



SRI RAMAKRISHNA ENGINEERING COLLEGE

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Grammar and Grammar Teaching: Changing Perspectives

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New Perspectives in Teaching Grammar - Activity Based Grammar Teaching

Dr. V. B. Chithra

Abstract

Almost everyone is aware of the importance of learning the global language, English. Learning and using English in day to day contexts has become highly indispensable to everyone and especially to the student community. As English has become the link language in India and teaching English is an important sector in the education field, English teachers are facing a number of challenges especially in teaching grammar to the undergraduate students in the states of our country. Activity based grammar learning develops active learning among the students. This paper aims at focusing activity based grammar teaching for effective use of the target language.

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Introduction

Teaching English is not an easy task. To learn a new language we need to know the rules of the language, namely, Grammar. Since English is a foreign language it is a very challenging task to the teacher to make students follow and understand the new language. Language learning is a natural process for the native speakers. “A very important aspect of language acquisition is that the child learns whatever language he is expected to. Normally a child is exposed to one language only. If he is exposed to two languages because of his growing up in a bilingual environment, he acquires both languages simultaneously. Though in the early stage there may be a merging of the two languages, later they are separated.” (Paul:1989 p.19) Of course, we Indians are definitely not the native speakers. English language is always secondary to us but it reached the pinnacle because of its tangible entity as a master language of the world. The native speaker learns English from his childhood in a natural environment without any hurdles in the process and knows the ins and outs, the components of the language. We the Indians have to take pains in learning English because our surroundings matter a lot, the upbringing of an Indian child may not be the same as the environment of a native speaker.

Teaching is not only the noblest profession but also an interesting profession. English teachers have to change their mind set and have to adopt new approaches expanding. Teachers should concentrate on improving the learning capabilities of their students and thereby help them learn the language. A key to getting and keeping students actively involved in learning lies in the hands of the teachers. As Sasson (2007) points out, it is always easy for teachers to teach students to learn a set of rules; however, it is much more difficult to encourage them to use those rules for effective communication. Many of them suddenly find themselves unable to produce a meaningful sentence either about themselves or something that interests them. When we figure out a good teacher, some qualities may promptly cross our minds such as patience and enthusiasm.

The Communicative Approach in Teaching

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In our country, English has been taught in a traditional way by making teacher-centred for many centuries. And students are made to listen to the teacher. This method has not resulted in enhancing communication skills of the students. Modern classrooms require the learner centered approach. Communicative Language Teaching is learner-centered, with an emphasis on communicative activities that mimic real-life interactions. Here the students are made to learn and speak the target language by exposing them to various situations and involving them in various activities in which communication is a must. The teacher encourages the students to express their own ideas and opinions, thereby stimulating their interests in a topic and motivating them to speak. The more the students speak the more confidence they will have in using the language.

Communicative Activities

Language is used as a tool for communication. To learn a foreign language, mental involvement is must. For this reason, CLT makes use of communication to teach languages. The teacher acts as a facilitator and mentor facilitating learning through modern techniques like pair work and group work in a CLT classroom, so that all students have plenty of opportunity to practice the target language. The activities which can be included in a CLT classroom are Group Discussions and presentations, Situational Dialogues and Role plays, Interviews, Games, Problem-solving tasks, Describing people/Objects/Situation, Just a Minute Activities etc. The common feature of all these activities is that they require students to communicate in the target language which is English in order to complete the activity. For doing these activities knowledge of grammar rules is required. Teachers are nowadays concentrating on teaching grammar through such activities. The teacher has to be innovative in choosing the material or designing the lesson plan that suit the situations and grammatical topic.

Why Do We Need to Understand Learners' Learning Styles?

Many researchers suggest that students who are actively involved in learning process will taste success. Once they are involved actively in learning process they get a sort of self-confidence and self-motivation to use the target language. So the teacher must understand the learning style preference of the students. The instructional materials and techniques used by teachers have a direct effect on many students . . . If the approach fits the preferred learning

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mode, the learner usually reacted favorably. If, on the other hand, the methods were mismatched, the student “worked hard to learn”, “learned some and missed some material”, or “tuned out.” (p. 5) A learner’s style of learning, if accommodated, can result in enhanced attitudes toward learning and an increase in thinking skills, academic achievement, and creativity (Irvine & York, 1995) Therefore teachers need to adopt the best possible learning strategy to make the students learn the language.

Activity based grammar learning strategy fosters active learning among the students. It is relatively easy to implement and helps students learn faster and more efficiently, have greater retention and develops positive attitude towards learning the target language. Task based communicative activities are student-centered and give the right direction to grammar teaching.

To quote Penny Ur “The function of task is simply to activate the learners in such a way as to get them to engage with the material to be practiced in an interesting and challenging way.....The phrase, ‘active language use’ implies the actual production of the structure on the part of the learners themselves. In many cases learners are rather perceiving, discriminating, understanding or interpreting: processes which also involve a high degree of mental activity” (Penny Ur, 2009: 11) Penny Ur further gives examples of activities: “to solve a problem, to guess something, to get someone to do something, to create some kind of pleasing composition, to brainstorm ideas, to get to know one another.... Underlying this main objective is the pedagogical one of providing for useful grammar practice; guessing game produces question forms, getting someone to do something involves the imperative and so on “ (Penny Ur, 2009, p.12)

Activities to Develop Grammar Elements

The teachers should give clear picture of grammatical elements like parts of speech, use of articles and prepositions, voice, transformation of sentences, sentence structures, direct and indirect speech, concord, conditionals, uses of tenses etc. In addition to explaining them theoretically the grammatical topics in the class rooms they should design some activities for

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each and every element of grammar to make the students learn faster with interest. Many students don't understand the accurate uses of tenses though they will be using them for different purposes. For example, to teach tenses, especially, the simple present tense, the teacher may give them an activity of writing about their routines and ask them to use v1 (base form of verbs) form. In another method the teacher may supply the sentences where v1 forms are used keeping blanks in place of the verbs and asking them to fill the blanks, for example,

I usually..... up at 5.00 a,m Ito college by bus. Isweets . I always remember the saying, honesty.....the best policy.The sunin the east andin the west.
(I usually get up at 5.00 a,m I go to college by bus. .. I like sweets. I always remember the saying, 'honesty is the best policy'.The sun rises in the east and sets in the west.)

From the above activity, students will learn to use simple present tense for the daily activities, for expressing likes and dislikes, for quotations/sayings/proverbs, for universal truths and so on by using verb in its base form. Further by giving such activities teachers can encourage students to learn the right form of verb (base form without 's' for I Person, II Person & III Person plural and 's' form for III person singular.)

Activities allow the students to participate enthusiastically involving themselves in pair or group work. Penny Ur differentiates the activity from exercise and stresses the importance of activities thus, "Learners may be motivated to participate in a learning exercise by *extrinsic* factors that have nothing to do with the nature of the activity itself-they may very much need to know the language in order to pass the exam, for example, or want to perform well in order to win approval. Activity design, however, aims to create *intrinsic motivation*: the desire to participate and learn because of the interest-arousing features within the activity itself" (Penny Ur, 2009, p.13)

It is to be noted that 'contextualization' and 'interaction' are the two great advantages we can get from activity.

Role of Discourse Analysis in Teaching Grammar

The discourse analysts are interested in its significance for producing comprehensible communicative products, realization of grammar items in different languages, their frequency of occurrence in speech and writing which is to enable teaching more natural usage of the target language, as well as learners' native language. The most prominent role in producing sophisticated discourse, and therefore one that requires much attention on the part of teachers and learners is that of words and phrases which signal internal relation of sections of discourse, namely conjunctions. There are more than forty conjunctive words and phrases, which might be difficult to teach. Moreover, when it comes to the spoken form of language, where *and*, *but*, *so*, *then* are most frequent, they may take more than one meaning, which is particularly true for *and*.

Games and Problem Solving Activities

Language learning is a continuous process. Games help and encourage many learners to sustain their interest and work. Teachers create contexts in which the language is useful and meaningful. Language learners want to know what the other party is saying or writing and they must respond to others in a game in the target language. Games are highly motivating challenging, interesting and encourage students to interact and communicate.. They can be used to give practice in all language skills and be used to practice many types of communication.

Problem-solving is a skill that involves mental agility. The problems we face can be large or small, simple or complex, and easy or difficult to solve. Regardless of the nature of the problems, the focus should be on defining the problem, ability to analyze it and suggesting possible solutions. Finally it should lead to implement the solution to overcome the problem. So, being a confident problem solver is really important to one's success. Much of that confidence comes from having a good process to use when approaching a problem. With this effective means, we can solve problems quickly and effectively.

Games and problem-solving activities, which are task based and have a purpose beyond the production of correct speech, are the examples of most preferable communicative activities. Such communicative tasks can be given to students to foster right use of grammar elements.

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Advantages of Activity-based Grammar Teaching

There are a number of advantages of interactive grammar activities. In the words of Raymond Comeau, 1987: “An interactive grammar exercise, therefore, stresses the teaching of grammar through mutual participation, usually in small groups. It is active rather than passive, student-centered rather than language-centered, cognitive rather than behaviorist, indirect rather than direct and personal rather than manipulative. As interactive grammar exercise puts communication on par with corrective, turning the study of grammar into a social activity.”(p.57)

Conclusion

In the present era, teaching grammar requires innovation and creativity to enrich its effectiveness. Students are not interested in teacher-centered classrooms so the teacher’s task has become difficult. So there is a need for activity-based grammar teaching as it adds a new dimension to grammar teaching and makes it more communicative. This kind of teaching interests the students to learn the language effectively.

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