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Advantages and challenges of teaching grammar

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Abstract: Grammar teaching has always been one of the most controversial and least understood aspects of language teaching. There are several aspects to learning a foreign language. One of these aspects is grammar. In teaching foreign language speaking, grammar plays an important role; it is a kind of framework on which vocabulary is based. Learning grammar and the correct formatting of a sentence, as well as recognizing grammatical forms in speech and writing, is done through the development of grammar skills. Perhaps no other aspect of language teaching has been the subject of so much discussion and debate over the years.

Keywords: grammar, a second language, a grammar skill, linguistic, a grammatical rule, language learning.

Few teachers remain indifferent to grammar and many teachers become obsessed by it. Grammar is conventionally seen as the study of the syntax and morphology of sentences. Put another way, it is the study of linguistic chains and slots (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 2015). That is, it is the study both of the way words are chained together in a particular order, and also of what kinds of words can slot into any one link in the chain. From a learner's perspective, the ability both to recognize and to produce well-formed sentences is an essential part of learning a second language.

But there are a number of problems. First, as we shall see, there is a great deal of debate as to how this ability is best developed. Second, it is not entirely clear what "well-formed" really means, when a lot of naturally occurring speech seems to violate strict grammatical rules. Third, an exclusive focus on sentences, rather than on texts or on words risks under-equipping the learner for real language use (Benitez-Correa, Gonzalez-Torres, & Vargas-Saritama, 2019). There is more to language learning than the ability to produce well-formed sentences. Texts and words also have grammar, in the sense that there are rules governing how both texts and words are organized, but it is not always clear where sentence grammar ends and either word grammar or text grammar begins. Grammar is a process for making a speaker's or writer's meaning clear when contextual information is lacking.

Language learners have to make do with a period of baby-like talk and reliance on contextual clues, until they have enough grammar to express and understand a great variety of meanings. Depending on their vocabulary knowledge and their resourcefulness, they can often cope surprisingly well. Learners need to learn not only what forms are possible, but what particular forms will express their particular meanings. Seen from this perspective, grammar is a tool for making meaning. The implication for language teachers is that the learner's attention needs to

be focused not only on the forms of the language, but on the meanings these forms convey. But what meanings do these grammatical forms convey?

There are at least two kinds of meaning and these reflect the two main purposes of language. The first is to represent the world as we experience it, and the second is to influence how things happen in the world, specifically in our relations with other people. These purposes are called, respectively, representational of a language and its interpersonal functions (Larsen-Freeman, Anderson, 2013). In its representational role language reflects the way we perceive the world. For example, things happen in the world and these events or processes are conveyed by (or encoded in) verbs. Many of these events and processes are initiated by people or things, which in turn typically encoded in nouns, and which in turn form the subject of the verb. And these events and processes often have an effect on other things, also nouns: the thing or person affected is often the object of the verb. The events take place in particular circumstances – in some time or some place or in some way - and these circumstances are typically encoded in adverbials. Time can also be conveyed by the use of tense. Finally, events and processes can be seen in their entirety, or they also can be seen as having stages, as unfolding in time. Tense and aspect can combine to form a wide range of meanings that, in English, are considered important.

The second main role of language – its interpersonal role – is typically reflected in the way we use grammar to ease the task of getting these things done. Modality is a grammatical means by which interpersonal meaning can be conveyed. These grammatical categories – subjects, objects, verbs, adverbials, tense, aspect and modality – are just some of the ways in which grammar is used to fine-tune the meanings we wish to express, and for which words on their own are barely adequate. It follows that in learning a new language need to see how the forms of the language match the range of meanings – both representational and interpersonal – that they need to express and understand (Larsen-Freeman, Anderson, 2013).

The relation between grammar and function is an important issue for teachers. Writers of language teaching materials attempt to move emphasis away from the learning of grammatical structures independent of their use, and on to learning how to function in a language, how to communicate. It is useful to match forms with their functions.

Until recently, the grammar presented to learners of English has been based entirely on written grammar. This accounts for the often-stilted style of many traditional course book dialogues. It is only recently that spoken in favour of teaching it. One problem with this shift of focus is that spoken English often has strong regional and idiomatic features (Brown, 2007). These may be difficult for the learner to understand, and also inappropriate for use in the kinds of contexts in which many learners will be operating. Most learners of English as a foreign language will be using English to communicate with other non-native speakers. For the purposes of mutual intelligibility the best, model of English for this type of learner may be a kind of neutral English without marked regional or cultural features, or without a strong bias to either the spoken or written mode.

Thus, It should be kept in mind that grammatical material should be organized functionally, namely, grammatical phenomena should be organically combined with lexical ones, and when teaching the correct construction and structure of sentences, one should also take into account their content and topics that are related to students of a particular age category. Grammatical skills should be developed both at the level of individual structures and at the level of coherent dialogic and monologic speech.

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