire. The collected data has been analyzed descriptively using the SPSS programmed. The study came up with a number of findings including the fact that the teachers faced problems which are intrinsic to them like their motivation, treacheries and some that are extrinsic such as insufficient training and working load. As for the methods and techniques, teachers expressed their opinions that most of the techniques are outdated and they do not match the new trends in teaching grammar. The study offered some suggestions for reformation based on the findings.

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INTRODUCTION

Pedagogical grammar has been and will presumably continue to be an important component of foreign language learning. For decades on end, pedagogical grammar has been a hot subject of debate and discussion among linguists and educationalist. Perhaps no area in foreign language teaching and learning has ever been hotter than pedagogical grammar. It has been examined from all aspects and perspectives. However, the teachers' voice has always been neglected – if not ignored – in this respect. Teachers are the active agents who put into practice all the theories and applications of researchers and specialist. They are the link between theory and practice. As such, they are the actual practitioners who put theories to the acid test. It is then a grave mistake not to listen to what they say and deprive them of their right to speak their minds about this issue.

This paper is an attempt to lend an ear to the teachers as the grass roots who are often overlooked and whose insights are so invaluable in informing both theory and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Grammar

Broadly speaking, the grammar of a language covers such points of usage as tenses, spellings, punctuation, agreement,

parts of speech, lexis and structures. Grammar has been defined from different perspectives. However, most scholars agree on a number of aspects about grammar. From a general point of view, William (1981) sees grammar as an inescapable fact of a language system because it is the set of principles which makes possible the orderly production of speaking and writing. He points out that grammar would exist even if there were no books about grammar because it is essentially the unwritten agreement among speakers of the language about the ways they will express idea most efficiently. From another angle, Odlin (1994:1) defines it as; grammar is “the types of grammatical analysis and instruction designed for the needs of second language students.” These two definitions capture almost the two levels of grammar; prescriptive grammar and descriptive grammar.

The main schools of English grammar

The following subsection will present a brief review of the main schools of English grammar. They will also point out their relative usefulness in the context of the EFL classroom. These schools are

- Traditional prescriptive grammar.
- Structuralism applied grammar
- Modern descriptive grammar.
- Chomsky generative grammar, and instructional materials and techniques

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Traditional prescriptive grammar

Traditional grammar tends to be prescriptive. It is quite dogmatic in that it establishes the norms of correct and incorrect usage and makes clear distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' grammar. As Odlin (ibid) notes, "Much of the time, though not always, decisions about what is good and bad are essentially arbitrary and do not often reflect any crucial principle of language or thought." Traditional grammar often ignores actual usage. It does not take into account the fact that a living language is in constant flux. Traditional grammar tries to preserve features and distinctions that have somewhat become obsolete.

It can be observed that prescriptive grammar rules sometimes have little relation to modern English usage. As Hung (2003:44) notes, "the grammar of a language resides not in books but in the minds of its speakers".

Structuralism applied grammar

This school of grammar (Structuralism applied grammar) has its roots back into the work of Bloomfield (1933). What the Structuralism grammarian is simply to collect samples of the target language and then classifies them in the same manner of scientific nomenclature. According to Cook and Newson (1996), a linguist's task in this respect is "to bring order to the set of external facts that make up the language" with the resulting grammar being described "in terms of properties of such data through 'structures' or 'patterns'".

Two scholars (each one on either side of the Atlantic) are accredited with the pioneering work on applying Structuralism grammar. These are Fries (1945) in the USA and Hornby (1976) in the UK. The two provided a fairly useful (though far from being comprehensive) taxonomy of the structural patterns of contemporary English. A whole generation of classical structurally-based English grammar books was built on this taxonomy.

Structuralism grammar has had a long lasting effect on ELT and it had a significant impact on both syllabus design and on teaching methodology.

The main limitation of the structural syllabus is that it focused on usage rather than on use which resulted in breeding learners who are structurally competent but communicatively incompetent.

The teaching approach which is closely associated with this school of grammar (and the Behaviorist Theory of learning) is the Audio-lingual Method (ALM). The ALM initially comprised an inductive presentation of the 'keys structure' which adopted the Presentation Practice Production model of teaching.

Modern descriptive grammar

Nobody these days knowingly teaches old-fashioned prescriptive grammar. Also Structuralism grammar has lost a lot of its popularity – even though as it the PPP teaching model is still widely used. Prescriptive grammar has been replaced by modern descriptive grammar; the main difference is that the latter describes language as it *is*, not as it *should* be. It is mainly based on a massive corpus of real spoken and written English.

Moreover, it considers many structures that traditional grammar either ignored completely or discussed only briefly. Like other kinds of grammar, descriptive grammar relies on structural analysis. It looks at syntax on many levels: morpheme, word, phrase, clause, sentence, and text. These high level units are then analyzed into lower units. When it comes to pedagogical grammar, most of the grammar can be conveniently grouped under the headings such as Noun Phrase or Verb Phrase.

A main difference between traditional grammar and corpus grammar is that the latter describes real English. The examples it gives are taken from real contexts of English use whereas examples in traditional grammar are contrived.

Chomsky generative grammar

Chomsky (1965) claims that language is an innate ability which is unique to the human species. In addition, he claims that language is made in the mind, and hence grammar is the mirror of the mind. Chomsky's attempts were to come up with a new kind of grammar, a 'mental grammar' that would have both descriptive adequacy and explanatory adequacy. However, his early versions of transformational grammar have

Cook and Newson (1996:42) spell out the two views of Chomsky. They point out that "the sounds are the external face of language" while "the meanings are the internal face of language". The 'sounds' make up the Phonetic Form (PF) component, and 'the meanings' make up the Logical Form (LF) component. The old labels of 'deep' and 'surface' structures are now replaced by D-structure and S-structure. "D-structure is related to S-structure by movement: S-structure is interpreted by the PF and LF components in their respective ways to yield the phonetic and semantic representations" (Cook and Newson, 1996: 47). A new concept of 'Spell-out' has now come into currency. 'Spell-out' is an operation that takes all phonetic and semantic information from the lexicon and splits them into sound elements (PF) and all other information (LF).

Some years ago, Chomsky made a crucial distinction between 'E-language' that is 'external' to the learner (i.e. the kind of grammar in school grammar books) and 'I-language' that is 'internal' to the learner (i.e. language that is stored in the mind) (Cook, 1988). The difference between the two is in the way grammar is taught. The E-language approach views grammar as a linear sequence of 'patterns' or 'structures' which are accumulated progressively over time. The I-language approach views grammar as knowledge in the mind in the form of rules or principles which allow learners to generate countless novel utterances and to evaluate the grammaticality of the sentences others produce. Even the most recent books of teaching grammar do not take into account this distinction. A quick look at typical ESL grammar books will show that it is E-language that is taught in schools.

It is to be noted here that the validity of E-language in teaching the grammar of a second language has been questioned in recent years. The assumption is that if grammar is made in the mind, it seems quite useless to attempt to teach it as if it were external to the learner. The point is that grammar is not acquired in a linear and atomistic manner. Learners need to experience the process of learning grammar. They have to

discover for themselves how the various grammatical systems (such as tense, aspect, mood, modality, and voice) operate and interact. In this sense, the main task of teaching should be to show “how to create the right conditions for students to ‘uncover’ grammar” (Thornbury, 2001). Most importantly, students must explore the meaning-making function of grammar. It is not enough for students to be able to perform mechanical operations such as transforming sentences from the active to the passive. By the same token, it is not suffice that students perform drills on the formation of structure. Instead of presenting grammatical rules to the students, they are better presented with linguistic data from which they can work out the rules inductively in their own way. This would be a more process-oriented approach than the conventional product-oriented approach.

Instructional materials and techniques

Language teachers are expected to be dynamic in their instructional techniques. They should be up to date with the modern trends in language teaching. Teachers who fail to develop professionally are bound to be dormant and ineffective. The widely held belief of learners that their teachers are infallible makes this type of challenge dangerous to the teaching and learning process. Teachers (who are basically non-native and whose English language is not up to the required standard) commit serious language errors. These errors will no doubt be imbibed by the learners as models of perfect language. Also, a common feature is a situation where unrelated language items are lumped together. Moreover, little or no preparation by teachers could also result in bad teaching. Secondary school teacher seldom make notes that would guide their teaching. It is also not uncommon to see teacher use L1 to communicate ideas in the second language. Though this is a common practice, it is doubtful that it will facilitate the learning of second language and its grammar. Teachers need aware of the techniques they use to teaching grammar.(ibid).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper is intended to provide answers to the following two questions:

- Q1: What are the problems that face the Sudanese secondary school teachers of English in teaching grammar?
- Q2: What are the problems that relate to methods and techniques of teaching grammar?

Significance

This study acquires its significance from a number of facts:

1. Most research in the field of pedagogical grammar focuses on aspects other than teachers. This study focuses mainly on the problems that face the teachers and the techniques they use. It is an attempt to hear the teachers’ voice.
2. Teachers of English at secondary level do not form a homogenous group. A great number of them now have backgrounds that do not relate to English language and education. These are the teachers who come from other areas and are known as alternative teachers.
3. Even those who are graduates of faculties of education or arts and their major specialty is English have not had enough training as teachers.

4. The series of books prescribed by the Ministry of Education (SPINE Series) is now more than 20 years old. There has been no rigorous re3vision or updating to its content – including grammar. Such a long period of time will inevitably render the rational upon which the syllabus was designed obsolete.

Procedure

This study is descriptive in nature. It focuses on the ‘what’ of the problems in question. The study will attempt to investigate the different aspects of the problem and it will shed light on the areas that need attention.

Population and sampling

The geographical setting of this study is in Umbada Locality. The population of the study is all of the English language teachers in Sudan a sample of 100 teachers was randomly selected for the questionnaire. In order to be representative, the schools to which the teachers belong included both the state run schools and the private schools. Some of the government schools were classified as ‘model schools’, others are ordinary ones.

The instrument

The instrument used for data collection is a questionnaire which had two instruments was used in the study for the purpose of data collection two sections to it. The respondents were presented with items to which they were requested to choose one of three options: Agree. Neutral or Disagree.

Section one

This section focused on the problems that face the teachers of English in teaching grammar. It had eight items in it.

Section two

This section focused on the problems that relate to methods and techniques of teaching grammar. It had seven items in it.

The questionnaire was developed through the following stages:

1. It was designed by the researcher in consultation with some colleagues.
2. It was then presented to the supervisor for approval.
3. Then it was referred to two experts for judgment.
4. After that it was piloted in a small scale group of teachers.

The reliability of the questionnaire was calculated by SPSS. The Cronbach’s alpha was as follows:

Table 1 Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.969	.975	8

This table shows a very high figure of reliability (0.975)

Procedures for data analysis

The data collected thorough the questionnaire was tabulated and treated statistically by the SPSS programme. The results in percentile from will be used to answer the relevant study questions.

DATA DISCUSSION

The data obtained from the questionnaire provided the following statistical results.

Section one of the questionnaires

This section tries to elicit information about the problems that face the teachers when teaching grammar.

Item One

The table below shows the result of the teachers' responses to the first item of this section which was about how bad teaching can negatively affect the achievement of the objectives of teaching grammar set by the syllabus designers.

Table 1 Effect of bad teaching on achievement of objective of teaching grammar

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	88	88.0	88.0
	Neutral	9	9.0	97.0
	Disagree	3	3.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0

It is clear from the table above that a very high percent of the sample (88%) agree that bad instruction does not help the achievement of the objective of the syllabus of grammar.

Item two

This item was intended to illicit the opinion of the subjects concerning a widely spread complaint amongst teachers viz. the high load of work that the teachers have to do.

Table 3 Effect of work load on teaching

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	68	68.0	68.0
	Neutral	22	22.0	90.0
	Disagree	10	10.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0

If those who are neutral about this point are taken aside, then those who agree that the number of hours the teacher has to work has its impact on the quality of teaching. Those who agree (68%) are almost seven times as much of those who disagree (10%).

Item three

Students do a lot of free writing in the form of compositions, notes or personal communication (e.g. over WhatsApp or through social networks). In such writing, students focus mainly on the content of the message they want to convey. Little attention will be directed to accuracy of grammar. This practice is widely spread among students. That is why item three of the questionnaire is included,

Table 4 Effect of ungrammatical free writing on students' grammar

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	75	75.0	75.0
	Neutral	14	14.0	89.0
	Disagree	11	11.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0

As table 4 above shows, a vast majority of the teachers (75%) agree on this point. Teachers feel that such kind of writing has a great impact on the students' grammar.

Item four

Classroom language and meta language are two major sources of language input. Teachers mainly use grammatical sentences to communicate with the students and to explain the subject matter. However; being highly context-dependent, such language might not be acceptable in terms of grammaticality. Nevertheless, students more often than not take such utterances as good models of language.

Table 4 Effect of teachers' short grammatical sentences on students' practice of grammar

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	56	56.0	56.0
	Neutral	20	20.0	76.0
	Disagree	24	24.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0

As table 5 above shows, 56% of the sample sees that such teachers can have a negative effect on the grammar of the students. Those who see that this assumption is not true amount to 24% of the sample, which cannot be taken as the norm among the teachers.

Item five

This item seeks to obtain the views of the teachers about a very important issue; the theory and practice of teacher-centeredness. In an age characterized by learner autonomy and independent learning, this trend will no doubt seem to be a far cry from the past.

Table 6 Teacher-centeredness

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	75	75.0	75.0
	Neutral	21	21.0	96.0
	Disagree	4	4.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0

Table 5 above reveals that 75% of the respondents believe that teacher-centeredness is undesirable practice. Those who disagree are only 4% of the sample.

Item 6

One important feature of the teacher's competence is the ability to bring his/her language down to the level of the students. Unfortunately, there is a tendency amongst teachers to show off by using words that are beyond the level of their students. Perhaps this might create an inflated picture of the teacher in the minds of the students; but at the same time, it will frustrate them and they will miss the point being taught and meant to be learned. \this item tries to gauge the opinion of the teachers in connection with such attitudes

Table 6 Effect of unfamiliar words in teaching grammar on students

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	77	77.0	77.0
	Neutral	14	14.0	91.0
	Disagree	9	9.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0

Table 6 above shows that 77% of the sample agrees that such an attitude is more harmful than useful. Only 9% view this practice as beneficial to the students' development of grammar.

Item 7

In relation to grammar, no aphorism can be truer than 'practice makes perfect'. Poor output from students in this field can mainly be attributed to lack of practice. If nor sufficient opportunities are provided for, no quality output should be expected from students. This item tries to find out how teachers feel about this assumption.

Table 8 Lack of grammar practice on students' output

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	65	65.0	65.0
	Neutral	30	30.0	95.0
	Disagree	5	5.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0

Table 8 above shows that 65% of the sample agrees that lack of practice has a negative effect on the output of the students. Only 5% hold the opposite opinion. However, it might be a bit surprising that 30% of the sample is neutral about this.

Item 8

Motivation is the driving force for any job and teaching cannot and should not be the expectation to the rule. However, oftentimes this is taken for granted and nobody stops to ask about this. Teachers need to be motivated in order to carry out their job with efficiency. This item is an attempt to see how teacher themselves look at this.

Table 8 Effect of lack of teachers' motivation on teaching

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	74	74.0	74.0
	Neutral	26	26.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0

As is evident from table 8 above; even though no one of the respondent disagrees with this idea, 26% are neutral. However, a vast majority of the respondents (76%) agree that lack of motivation has negative effects on teaching.

Section two of the questionnaires

This section tries to elicit information about the problem related methods and techniques that teachers use when teaching grammar.

Item 1

One method which is still widely used by the teachers in teaching grammar is the Grammar Translation Method. It is common practice in the profession to borrow techniques from the GTM to teach grammar. This item tries to find out the spread of such techniques amongst teachers nowadays.

Table 9 Use of GTM improves students' grammar

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	51	51.0	51.0
	Neutral	24	24.0	75.0
	Disagree	25	25.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0

Table 9 above show that 51% of the sample believes that techniques of GTM are still being used by the teachers for the teaching of grammar. Those who disagree are 25%. So, it can be concluded that GTM techniques are still being employed by many teachers.

Item 2

The Oral situational Approach (OSA) has its roots in Behaviorism and structuralism. Learning of grammar through OSA techniques (such as repetition, drilling, chorusing, etc) prevailed at some time up to late 1960s and the early 1970s. This item tries to see to extent such techniques have survived up to the middle of the 21st century.

Table 10 Misuse of OSA affects students' output

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	69	69.0	69.0
	Neutral	26	26.0	95.0
	Disagree	5	5.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0

Table 10 above shows clearly that OSA techniques are still being used by a lot of teachers in teaching grammar. Those who agree to this amount to 65% of the sample while those who disagree are no more than 5%.

Item 3

Pair work and group work have largely replaced the traditional techniques of classroom interaction patterns. These two techniques are used in situations where communicative Language Teaching prevails. They also match very with the views of Chomsky grammar. This item tries to find out the extent to which these two techniques prevail in the field.

Table 11 Lack of group work and pair work negatively affects students' acquisition

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	69	69.0	69.0
	Neutral	20	20.0	89.0
	Disagree	11	11.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0

As table 11 above shows, a majority of 69% of the respondents agree that these two techniques are used by teachers for teaching grammar. On the other hand, a minority of 11% do not agree with this.

Item 12

One way to realize the principles of modern descriptive grammar is to contextualize the grammar point being presented. Contextualization in the classroom setting can sometimes be difficult or time consuming. A shortcut is to use visual aids and illustrations. This item tries to see how far this practice prevails in the schools.

Table 12 Lack of visual aids badly affects the illustration of some grammatical structures

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	56	56.0	56.0
	Neutral	20	20.0	76.0
	Disagree	24	24.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0

Table 12 above shows that 56% percent of the respondents agree to the use of visual aids and illustrations in teaching grammar. Those who do not agree represent 24% of the sample.

Item 13

In order to reinforce grammar in the minds of the students and to make that more internalized and spontaneous, grammar has to move from the E-grammar in the textbooks and find its relevant place in the minds of the students and be part of their I-language. This item seeks to discover if the teachers use techniques such as conversations in order to develop the students' communicative competence.

Table 13 Lack of conversation practice affects students' communicative competence

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	79	79.0	79.0	79.0
	Neutral	14	14.0	14.0	93.0
	Disagree	7	7.0	7.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 13 above shows that 79% of the respondents agree that this technique is not used by the teachers. Only 7% of the sample disagree this.

Item 14

Teaching grammar out of context is to consolidate the notion of E-grammar (grammar in the textbook). It does not help the buildup of I-language (which is internal to the students' minds). This item attempts to see which of the two views are adopted mainly by the teachers.

Table 14 Teaching grammar out of context building up of students' own grammar

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	69	69.0	69.0	69.0
	Neutral	18	18.0	18.0	87.0
	Disagree	13	13.0	13.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 14 above illustrates the fact that the explicit teaching of grammar is more beneficial to the students. A majority of 68% of the respondents believe that explicit teaching of grammar can build up the students' internal language.

Item 15

Gap activities foster genuine learning. However, such activities, if not properly used, will not have the required effect on the building up of the students' grammatical competence. This item tries to explore the attitude of teachers in this respect.

Table 15 Misuse of information gap technique affects students' grammatical competence

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	63	63.0	63.0	63.0
	Neutral	26	26.0	26.0	89.0
	Disagree	11	11.0	11.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Table 15 above show that 63% of the respondents agree that the misuse of information gap activities have a negative effect

on the students' grammatical competence. Only 11% of the sample holds the opposite opinion.

CONCLUSIONS

This section will pull the threads of the results obtained from the data analysis together. They will be grouped under the two research questions.

Q1: The problems that face the teachers in teaching English can be summarized as follow:

1. Teachers admit that they are not satisfied with the quality of instruction with respect to grammar.
2. The number of hours the teacher has to work has its impact on the quality of teaching.
3. Free writing has a great negative impact on the students' grammar.
4. Some aspects of teacherese can have a negative effect on the grammar of the students.
5. The undesirable practice of teacher-centeredness.
6. The tendency amongst teachers to show off by using words those are beyond the level of their students.
7. Insufficient opportunities for practice of grammar.
8. Lack of motivation among teachers.

Q2: The problems associated with the techniques can be summarized as follow:

1. Most teachers still resort to techniques borrowed from the outdated Grammar Translation Method.
2. Mechanical and repetitive drills characteristic of Oral situation Approach are still popular among the teachers.
3. Negligence of using pair work and group work.
4. Negligence of using visual aids and illustrations to contextualized grammatical structures.
5. Tendency to rely a lot on explicit teaching of grammar (i.e. out of context)
6. Negligence of using conversation activities for reinforcing grammar.
7. Misuse of gap activities.

Suggestions

Based on the above, the following suggestions can be made:

1. Teachers need to be trained on two levels:
 - A. Knowledge of what to teach
 - B. Technical-know how of methods and techniques
2. Teachers have to find practical ways of effective use of classroom language and metalanguage.
3. The work load of teachers has to be so that they find enough time for grammar practice and for follow-up.
4. Ways of motivating teacher have to be sought by the authorities at all levels.

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