

From an Idealized System to Contextualized Grammar Instruction



Linguistics

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Abstract

The central role of grammar in the study of language has become an established tenet of modern linguistics. Outside the status of this subject has in recent decades been the subject of much controversy. Currently there is a movement which again recognizes the importance of grammar in general education. The fundamental purpose of the language is to make sense to communicate intelligibly. For this we need to share a single system of communication. The rules controlling the way a communication system works are known as its grammar and both sender and recipient need to use the same grammar if they are to understand each other. This work mentions the role and importance of grammar in foreign language teaching. It focuses especially on the need to change from artificial prescriptive grammar teaching to contextualized grammar instruction.

Grammar teaching and learning is necessary in foreign language teaching. Ur (1988) puts it "You cannot use words unless you know how they should be put together." However, the function and method of teaching grammar have been argued for decades. Some instructors maintain that it is not necessary to teach grammar. So many teachers abandon teaching grammar. As a result, the students make rapid progress in speaking and listening more than before, but their written English still lacks accuracy.

For the past decades English grammar teaching in Albania has been characterized by classes taught in the mother tongue, with little active use of the target language, long elaborate explanations of the intricacies of grammar. Often the only drills have been exercises in translating, disconnected sentences from the target language into the mother tongue. As a result, the traditional method has produced unsatisfactory teaching results and students lack the ability to speak and understand English. There is evidence of inconsistency between the goal of teaching and real classroom teaching, ignorance of teachers and learners, inappropriate textbooks, and negative learning attitudes.

The goal of teaching is to enable students to communicate in the target language. But in real classroom teaching, the goal becomes to help students get high marks. Generally, we, teachers should agree that our students have problems with style. Even if they are able to construct correct sentences their English is far from "natural". They learn rules, lists of idioms, phrasal verbs or prepositions but can not use them appropriately. Such problems seem to result from artificial prescriptive grammar teaching which is favored by both teachers and students. The former prefer to organize their courses around certain rules or forms because this makes assessment of student's progress relatively easy-only check how well the rules have been mastered. The latter, in view of the final exam want to have clear, ready-made guidelines, which give them a feeling of security but make their language study superficial and ineffective, since the result often is that students are not aware of the meaningfulness of grammatical choices in real communication. Especially their mastery of levels of formality is frequently insufficient.

Most subjects of language teaching use authentic language materials in their practical classes especially in listening, reading and writing. The situation is quite different in the field of grammar. Here most teachers use traditional reference and practice books which employ artificial formulated, de-contextualized sentences and do not provide appropriate authentic input. Most of the teachers explain grammar in the mother tongue, they confine themselves in giving grammatical definitions only, they do not make use of grammatical activities which could give students possibilities of practicing communication. The subject should make students aware of how English grammar is used for communicating meanings in real situations, in various types of discourse and to make their own language production appropriate.

Also students hold negative attitudes towards grammar learning. Many students feel grammar teaching has little effect on students' practical ability to use English, especially in listening and speaking. They think the presentation and explanation of grammar rules in class are dull and less motivated.

The textbooks are not appropriate. In any language teaching-learning situation, success depends on giving proper consideration to both human elements, and also to the non-human elements such as the textbook, the syllabus est. From a study on the teaching and learning the English language in Albania carried out by the Ministry of Education and supported by the British council in 2003 it was found out that most of the teachers used text books compiled by Albanian authors approved by the Ministry of Education and Science. They were characterized as out of fashion, boring, overburdened with mechanic exercises and a lack of creativity. They didn't give enough instructions about the methodology of teaching grammar. As a result new textbooks by foreign authors were introduced which improved in a way the situation but not completely because they also have not proved to be absolutely successful.

All these problems have given rise to working out the best model of teaching grammar to would - be English teachers at university level, the need for updating the English grammar course following the new developments within language teaching. It has resulted in enriching course content with new elements and developing the teachers' awareness of different methods of teaching, the selection of which depends on the learners and their learning stage.

In the field of grammar teaching the updating of the syllabus is done owing to the new place and role of grammar in language acquisition and language teaching. This updating consists in reorganization of the traditional content of grammar according to the meaning embedded in grammatical structures. (grammatical forms are taught to show students how they can perform specific language functions).

According to Widdowson, H. G in his book “Teaching language as communication” the following would be of use: 1) Knowledge of grammatical structure – how syntactically well formed utterances are composed and 2) knowledge of grammatical use – how grammatical structures are employed in discourse. The intention is to raise students’ communicative competence i.e. make them use English grammar in pragmatically and socially successful ways. As a result they should be able successfully to communicate whatever meaning they need in ways appropriate to situations they find themselves in. The organizing principle of the course is the progress from studying the idealized language system presented in grammar practice books (part one), through contextualized grammatical item analysis (part II) to text feature analysis (Part III). In this way students deal with real English used in various text types (genres) both written and spoken.

As has been mentioned part I focuses on major aspects of English Grammar. At this age grammar is viewed with a lot of generalizations and simplifications. Hence they learn an idealized system rather than the real one. Part II mainly deals with big fields of English grammar for example the tenses, the passive or reported speech. Students not only should practice them in traditional exercises but also see them at work i.e. in such texts which demonstrate many aspects of usage of the form discussed.

The basic text-based tasks here will be item recognition in carefully selected texts ex: horoscopes for models, instructions for imperatives, narrative prose for the tenses. Recognizing particular grammatical items and seeing them used in real communication should help transfer students’ theoretical knowledge of the item into their competence.

Part two moves somewhat away from the idealized system, towards contextualized–grammatical item analysis. The teacher selects an authentic British or American English text to provide comprehensive illustration of the grammar problem to be discussed. Students analyze the passage with the special focus on the author’s grammatical choices which should involve trying to account for his/her choosing one grammatical form rather than its alternative. As the course progresses it should move towards context dependant grammatical features, best observable in texts. This means that grammatical rules should be presented and explained implicitly in certain contexts. And the teacher should make up a situational context for practice. What is important in this part is that students do not see grammar as an abstract field of study they need to cover in order to pass their exams. Working with discourse which has been used for authentic communication should help students develop a good understanding of how English grammar operates.

In part three the scope of study is grammar at the discourse level. It provides for such textual features as cohesion, theme /rheme development, focus est. The typical tasks include gap- feeling, following the connections, stylistic analysis, reformulation, text- comparison, translation. Apart from the books which can serve as sources of material the teacher ought to design his own tasks and activities based on materials such as current news, magazines, TV programs or any other spoken texts or real communicative activities

Thus in Part I language is looked at as if from afar. Part II reduces the distance by providing students with real-life language materials; however language is still analyzed from the point of view of form rather than function (a grammar problem is intention for text selection) This tendency is reversed in Part III, in which the object of analysis is text (or genre).

This syllable is very cyclical: it gives students an opportunity to look at most difficult aspects of English grammar in each stage of the subject, but each time from different perspective. It has been conceived in the way that should allow students to progress evenly, to convert their acquired rules and “building blocks” into analyzed language, to develop their language awareness and, in consequence, their communicative competence.

In each part the teacher should decide on how much grammar really needs to be taught. If students are preparing for a Cambridge Exam then grammar will play a large role in our lesson plans. On the other hand, if we are teaching a business class, linguistic formulas may play a larger role as we provide the learners with standard phrases for written documents, participating in meetings, etc. The more learning resources we have the easier it will be for you to employ different strategies when teaching your students grammar. For example, a group of students who like using computers could use the computer to study a certain grammar task while another group who prefers spoken explanations might prefer to have us explain the point with a number of examples. Obviously, the more varieties of learning opportunities the better our chances are that each student will be able to learn the grammar point well.

Part of the subject syllable is that each topic be accompanied by didactic elements. In this way students are given methods and strategies of dealing with grammar points. According to Ur (1988) the following are four stages of explaining grammatical issues: a) Presentation; b) Isolation and explanation; c) Practice; and d) Test.

a) Presentation. The aim of the presentation is to get the learners to perceive the structure—its form and meaning—in both speech and writing and to take it into short-term memory (Ur, 1988). Teachers often read aloud the dialogue or the short story in the textbook, and then the students are asked to read, repeat, or retell. Teachers will ask students to make sentences with the pattern drills learnt. The teacher usually begins by presenting the class with the text in which the grammatical structure appears Its aim is to get the learners to perceive the structure(its form and meaning in both speech and writing and to take it into short term memory Often a story or short dialogue is used which appears in a written form and is also read allowed by the teacher or student. Where the structure is very simple the presentation may be a sample sentence which serves as a model for immediate practice. Ex. He is a doctor (not he is doctor)

b) Isolation and explanation

Isolation and explanation. According to Ur, the objective is that the learners should understand these various aspects of the structure. At this stage, teachers focus on the grammatical items: the form, the meaning, the function, and the rules. At this stage we move away from the context and focus on the grammatical item what rules govern it, what it sounds, looks like, means. The objective is that the learner should understand these various aspects of the structure. In some classes we may need to make use of the students native language to explain or translate. However when the structure is very simple or the students tend to learn the language intuitively rather than intellectually it may be entirely omitted

c) Practice

Practice. ... whose aim is to cause the learners to absorb the structure thoroughly; or, to put it another way, to transfer what they know from short-term to long-term memory (Ur, 1988). At this stage, teachers design a series of exercises for classroom practice, or home assignments, this can make the learners absorb the grammar rules completely. The practice stage consists of a series of activities done both in the classroom and for home assignments whose aim is to cause the learners to absorb the structure thoroughly or in other words to transfer what they know from short term to long term memory

d) Tests

The main objective of tests within a taught course is to provide feedback, without which neither teacher nor learner would be able to progress very far. We have to know where we are in order to know there to go next (Ur, 1988c). A test is a good way to check whether the students have mastered the grammar rules they have been learning. It is also an evaluation of teachers' work. Learners do tests in order to demonstrate to themselves and to the teacher how well they have mastered the material they have been learning. The main objective of tests is to provide feedback without which learners would be able to progress very far. Of the 4 stages the practice stage is most important in that it is through practice that the material is most thoroughly and permanently learned.

The following are some activities:**1. Adjectives position of adjectives before nouns.**

Materials: a set of ten cards or slips of paper on each of which an adjective noun phrase is written: *a tall man, a fat boy, a brown cow.*

Procedure one student is given a phrase and tells the others only what the noun is Then they have to guess the entire phrase for ex if the knower gives the noun table the others might guess *a square table, a small table est.*

2. Yes/no Wh questions, the introduction, of do/ does.

Material: two miss mashed pictures of a bedroom.

Procedure: Students are given the pictures of a bedroom. They must be told in advance not to look at each others pictures Through asking students have to find the same things in different positions (*do you see a dog in your picture ?, Where is it ect).*

3. Comparisons Comparative degree of adjectives.

Material: pictures of two different people.

Procedure: The students are given two pictures with data for each one specifying the persons name, age, height, weight and other information. Students should share their information orally and generate a series of sentences comparing the two people in their pictures. In this way they practice the comparative degree of adjectives

4. Narrating past tenses

Material: a story.

Procedure: Listen carefully to the story once or twice then narrate it to the class. Discuss why omissions and changes occur especially in grammatical points.

5. Indirect objects

Material: realia

Procedure: The teacher starts by throwing a ball to a student and then elicits from the class what he has done. Then he writes it on the board *You threw the ball in the air and caught it.* Then he throws it to a student and elicits from the class *You threw the ball to Jose* and writes the sentence on the board. Then the teacher changes his focus to ball by displaying several different things you could throw and then asks what did I throw to Jose. The teacher wants to elicit different indirect movements *You threw him the pencil* It is of great importance to draw the attention of the students to the fact that the name of the person you are giving something to can come before the name of the object you throw.

In conclusion we can say that grammar taught in isolation is ineffective. Since grammar is the most critic aspect of the foreign language teachers should work hard to make it more comprehensive and a proper contributor in communication. To find ways of developing a person's knowledge about grammar continues to be an important goal of contemporary educational linguistics.

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