Strategies in Teaching English Grammar

Dr. M. Meenadevi

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Introduction

Grammar is a description of the structure of a language and the way in which linguistic units such as words and phrases are combined to produce sentences in the language. It takes into account the meanings and functions the sentences have in the overall system of the language. As an important element of language and as the essential part of linguistic competence, grammar has a central role in making up learner's language skills and their communicative competence.

Place of Grammar in Instruction

The debate over the place of grammar in instruction has played a dominant role in the history of language teaching. The debate revolved around the question of whether grammar instruction helped learners gain proficiency in a second language. According to Paul Verghese,

> A knowledge of grammar is perhaps more important to a second language learner than to a native speaker. This is because in the process of acquiring the language the native speaker has intuitively internalized the grammar of the language whereas the second language learner has to make a conscious effort to master those aspects of the language which account for grammaticality. It is, therefore, necessary for us, to whom English is a second language, to learn the grammar of the language. (41)

Teaching English grammar should result in the students being able to use the language to express themselves. 'Use the language' refers not only to the students' using the language in oral discourse where creativity and anomalies are accepted, as long as the language is intelligible, that is, understood by the listener, but also to their using the language in written form where ideas are more rule-governed than freely expressed.

Challenges and Problems

One of the challenges before the teachers of grammar is the selection of suitable examples to teach grammatical rules and forms. In the old traditional grammar, examples used for illustrating rules are of alien context for the Indian students. For example, a few examples in Wren and Martin's *High School English Grammar and Composition* in page numbers 1 and 2 have the literary flavor but do not have any bearing to the native environment of the Indian students.

Eg.   Hampty Dumpty sat on a wall.

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Tubal Cain was a man of might.

Ascham taught Latin to Queen Elizabeth.

So the challenges before a teacher of grammar is to make the teaching meaningful and relevant to the needs of the learners by contextualizingit using examples derived from the socio-cultural situations of the learners. An important part of grammar instruction is to provide examples but the examples should be accurate and appropriate. But the examples should focus on a particular theme or topic so that students have more contact with specific information and vocabulary.

Another challenge before the teacher is to decide the amount of rules to be taught to the learners. A teacher should select those grammatical rules and patterns which have greater communicative potential. Overtaxing of learners with rules which do not exist or do not facilitate the learning of a language has a retarding effect on the learners. For example, only two forms of nouns 'John' and 'John's' exist in the case system but the old grammar unnecessarily teach five cases, namely, i) Nominative ii) Vocative iii) Genitive iv) Accusative and v) Dative to the students, as mentioned in Nesfield's *English Grammar, Composition and Usage*. Therefore it depends on the teachers to make a selection of only those grammatical items and patterns which have wide communicative range and could cover a number of speech situations.

One of the problems generally faced by most of the teachers of English is the poor standard of the students. Students are even ignorant of the basic rules and structural patterns which they are supposed to have learnt at the lower level. If a teacher directly starts his teaching at the graduate level without trying to know the level of the students, his efforts will not bear any fruits as he will not be able to raise a structure over a feeble foundation. A teacher should begin from the simple grammatical terms and proceed towards the complex ones. Thus by carefully selecting the frequently recurring grammatical items and by grading them as per the background of the learners, a teacher should provide constant practice to the students in creating and using sentences based on the grammatical forms and structures in various day to day situations of their lives.

Identification of Core Rules and Structures

The teacher should identify the core rules and structures of English grammar and to provide practice in their use. The rules which have greater frequency in use should be taught first and emphasized by a teacher and the rules of peripheral nature which represent the exceptions, irregularities and anomalies should be taught at a later stage, when a learner acquires competency in the use of core rules and structures. One of the dilemmas of a teacher is to decide whether the aim of teaching grammar is to teach rules or to help the learners in learning a language. The aim of teaching grammar is to provide necessary exposure to the learners in the learning of a language. Teaching of only rules without providing sufficient practice in their use

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will not contribute to the learning of a second language. Rules should be taught simultaneously with their uses. Both grammatical rules and their situational uses should be taught side by side, and then only communicative competence which is the ultimate aim of teaching can be achieved.

Grammar-based Teaching

The teachers, through grammar, can help students use the language correctly and appropriately. The teacher should help the students understand the different tenses and how to use them. In English, there are so many present, past, future, past participle, present progressive etc., and also gerunds which can act as nouns. Drawing out a timeline and giving examples with specific times work the best in teaching tenses. The teacher should constantly remind the students to use proper verb conjugation and make a list of all the exceptions (e.g. everyone/someone/everybody/somebody 'is', not 'are'). English prepositions are a problem. Too many prepositions should not be taught at one time. The teacher should help the student to put the prepositions in context (in a situation where the use is natural). Using prepositions can also be very difficult for ESL students, so it is best to have a list of what each preposition is usually used for and practise fill in the blank ones (e.g. in July, at 8.00 a.m., on 6th September, etc.,).

Teaching Grammar and Topics Integrated

Grammar-based teaching is the teaching of a language built-around the linguistic components of the language (e.g. past tense, gerund etc.,) English treated this way is put as a subject, rather than a skill. It is taught and learned as parts, not as a whole. So theproblem associated with grammar-based teaching is that language items taught are given in isolation, not in context.

So if topic-based teaching is integrated into grammar teaching, it will be of much use. Topic-based teaching is teachingbuilt around topics. What is taught is topics, not linguistic components. While the teacher teaches a linguistic form, he has to think of a good topic (eg. childhood experiences, values, family etc.,) to serve as the context in which the form is going to be used. This method covers both grammar and topic integrated with each other.

While teaching past tense, ask the students to describe the past events by using past forms such as "Past 'be' forms: was, were, past modals: could, would etc., past verbs: regular-ed forms: walked, played etc., irregular forms: sang, wrote etc.,"
Eg.

When I was 5, I could sing very well.

I would sing a lot at school.

I would sing in the bathroom too.

I used to participate in singing contests and I won most of them.

My parents were very happy.

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This strategy is useful when both grammar and topics are equally important to master.

Diagramming Sentences

In the past, memorization-based techniques that relied on repetition slowly gave way to more creative methods. One of the older forms of teaching grammar, diagramming sentences, involves visually mapping the structures of and relationships between different aspects of a sentence.

Learning through Writing

The method of learning through writing encourages the students to explore language through creative writing and reading, picking up correct grammar usage along the way. An emphasis is placed upon language acquisition over language learning, as learning grammar by memorization only does not work well and that students are better able to recognize and understand grammatical rules when lessons are more interactive (i.e., they have to apply these rules in their own writing). Repeated practice is also important and easily achieved through creative or personal writing exercises.

Inductive Teaching

The inductive method of teaching grammar involves presenting several examples that illustrate a specific concept and expecting students to notice how the concept works from these examples. No explanation of the concept is given beforehand and the expectation is that students learn to recognize the rules of grammar in a more natural way during their own reading and writing. Discovering grammar and visualizing how ruleswork in a sentence allow for easier retention of the concept than if the students were given an explanation that was disconnected from examples of the concept. The main goal of the inductive teaching method is the retention of grammar concepts, with teachers using techniques that are known to make an impression on students' contextual memory.

Deductive Teaching

The deductive method of teaching grammar is an approach that focuses on instruction before practice. A teacher gives students an in-depth explanation of a grammatical concept before they encounter the same grammatical concept in their own writing. After the lesson, students are expected to practise what they have just been shown in a mechanical way through worksheets and exercises. But the method has its shortcomings, as it is more of teacher-centred approach.

Interactive Teaching

Another method of teaching grammar is to incorporate interactivity into lessons-using games to teach grammar not only engages students but also helps them to remember what they have learned. This method allows the teachers to prepare their lessons to the different learning

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styles of students. For instance, each student can be given a large flash card with a word on it and the students must physically arrange themselves into a proper sentence. Other games include word puzzles, picture stories, expanding texts etc.,

The Language Experience Approach

The language experience approach, as pointed out by Larsen Freeman, is a technique in which the learners dictate to the instructor, in English, something they would like to be able to say. The instructor then writes students' messages in correct, grammatical English and gives them to the students. For example, a student might say or write, "I late the work for the bad traffic". The teacher would write the sentence as "I was late for work because the traffic was bad". With the corrected text in hand, students have the opportunity to compare what they said or wrote with the correct form of the messages they wished to convey, ask questions and learn. In English, word order is more important. Very often ESL students produce sentences that sound strange to the native's ear because the order of the words in the sentences is wrong. Teachers should help the students to rearrange words to form meaningful sentences and the teachers should also encourage students to speak and write about their daily events freely.

Structure-based Task

Structure-based task is a strategy in which the students are asked to compare two cities. Apair of students should tell each other about the features of familiar cities and record the information on task sheets. They are then instructed to write sentences comparing the cities according to the features they had described (e.g. Chennai is bigger than Madurai). Students are not explicitly taught comparative structures at any point during the task, but they have to use comparative forms to complete it. Afterwards, the teacher should teach a lesson on comparatives and students should rewrite incorrect sentences, do more exercises and then read stories that contain frequent instances of the comparative form.

Communicative Competence Model

In the communicative competence model, the purpose of learning grammar is to learn the language of which grammar is a part. The teachers therefore teach grammar forms and structures in relation to meaning and use for the specific communication tasks that students need to complete. For example, while teaching the past tense in English, the teachers could distribute a short narrative about recent experiences or events and teach the regular-'ed' form, using verbs that occur in the text as examples. Then the teachers should teach the pronunciation and doubling rules if those forms occur in the texts and then teach the irregular verbs that occur in the texts.

The Discovery Technique

The discovery technique is a method of teaching in which students are not directly presented with a target-grammatical structure or rule. Instead students are given consent in which the target structure is used. Students then discover the grammatical rule or figure out the pattern

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for themselves. The teacher's role is to guide students to their own discovery, not to give students the information on the grammar rule. The discovery technique may seem a lot like task based learning, but the task based learning puts a communication exercise before students and does not stress the grammar necessary for this task. The discovery technique, on the other hand, focuses on a particular grammar point, and the goal of the lesson is to learn that point and to elicit a grammar rule from the students and not complete a communication task. With the discovery technique, there is a greater emphasis on implicit knowledge, which gives students language in context and then challenges them to figure out the grammar on their own. Students tend to remember the rules of grammar better because they have played a part in discovering them.

Summation

To be able to perform both in oral and written discourse equally well, the teacher should devise ways to enable the students to be able to do that at the classroom. There are so many intricacies, obscure rules and exceptions that different generations of teachers have used various approaches to teaching grammar. Over the years, many methods have been developed for teaching grammar and have been built upon, abandoned or combined, but all with the same goal in mind-teaching students how to communicate effectively and understand how to use English language. Sometimes teachers are attracted towards new approaches and without examining their merits and demerits, they are excited to use them due to their novelty and difference from the earlier ones. The challenge before a teacher is to choose the right approach or to integrate the concepts of different approaches in teaching grammar and the language. Only when learning of rules of grammar is extended to their spontaneous use in different socio-cultural contexts, the learners will be considered to achieve communicative competence which is the main aim of language teaching.

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