

# **United Doubts: Grammar Teaching in Pakistan**

## **Teachers & Learners' Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to investigate the nature of Pakistani teachers and learners' responses towards grammar teaching. Our population sample consists of 25 male and 25 female teachers from public sector institutions in Faisalabad city and 25 male and 25 female learners of 10<sup>th</sup> grade from those public sector institutions. We have designed a questionnaire to explore their responses. The questionnaire seeks to draw out the respondents' opinions about whether grammar should be a part of English language instruction or not. It also aims to find out teachers and learners' responses regarding structural and functional grammar, competence and performance based grammar instruction, the teaching of simple and complex structures, contextualized grammar instruction, explicit and implicit grammar teaching, integrated vs. separate lessons, the use of teacher feedback and the appropriate age to start grammar instruction. The results were analysed with the help of SPSS 19.0. We analysed the frequency of learners and teachers' responses and further cross - tabulated those responses with the gender variable. During the analysis of results, we realized that our respondents have no idea about various aspects of grammar instruction. Therefore, instead of interpreting their responses as

reliable indicators of their opinion, this study helps highlight the ignorance of Pakistani English language teachers with the central concepts involved in language teaching and their inability to keep abreast of the latest trends in the world of ELT at international level. This paper also stresses that teacher training is an effective solution to address this problem.

While going through an article titled “Current Issues in the Teaching of Grammar: An SLA Perspective” by Rod Ellis (2006), I was struck by the relevance and enormity of the issues raised by him. He has discussed various issues related to grammar teaching and offered some insights as answers to those issues. These concerns are of paramount importance for language teaching community all over the world.

We already know that grammar has long been the centre of language teaching and learning activity. As far back as fifteenth century, the problem of teaching grammar effectively has been at the heart of most language teaching debate. For centuries language teaching has been synonymous with grammar teaching until the rise of communicative language teaching (CLT) dealt a severe blow to this approach (Thompson, 1996). The communicative approach provided language teachers with a reason to abandon grammar teaching completely. It was a blessing for the non- native teachers who felt burdened with the load of grammar teaching and for the native teachers who now had a reason for not knowing the grammar of their own language (Swan, 2006). Under the influence of Corder (1967) and Krashen (1981), the role of grammar instruction in language teaching was minimized (as cited in Ellis, 2006). The language teachers believed that grammar should not be a part of language instruction. At best, it could be tolerated as a part of home study material (Lightbown as cited in Byrd, 2005). However, with the recent attention

being paid to focus on form movement of grammar teaching (Fotos, 1998), grammar has again become the core of a hot debate. There is no disagreement among linguists now as to the importance of grammar teaching in the language classroom (Burgess & Etherington, 2002). Nevertheless, the method of introducing and teaching grammar in the language classroom is a disputable topic.

Under the influence of discussion on cognitive psychology, it was assumed that the learners acquire the grammar of the target language if they are constantly exposed to the language itself (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004). But the growing body of current research shows that grammar is necessary for communication to take place (Thompson, 1996). Without some knowledge of grammar, the learners will not be able to make sense of the linguistic input presented to them. Fotos (1998) suggests a qualified return to grammar teaching as a solution. According to her, this does not mean a return to the “old ways” of grammar teaching with extensive drills, rule memorization and explicit grammar teaching. Instead, she suggests a focus on form based approach, incorporated in lesson before and after the communicative activities. Accordingly, she offers an amalgamation of CLT and grammar teaching. Thompson (1996) also advocates this shift in focus from “teacher covering grammar to learner discovering grammar (p. 11).

If grammar teaching has to be a part of language lesson, a very pertinent question is whether it should be explicit and presented as a separate lesson or incorporated in the lesson. There is a baffling number of options and techniques ranging from complete exclusion to implicit inclusion of grammar (Burgess & Etherington, 2002). The attitudinal study conducted by Burgess and Etherington (2002) shows that even at advanced level; learners expect explicit grammar instruction from the teacher. Burgess and Etherington also conclude that teachers

themselves prefer explicit grammar instruction. This preference on teachers' part may be motivated by a belief that explicit grammar teaching decreases teachers' burden, as they do not have to come up with interesting ways to introduce grammar explicitly in the language class. On the other hand, Swan (2006) opines that the answer to explicit/implicit dilemma should be based on the consideration of context. He claims that the level and needs of the learners needs to be taken into account while deciding how grammar is to be taught. It also depends on the nature of topic. Therefore, teachers have to consider all these variables before deciding upon explicit or implicit grammar teaching.

Yet there are others who support a combination of explicit grammar teaching and communicative approach. Nunan (1998) favors this blend and advocates for an organic perspective of grammar teaching. He argues that using CLT or explicit grammar teaching exclusively does not lead to effective language learning. Therefore, he promotes a systematic, easy to difficult approach to grammar teaching. This hierarchal approach to grammar teaching may be traced back to Pienemann's Teachability hypothesis (Pienemann, 1989). According to this hypothesis, learners acquire the grammar of the target language only when they are ready to learn it. One cannot teach everything to the learners en masse. So a consideration of learners' interlanguage is important while determining what aspects of grammar should be taught to the learners and how they are to be taught.

Another important distinction here is between second and foreign language context. Swan (2006) strongly recommends grammar teaching in foreign language context. Fotos (1998) draws on the same distinction. She suggests that grammar teaching methods used in second language situation may not be used in the foreign language context. Instead, an adapted version of grammar teaching should be used for foreign language teaching. This adaptation may include

explicit grammar teaching. She claims that explicit grammar teaching “may increase learner awareness of the target structure and improve accuracy in its use” (p. 307). Muncie (2002) advocates explicit grammar teaching in foreign language environment. Yet this explicit teaching will be based on limited components of grammar and generalized in nature.

This leads us to consider the importance of context in grammar instruction. The issue of contextualizing language structures has been discussed extensively in the previous decades. Long (1987) has stressed the importance of using target language structures in their natural, communicative contexts. Nunan (1998) points to the problems caused by those grammar textbooks that present decontextualized language structures. He suggests that language structures should be presented in communicative context so that the learners may explore the “communicative appropriacy” of those structures.

Gokhale (2010) discusses the same problem in the background of English language teaching in India. She considers it a major drawback in Indian teaching system, which results in dull, boring classes and unmotivated learners. She also stresses the need for English language teachers in India to increase the communicative competence of their students by contextualizing the language input presented to them.

Swan (2006) presents some examples of decontextualized language structures, which appear to be comical. Referring to these examples, he emphasizes the need for using authentic material for grammar teaching. He compares corpus authenticity with classroom authenticity and calls for using “realistic” examples to teach grammar. Nunan (1998) also states that he executes his organic approach to grammar teaching by using authentic data in the language classroom. He

clarifies that the use of unauthentic data complicates the grammar learning process instead of making it easy.

Having established that grammar is an essential part of language teaching, Ellis (2006) asks another relevant question. He addresses the issue of what grammar is to be taught in the language classroom. He agrees with the modern trend of grammar teaching which lays more stress on functional rather than structural aspect of grammar. Gokhale (2010) also supports a functional approach to grammar teaching. She considers this approach a key which can revolutionize the language teaching methods in India.

Swan (2006) makes an in-depth analysis of the issue at hand and gives detailed criteria for determining what type of grammar should be taught. He mentions comprehensibility, acceptability, scope of a rule, frequency of an item and its relevance as guiding principles for deciding which items and structures should be taught. We can see that these criteria are learner centered; thus, learners' needs are considered as the guiding force for determining what should be taught in grammar.

The next logical question raised by Ellis (2006) is how much grammar should be taught to the language learners. He finds that there is no definite answer to this question and more research needs to be done in order to formulate conclusive opinions.

However, this is not the only area that needs extensive research. All the above- mentioned issues and opinions may stand true in some contexts and be falsified in others. Moreover, all these opinions related to grammar teaching issues have been seen through the eyes of linguists or language teachers/theorists. Mostly, the researchers have ignored the view- point of learners in this debate. While Burgess and Etherington (2002) have hinted at the disparity that may exist in

teachers and learners' point of view about grammar teaching, their study does not incorporate the learners' perspective. So this present study aims to find out the nature of this disparity in English language teachers and learners' opinions and to confirm if it exists at all. Moreover, this paper aims to find out the opinions of Pakistani English language teachers and learners about the following questions:

1. Should grammar be taught in the English language classroom or not?
2. If yes, should it be taught explicitly or implicitly?
3. What grammar should be taught in the language classroom?
4. Which grammatical structures should be taught in the language classroom?
5. Should grammar teaching be contextualized or not?
6. Should grammar teaching be competence or performance based?
7. Should grammar lessons be integrated or taught separately?
8. Does corrective feedback by the teacher play any role in grammar teaching/learning?
9. What is the appropriate age for grammar instruction?

These questions are based on the issues raised by Ellis (2006).

## **Methodology**

The focus of our research is to find out the attitude of Pakistani English language teachers and learners towards grammar teaching in the language classroom. Moreover, we have aimed to find out answers to the other issues related to grammar teaching. For that purpose, a non-experiment, qualitative research has been conducted as it helps to “uncover information from information-rich samples” (Perry, 2005, p. 75). It is a survey research and exploratory in nature. As the most

important tool for survey research is written questionnaire, (McKay, 2006) we have used it as a tool for data collection.

## **Sampling**

We have used representative sampling paradigm to determine our population as it is considered the most effective paradigm for generalizing the results of the findings (Perry, 2008) to the target population. The population we have selected is experimentally accessible and it comprises of 50 public sector teachers and 50 students from public sector institutions. The students of 10<sup>th</sup> grade have been selected for this study. The population is further categorized on the basis of gender. 25 male and 25 female teachers make up our population sample. Similarly, an equal number of male and female learners have been selected from ten public sector high schools in Faisalabad city. Our sampling strategy is simple random (Perry, 2008) as the institutions have been chosen randomly. The respondents have also been selected through simple random sampling.

## **Instruments**

We have designed a questionnaire to probe the attitude of our respondents to grammar teaching. Zikmund (2000) claims that questionnaire based on Likert scale is the most frequently used tool for attitudinal study. So we have used the questionnaire based on the Likert scale offering anchor statements like strongly agree, agree, strongly disagree, disagree and uncertain.

The questionnaire has been divided into two parts. The first part is used to elicit personal information from the respondents. In addition, the second part is used to draw the participants' responses regarding our research questions. This part offers neutral statements about various aspects of grammar teaching and seeks to draw out participants' responses regarding those issues. These statements are related to the dilemma of grammar teaching, structural vs. functional



grammar, competence and performance based grammar instruction, teaching of simple and complex structures, incorporation of target and local culture in grammar teaching, explicit or implicit instruction, integrated and separate grammar lessons, the use of corrective feedback and the appropriate age to start grammar instruction.

We have added only one reverse question to check the validity of the preceding reply. As we asked the respondents if they thought grammar must be taught in the English language classroom we also asked the reverse question i.e. if they think grammar must not be taught in the English language classroom. The rest of the statements in the questionnaire reflect a particular view- point about grammar teaching. These view points are in no way exclusive and disagreement with one aspect of grammar teaching does not entail agreement with its opposite. For example, if the respondents agree that functional grammar should be taught in the English language classroom, it does not mean that structural grammar teaching should be abandoned. This questionnaire simply aims to seek teachers and learners' responses about various aspects of grammar teaching without passing or drawing any value judgments.

## **Data Collection**

As mentioned earlier, the schools and the respondents were selected randomly for data collection. During the collection of data, I faced certain problems as well. Many administrators refused to allow me to collect data claiming that they did not want to be bothered or that all the teachers were engaged in classes at that time and could not be disturbed. But the most important problem was to make our respondents, teachers as well as learners, understand the concepts of grammar teaching. Most of the concepts introduced through the questionnaire were newspeak to them. The teachers had no idea about explicit or implicit grammar teaching, or competence vs.

performance based instruction. They had no clue about contextual grammar teaching and no clear opinion as to what culture, target or local, should be incorporated in grammar teaching.

The learners also presented an array of interesting responses when presented with the questionnaire. Some of them were baffled that their opinions should ever be asked about anything related to teaching. We should keep in mind that the educational set up in Pakistan, especially in public sector institutions, is largely teacher centered where learners have no say in the classroom. Yet some of the learners felt thrilled and excited thinking that their teachers were going to modify their teaching on the basis of the results of this study. Amid all this excitement and wonder, I had to intervene to make them understand the concepts that the questionnaire was asking their opinions about. All those aspects of grammar teaching and their implications were alien to the learners as they were introduced to them for the first time. This should not be surprising for us as the learners of 10<sup>th</sup> grade are not supposed to know about the technical aspects of grammar teaching. But what is worth noticing is that learners were surprised to find that such possibilities and ways of grammar teaching ever existed. In this regard, the teachers too were no exception. Although many of them held professional degrees such as Bachelors in Education, they were unfamiliar with the commonplace notions and terminologies that make up teaching register. When the concept of deductive grammar teaching was explained to a teacher, she felt delighted that such a possibility existed. Many times, I had to intervene and make the respondents understand with the help of examples other than those already given in the questionnaire. Most of the teachers responded that they wanted it all, explicit as well as implicit, integrated and separate lessons too, target culture incorporated with the local culture and grammar teaching steeped in both of them.

The respondents also ignored the implications of the responses they chose to make. For example, when asked about the appropriate age to start grammar instruction, they responded that learners should be old enough to understand what they were learning and chose 15 years as the appropriate age for grammar instruction. Interestingly, most of the learners who responded to this questionnaire belonged to the age group of 14 to 15. When I further asked if they thought they should not have been exposed to grammar in their early years of education, they claimed that was not what they meant and modified their responses to five or ten years as the appropriate age to start grammar teaching.

## **Design and Statistical Procedure**

The results of the questionnaire have been analysed using SPSS 19.0. The frequency of teachers and learners' responses with reference to different questions has been measured. On the basis of this frequency check, we have explored the nature of Pakistani teachers and learners' attitude towards grammar teaching. The gender based differences have also been measured by cross tabulation which is believed to be a valid method for studying correlation between two factors (Ary; Jacobs; Razavieh & Sorenson, 2009)

## **Results**

The results of our study depict some baffling patterns. As far as the issue of grammar teaching is concerned, there is no debate at all. 100 % students and 91.8 percent teachers agree that grammar is an essential component of target language teaching. The results of the reverse question also endorse this point as 87.8 % learners and 80 % teachers disagree with the idea that grammar teaching should be abandoned. And when it comes to what type of grammar should be taught in the English language classroom, 96 % learners rejected structural model of grammar teaching

and 60 % of them agree that functional grammar should be taught in the language classroom. Teachers endorse the same opinion and 69.4 % of them support the teaching of functional grammar as opposed to 46.9 who favor structural grammar teaching. Moreover, there are no prominent gender based differences in these opinions. Yet it is observed that female students (68 %) are more inclined to favor functional grammar teaching as compared to male learners (52 %).

As for the competence and performance based teaching, 70 % learners and 89.4 % teachers agree that grammar teaching should be performance oriented. Conversely, a large number of teachers i.e. 72 % also favor competence based instruction.

90 % of the learners opine that grammar teaching should include complex as well as simple structures. In this regard, teachers appear to be confused about their stance as we see that 60 % of them support the teaching of simple structures and 53.1 % agree that complex structures should also be taught. Moreover, gender based differences are manifested by the teachers as 64 % females support the teaching of complex structures while 52 % male teachers disagree with this point of view.

The contextualization of grammar teaching is another issue that attracts varying opinions. 54 % learners support the inclusion of both target and local culture in grammar teaching while an overwhelming majority of teachers i.e. 94 % believes that grammar should be taught in the context of target culture. But 55.1 % of them also support the incorporation of local culture in grammar instruction. Yet again 93.9 % of them agree that grammar should be taught in the general context free from target and local culture.

The analysis also shows that both teachers and the learners favor explicit grammar teaching. 54 % learners prefer it to implicit grammar instruction. Gender based differences

surface again among the learners as the majority of female learners (88 %) oppose the implicit grammar instruction. 88.1 % teachers also prefer explicit over implicit grammar instruction. But 68 % of them also agree that grammar should be taught implicitly.

Furthermore, 90 % learners and 71.1 % teachers maintain that grammar should be taught in separate lessons instead of integrating them into regular lessons. Yet again, 81.6 % of the teachers agree that grammar teaching should be integrated.

The attitude towards corrective feedback by the teachers presents some very interesting results. 90 % learners and 92 % teachers agree that teachers should provide immediate corrective feedback to the learners. And there are no gender based differences in this regard.

As for the appropriate age to start grammar instruction, 100 % students agree that learners should be exposed to target language grammar in the first ten years of their lives. Whereas 54 % teachers believe that grammar instruction should start by the age of 10.

In the last two responses, it appears that teachers and learners are sure about their responses as there are no opposing opinions about these issues.

## **Discussion**

The above mentioned statistics show that there is no disagreement among teachers and learners about the importance of grammar teaching. When I sought the opinions of teachers and learners in informal interviews, they all claimed that no language could be taught and learnt without focusing its grammar. This is in line with the international trend of focus on form movement in language teaching. But the opinions of Pakistani teachers and learners may not be viewed as a reflection of latest international trends. In Pakistan, language teaching has traditionally been

identified with teaching the grammar of that language. While the international language teaching diverted from and later returned to grammar teaching, the Pakistani language teaching approaches have always been concerned with and based upon the traditional concept of grammar teaching.

Ellis (2006), Gokhale (2010) and Swan (2006) also share the Pakistani teachers and learners' preference for functional grammar as opposed to structural grammar. However, most of them have no idea about the functional grammar teaching as the English language curriculum in Pakistani public sector institutes is based only on the structural aspects of the grammar. So when they were exposed to the idea of functional grammar teaching as an alternative to structural grammar teaching, they accept the idea without being aware of its true implications.

The next issue is competence vs. performance based grammar instruction. As mentioned in the previous section, an overwhelming majority of teachers and learners believe that grammar instruction should aim to enhance the linguistic performance of the learners. This may reflect the Pakistani educationists' recent obsession with the primacy of speech and accuracy of oral output by the language learner. But a large number of teachers have also supported competence oriented teaching. So we are forced to conclude that either the teachers have no idea about competence or performance based grammar instruction as we suspected during our data collection. Alternatively, they may believe in the incorporation of both competence and performance based strategies.

Some interesting results are seen with reference to the issue of teaching simple and complex structures. A majority of learners favored the teaching of complex grammatical structures. When asked by the research, in informal discussion, whether they should be taught

complex structures or the grammar instruction should be limited to simple structures like parts of speech, they unanimously claimed, “We should know it all”. As obviously, it is not possible for them to know it all; their ready and willing response to learning complex structures came as a surprise. Of course, the respondents did not consider the level and age of the learners when the instruction of complex structures should start. Here again the teachers are divided in their preference for simple and complex structures. So a further issue may be to find out their opinions about the level of the learners’ competence and the nature of complex structures that can be instructed at those various levels.

One very important but controversial issue is the inclusion of target or local culture in grammar teaching. As mentioned earlier, learners’ opinions are divided about this issue. In the oral interviews, they again claimed that grammar teaching should be embedded in target as well as the local culture. But the teachers have a different opinion as 94 % of them favor target culture settings for grammar instruction. Some of the teachers refused to accept that the incorporation of local culture might also be an option in grammar teaching. They claimed that Pakistanis use British variety of English so the learners should also be taught the grammar of the target language in the same context. This idea gains enormous importance when seen in the perspective of colonization phenomenon. British English, being the language of the colonizers in the sub-continent, still carries a lot of prestige and is generally accepted by the masses as the only acceptable variety. However, it is important to note that no educational policy or curricula developed by the ministry of education has explicitly supported or documented this preference for the British variety of English. Moreover, when asked by the researcher if they could describe the salient features of British variety of English, they failed to come up with any explanations. There is another dichotomy as 93.9 % teachers favor the decontextualized teaching of grammar

where the structures of grammar in general should be taught to the learners without associating those structures with any particular culture. So again we are in a dilemma whether to accept their opinions as they are or to believe that they have no idea about contextual grammar teaching. It is important to mention here that an average public sector teacher in Pakistan has no role in policy making in syllabus designing. That is why most of them are not trained to analyze critically whatever they are teaching in their classrooms. In the absence of training for curriculum development and syllabus designing, they are unable to analyze if they are teaching grammar in context and if yes, what context it is.

As for the explicit vs. implicit grammar instruction, teachers and learners prefer the explicit teaching practices. This finding echoes the results of the study conducted by Burgess and Etherington (2002). Their study also shows that teachers and learners prefer explicit grammar instruction as they feel it is more satisfying. The teachers are divided on this front too as more than half the respondents favor implicit grammar too. So we may advocate for a combination of explicit and implicit teaching techniques decide on the basis of the nature of structures and the level of the learners.

During an informal conversation between the researcher and some respondents, one of the participants exclaimed that they should be taught in the “normal” way. The normal way here meant the usual practice of separate sessions for grammar when the teacher focuses on the teaching of grammatical structures and no attention whatsoever is paid to the practical use of those structures. This leads us to the issue of integrated and separate lessons for grammar. The learners favor explicit grammar instruction in separate lessons where a large portion of teaching time is dedicated to the teaching of grammatical structures and drills and translation exercises.



But the teachers prefer integrated grammar lessons where grammar instruction is incorporated with the communicative activities.

When the learners were asked if their errors should be corrected by the teacher or not, they gravely responded “How shall we learn if the teachers don’t correct us. We ’ll keep making the same mistakes!”. The teachers forwarded the same point of view although some of them murmured that perhaps learners could learn by trial and error. The researcher further deduced by her discussion with the learners that they were afraid to make mistakes and their overwhelming concern was that mistakes or errors might result in poor grades in examination. So the teachers must correct them or they will never be able to identify and correct their errors on their own.

The last issue to discuss here is the age when grammar teaching should start. All the respondents claim that five to ten years is the right time for introducing grammar to the learners. Some respondents claimed that the earlier they started the better. They believed that it would strengthen their knowledge of grammar if they were taught grammar at the early age. Again they did not consider and mention the level of complexity of grammatical structures that should be taught at this early stage.

## **Conclusion**

When we set out to conduct this study, our aim was to find out the teachers and learners’ responses to different aspects of grammar teaching. But we reached a destination very different from the one that we had envisioned in the beginning. Far from obtaining some informed opinions about grammar teaching, we found out that our respondents had no idea that those facets of grammar teaching even existed. Leaving aside the learners who may have no idea about the technicalities of teaching, the teachers themselves had no clue as to what was being asked of

them. So we arrived at the conclusion that instead of asking what was their opinion about certain concepts we should better have asked if they had any idea about those concepts and their implications.

This study may be eye opening for our teacher trainers and planners who are responsible to ensure the availability of qualified teachers. We wonder about the proficiency level of the teachers, as most of them were unable to make sense of simple sentences of English. It is important to mention that the Flesch Reading scale of our questionnaire is 62.6 and the according to the Flesch –Kincaid grade level, it is rated at 7.8 points. So ideally the English language teachers should be able to understand the questionnaire which an American eighth grade student can understand. Granted that English is not the native language of those teachers, yet they are language teachers with years of field experience! It appears that our teachers are in dire need of training programs and courses that may help them keep abreast of the international trends in the world of ELT.

We started our study with the aim of finding answers to some issues raised by grammarians and discussed in the books of ELT. In this journey we took the way that our results led us to. During the analysis we found out that our respondents are not concerned with these problems. Their dilemma is not to choose between structural and functional grammar, or explicit and implicit grammar teaching etc. Their problem is that they are simply not aware of the existence of these notions. They are blissfully ignorant of the alternative ways of teaching grammar than those they have been using for years. No education policy and no revised curriculum in Pakistan has ever pin pointed this situation. This is a problem not addressed in any ELT planning. Over the years, Pakistani educationists have been clamoring over the reasons that led to the failure of our education policies. But they never once realized that no matter how practical, advanced and

realistic our policies are, they will fall short of achieving their aim if the English language teachers fail to implement them in class and incorporate them in their teaching practices.

Since our problem is extraordinary and belongs to the world not found in books, we need to find unusual solutions. We need to train our teachers and make them realize that whatever they study, that is if they do, in teacher trainee courses may also have practical use in the classroom.

Here it is important to mention that during my data collection, I met many English language teachers who were not qualified to teach English. Most of them were teaching English because they were senior teachers or just because they have been teaching English for past many years. Although many subject specialists have been hired in public sector institutions, there is still a large number of teachers out there who are not qualified and trained to teaching English language.

In order to address these problems, I suggest that training program should be a prerequisite for appointing teachers at every level. Many Pakistani English language teachers enter the world of teaching without any professional training. Once they are in service many of them resort to these training programs merely because it can earn them promotion and higher salaries. We need to change this mindset and make our English language teachers realize that ELT is dynamic in nature and they must keep abreast of the latest trends in ELT if they want to succeed in their fields.

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