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Teaching grammar in context in ESL classrooms

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Abstract

This article tries to explain the current views on teaching English grammar. First, it tries to introduce teaching grammar based on the traditional model of teaching grammar, considering PPP that stands for presentation, practice and production. Then, it will try to examine those approaches which connect teaching grammar to the new and current models of teaching grammar called the use of grammar in context. In addition, it will consider Afghan learners' problems with acquiring English grammar, and discussing how to apply theory to the practice of teaching grammar within low-level, mid-level and advanced-level learners. By this article, the reader will get the primary picture about the modern and useful ways of teaching grammar.

Keywords: What is grammar ? The tradition model of teaching grammar (PPP), teaching grammar based on the current methods (teaching grammar through content), afghan learners' problem, learners' level.

Introduction

Grammar is not just analyzing grammatical forms, but also it includes grammatical meaning and grammatical use. "Grammar is better to be taught consistent with contemporary theory and the need to focus on form within a meaning-based or communicative approach" (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p. 251) ^[6]. Adding to this point, grammar structure is better understood based on "meaning-focused use of the form in communicative activities" (Fotos, 2001, p. 267) ^[2]. As grammar is not only form then its teaching is ill severed if students are simply given rules. Moreover, grammar is considered as the rules in a language in order to change the words' form and then combine them into sentences (Hornby, 1995) ^[4]. Larsen-Freeman (2001) ^[6] emphasizes on the change of simple and common practices of analyzing grammatical structures and applying grammar rules to the use of more communicative approach in which grammar is used as a means of communication. Therefore, grammar should not be just considered as rules and forms like to get students learn only the elements of language; such as, sounds, structures, and vocabulary but also enabling students to use these elements in order to communicate. Hence, in order to keep a better balance of teaching grammar it is better to use grammatical forms in communicative interactions rather than using them in isolation.

Theory

The real meaning of teaching grammar is enabling the students in a language class to use the forms of linguistic accurately with a full meaning and in an appropriate way. The tradition teaching of grammar employed a syllabus based on structure in which the grammar lessons were composed of three phases; such as, presentation, practice and production for communication which refer to the reader as "PPP" (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p. 256) ^[6]. In fact, this approach is a systematically teaching grammar towards communication. However, today's most of the language teachers believe in communicative activities for teaching grammar. For example, teaching grammar through content based materials which mean grammar is preferred to be taught in context as a communicative means through various ways to have students' attention towards a grammatical structure in context (Larsen-Freeman, 2001) ^[6]. In fact, in this approach grammar structures are not taught before putting them in context as a communicative means. It can be done in different ways like if a student makes oral or written grammatical mistakes/errors and there is a need for correction by the teacher, then, the teacher can "recast or reformulate" (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p. 256) ^[6] in order to respond to student's errors. Therefore, if the error is in form, the teacher can recast the production of the student's

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correctly. For instance, if a learner makes a mistake with the use of possessive (s) and says like, that is Mike pen. The teacher can recast the production of the learner correctly like, oh, that is Mike's pen.

In addition, if the problem is in meaning, the teacher can recast whatever the learner has said meaningfully. As an example, if the learner says like, I want to look at the meaning of this word in the dictionary. Then, to correct the learner the teacher may say like, ok, you want to look up to the meaning of this word in the dictionary. Furthermore, if the problem is in the use, then again the teacher can recast it in an appropriate manner. For example, if the learner says like, my sister arises at seven o'clock in the morning. The teacher may correct him like, oh, well; your sister gets up at seven o'clock in the morning.

Using a communicative task persuades the students to use the target structures through producing "output" (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p. 257) ^[6] which calls feedback from a teacher or from other students. In fact, output means students production which plays a really crucial role in learning structure or grammar. For example, one of the beneficiaries of the output is pushing students and offering them the ability to develop their level of knowledge beyond semantic process to syntactic process (Swain, 1985, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2001) ^[6]. It happens that sometimes a communicative task itself needs students attending to relevant features of the target language (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2001) ^[6].

For example, using a certain grammatical structure or form for completing the task like when students are asked to use certain prepositions for giving direction using a map to each other.

Larsen-Freeman (2001) ^[6] supporting the above idea mentions that language teachers should not be interested in filling the head of students with grammatical structures. Instead, it is preferred to encourage students towards learning grammar and then applying that in conversation or speaking. Therefore, grammar teachers should think of grammars as a skill in order to be used by the students meaningfully and if needed through meaningful practice than memorizing the structures.

In addition, Donato (1994, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2001) ^[6] adding to Larsen-Freeman's idea suggests that if grammar is taught through interactive and collaborative dialogue it stimulates the development and the improvement of the students' interlanguage since according to (Swain & Lapkin, 1998, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2001) ^[6] the interactive dialogues can function as a means of communication and cognitive tool that foster grammatical development. Next, Gatbonton and Segalowitz (1988, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2001) ^[6] urge that to teach grammar having a better result it is better to avoid teaching grammar through drills and exercises since this can lead students towards memorization of some particular grammatical structures. On the contrary, it is better to make a try in order to teach grammar in a way which helps students to become able to use grammatical structures skillfully and meaningfully.

In fact, in teaching grammar sometimes grammar rule or structure needs practice and so it should be taught based on a meaningful practice in which students are encouraged to use the grammatical points meaningfully and to use the declarative knowledge (Dekeyser, 1994, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2001) ^[6]. Adding to this point (Larsen-Freeman,

2001) ^[6] states that if a practice is meaningless, for example, in form of mechanical drills like some drills in which structures are repeated or students repeat the drills then these kinds of drills never persuade students in conveying what they have learned to an environment out of the class and transferring meaning through language.

Teaching

Afghan Learners' Problem

Farsi learners have problems in learning the English language grammar. In fact, the learners' problems are a lot within the beginning stages of learning the English language grammar. In addition, it is better to add that Farsi language grammar which is similar to Dari language grammar is really similar to English language grammar because Farsi language is an Indo-European language. In addition, the grammar of this language has similarities in different ways to English language grammar. However, the grammar of this language is very different in some areas from English language grammar too. For example, word order in Farsi language is very different from English language and for the lower level learners is problematic. In fact, adjectives are always following the nouns, and verbs are always coming at the end of the statements.

For instance, last month boy handsome (I) met. In addition, in Farsi language the auxiliary do doesn't have any equal form. Furthermore, in the formal Farsi language yes/no questions are made by a particular word (aya) or through raising the tone of the sound. Therefore, the Farsi speakers try to use questions by only intonation, and if the situation is more serious they delete the auxiliary. For example, when you travelled to Canada?

Furthermore, another problem of Farsi learners with English grammar is with the use of the auxiliary to be since Farsi speakers add he equivalent to the auxiliary to be as a suffix to nouns rather than using it as a full form. Therefore, Farsi learners may omit to be verb in English language sometimes. For example, He (a) father. (For he is a father.). Moreover, the Farsi speakers have a variety of problems with using tag questions in English. Because Farsi language does not have a vast usage of tag questions. In fact (Na) which is equal to (No) is used in all situations in Farsi language. For instance, she said she was going, no? For (She said she was going, didn't she?) (Swan & Smith, 2001) ^[7].

Learners' Level

Low Level Learners

Low level learners don't come into a language classroom with a fully prior knowledge of grammar and structure. Second language learners depend on the experience and on the knowledge which they have. If the students are beginner level, they will depend more on their L1 and will use their L1 as a source about how to learn L2. Actually at this level students need to be taught more vocabulary than structure because learning vocabulary is the central and essential element for learning a language and grammar (Decarrico, 2001) ^[1].

In addition, (Decarrico, 2001) ^[1] argues that grammar plays the role of the starting point of learning a language. Therefore, paying attention to grammar skills consisting simple vocabulary with words that are new to make possible drills are considered in teaching grammar to the low level learners cited in Decarrico, 2001 ^[1]. For example, a simple activity for both making drills and improving vocabulary

could be like using demonstrative pronouns with a variety of nouns such as this is a ceiling, and that is a door. This is a window and that is a wall, and so forth. Once the learners get the habit of learning the structural frames then lexical items in order to fill the grammatical spaces later in the frames becomes easier.

Additionally, the lower level learners won't learn the rules and are not able to use the grammatical rules and structures unless they have sufficient vocabulary knowledge (Harmer, 1991) ^[5]. For this reason a teacher can use real objects and Flashcards through different activities in order to have learners improve and enhance their vocabulary. For instance, for teaching vocabulary and enhancing nouns, a teacher can simply put the vocabulary with something like a real life object. In fact, this could be done with particularly anything from a pen in his/her hand to even trees from the forest. Moreover, photos could be other kind of real objects for making activities of improving vocabulary in the lower level learners. Indeed, photos are great sources in order to show lower learners an object or person which is real.

For instance, one activity that works well in this regard is learning about family members in order to improve vocabulary and especially to learn more nouns. For doing this, both the teacher and the learners can take their family photos to class and share them while describing the relatives in the photos. Indeed, a teacher at this level can use demonstrative pronouns (this/that) to point out to photos using vocabularies (nouns) like father, mother, brother, sister, and so on. Furthermore, flash cards are other great resources to improve vocabulary through structure. For instance, a great activity for this could be writing a variety of vocabulary like simple nouns; such as, name of the flowers, fruits, colors, and so forth on flashcards and then helping the learners to use those nouns with some simple structures like demonstrative pronouns this/that into simple sentences.

Mid-Level Learners

The mid-level learners learn the grammatical structures through practicing the language and structure and doing practical examples in the mid-level. For instance, if the structure is superlative form of adjective, the teacher will start through drawing three different figures on the board. Then, he can say like (This is John. He is tall), with the second figure he might say (This is Mike. He is taller than John). Finally, with the third figure he might say that (He is Bob, He is the tallest). The teacher will then say many examples. He can use students in the classroom, objects in the classroom, famous people, and so on in order to encourage students to learn and to understand the structure. After saying many examples, students will practice the structures meaningfully in pairs or in groups (Gower, Phillips, & Walters, 1995) ^[3].

In addition, for the mid-level learners performing relevant activities such as role plays are really efficient for using grammatical structures (Larsen-Freeman, 2001) ^[6] since by role plays a teacher may persuade learners to practice how the choice form is affected by changes in social variable. For instance, if students don't know how to use modal verbs for giving advice, they can have role plays and having dilemma or problem.

A good example in this regard could be, one student creating a problem like the door of my house has been broken. Then, the other students asked and encouraged by

the teacher to use some model verbs for giving advice to the person who has a problem. For instance, the learners may use some models and will say like (you might call the police; you should ask your neighbor and so on). Therefore, the use of grammar and structure at this level is emphasizing more on using structure in communication.

High Level Learners

Students' production at the high level has got a very important role in learning grammar. As the high level learners have passed the process of awareness about grammar and grammatical structures, now it is the time to build upon their prior knowledge and to take their level of knowledge higher. Therefore, the output production of the learners is extremely important at this level since it pushes the learners to move from the process of semantic to the process of syntactic (Swain, 1985, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2001) ^[6].

In addition, when students try to produce rules and structures, they try to see how much they can use their theory and perceptions on how the structures is formed, what the structure means and when the structure is used. For example, "text generation or text-manipulation-type exercises" (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p. 261) ^[6] can be of considerable and effective points for grammar subject at this level. Teacher as an example teaching the active and passive voice can give the learners a text comprehension exercise. In fact, the teacher may provide a few lines at the beginning of the text as the example below:

"Town meetings were held throughout new England yesterday. Many issues were discussed although the big one for most citizens was the issue of growth. Many changes have been made recently. For example". (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p. 261) ^[6]. Then, the rest part of the text might be completed by the learners through using active and passive voices.

Conclusion

Teaching grammar through meaningless and repetitive drills is not in the core of consideration anymore for it discourages the learners not to relate structure with the real life situation. However, if sometimes there is a need for grammatical practice, then, the practice should be meaningful and based on communicative approach which persuades learners towards using their declarative knowledge to use grammar points really meaningfully. Therefore, to have a better grammar class the approach of distributing grammar structures based on form, meaning, and use are more considered.

Next, Farsi learners' problems which are really near to Dari learners' problems in learning English language grammar could be a matter of ESL grammar courses for there are many differences between English language grammar and Farsi language grammar. For instance, word order, yes/no questions, auxiliary verbs; such as, to be verbs and do verbs, and tag questions are considerable in this regard.

Furthermore, grammar teaching is different in accordance to different level of learners. For instance, in the lower level grammar structure is better used for learning more vocabulary since students at this level are not able to learn the target language and grammar unless they have sufficient vocabulary in order to make common drills. Next, in the mid-level, grammar is taught by practicing the language through doing more practical examples in the class. In fact,

doing role plays for using grammatical structures could really be practical in this level. Furthermore, in the high level the output production of the learners is really essential. In fact, Learners have to use their own hypothesis and perceptions while using structures to build up on their prior knowledge.

Finally, moving from the stage of semantic to the stage of syntactic, and encouraging learners towards learning grammar based on meaning and communicative approach would be more effective and practical so that to take structure outside the class in the real life environment.

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