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Eroding Boundaries: The Decline of Traditional Grammar in the Age of Communicative English

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Abstract

The landscape of English language teaching has undergone a radical transformation in recent decades, with the communicative approach gaining prominence over traditional grammar-oriented instruction. While communicative English emphasizes fluency, interaction, and real-world application, it has simultaneously diminished the attention once paid to structural correctness and the aesthetic dimensions of grammar. This article explores the gradual decline of traditional grammar in the face of communicative trends, highlighting the historical role of grammar, the pedagogical shifts that marginalized it, and the implications for learners, educators, and cultural heritage. The discussion argues for a balanced pedagogy where the functional strengths of communicative English coexist with the precision and intellectual beauty of grammar, ensuring both fluency and accuracy in language use.

Keywords: Traditional Grammar, Communicative English, Language Pedagogy, Linguistic Accuracy, Fluency vs. Accuracy, Language Education, NEP 2020

Introduction

Grammar, often called the backbone of language, has long been considered central to linguistic education. For centuries, English instruction revolved around parsing sentences, memorizing rules, and analysing structures that demonstrated logical thought and aesthetic beauty. Traditional grammar not only provided a framework for correctness but also instilled discipline and a sense of linguistic artistry.

However, the global rise of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the late twentieth century marked a paradigm shift. Rooted in sociolinguistic theory and influenced by real-world communication demands, CLT emphasized the learner's ability to interact effectively rather than their mastery of abstract rules. As a result, classrooms worldwide—including those in India—gradually shifted from grammar drills to role-plays, group discussions, and task-based activities.

In India, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 further endorsed communicative competencies as a priority for employability and global integration. While this direction has clear merits, it has also led to an unintended consequence: the diminishing role of traditional grammar in curricula and student consciousness. This article seeks to analyse this transformation, asking an important question: *What have we lost in neglecting the beauty of traditional grammar, and how can we restore balance?*

Historical Significance of Grammar

Traditional grammar was not merely a set of prescriptive rules but a cultural and intellectual practice. In colonial India, grammar was taught rigorously to create a disciplined class of clerks and administrators. Globally, grammar study was considered essential to understanding literature, rhetoric, and philosophy.

The practice of diagramming sentences, parsing classical texts, and identifying linguistic functions provided learners with cognitive discipline. Grammar connected learners to canonical writers like Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth, whose works depend heavily on grammatical elegance for their poetic and rhetorical power. Thus, grammar was a gateway not only to language but also to culture and aesthetics.

The Rise of Communicative English

By the mid-twentieth century, traditional grammar instruction faced criticism. Critics argued that rote learning of rules did not enable students to use English effectively in real-world contexts. Chomsky's theories of generative grammar and Hymes' notion of communicative competence influenced the development of CLT. The classroom shifted toward meaning-making activities – dialogues, role-plays, and collaborative tasks.

In India, the demand for English as a global skill reinforced this shift. For students

seeking jobs in multinational companies, call centres, or academic opportunities abroad, **fluency mattered more than correctness.** Grammar, once the cornerstone, became peripheral.

Where We Lost the Beauty of Grammar

1. **Loss of Precision: Learners** today may express ideas fluently but often compromise on accuracy. Errors in subject-verb agreement, tense consistency, and preposition use are common. The subtle distinction between "I have been working" and "I worked" often goes unnoticed, eroding the precision that grammar ensures.
2. **Decline in Literary Sensitivity:** Literature is deeply intertwined with grammar. Poetic devices such as inversion, ellipsis, or complex subordination rely on grammatical mastery. Without training in grammar, students struggle to appreciate how Milton's elaborate syntax or Shakespeare's rhetorical flourishes contribute to meaning.
3. **Superficial Competence:** Fluency achieved without grammatical awareness often remains superficial. Learners can "get by" in everyday interactions but falter in academic writing, professional correspondence, or advanced discourse. Grammar provides depth, allowing language to move from transactional to intellectual expression.
4. **Marginalization in Curriculum:** Examinations increasingly test oral communication, project work, or comprehension rather than detailed grammatical knowledge. This shift discourages both teachers and learners from devoting time to grammar instruction.

Pedagogical Implications

The decline of grammar raises serious pedagogical questions:

- **Teacher Challenges:** Educators often find themselves torn between teaching for exams (communication-focused) and ensuring students understand the mechanics of language.
- **Student Outcomes:** Students gain confidence in speaking but lack accuracy in writing, leading to errors in research papers, official documents, and job-related communication.
- **Cultural Disconnect:** Without grammar, learners become disconnected from classical and literary traditions that depend on syntactic richness.

Striking a Balance: Toward Integrated Pedagogy

The way forward is not to return to rote grammar teaching but to integrate grammar meaningfully within communicative contexts.

1. **Contextualized Grammar:** Grammar rules can be taught through conversations, role-plays, and writing tasks, making them functional and memorable. For example, teaching the past perfect tense through storytelling activities combines fluency with accuracy.
2. **Grammar as Enrichment:** Grammar should be reframed not as a set of prohibitions but as a **tool for richer expression**. Understanding relative clauses or rhetorical devices empowers students to write with sophistication.
3. **Digital Integration:** The use of digital theatre, AI tools, and interactive apps can make grammar engaging. Students may perform dialogues, create short plays, or use online editing tools to

notice and correct their grammatical mistakes in real time.

4. **Policy Alignment:** The NEP 2020 emphasizes critical thinking and creativity, which require both fluency and accuracy. Curriculum planners must therefore design syllabi where grammar is not sidelined but taught in harmony with communicative practices.

Conclusion

The decline of traditional grammar in the age of communicative English represents both progress and loss. It has democratized language learning by prioritizing fluency and practical communication. Yet, it has also eroded the intellectual depth, precision, and cultural appreciation that grammar nurtures. The future of English education lies not in choosing one over the other but in synthesizing fluency with accuracy. By blending communicative activities with a renewed respect for grammar, educators can ensure that learners gain not only the confidence to speak but also the artistry to write, analyse, and appreciate the language in its fullest beauty.

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