Task-based Method in Teaching Grammar in ESL Classroom

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What is the role of grammar in ESL teaching? What sorts of structures should/should not be taught in ESL classrooms? What are the best methods to teach grammar in ESL contexts? Should grammar be learned incidentally and implicitly or should learners master each linguistic item in synthetic syllabus? And how to motivate learners in grammar teaching and make the task less ‘boring and uncool’?

These and many other questions are continuously posed by educators in regard to grammar teaching, especially in an ESL environment. The reason for this is that texts and methods used throughout the process have proved once and again ineffective in producing a high level of learners’ linguistic competency. The creation of opportunities for rendering grammar teaching more personally relevant to learners, if it is to be truly effective, goes beyond the presentation stage and is developed in the practice stage.

Although controlled practice can play a very important role, especially in developing the learners’ confidence in producing a new form, it has been asserted that it is not in itself a sufficient condition for the full mastery and acquisition of a new structure to take place. There is evidence that grammar, which is taught purely through controlled exercises, may not stay with the learner for long (Batstone, 1995). Thus it is important of teachers to provide activities which involve the ‘active manipulation of language’, where the learner has to think for himself/herself before she can correctly act on the grammatical rules and principles, and is not merely active, but actively involved.

Furthermore, the traditional notion of grammar as some idealized set of principles to master contradicts the more organic view of grammar -- how it is actually used in spoken and written communication. The role of the learner in second language grammar acquisition and how he/she gains awareness of usage through self-analysis, positive feedback, and contextualized practice must become central in educators’ approaches to grammar teaching.
In addition to this methodological conflict, grammar teaching has traditionally been plagued by another bigger problem, against which many educators find themselves idle. That is the grammar textbook.

Many grammar texts are still ‘drill and kill,’ ‘fill-in-the-blanks’ oriented with little if any contextualized practices. The approach is mostly one of presenting and explaining grammar points followed by controlled production practice. And while many grammar textbooks pay no attention to learner-generated use of certain structures, they rarely give enough examples of how the spoken and written language is actually used so that student production can be truly creative.

The challenge for ESL teachers is to make the materials being taught relevant, which is why many of them are forced to "supplement," by exposing students to a variety of spoken and written language they aren't going to find in most current grammar textbooks.

This is why applying task-based methods in grammar teaching is becoming more popular among English teachers and learners. But how practical is it to utilize such methods throughout the process and are we, as some proponent of classical grammar teaching methods argue, skewing the process more toward ‘fast teaching’ or some sort of ‘edutainment’?!

A learner-centered method in education focuses on having the student become competent in the taught material. A successful task-based strategy focuses both on form and meaning by allocating resources that draw students’ attention to linguistic elements in context, as they arise incidentally in lessons in which the focus is on meaning or communication, and by utilizing effective methods that meet the educational standards and do not conflict with the social orders.

In ESL classroom, using task oriented methods provides the learner with the opportunity to practice English in a more personalized, contextually relevant manner, while promoting the acquisition and use of grammatically rich language. In this environment, Batstone proposes what he terms as 'context-gap activities', where the need for grammar in communicative tasks is heightened by the absence of shared knowledge, and which can involve an exchange of opinion or information, or reasoning
and persuasion, and often include an element of ambiguity. For Batstone, such activities can heighten the personal relevance of grammar.

If we can encourage ESL (as well as mainstream) students to use reasoned argument or debate and student-generated ideas in the tasks we design, then we will be encouraging them to utilize grammar as a necessary tool for their self-expression. Thus, grammar teaching would be more likely to succeed if it actively engages the personality and interests of the learner. However, the equal importance of engaging the learner's cognitive powers has also been central to the shift from more deductive to more inductive approaches to the teaching of grammar, with the general idea that the expenditure of mental effort on the part of the learner can facilitate his/her full comprehension and memorization of a new structure. This type of control would probably manifest itself the best in the design and manipulation of the tasks given to students.

Researchers suggest that teachers should pay closer attention to the language students need to use in order to perform a task noting that, in many class activities used in language teaching, students are asked to work around rather than with the target grammar. This is best manifested in the use of games and problems solving as viable task-oriented tools in grammar teaching.

Games and problem-solving activities, which are task-based and have a purpose beyond the production of correct speech, are examples of the preferable communicative activities. Such activities highlight not only the communicative competence but also the performance of the learner. Yet they are the indispensable parts of a grammar lesson, since they reinforce a form-discourse match. In such activities, the attention is on the discourse context.

Rinvolutri (1995) underlined the real pedagogical value of grammar games:

- They are lively, involve students in thinking and communicating, not just drilling;
- They allow students to work in groups, and to show themselves (and the teacher!) how much/little grammar they know;
- They can be used diagnostically or as a means of revising grammar points;
Here is an illustration for the use of game in grammar teaching:

Sentences with ‘is and are’ are a problem for speakers of some languages, such as Arabic, which do not possess corresponding items. A teacher could have her students practice them by doing transformation or slot-filling exercises (boring); or ask the class to describe a picture using sentences with is and are (better). Or make the picture-description exercise into a challenging game by asking them to produce 20 correct is/are sentences about the picture within one minute. By adding a clear objective (getting to 20) and the generated competitive tension of doing it within a time limit, the whole activity becomes more motivating, and tends to produce more language practice. Also, of course, the open-ended activity renders students free to produce original expressions, more often funny and unexpected, which add to the entertainment value, and provide opportunities for the expression of individual personalities.

Finally, teachers should maintain an assorted and open-minded approach, whereby, with a degree of experimentation, and sensitivity to their students, they can attempt to create the best possible conditions in which accuracy and fluency of language use can be developed simultaneously and complimentarily. Task-based methods have proved in many ESL classrooms the ability to bring the learners much closer to reaching this goal. Teachers should also pay a special attention to the speed against which they set the learners’ goals in developing their English skills. It is very important to remember that language acquisition is a gradual process that must be approached with a degree of sensitivity on the part of the teacher, avoiding the overloading of students by modifying the pressure on one task element at a time in order to assist ESL students in eventually achieving full automation of the skills involved in language acquisition that is both fluent and accurate.
References


