

## CHALLENGES OF TEACHING GRAMMAR AT ELEMENTARY LEVEL: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ESL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

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### Abstract

One of the most important objectives of English language teaching in Pakistan is to make students competent in using correct English grammar. The researcher has observed many challenges which hinder the ESL teachers to achieve the objectives. So, the researcher attempted to study these challenges. The present study aims at exploring the challenges of teaching grammar at elementary level faced by ESL teachers in the Government schools of Bahawalpur City. It is also analyzed that whether these challenges vary according to gender or not. Qualitative research paradigm has been followed by the researcher for the present study. The data has been collected through an open-ended questionnaire. The analysis has been done thematically and in tabulated form. The results reveal that the challenges falling under the themes of experience, students, lesson, English and LI and facilities are greatly faced by the ESL teachers in different situations. However, teachers contradicted about one of the challenges falling under the theme of teachers' perception. The impact of gender and teaching experience regarding facing challenges also studied. So, there is an impact of gender as the female ESL teachers have been facing more challenges of teaching English grammar as compared to the male ESL teachers. It is also concluded that teaching experience helps the teachers to solve many challenges of teaching grammar. Lastly, pedagogical recommendations have been given to overcome the challenges of teaching grammar.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, Teaching Grammar, ESL Teachers, Challenges, Elementary Level.

### Introduction

Grammar acts as a bond that connects words, phrases and sentences in meaningful structures and makes the language effective for the purpose of successful communication (Abdullah,2015). Using grammatically accurate language can not only improve listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills but it also makes a good impression, build self-confidence and increase accuracy. According to Crystal (2004) "grammar is the structural basis of our ability to express ourselves. Being the non-native speakers of English language, the more we know about the rules and principles of grammar the more we can observe the meaning and effectiveness of the way we and others use language. It can help increase accuracy, detect uncertainty, and take advantage of the richness of expression available in English".Hall (2017) states that grammar offers the structural support which aids second language learners to avoid mistakes. It provides the rules that are fundamental in constructing the coherent sentences. These coherent sentences form well-constructed paragraphs in order to communicate the meanings. While talking about language learning, grammar is considered to be the most significant component. According to Allwright (2009), grammar is, in fact, an understanding of the rules that help us to use language skillfully. Though much attention is paid to the teaching of grammar, there are still many difficulties encountered by school teachers. One of the common challenges is the inadequate knowledge of grammar of students. Even students are uninformed of the common structural rules that are supposed to be learned at very initial level of their education. Therefore, when ESL teachers start teaching grammar at elementary stage, his efforts are in vain. Therefore, the teacher must know the current competence level of the students, because he cannot build a structure on a weak foundation. This means that the teacher must teach each grammar element based on the students' past knowledge and their aptitude. According to Abrar (2016) the teacher must master the strategy of moving from a simple grammatical structure to a complex structure and from a known concept to an unknown concept. Muhsin (2015) argues that the attitude of learners and ESL instructors towards grammar is also a leading challenge, as many learners find grammar class challenging and tedious. Even many teachers find it a tough area and they themselves are not very good at teaching grammar. There is a requirement to create a possible and comfortable setting in the classroom for efficient and productive teaching of grammar by means of various activities and exercises. ESL teachers also need to increase their grammar knowledge (Kelly, 2018). There is a need to focus on the teaching methods and strategies which teachers can employ in the lessons of grammar teaching so that they can deliver the concept to the students.

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For example; many ESL learners face difficulty in prepositions as same notions are stated by means of different prepositions in different languages. It implies that the teacher must teach a single concept at a time with the help of various hands-on activities and examples. Moreover, the difference in the structures of the languages also poses a challenge for learners. For instance, 'Urdu' being the national language of Pakistan is entirely different from English. The sentence structure of Urdu is subject-object-verb; however, the sentence structure of English is subject-verb-object. This contrast in structures makes it difficult for second language learners to learn the language. Thus, teachers need to make sure that students are aware of the differences between their native language and the structures of English before moving on to other grammar elements (Takala, 2016). Furthermore, there is one more upsetting state that many students cram the rules of grammar without developing any understanding or concept and therefore, they are unable to apply grammatical rules in their writing and speech (Yule, 2010). Thus, it can be concluded that the understanding of rules of grammar and structures should be ensured by the language teachers.

### Statement of Problem

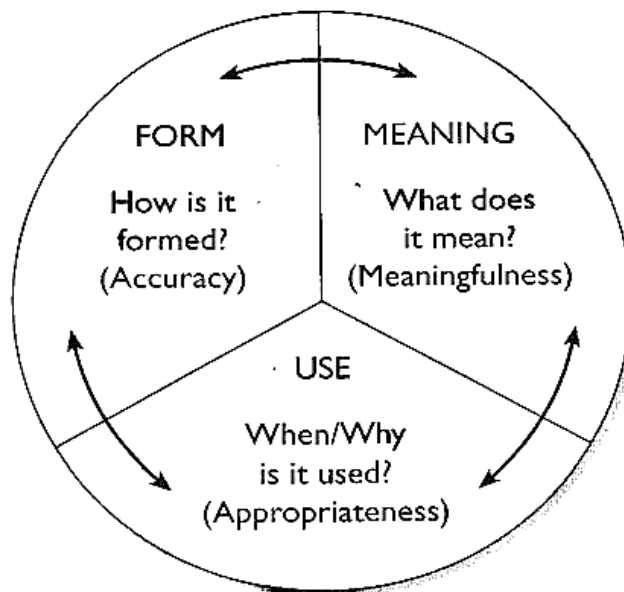
Grammar is an important component of language learning and teaching in the ESL context. In almost all schools, grammar is taught to students from primary classes. At the initial stage, the syllabus includes basic concepts and simple structures. More complex concepts of grammar are gradually incorporated into elementary grades. Based on this fact, primary school teachers assume that students are aware of the fundamental concepts and common structures of grammar and begin to teach grammar according to the current level of the students. Though, the worst situation is that when students lack the required grammar knowledge at the primary level. As a result, they are unable to comprehend the concepts that their teachers teach them. Besides, many teachers do not bother to ensure the validity and effectiveness of teaching of grammar (Biswas, 2018). Thus, teachers face various difficulties in the process of teaching grammar. With this in mind, this research was planned to explore the numerous challenges and difficulties faced by ESL teachers in grammar teaching at the elementary level and ways to overcome them.

### Literature Review

In general words grammar can be described as a set of principles and rules that allow language comprehension in an organized manner (Andrews, 1997a). Grammar acts as a structural base for any individual so that he can express his opinions, feelings, and interpretations with the help of accurate structures and correct meanings. The meanings of the words or phrases and the method of using the language are scrutinized by awareness of grammatical structures.

In order to learn a language, the first step is to identify the sounds of that language and then the most important step is to recognize and understand the rules and structures that govern that language (Ur, 2011). Therefore, it can be said that learning a language means learning the sentence structure of a language that cannot be omitted from the grammatical research. According to Radford (1989) grammar consists of a framework of linguistic capabilities that makes it easier for native speakers to use their own language. Ur (1996) defines grammar as a means to use the language and combine words (or bits of words) to construct extended semantic structures. For instance, in English, the first form of a third-person verb has two unlike forms, and if "are" is used with a singular subject, the outcome is typically improper or "non-grammatical." There are rules governing the formation of units of meaning in language: it is assumed that the student masters the language by knowing grammar and is able to express his thoughts in the appropriate language. Larsen-Freeman (2003) proposed a framework which shows the relationship between form, meanings and use of the grammatical structures. She argues that language must be taken as a whole; as grammatical units, semantic units and the pragmatics (context) play a significant role in order to convey the meanings (p. 35). The relationship between these three units can be seen in the figure below:

Figure 1. Three-perspective grammar framework given by Larsen-Freeman (2003: 35)



Harmer (1987) states that grammatical rules are imperative for language learning. It cannot be used by people unless it determines the order of the words. Moreover, the grammatical characteristics of a language shapes the way in which sentences are constructed in that language. In ESL classes many students remain muddled about grammar, and many times they have difficulty in voicing what they intent to say (Navaz, 2017). They lack confidence because they are unable to grasp or even recognize the forms and the structures used in English, especially when they find English in written discourses. As a result, they pay extra attention to the set of guidelines and the rules of language while creating an inaccurate and well-organized sentence.

### Grammar Teaching

Tuomasin2015 states that grammar teaching is perceived as the organization and application of different structures of grammar. Hedge (2000) also focuses on "presenting grammar" and "dealing with grammar" in his chapter on grammar. This is a very abbreviated description of grammar teaching. Undoubtedly, the demonstration and application of grammatical elements are involved in the teaching of grammar. Firstly, few grammar lessons may consist of a self-presentation (i.e. without any experience), whereas some may consist only of an experience (i.e. they lack presentation). Secondly, students themselves can be the part of grammar training to determine grammatical rules (i.e. lack of practice and presentation). Lastly, grammar teaching can also be planned by exposing learners to fabricated information to provide them with numerous examples of target structure. Thus, there is no practice and no presentation, at least in the sense of revealing the production of the structure.

Finally, grammar training is the key to any communicative task. It can be done through corrective feedback on the errors of the student that occur in the context of compliance (Dean, 2016). The comprehensive definition of grammar training is as follows:

Teaching grammar involves any teaching technique that draws the attention of learner to a particular grammatical form that helps them either understand it meta-linguistically, process it in perception and production so that they can master it (Ellis, 2006). An effective and efficient grammar teaching can be described as an instruction which comprises of several approaches and exercises to engage the students in the process of learning. According to Ellis (2004) "an effective and productive grammar teaching includes the instructional practice that focuses the attention of learners towards a particular grammatical form or a component in a way that it aids them to comprehend it meta-linguistically and to utilize it in understanding or production of discourse".

### Research Questions

The research questions created for the current study are as under:

1. What are the challenges faces by ESL teachers' regarding teaching grammar at elementary level?
2. Do these challenges vary according to the teachers' gender and experiences?

### Significance of the Study

The ESL Teachers in Pakistan face many hurdles or obstacles in way of teaching grammar effectively. This study was carried out to explore what challenges the teachers faced while teaching grammar at elementary level. This research would help serve as a guide for English language teachers.

### Research Design

The present study was ‘descriptive’ in its nature and form. The researchers collected the responses and opinions from the L2 teachers teaching at elementary level. The data collected was consisted of an open-ended questionnaire. This questionnaire was constructed to gather perceptions of the teachers about the challenges they encountered in their classrooms. A sample of thirty ESL teachers was randomly selected for the collection the data. Sample included fifteen male teachers and fifteen female teachers.

### Procedure of Data Analysis

Answers of the teachers were collected and analyzed by means of thematic analysis. The codes were given to the ESL teachers and their answers were recorded. Teachers’ responses were studied on the basis of the six themes as given below :

**Table 1.** Themes and their descriptions

Themes	Description
<b>Experience</b>	To analyze the role of teachers’ experiences and to what extent the experience of a teacher can help her/him to overcome challenges of teaching grammar.
<b>Students</b>	To examine that how many challenges teachers have to face due to students’ low motivation level, students’ negative attitudes and students’ inadequate proficiency level.
<b>Teachers’ Perceptions</b>	To get information about teachers’ perceptions regarding English grammar being boring for teachers and tough for students.
<b>Lesson</b>	To analyze about how much it is problematic to know about students’ actual needs and their background knowledge. It also includes to what extent teaching English grammar is time consuming.
<b>English and L1</b>	To explore how much the difference between structures of English and L1 is a challenge for ESL teachers.
<b>Facilities</b>	To find out to what extent poor classroom environment can be a challenge for an effective grammar teaching.

## Data Analysis

### Themes –wise Responses of Female Teachers

1. Majority of the L2 teachers agreed with the statement that experience played a significant role in grammar teaching whereas only 3 teachers disagreed with the statement.
2. In response to the second theme, the teachers stated that the negative attitude of students towards learning the grammar had great influence on the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching grammar. 05 teachers agreed to the notion whereas 03 teachers opined that students did not have negative attitude towards learning grammar. Grammar has fairly some influence. While, 03 teachers claimed that students don’t have negative attitude towards grammar and they didn’t consider it a challenge. Moreover, 12 teachers were of the opinion that the proficiency level of students regarding grammatical use and concepts pose a challenge whereas, only 03 teachers didn’t consider it a problem.
3. The third theme pertained to “perceptions of the teachers”. 05 teachers were of the opinion that understanding the concepts of grammar were difficult to understand. 08 teachers agreed to the notion while only 02 teachers went vice versa.
4. The fourth theme was related to the “lessons or lesson planning for teaching grammatical concepts. 06 teachers viewed that preparing lesson of English grammar was really a hectic activity. 08 teachers considered it somewhat time-consuming activity while only 01 teacher didn’t find any challenge in it.
5. The fifth theme was “English and L1 or mother tongue”. 05 teachers were of the opinion that it was a hurdle in teaching L2. the rest declined the statement.

6. The last theme was related to the “facilities” available in the classroom. 08 teachers responded that the poor classroom environment proved a hurdle in teaching. 04 teachers opined that it sometimes became a hurdle. Though, 03 teachers didn’t consider it a challenge in the first place. The tabulated information is given below:

**Table 2.**Challenges faced by Female ESL Teachers at elementary level

Challenges	Frequency	Total
<b>EXPERIENCE:</b>		15
<b>Experience Enhances Competence:</b>		
It really helps	12	
It does not help	03	
<b>STUDENTS:</b>		15
<b>Students’ Negative Attitude:</b>		
Powerful impact	07	
Somewhat impact	05	
No negative impact/attitude	03	
<b>Students’ Proficiency:</b>		15
In some cases	12	
Not a challenge	03	
<b>Students’ Low Motivation:</b>		15
Great challenge	08	
Sometimes a challenge	07	
<b>TEACHERS’ PERCEPTION:</b>		15
<b>Difficulty Level:</b>		
So much difficult	05	
Somewhat difficult	08	
Not difficult	02	
<b>Boring Subject:</b>		15
Boring	05	
Interesting/ not boring	10	
<b>LESSON:</b>		15
<b>Time Consuming:</b>		
Really time consuming	06	
Somewhat time consuming	08	
Not time consuming	01	
<b>Students’ Actual Needs:</b>		15
Difficult	02	
Sometimes/Somewhat difficult	09	
Not difficult	04	
<b>Background Knowledge:</b>		15
Difficult	05	
Somewhat difficult	02	
Not difficult	08	
<b>ENGLISH AND L1:</b>		15
<b>Difference Between Structures:</b>		
Great hurdle	05	
Sometimes/ some cases	06	
Not a challenge	04	



<b>FACILITIES:</b>		15
<b>Classroom Environment:</b>		
Great hurdle	08	
Sometimes hurdle	04	
Not a hurdle	03	

**Themes –wise Responses of Male Teachers**

1. Majority of the L2 teachers i.e. 14 agreed with the statement that experience played a significant role in grammar teaching whereas only 1 teacher disagreed with the statement.
2. In response to the second theme, the teachers stated that the negative attitude of students towards learning the grammar had great influence on the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching grammar. 06 teachers agreed to the notion whereas 07 teachers opined that students did not have negative attitude towards learning grammar. Grammar has fairly some influence. While, 02 teachers claimed that students don't have negative attitude towards grammar and they didn't consider it a challenge.
3. The third theme pertained to “perceptions of the teachers”. 13 teachers were of the opinion that understanding the concepts of grammar were difficult to understand. 02 while only 02 teachers went vice versa.
4. The fourth theme was related to the “lessons or lesson planning for teaching grammatical concepts. 04 teachers viewed that preparing lesson of English grammar was really a hectic activity. 08 teachers considered it somewhat time-consuming activity while only 03 teachers didn't find any challenge in it.
5. The fifth theme was “English and L1 or mother tongue”. 02 teachers were of the opinion that it was a hurdle in teaching L2. 07 teachers declined the statement.
6. The last theme was related to the “facilities” available in the classroom. 11 teachers responded that the poor classroom environment proved a hurdle in teaching. 02 teachers opined that it sometimes became a hurdle. Though, 02 teachers didn't consider it a challenge in the first place. The tabulated information is given below:

**Table 3. Challenges faced by Male ESL Teachers at elementary level**

Challenges	Frequency	Total
<b>EXPERIENCE:</b>		15
<b>Experience Enhances Competence:</b>		
It really helps	14	
It does not help	01	
<b>STUDENTS:</b>		15
<b>Students' Negative Attitude:</b>		
Powerful impact	06	
Somewhat impact	02	
No negative impact/attitude	07	
<b>Students' Proficiency:</b>		15
In some cases	13	
Not a challenge	02	
<b>Students' Low Motivation:</b>		15
Great challenge	06	
Sometimes a challenge	08	
Not a challenge	01	

<b>TEACHERS' PERCEPTION:</b>		15
<b>Difficulty Level:</b>		
So much difficult	06	
Somewhat difficult	06	
Not difficult	03	
<b>Boring Subject:</b>		15
Boring	06	
Interesting/ not boring	09	
<b>LESSON:</b>		15
<b>Time Consuming:</b>		
Really time consuming	04	
Somewhat time consuming	08	
Not time consuming	03	
<b>Students' Actual Needs:</b>		15
Difficult	04	
Somewhat difficult	02	
Not difficult	07	
Not necessary	02	
<b>Background Knowledge:</b>		15
Difficult	08	
Somewhat difficult	02	
Not difficult	05	
<b>ENGLISH AND L1:</b>		15
<b>Difference Between Structures:</b>		
Great hurdle	02	
Sometimes/ some cases	07	
Not a challenge	06	
<b>FACILITIES:</b>		15
<b>Classroom Environment:</b>		
Great hurdle	11	
Sometimes hurdle	02	
Not a hurdle	02	

### Conclusion

This study was an attempt in exploring the difficulties of ESL teachers in teaching grammar at the elementary level. Through an open-ended questionnaire, the data was amassed and thematically analyzed. The questionnaire surveyed the possible problems faced by ESL teachers in teaching English grammar. The results showed that the majority of the teachers faced challenges related to themes of experience, students' motivation, lessons planning, and the influence of L1 in teaching English as L2 at elementary level. The results of the study also suggested that the problems covered in the six topics also varied according to the gender and experience of the L2 teachers. The number of female teachers faced more difficulties in teaching grammar compared to the male teachers. The study concluded that gender had an evident impact on teaching grammar. As for the teaching experience of teachers, most male and female teachers found the teaching experience easier in teaching grammar.

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