TEACHING GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT

Khayrulloyeva Sitora Lutfulloyevna
Bukhara State Pedagogical Institute
Foreign languages, professor

Abstract: In the grammatical view, most of the foreign language programs and teaching materials are based on a linear model[1] of language acquisition. The model divides a target language into particles and encourage learners acquire only a piece of the language at once and in a sequential, step-by-step trend. However, such a model is lagging behind proving itself beneficial in the test of time comparing to another new approach, grammar in context, better term, an organic approach[2] to the second language pedagogy.

Linear model:

Analogically, mastering totally novel language by this method is quite similar to constructing a wall. The wall is built through linguistic 'brick' that are laid one by one. The easiest grammatical bricks like "to be", "there is/are…", "have/has" are laid at the bottom of the wall, establishing a solid foundation for the complex ones.

However, learners while they are embarking on the process of learning another language, it may seem that, by and large, they do not acquire language in the step-by-step. Kellerman (1983), for example, notes the 'u-shaped behavior'[3] of particular linguistic items in learners' interlanguage development. Accordingly isolated bricks, that are the different elements of a target language , may exert negative influence on the learner's academic performance, since the similarities in their functions. Indeed this may lead the learners to some misunderstandings and eventually, improper usage of the language.

Organic Approach:

The adoption of an 'organic' perspective can greatly contribute our understanding of language acquisition and use. The organic metaphor puts an emphasis second language acquisition more like growing a garden than building a wall. From such a perspective, learners do not learn one thing perfectly, one item at a time, but numerous things simultaneously (and imperfectly). The linguistic flowers do not all appear at the same time, nor do they all grow at the same rate.

In textbooks, grammar is very often presented out of context. Learners are given isolated sentences, which they are expected to internalize through exercises involving repetition, manipulation, and grammatical transformation. These exercises are designed to provide learners with formal, declarative mastery, but unless they provide opportunities for learners to explore grammatical structures in context, they make the

task of developing procedural skill—being able to use the language for communication—more difficult than it needs to be, because learners are denied the opportunity of seeing the systematic relationships that exist between form, meaning, and use.

As teachers, we need to help learners see that effective communication involves achieving harmony between functional interpretation and formal appropriacy (Halliday 1985) by giving them tasks that dramatize the relationship between grammatical items and the discoursal contexts in which they occur. In genuine communication beyond the classroom, grammar and context are often so closely related that appropriate grammatical choices can only be made with reference to the context and purpose of the communication. In addition, as Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (forthcoming) point

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[1] D. Nunan (1993).
[2] D. Nunan (1993).
[3] Kellerman, E. 1983

out, only a handful of grammatical rules are free from discoursal constraints. This, by the way, is one of the reasons why it is often difficult to answer learners' questions about

grammatical appropriacy: in many instances, the answer is that it depends on the attitude or orientation that the speaker wants to take towards the events he or she wishes to report. If learners are not given opportunities to explore grammar in context, it

will be difficult for them to see how and why alternative forms exist to express different communicative meanings. For example, getting learners to read a set of sentences in the active voice, and then transform these into passives following a model, is a standard way of introducing the passive voice. However, it needs to be supplemented by tasks which give learners opportunities to explore when it is communicatively appropriate to use the passive rather than the active voice. We need to supplement form-focused exercises with an approach that dramatizes for learners the fact that different forms enable them to express different meanings; that grammar allows them to make meanings of increasingly sophisticated kinds, to escape from the tyranny of the here and now, not only to report events and states of affairs, but to editorialize, and to communicate their own attitudes towards these events and affairs. Unfortunately, many courses fail to make clear the relationship between form and function. Learners are taught about the forms, but not how to use them to communicate meaning. For example, through exercises such as the one referred to in the preceding paragraph, they are taught how to transform sentences from the active voice into the passive, and back into the active voice; however, they are not shown that passive forms have evolved to achieve certain communicative ends—to enable the speaker or writer to place the communicative focus on the action rather than on the performer of the action, to avoid referring to the performer of the action. If the communicative value of alternative grammatical forms is not made clear to learners, they come away from the classroom with the impression that the alternative forms exist merely to make things difficult for them. We need an approach through which they learn how to form structures correctly, and also how to use them to communicate meaning. Such a methodology will show learners how to

use grammar to get things done, socialize, obtain goods and services, and express their personality through language. In other words, it will show them how to achieve their communicative ends through the appropriate deployment of grammatical resources.

Conclusion:

In this article, I have argued that we need to go beyond linear approaches and traditional form-focused methodological practices in the — grammar class, and that while such practices might be necessary, they do not go far enough in preparing learners to press their grammatical resources into communicative use. I have suggested that grammar instruction will be more effective in classrooms where:

—students are exposed to authentic samples of language so that the grammatical features being taught are encountered in a range of different linguistic and experiential contexts;

—it is not assumed that once learners have been drilled in a particular form they have acquired it, and drilling is seen only as a first step towards eventual mastery;

—there are opportunities for recycling of language forms, and learners are engaged in tasks designed to make transparent the links between form, meaning, and use;

—learners are given opportunities to develop their own understandings of the grammatical principles of English by progressively structuring and restructuring the language through inductive learning experiences which encourage them to explore the functioning of grammar in context;

—over time, learners encounter target language items in an increasingly

diverse and complex range of linguistic and experiential environments.

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