

Approaches to the Teaching of Grammar: Methods and Strategies

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Abstract: *Every language has its grammar. Whether it is one's own mother tongue or second - language that one is learning. The grammar of the language is important. This is because acceptability and intelligibility, both in speech and in writing within as well as outside one's own circle or group depend on the currently followed basic notions and norms of grammaticality. A knowledge of grammar is perhaps more important to a second-language learner than to a 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. So, without the knowledge of the grammar of a particular language, we cannot properly use the language in communication. But question may arise what should be the method and approach to the study of grammar. Several approaches have been followed through the ages for the study of English grammar. The major approaches are the traditional approach, the structural approach, the notional- functional approach and the communicative approach.*

Keywords: *English grammar, language, communication, approach*

1. TRADITIONAL APPROACH

Language has been studied for centuries in ancient Greece, Rome, Arab, India etc. The word 'traditional' is usually used to refer to the rendition of language study and writing grammars which was handed down to us from ancient Greeks. Through Rome and then, after Renaissance, through other European languages which generally followed the Greek and Roman tradition. Traditional grammar also does not refer to any single author's or country's work. It was not as if a uniform, or identical grammars were written or taught at that time. It refers to the general attitude of scholars of the time, to their specific methodology, their ways of looking at things. For example, the ideas about sentence and sentence analysis came from Aristotle and Plato (5th century B.C.): The stoic grammars had written parts of speech, the scholastic philosophers of the middle Ages had speculated about meaning, the concept of 'correctness' came from the latter, eighteenth century grammarians of England had ideas about the history of language deriving from the nineteenth century emphasis on comparative philology.

Before the eighteenth century the study of the English language was neglected. Preference was given to the classical languages such as Greek and Latin was the language of the church and of the university and was widely used by the educated person throughout Europe. By the eighteenth century, however, the knowledge of the Renaissance had been translated into the language which everybody spoke. This gradual use of English for affairs of state and literature and the invention of the printing press generated a need for the study of grammar. The scholar should want to codify what they felt was a disorderly language.

These scholars believed in universal grammar- a perfect grammar of which individual grammar was corruptions. (This belief in a universal grammar exists even today; this is because some grammatical features are shared by all languages). Because the educated Englishmen of the 18th century knew Latin so well that they naturally believed that that this classical language must be the closest to the universal grammar. The differences between English and Latin they considered as errors or corruptions of English. The grammar text books of period, then were written to correct these errors and to prescribe desirable usage. As Johnson says in the preface to his dictionary:

“I have laboured to refine our language to grammatical purity, and to clear it from colloquial barbarism, licentious idioms, and irregular combinations”.

In order to establish a language as perfect, early grammarians obviously had to use Latin as a model to build as English grammar. Their difficulties were great, however, Latin and English differ significantly from one another. In Latin morphology (word form) is far more important than syntax (word order). In English, syntax is more important than morphology. It is true that we alter word form in English too; ‘run’ is changed into ‘ran’ or ‘drive’ into ‘drives’. But we can understand an English sentence in which the usual form changes are not made; for example, there is no difficulty in understanding the sentences, “The engine of the car run well when he drives the car fast”. The intended meaning of the sentence will not be grasped by us if our understanding depends primarily upon word form. As it is, however, it makes sense though it sounds awkward.

What is essential to our understanding of English is syntax or word order. The sentence “Engine well runs the fast car of the drives the car he fast when” is unintelligible because its order is simple not common to the English language system. In Latin nearly the opposite is true. The form of most Latin words is more important than their position.

Generally, the failure to alter the form of Latin words results in confusion. But except for a few like ‘ad’ and ‘cum’, most Latin words do not have fixed places within a sentence.

More problems appeared when the grammarians attempted to analyse English structures in two ways – some in terms of lexical meaning and others in terms of grammatical function.

The most widely known definition of the sentence is based upon meaning:

“A sentence is a group of words expressing a complete thought” But what exactly is a thought? And if we could define it how would we determine its completeness?

Another popular definition is functional: “A sentence must have a subject which names a person, place, thing or idea, and a predicate which says something about the subject”. This explains a construction like “The child is crying”. But couldn’t “the crying child” also fit the definition? The word ‘child’ names a person; and the word ‘crying’ says something about the child.

For traditional grammarians, written language was both the aim and the basis of their work. There are few or no rules for teaching spoken language. Spoken language is generally neglected. Pronunciation and suprasegmental features find no mention in these grammars. The learners were asked to cram by rote memory rules of grammar and translate the language into the mother tongue or vice-versa. Where used to be composition exercise, but no attention was paid to oral practice. The traditional grammar included rules and even vocabulary that may be more characteristic of written English. The rule for example, phonetics, morphology, syntax and semantics, But traditional grammarians, discussed with phonetics, phonemics, morphology and syntax. In this way we can see that the structured grammar which deals with one more topic which is known as semantics.

2. STRUCTURAL APPROACH

One of the primary characteristics of structural grammar is its division of the study of the language into basic parts: structure and meaning. Usually, the structural grammar prefers to study the grammatical forms or structures of the language before considering lexical meaning.

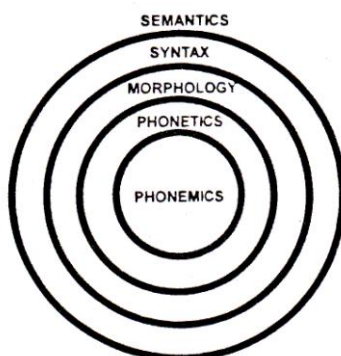


Diagram1. Structural Grammar

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English grammar in terms of structure is not as complicated as it seems. The native speakers remember learning lexical meanings because this takes place every time they encounter a new word. They do not learn grammatical signals because this happens early and informally in their lives. But the second language learner is not in the same position as the native speaker is. His internalization of grammatical to the structures though not complicated is through deliberate exposure to the language. That is why; he has to learn both lexical meanings and grammatical signals more or less at the same time.

3. NOTIONAL -FUNCTIONAL

The term “functional-notional approach” embraces any strategy of language teaching that derives the content of learning from an initial analysis of the learner’s need to express three different kinds of meaning: Functional (i.e. the social purpose of the utterance); Modal (the degree of likelihood); Conceptual – the meaning relations expressed by forms within the sentence (categories of communicative function). These method of language teaching is categorize along with others under the rubric of a communicative approach. The method stresses a means of organizing a language syllabus. The emphasis is on breaking down the global concept of language into units of analysis in terms of communicative situations in which they are used.

Notions are meaning elements that may be expressed through nouns, pronouns, verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, adjectives or adverbs. A notion is a concept, or idea: it may be quite specific, in which case it is virtually the same as vocabulary (dog, house, for example); or it may be very general – time, size, emotion, movement – in which case it often overlaps with the concept of “topics”. A notion may be “time past”; this may include past tenses, phrases like *a month ago, in 1990, last week*, and utterances using temporal clauses beginning with *when....., before....., after....* and so on;

A *function* is some kind of communicative act: it is the use of language to achieve a purpose, usually involving interaction at least between two people. Examples would be suggesting, promising, apologizing, greeting, inviting.

“Inviting” may include phrases like “*Would you like to....? I suggest....., How about...? Please...*”

4. STRATEGIES OF TEACHING GRAMMAR

The strategies of teaching grammar depend on certain key areas of focus. These areas may be identified with reference to the practice and use of grammar.

Practices	Use
Drill	Communicative
Contextualized clues	
Communicative	

4.1. Practice: Drill

Drills can be of the following types:

Substitution Tables

He	had ate	an apple a bar of chocolate two ice creams
She		
Raja		
Rani		

Structure Tables

He	writes	clearly a letter every day detective novels carelessly
I		
They	write	
you		
She		

Cue/Response

Cue : Romu is ten.
 Response : He'll be eleven next year.
 Cue : Raghu is twenty.
 Response : He'll be twenty

Teacher : Baby likes banana
 Response : Baby doesn't Like bananas.
 Teacher : I like bananas.
 Response : I don't like

4.2. Practice: Contextualized Clues

In this type of an exercise the context provides the clue to the type of grammatical item to be used.

4.2.1. Now Response to the Following Situations

- The washing is outside and it starts to rain.
- Your father cannot understand a letter written in English.
- Your friend in says he's thirsty.

4.2.2. Response to the Given Situations

Situation: The telephone's (cue) ringing.
 Response: I'll answer it.

A friend has come to see you in your house. Offer him something to drink.

You are in a post office. You need three stamps for a letter to the USA. What do you say?

4.2.3. Passages/Letter Completion

Complete the following letter using verbs in either the simple present or the present progressive

Dear Bhanu,
 We _____(enjoy) our holiday a lot. Every day, we _____ (walk) down to the beach, _____(take) a dip the sea; _____(go) for a ride and _____(have) lunch at Tropicana.
 In fact, I _____ (write) the letter from Tropicana. We _____ (wish) you were here.
 Love
 Lata

4.3. Practice: Communicative

Here, the grammar to be practiced is based on information -gap or opinion – gap activities. The general framework is given, but the language is not controlled strictly.

4.4. Communicative Question - Asking Activity

Through fifteen *yes/no* questions, learners try to discover the person, animal or thing a learner can take the oral of the teacher.

Learner 1 : *Are you alive?*

Teacher : *No.*

- Learner 2 : *Were you a man?*
Teacher : *Yes.*
- Learner 3 : *Did you really exist?*
Teacher : *Yes.*
- Learner 4 : *Were you an American?*
Teacher : *No.*
- Learner 5 : *Are you hungry?*
Teacher : *No.*
- Learner 6 : *Are you coming?*
Teacher : *Yes.*
- Learner 7 : *Do you agree?*
Teacher : *No.*
- Learner 8 : *Is he your brother?*
Teacher : *Yes.*
- Learner 9 : *Is she crying?*
Teacher : *No.*
- Learner 10 : *Was he famous?*
Teacher : *Yes.*
- Learner 11 : *Was she following?*
Teacher : *No.*
- Learner 12 : *Were you writing?*
Teacher : *Yes.*
- Learner 13 : *Does he know?*
Teacher : *No.*
- Learner 14 : *Is she ill?*
Teacher : *Yes.*
- Learner 15 : *Is he waiting?*
Teacher : *No.*

5. EVALUATING GRAMMAR TECHNIQUES

Grammar is a heavy subject. If we ask most teachers how they felt about it they respond with words like 'boring' or 'difficult' and they recount stories of student who ask for 'more grammar' with amused resignation. Grammar with amused evil, without the high status afforded to other elements in the curriculum such as communicative activities, reading, the use of videos and computers, etc.

Grammar has had a chequered history in the evolving world of EFL teaching and learning. There was a time, of course, when the study of grammar and techniques of translation were the main approaches to language learning. The Direct Method changed all that, however, and Audio- Lingualism (and structural-situational methodology) made strenuous effect to disguise the grammar that was, in fact, being taught.

Grammar's decline continued in the first flowering of the Communicative Approach, concerned it seemed to be with functional teaching and unstructured (in the linguistic sense) spontaneous communicative. But gradually the communicative movement has provoked a debate about exactly where grammar fits into the curriculum and the results of this discussion are now beginning to emerge as a renewed interest in, and emphasis on, the teaching and study of grammar in the general EFL classroom.

In order to find out how teachers felt about various styles of grammar teaching a number workshops were held in which teachers (and in at least one case, student) were asked to assess a number of activities (see below) in terms of where they fitted on lines between covert and overt; student – centred and teacher-centred; creative and non-creative and finally helpful and unhelpful. What exactly do these terms mean in this context?

6. CONCLUSION

Amid the plethora of differed approaches, theories, grammar debates and discussions on the usefulness or otherwise of the teaching grammar what should be the standpoint of a teacher of English? Certainly he cannot do without grammar. Grammar is essential to second-language learning. As Wilkins observes:

“The acquisition of the grammatical system of a language remains a most important element in language learning. The grammar is the means through which linguistic creativity is ultimately achieved and an inadequate knowledge of the grammar would lead to serious limitations on the creativity for communication. A notional syllabus, no less than a grammatical syllabus, must seek to ensure that the grammatical system is properly assimilated by the learner”.

What Wilkins means is that grammar should be taught; without knowledge of the grammar of the language, one’s learning of the language is inadequate; conscious learning of grammar is slowly converted into an automatic process.

Once it is recognized that the teaching a grammar is necessary but the question arises: how is it to be taught? In spite of the disagreements which exist between linguists regarding the relationship of traditional, structural, notional-functional and communicative approaches. Some predict an eventual synthesis of all these approaches to the study of languages. Each approach has made valuable contribution to our knowledge of language and each has assimilated some of the facts and methods of the one preceding it. So we should be eclectic in our approach; we should be select is best suited for our purpose in the classroom. We need not have a whole hearted commitment to traditional grammar; nor should we reject outright the insights of modern linguists. We should select what is the best in these approaches suited to the study of grammar. We should explain and describe grammatical aspects of structure illustrate them with examples and lay down certain rules for our students’ guidance and practice. In other words, we should have our own approach based on a synthesis of the insights we have gained from our study of the different approaches to the teaching of grammar.

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