

The Attitude to and Practice of Grammar Teaching in EAP Courses

By Michelle Ives

The purpose and method of grammar teaching is often debated, although little research has focused on the role of grammar teaching in EAP courses. An investigation into teachers' practice of and attitudes to grammar teaching in an EAP programme was undertaken at a Sino-British university in China. Unlike previous research, this study also included the attitudes of subject teachers as key stakeholders in the learning-teaching process. It appears that, although there are few references to grammar teaching in the course documents, the majority of EAP teachers try to build the teaching of this into their course. Weaknesses in grammar affect student performance not only in EAP classes, but also in subject classes. Subject teachers played a larger role than expected in supporting EAP teachers in the teaching of grammar. However, there remains an inconsistency in how grammar errors are penalised in subject-class assessments. It is recommended that a more consistent and formalised approach is taken to the teaching of grammar in EAP programmes.

Introduction

As noted by Fotos (1998, as cited in Barnard & Scampton, 2008), it is now clear that communicative teaching alone cannot ensure grammatical accuracy. It is often noted that, although EAP students may be able to write an accurate reference list, they often cannot create a sentence without several grammatical errors. Although grammar is often assessed in EAP courses, the teaching of it is seldom built into the curriculum and, hence, it is believed by the researcher to be the reason that students frequently fall short in this part of their assessments.

This problem has also been noted in ESL teaching, with Muncie (2002) stating:

the place which grammar should occupy in composition classes is a confused issue, as EFL teachers on the one hand recognise that the stress in the methodology that reaches them is very much against grammar in favour of meaning and communication, while on the other hand students and curricula continue to place grammatical concerns at the forefront of their needs (p. 181).

The preferred approach to a grammatical focus in teaching is still being debated. Currently,

there is disagreement about whether to *focus on forms* (FoS) or to *focus on form* (FoF). The former is a more teacher-centred and pre-planned teaching of grammar which is based on the assumption that grammar is learnt in a systematic fashion. Such theories have long been discredited. As a result, FoS has been criticised when used as the sole form of grammar teaching. In response to the perceived deficiencies of FoS, Long (1997) suggests *focussing on form* (FoF) – where grammar is only addressed if it affects communication, and is therefore taught as and when the student needs it – as it is a more timely and student-centred approach (Barnard & Scampton, 2008; Muncie, 2002; Sheen, 2002; Gollin, 1998). However, it could be argued that while this approach is in keeping with more modern teaching practices, in courses that have assessments based on grammar, a FoF approach alone may not adequately prepare students.

Although there is debate about the purpose of grammar teaching, it is generally agreed amongst communicative language teaching (CLT) practitioners that grammar should no longer be taught at purely the sentence level; instead it should be taught more inductively as part of discourse and in context (Barnard & Scampton, 2008; Nunan, 1998; Petrovitz, 1997; Goodey, 1997).

Even though its importance is acknowledged, EAP teachers may feel that there are so many other skills for them to teach (such as using sources and writing accurate citations and references) that they have little time to formally address the problem of inaccurate use of language. There have been at least two surveys into EAP teachers' beliefs and attitudes regarding grammar teaching: Burgess and Etherington (2002) in the UK, and Barnard and Scampton (2008) in New Zealand. Burgess and Etherington found that the 48 teachers surveyed "appear to see grammar as important for their students and have a sophisticated understanding of the problems and issues involved in this teaching" (as cited in Barnard & Scampton, 2008). This contrasts with Barnard and Scampton (2008) who stated that "the attention to grammar [by teachers] was secondary to other aspects of language, such as appropriate organisation of written texts" (p. 67). Moreover, in 2009, Tribble undertook a survey of EAP writing course books. Not one of these texts mentioned the teaching of grammar, nor did his research discuss this omission.

As a result of these findings, and observations from several years working as an EAP teacher, this researcher was led to ponder the role of grammar in the teaching of EAP.

Research procedure

This research took place at a Sino-British university in Shanghai, China. English is taught concurrently with major subjects during the first year, as opposed to being a pre-sessional programme.

As the EAP department's role is to enable students to function in English in subject classes, teachers of subject majors have a vested interest in this process. There is often a conflict between EAP teachers and subject teachers as a result of the students' poor level of general English. Native-speaker subject teachers, teaching majors such as economics, business or biology, who have to face written and oral communication difficulties with their students, may feel ill-equipped to deal with non-native speakers of English. They may feel resentment towards EAP teachers, whose job they feel is to better prepare the students.

The literature discussed previously did not investigate the attitudes of other stakeholders involved in the EAP teaching process such as subject teachers. For this reason a dual approach was used in this research, with questionnaires going out to both EAP and subject teachers.

Researcher's null hypotheses

- Grammar teaching is not the responsibility of the EAP teacher.
- Formal grammar teaching, defined as the conscious decision by a teacher to include a particular target grammar structure in their lesson plan, will not take place in EAP classes.
- Grammar errors will not affect a student's performance in subject classes.
- Subject teachers will play no role in teaching grammar.

Aim and research questions

This aim of this research was to define the role of the EAP teacher in regards to grammar teaching, by finding answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: What are EAP teachers' attitudes to teaching grammar?

RQ2: To what extent and how do EAP teachers teach grammar?

RQ3: What role do subject teachers play in grammar teaching?

Questionnaire design and collation

Twenty-three invitations to complete the questionnaire were sent out to the EAP department teaching staff. This comprised 100% of the first year teachers at the organisation. The final return rate was 39% (9 teachers). Questionnaires (Appendix 2) were also sent out to subject teachers in all departments and the return rate for this group was 25% (16 teachers). The EAP questionnaire design (Appendix 1) was based on previous research, in particular that of Barnard and Scampton (2008). Due to the restrictions of the on-line survey software, the EAP questionnaire was created in two parts.

Findings and discussion

It should be noted that not all respondents replied to all of the questions. Nine teachers replied to the first part (Q1-10); 6 replied to the second.

EAP teachers: Attitude to grammar teaching

Most (78%) EAP teachers who responded believed that it is the EAP teacher's role to teach grammar either as part of error correction / feedback or as preparation for other work (for example, a listening task). None believed it was only the job of the high-school English teacher. The majority (60%) thought that more of a grammar focus should be built into the Scheme of Work (SOW). The reasons for this varied from the frequency of student errors to being part of a more holistic teaching approach, as this respondent explains: "The grammar shouldn't be the focus but the support system which provides the rationale of the language". This is echoed by Thornbury (1999) who cites the 'rule of usage' – teach grammar not as to an end in itself but to help learners understand and produce real language. One teacher acknowledged that the current system of students learning grammar independently is not working: "they seem to find it difficult working on their own time". Another made this strong statement: "it's neglected. We assume students have a solid grammar base when many of them don't".

In addition, most respondents commented that they would like to see more grammar activities that are contextualised and integrated within the four skills. This agrees with research by others (Nunan 1998; Petrovitz 1997; Goodey 1997). The reasons why some teachers rarely taught grammar or would like to teach more, but did not, were split evenly between "not having enough time in class / in the course" and "grammar not being part of the SOW". Some comments also related to issues of student and staff-workload, for example, "the students are already inundated with homework and I am equally snowed under with marking so my recommendations of 'do more grammar and I'll check it for you' don't come to much" and "requires a lot of prep time to be integrated effectively".

EAP teachers: Practice of grammar teaching

The most common class that had a grammar focus was Academic Writing, followed by Speaking and Discussion Skills, that is, the productive skills classes. A wide range of grammar activities are used by EAP teachers, the most common being student-generated errors and teacher-created worksheets. General grammar book exercises were the least popular. Although none of the teachers built a grammar focus into every lesson, all teachers taught it in their classes in some way, mostly when needed to help students complete other work (78%). Thornbury (1999) agrees with using student-generated errors as teaching material as it ties in with his 'Dogme' (low-technology, student-centred) approach. He believes that especially in monolingual L2 classes, as at the institution where this research took place, students recognise their mistakes in others' work, as they are often the same result of L1 interference. Just as important, using student-generated errors as teaching material reduces the class preparation time for a teacher.

Although all EAP teachers who responded to this question (6) asked their students to buy or have access to a grammar book, the majority (67%) had never asked their students to use their book in class, and rarely assigned homework from it (83%). In addition, only one teacher would refer a student to their book if they encountered a grammar problem in the class. They would instead teach / revise the point in class, but only if perceived to be a common problem. Although approximately a quarter of EAP teacher respondents would help the student during class time, none of them would arrange to tutor the student after class. This could be related to the workload issues previously mentioned.

In terms of more independent work, 67% of the EAP teachers who answered this question encouraged students to use the 'grammar check' feature of Word, and, of these, most had either shown or explained its usage to their students. Teachers' correction codes for written work also generally gave the students constructive feedback by identifying the grammar errors by type and some teachers use different levels of feedback according to the needs of their classes. Barnard and Scampton (2008) also found a wide variety of error correction techniques in their study, from one teacher having a reasonably thorough

approach, “I will circle and underline mistakes, but I don’t rewrite things for them”, to a more minimalistic approach to avoid undermining a student’s confidence, “picking up too many errors at once can make a student feel their writing is beyond correction”.

Subject teachers: Grammar problems and teachers’ reactions

Subject teachers across the four majors encountered a wide range of English problems in their classes. The responses tended to relate to a general lack of English skills, not only to grammar. Lack of vocabulary and problems with face-to-face communication with the teacher and other students were mentioned, with one maths teacher noting “[there is] no mandate [from the Institution] to speak English so conversational skills are stalled”, while another suggested teaching “how to raise questions and issues in a positive way ... help with linking words / phrases [as they] lack vocabulary thus affecting the three basic skills in EAP – writing, speaking, listening”. This finding is similar to the study by Evans and Morrison (2010) who found that their Hong Kong students had difficulties with academic writing and subject-related terminology.

When students did have problems, 81% of the subject teachers who responded said they helped them with grammar themselves, though four teachers would ignore the problem, believing their job was to focus on content. Surprisingly, nearly twice as many would direct students to a grammar text or website rather than refer them back to their EAP teacher.

Subject teachers: Attitudes to EAP and grammar teaching and the penalising of English errors in assessments

The teaching of grammar seems to be viewed as a shared role, with nearly half of the subject teachers seeing grammar teaching being the role of both the high school and EAP teacher, and 40% thinking the subject teacher should also play a role in this. Neither EAP nor subject teachers considered that the responsibility for grammar teaching should end with the high school teacher.

The majority (63%) of subject teacher respondents stated that their department did not penalise for linguistic errors in

assignments. Of those departments that did, the amount ranged from “50%” to “a small amount and only if I can’t guess which word they should be using or it still doesn’t make sense”. However, it should be noted that this question did not specifically relate to grammar errors. Moreover, such errors, when penalised in subject assessments, are usually only one part of a more general assessed concept of ‘presentation’ or ‘style’, so it is difficult to determine the actual effect poor grammar alone has on the final grade.

Conclusion

The sample size of this study was limited, so further studies are needed to provide sound evidence. However, from the results it appears that the majority of the null hypotheses were proven to be rejected. The responsibility for grammar teaching was not felt to end once a student leaves high school; on the contrary this research showed that it continues to be an area needed to be taught within an EAP programme. Although grammar is often not taught formally, it is addressed in EAP classes using a FoF approach. Grammar weaknesses can affect the teaching-learning experience within subject classes, so subject teachers also have a vested interest in how grammar is taught. Institutional factors, such as externally-created syllabi and differing views between subject departments in terms of penalising linguistic errors, also need to be taken into account when discussing the best approach. The attitudes to the method of grammar teaching and error correction among teachers are diverse, yet a return to the inclusion of formalised, generalised teaching of common areas of grammar weakness (FoS) is suggested to ensure students at similar institutions have a good grammatical grounding and that teaching better matches assessments.

Recommendations

Although this research relates to a particular Sino-British institution, the findings may be applicable to other EAP courses in China. The following general recommendations can be applied to institutions where EAP is taught alongside other subjects.

Pre-course preparation is vital. Entrance exams and summer courses should have a

strong grammar component so students have a good grounding before the EAP course proper starts. Focus group meetings comprising of student representatives, subject teachers, and EAP teachers should be held at the start of the year to explore how grammar can be better taught and to determine common areas of grammar weaknesses to be addressed.

A more formalised teaching of common grammatical problem areas should be built into the SOWs. It is suggested that this be in a contextual and task-based manner and presented within a piece of discourse, with practice given within an assigned writing or speaking task. However EAP teachers should be encouraged to tailor this suggestion to meet class needs. Students should be given the tools for independent learning. Where necessary meta-language should be taught to enable students to use grammar books and understand teacher explanations and feedback. A good understanding of the methods used for identifying and correcting errors, including correction codes is important. An appropriate grammar book, used in class as part of the formal grammar teaching, for student reference, and / or as part of assigned homework, and the directing of students towards online grammar sites are other ways to ensure working independently is possible. When problems occur, small group feedback can be given during tutorial slots built into the timetable.

Within subject classes, there should be greater standardisation across teaching departments concerning the penalising of grammar and other linguistic errors in assessments. Further research also needs to be carried out to investigate the vocabulary teaching needs raised by subject teachers in this study.

This pedagogical topic is complex; the purpose of grammar teaching and the 'best' method are continually debated by practitioners and researchers alike. To further complicate matters, it is important to consider that, even if formal grammar teaching is incorporated into an EAP programme, it still does not address the major problem of linguistically adapting to different expectations within different text genres, disciplines, and departments. Evans and Morrison (2010) found that there is a "need to understand and appropriate the discourse practices of the

disciplinary community they [students] have chosen to enter" (p. 9) and recommend using key subject genres to contextualise the teaching of grammar. The cultural context in which the teaching occurs is paramount, so a "one-size-fits-all" approach to grammar teaching is not possible, nor appropriate. EAP teaching is still developing and faces several challenges; where grammar fits in to the syllabus is but one of them.

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Appendix 1

EAP teachers' questionnaire and raw results

EAP Teachers' Questionnaire		
1. How long have you been teaching at ?		
	% response	N
3 months	11	1
1 year	22	2
1.5 years	11	1
3 years	33	3
4 years	22	2
2. What classes do you teach?		
Gao kao only	0	0
Non-gao kao	56	5
Both	44	4
3. What are your TESOL qualifications? (You can choose more than one)		
CELTA / Cert.TESOL	88	7
DELTA / Dip. TESOL	25	2
MA	50	4
4. What EAP skills classes do you teach at SBC? (You can choose more than one)		
AW	89	8
AR	67	6
SDS	89	8
LNT	56	5
5. Regarding grammar, do you think it is the role of the EAP teacher to: (You can choose more than one)		
Teach it explicitly (i.e. in class) for all students as part of a scheme of work (SOW)	44	4
Teach it incidentally in class (e.g. as preparation for a reading activity)	67	6
Teach it as part of error correction / feedback in class	78	7
Teach it remedially for individuals to improve their ability	44	4
Teach it remedially for students / classes at risk of failing	22	2
Only highlight grammatical errors for students and suggest they learn / revise grammar independently	11	1
Have nothing to do with teaching grammar - this is the high school English teacher's job	0	0

6. In general, how often do you explicitly teach grammar (i.e. focus on a language point) in class?

I try to build in a grammar point into all of my lessons	0	0
In any class, when needed as a preparation for other work	78	7
Remedially in any class	56	5
When preparing for the exams	56	5
If it is part of the SOW or teaching materials	56	5
Never (PLEASE GO TO Q10)	0	0

7. If an individual student brings up a grammar point (and there is time to focus on it in class) do you usually: (Choose one only)

Bring it to the whole class's attention and teach / revise the grammar point	11	1
Bring it to the whole class's attention and teach / revise the grammar point only if you think it is a common problem	56	5
Bring it to the whole class's attention and refer them to their grammar books	0	0
Plan to teach the point in the next class explicitly	0	0
Plan to give homework related to the grammar point in the next class	22	2
Help the individual student during the class	11	1
Refer the individual to their grammar book	0	0
Arrange for a time to tutor the relevant student	0	0
Ignore it	0	0

8. What kind of grammar activities do you do IN CLASS? (You can choose more than one)

Exercises from a general grammar book	22	2
Exercises from an EAP grammar book	44	4
Self-created grammar exercises	67	6
Examples of student errors for correction	78	7
Peer marking of written work focussing on errors	33	3
Identification and correction of errors from T-created materials	56	5
Writing or speaking activities incorporating the target structures	33	3
Grammar games e.g. grammar auction	44	4
Never focus on grammar in class	0	0

9. In which classes do you tend to have a grammar focus?

AW	89	8
AR	22	2
SDS	56	5
LNT	11	1
Never have a grammar focus	11	1

10. When marking written work, does your error correction code / feedback: (Choose one)

Just tells students to check their grammar	0	0
Identify the grammar errors by type (e.g. missing article)	44	4
Highlight the grammatical errors but doesn't identify the type of error	0	0
Highlight the errors and provide the correct grammar	11	1
Use different correction techniques according to the level of the student	44	4
Never mentions grammar	0	0

11. Do you encourage your students to use the Grammar Check feature of Microsoft word?

Yes	67	4
No	33	2

12. If yes, have you explained / shown your students how to use the Grammar Check feature?

Yes	75	3
No	25	1

13. Do you ask your students to buy / have access to a grammar book?

Yes	100	6
No	0	0

14. If yes, how often do you ask the students to use their grammar book IN CLASS?

Never	67	4
Rarely	33	2

15. How often do you assign grammar homework?

Never	0	0
Rarely	8	5
Sometimes	17	1
Often	0	0

16. Do you think more of a grammar focus should be built into the SBC EAP SOWs?

Yes	60	3
No (go to Q19)	40	2

17. If you'd like to see more of a grammar focus, why is this?

- Because students make frequent grammar errors. They also need to be able to use more complex grammar e.g. present perfect, conditionals, modals etc.
- The grammar shouldn't be the focus but the support system which provides the rationale of the language. Therefore, grammar can help improve the accuracy especially in writing and have a better understanding of the language.
- The students have a lot of problems with grammar and seem to find it difficult working on it in their own time (this may be because of a lack of time).
- It's neglected. We assume students have a solid grammar base when many of them don't.

18. If you'd like to see more of a grammar focus, what kind of grammar activities/ teaching would you like to see in the SOWs?

- Proper exercises for passive. Review of verb tenses functions/ rules etc. Basically the 'sophisticated grammar' they are supposed to use as graded in speaking and writing exam criteria.
- Grammar should be embedded in the texts relevant to their subject study and should be taught in a communicative way.
- It should be integrated with the different skills (especially reading and writing).
- Exploring grammar in context - e.g. grammar used in model essays, language used in actual presentations, discussions etc.

19. If you don't teach grammar or would like to teach it more often but don't, what is / are the reason(s) for this? (You can choose more than one)

Not enough time in class/ in the course	67	4
It's not part of the SOW	67	4
Are not provided with any materials for it	33	2
Students not interested in learning about grammar	17	1
Don't feel confident teaching it	0	0
It's not the EAP teacher's role	17	1

Other (please specify):

Not enough time for this particular focus

To be more specific the students are already inundated with homework and I am equally snowed under with marking so my recommendations to do more grammar and I'll check it for you don't come to much. I do try to add quick explanations as and when they seem to fit.

- Requires a lot of prep-time to be integrated effectively

Appendix 2

Subject teachers' questionnaire and raw results

Subject Teachers' Questionnaire

1. How long have you been teaching at SBC?

	<u>% response</u>	<u>N</u>
Less than one year	25	4
1-2 years	44	7
2-3 years	6	1
3+ years	25	4

2. Which department do you teach in?

Biz / Economics	44	7
Engineering	19	3
Events Management	6	1
Maths	31	5

3. Which year(s) students do you teach?

Year one	56	9
Year two	44	7
Year three	13	2
Year four	19	3

4. What are TWO main problems your students have with their English and what areas do these affect (e.g. writing)?

Speaking and reading.

●Speaking weakness will affect when they have questions, it is hard for them to tell what are the questions. reading weakness will affect: when the questions has a long sentence, it is easy for them to misunderstanding the question.

●Lack of vocabularies thus affecting three basic skills in EAP (writing, speaking and listening).

Speaking and writing

1. Difficulty in extracting the essential information from articles. It could be seen as the inability to do speed reading, although this is obviously very difficult in a foreign language. It appears that all information is given equal weight. This carries over into their writing, where they have difficulty in getting to the core of an issue and bringing out the core of an issue in their writing. I have seen this problem with new graduates in industry many times.

2. How to raise questions and issues in a positive way. They need help with the language to use when they raise a disagreement.

3. And one small one. They could use help with what I call linking words/phrases. Those that can be used to bring together two issues, or thoughts, e.g. "as well as", "together with", "in addition".

●Like all kids, they can't make a logical argument in any language, even their own. Some of the problems emerge from English and some from logic.

●Note taking and explaining concepts verbally. I feel all aspects of the language are affected. Poor listening skills have a detrimental effect on the students ability to study in their own time and ask relevant questions.

●1. Lack of interest 2. Poor vocabulary

●Student's vocabulary do not try to understand EVERY word in a sentence.

●Organisation of essays inability to properly reference and paraphrase.

●Understanding of questions understanding of the teacher.

●Speaking - communicating with teachers and other students in class. Writing - often constructing sentences can be problematic for some students.

Writing & Reading

●No mandate from SBC to speak English so conversational skills are stalled

●Vocabulary - affects writing and speaking sentence structure - affects writing

●Understanding questions (reading) communicating face-to-face (speaking-confidence)

●Difficulty with abstract terms - comprehension Use of words no native English speaker would use - from translation dictionary?

5. In general, what do you do if a student has problems with their English?

Refer them back to their EAP teacher (if still studying EAP)	25	4
Refer them to an appropriate textbook or website	44	7
Help them yourself	81	13
Ignore it - your job is to focus on content	25	4

6. Do you penalise for English errors in your assessments?

Yes	38	6
No	63	10

7. If you penalise, on average what % of the assignment is English worth

50% of the final project mark is based on writing.
Small; and only if I cannot guess which word they should be using, or it still doesn't make sense. They need warning to re-read after they have used the spell checker. Only penalise if the intended content is not clear- I would estimate that about 5% of overall content is incomprehensible
Depends on the assignment - between 10-20%
25% for overall presentation (including English)
Writing assignments usually have a section for written English - maybe 5-10%

8. In your opinion, whose role is it to teach / revise general English skills e.g grammar and general vocab?

The high school teacher	0	0
The SBC EAP teacher	13	2
The high school teacher and the EAP teacher	47	7
The high school teacher, EAP teacher, AND subject teacher	40	6

9. In your opinion, whose role is it to teach Academic English Skills (e.g. giving presentations, using sources, writing a bibliography, discussion skills)?

The EAP teacher's role	20	3
The EAP and the subject teacher's role	80	12

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