

Aspects of Grammar Teaching Techniques

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Abstract. The present work was meant to be a support of grammar teaching and learning at different levels of instruction. The paper offers some perspectives on the teaching of grammar and some models of instruction. The goal of grammar instruction is to enable students to carry out their communication purposes.

Keywords: Teaching, Grammar, Exercise, Tasks, Practice.

1. Introduction

Grammar is the system of a language. People sometimes describe grammar as the "rules" of a language; but in fact no language has rules. If we use the word "rules", we suggest that somebody created the rules first and then spoke the language, like a new game. But languages did not start like that. Languages started by people making sounds which evolved into words, phrases and sentences. No commonly-spoken language is fixed. All languages change over time. What we call "grammar" is simply a reflection of a language at a particular time.

Jeremy Harmer sees the grammar of a language as "the description of the ways in which words can change their forms and can be combined into sentences in that language" [1]

2. Children Learners Versus Adults Learners

The age of the learners is very important. Research suggests that children are better at picking up language implicitly, rather than learning it as a system of explicit rules. Adult learners, on the other hand, do better at activities which involve analysis. Cultural factors play an active role in the success of classroom activities. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been criticized for its Western beliefs such as learner-centeredness, relaxed attitude towards accuracy. Its critics argue that CLT is an inappropriate methodology in those cultural contexts where the teacher is regarded as a fount of wisdom, and where accuracy is valued more highly than fluency.

3. Teaching Techniques

Any generalization about the 'best' way to teach grammar – what kinds of teaching procedures should be used, and in what order – will have to take into account both the wide range of knowledge and skills that need to be taught, and the variety of different kinds of structures subsumed under the heading 'grammar'. [2] Thus the need to organize the teaching of grammar structures arises.

The following organization (divided into four stages) is only a general framework into which a very wide variety of teaching techniques will fit:

- Presentation
- Isolation and explanation
- Practice
- Test

3.1. Presentation

We usually begin by presenting the class with a text in which the grammatical structure appears. The aim of the presentation is to get the learners to perceive the structure – its form and meaning – in both speech and

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writing and to take it into short-term memory. Often a story or short dialogue is used which appears in written form in the textbook and is also read aloud by the teacher and/or students. As a follow-up, students may be asked to read aloud, repeat, reproduce from memory, or copy out instances of the use of the structure within the text.

3.2. Isolation and explanation

At this stage we move away from the context, and focus, temporarily, on the grammatical items themselves: what they sound and look like, what they mean, how they function – in short, what rules govern them. The objective is that the learners should understand these various aspects of the structure. In some classes we may need to make extensive use of the students' native language to explain, translate, and make generalizations.

In more academic classes, or where the structure is particularly difficult for the students to grasp, this stage may take some time. However, where the structure is very simple, or very close to a parallel in the native language, or when the students tend to learn the language intuitively rather than intellectually, it may take only a minute or so or be entirely omitted.

3.3. Practice

The practice stage consists of a series of exercises done both in the classroom and for home assignments, 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. Obviously, not every grammar practice procedure can 'cover' all aspects of the structure in question. Therefore we will need to use a series of varied exercises which will complement each other and together provide thorough coverage.

With a structure whose formal rules are difficult to grasp, we might start by devoting some time to manipulation of the written and spoken forms, without relating particularly to meaning. Such practice is usually given through exercises based on discrete items (a series of words, phrases or sentences with no particular connection between them, except insofar as they exemplify the structure to be practised). Commonly found exercises of this type are:

- Slot-fillers (the learner inserts the appropriate item)
e.g. She is ... girl. They have ...orange. (a, an)
Answer: She is *a* girl. They have *an* orange.
- Transformation (the learner changes the structure in some prescribed manner)
e.g. This is a mouse. (put into the plural)
Answer: These are mice.

The function of these exercises is simply to help make the rules of form clearer and to ensure that they are learnt more thoroughly. A learner who has worked through a series of them may find it easier, eventually, to express him or herself correctly, in language that will be acceptable to a native speaker. On the other hand these exercises have limited usefulness because they give no practice in making meanings with the structure.

Another category of practice procedures still stresses the production or perception of correct forms, but involves meanings as well – though as yet unlinked to any general situational framework – and cannot be done without comprehension. Such exercises are usually based on discrete items and tend not to be open-ended.

- Translation to or from the native language,
- Slot-filling or multiple-choice based on meaning.
e.g. My brother (is working, works, has worked) for a large company.
Answer: My brother *works* for a large company.
- Slot-filling with choice of answers not provided
e.g. Hea new suit yesterday.
Answer: He *bought* a new suit yesterday.

First the learners perform a communicative task that the teacher has set them; the teacher then uses this to identify language features needed to communicate effectively. These features are taught and practised, before students re-perform the original (or similar) task:

TASK > TEACH > TASK

The syllabus is organized around tasks. Thus the syllabus objectives are expressed in terms that relate to real language use (telling a story, booking a hotel room etc.) rather than in grammar terms (present continuous, comparatives and superlatives of adjectives etc.).

The disadvantages of this model are represented by the following questions: what criteria determine the selection of tasks, the ordering of tasks, and the evaluation of tasks? It is also difficult to set and monitor tasks. [4]

4. Conclusion

The multitude of factors in favour of grammar encourages us, the teachers or professors, to include grammar in the process of acquiring a second language, English in our case, if we want our learners to be competent users of this very important language both in writing and speech. I am not saying that grammar should be made compulsory for teaching English; the teachers are given the freedom of selecting the aspects of a language they want and consider appropriate and effective to trigger competent and procedural knowledge of a foreign language.

5. References

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