



Teaching Grammar at the Level of Discourse and Its Effect on Learners' Understanding and Using of English

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Abstract-

This paper deals with the role of grammar in language teaching and the way it should be taught. It investigates an alternative approach of teaching grammar which emphasizes raising learners' awareness to discourse so that they can understand and use the grammatical structures accurately and effectively. It is proposed in this article that grammar is best explained and understood when it is embedded in meaningful context and discourse.

Key words: grammar, discourse, discourse analysis, context, discourse-level, isolated sentences

الملخص-

يعالج هذا الموضوع دور النحو في تدريس اللغة الأجنبية و الطريقة التي يجب إتباعها . إضافة إلى ذلك يناقش الموضوع بيداغوجيا بديلة لتدريس قواعد اللغة الانجليزية التي تركز على إثارة وعي الطلبة للخطاب (أو النص عوض الجمل) من أجل إن يفهموا ويستعملوا القواعد النحوية بطريقة صحيحة وفعالة. الهدف الأساسي لهذا الموضوع هو أن النحو لا يكون مفهوما ومستساغا من طرف الطلبة إلا إذا كان مقدما من خلال السياق أو الخطاب و ليس في جمل معزولة. الكلمات مفتاحية: النحو- الخطاب - تحليل الخطاب - السياق - مستوى الخطاب - جمل معزولة-

The place of grammar in foreign language teaching has always been the subject of much debate. In the centre of this debate is the role of grammar in language teaching and the way it should be taught. This article investigates an alternative approach of teaching grammar which

emphasizes raising learners' awareness to discourse so that they can understand and use the grammatical structures accurately and effectively. It is proposed in this article that grammar is best explained and understood when it is embedded in meaningful context and discourse.

Key words- grammar, discourse, context, discourse-level

Rationale

Most of EFL students at Algerian universities have great difficulties in mastering grammar. For example, they do have a good formal knowledge of tenses (i.e., they can identify the different tenses and their rules. They can even use tenses with different tense markers but when they have to use these tenses independently, their production –either spoken or written- is most of the time rife with tense mistakes and tense shifting. This may be due to the fact that their teachers give much importance to the mastery of grammar rules through isolated sentences and neglect the discourse aspects of language. These teachers teach grammar in isolated, unconnected sentences that "give a fragmented, unrealistic picture of English".

The irrelevance of sentence-based drills

Theoretical background

The discourse-based approach to teaching grammar has developed from two prior lines; the first of which is the view that grammar should no longer be seen as an autonomous system to be learned but rather as a system that closely interacts with meaning, social function, and contexts in which it is used. According to Celce-Murcia (2004:108) grammar should be taught both as a resource for creating discourse in context and as a resource for using language to communicate both receptively and productively. As Celce-Murcia and Yoshida (1997:23) put it:

Given the dominance of the communicative approach in language teaching, we assume that grammar explanations and grammar exercises will be well contextualized and discourse-based. There is also the expectation that such explanations and exercises will not be based primarily on the intuitions of the materials writers or of the teachers who prepare grammar lessons; they will be based on a solid understanding of when and how native speakers use a given structure.

Another line from which a discourse –based approach has developed is that language should be taught as communication and for communication. To put it another way, learners should be taught to attain effective communication. The objective of language teaching should, therefore, be to help learners communicate through using the language meaningfully and appropriately. This can be done through interaction and meaning negotiation where learners must be given the opportunity to interact in the target language and "to practice their productive as well as their receptive language skills in meaningful contexts at the level of discourse" (Olshtain and Celce-Murcia, 2003:732).

Many researchers (Hymes, 1972) and later, Celce-Murcia (1991) and Larsen-Freeman (2001) posit that to help students be competent users of language , teachers need to understand the complex and integrated nature of communicative competence. Canale and Swain (1980, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2001:16) have posited that the grammatical competence is merely one component of the communicative competence which consists of three more components (sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence). All of these components are interrelated; they cannot be developed or measured in isolation and “an increase in one component interacts with other components to produce a corresponding increase in overall communicative competence” (Larsen-Freeman, 2001:17). To achieve the ability to communicate effectively, focus should not be only on the grammatical competence which is concerned with knowledge of the language itself, its form and meaning, but also with the discourse competence which is concerned with the learner’s ability to know how to interpret the larger context and how to construct longer stretches of language so that the parts make up a coherent whole (Celce-Murcia, 1991:466).

The benefits of discourse-based approach and procedure

Recent research has shown that the discourse-based approach may help improve grammar instruction due to the advantages it demonstrates. Indeed, discourse as the basis of teaching grammar helps students enhance a deeper understanding of the grammatical functions and increases their awareness of the different grammatical options that exist within the text. Learners benefit greatly from learning how various grammatical features and grammatical systems are used in authentic discourse. When learners are taught grammar

through discourse, they become not only able to interpret the different grammar rules they have already learnt but also more aware of how language is used. Moreover, it has been claimed that there are uses of grammatical structures that can be explained only through a discourse-based approach. Many researchers, among whom McCarthy and Carter, 1994; Celce-Murcia, 1997; Feez (cited in Hughes and McCarthy, 1998:265) argue that when learners focus on how they use the target language, learners can utilize that language more successfully in and outside the classroom.

Thus, the discourse-based approach fulfils the following conditions:

- The target grammatical structures should be presented through discourse.
- Learners' awareness should be raised to how grammar functions at the level of discourse and not at the level of the isolated sentences only.
- Learners with the help of their teachers should analyze the target structures through discourse (i.e., use discourse analysis).
- Learners should be given the opportunity to discover form-meaning-use associations that are not always apparent in sentence-level presentations

The discourse-based approach, therefore, calls for the implementation of discourse analysis in grammar teaching. This model of teaching grammar (Celce-Murcia, 1990) advocates that learners should be exposed to varied and rich texts which they have to explore through reading comprehension and through analysis. Reading comprehension helps learners to notice and understand the form and meaning of the grammatical structures whereas analysis enables learners to explore ways in which language is used in real life and also raises their awareness of its conventions and complexities. In other words, learners should be able to be conscious of how the grammatical structures function in discourse so that they can understand and use them appropriately and accurately. According to this model, the reading and analysis of discourse prepare learners to produce –orally and/or in writing – the target grammatical structures. Celce-Murcia (1990:206) explains this model of teaching grammar in the following quotation:

I want to emphasize that this discourse approach to grammar will require that students experience and analyze relevant data and subsequently apply generalizations drawn from these data to producing their own texts on topics reflecting their needs or interests.

Conclusion

This article claims that a discourse-based approach to grammar instruction helps learners not only to know the forms of the target grammatical structures but also how they function in discourse. It also claims that in order help learners become efficient users of the target language, grammar should not be presented through isolated sentences but should be analyzed as an aspect of discourse. This is in view of making the learners use the grammatical structures effectively and appropriately.

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