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Making Grammar Palatable To Engineering Students

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Introduction

"Mention the word grammar and students will cringe. In fact most teachers will cringe too," according to Claudia Pesce. A feeling of aversion to grammar appears to be an inevitable aspect in today's classroom scenario but the teaching of grammar is a necessary evil and one is reminded of the trouble children have with eating vegetables and greens. The same applies to the grammar class as it cannot be dispensed with, but has to be tolerated. Grammar is an essential part of good and effective writing but how does one make it palatable to the students especially those at the tertiary level?

To Teach or Not to Teach

There exists controversies relating to how we should teach grammar. To teach or not to teach is not the issue as it is undeniable that grammar has to be taught for effective writing.

Much grammar research over the past decades has concentrated on determining whether grammar should be taught at all. Researchers have spoken for and against the teaching of grammar but at the centre of this issue is that it has to be taught in some manner or the other. Grammar has held and continues to hold a central place in language teaching (Ellis, 101). In the website www.grammarly.com there is a humorous reference to grammar as being the glue that holds everything together. Further the writer cautions that if you don't use the glue properly or if one uses the wrong glue then everything would shatter as there would be no communication at all. http://www.grammarly.com/handbook/grammar/

Thus teaching grammar does play a central role in every ESL / EFL teacher's classroom. The important question that needs to be answered is how does one teach grammar? In other words, how do I help students learn the grammar rules that they require for their academic purposes. This brings into focus the approach to be adopted to teach grammar rules. Teachers need to consider how to present grammar to their students (approach), what options for dealing with the grammar should be used and which area they will focus during the language practice, be it accuracy, fluency or restructuring. The methods to be adopted are again a crucial issue with some advocating incidental and some advocating explicit teaching. But there is no denying that current research in Second Language Acquisition has led to a reconsideration of the role of grammar in the L2 classroom. There is evidence for the positive effects of grammar instruction. Long (1991) proposed an approach that he termed "focus on FORM" distinguishing it from a "focus on FORMS" approach to teaching grammar. FORMS involves discrete grammar forms selected and presented in an isolated manner, focus on FORM involves the teacher's attempt to draw the student's attention to grammatical forms in the context of communication.

The Role of Grammar in Krashen's View

According to Krashen, the study of the structure of the language can have general educational advantages and values that high schools and colleges may want to include in their language programs. It should be clear, however, that examining irregularity, formulating rules and teaching complex facts about the target language is not language teaching, but rather it is "language appreciation" or linguistics.

The only instance in which the teaching of grammar can result in language acquisition (and proficiency) is when the students are interested in the subject and the target language is used as a medium of instruction. Very often, when this occurs, both teachers and students are convinced that the study of formal grammar is essential for second language acquisition, and the teacher is skillful enough to present explanations in the target language so that the students understand. In other words, the teacher-talk meets the requirements for comprehensible input and perhaps with the students' participation the classroom becomes an environment suitable for acquisition.

Incidental Teaching vs Explicit Teaching of Grammar

Ellis (2006) raises the question whether one should teach grammar or should one simply create the conditions by which learners learn naturally. Krashen (1983) is of the opinion that the the study of grammar promotes knowledge about language but not how to use the language. Thus a mere theoretical knowledge of the rules of grammar is not going to be of any help for the student. He should be taught to understand how to use the rules in a communicative situation. Ellis (2006) further goes on to question if grammar is to be taught what exactly should be taught and how does one go about it? There exists a wide variety of grammar that can be adopted ranging from structural to generative to functional but it should be noted that not all items and not all types are actually required for all students. Thus the teacher has to come to some conclusion of what exactly is required for the learners. That is, one should go in for a need-based syllabus of grammar items. Krashen advocates the minimalist approach in the teaching of grammar whereas we have researchers like Walter and Swan (1990) who advocate teaching the whole grammar of the target language.

Activity-based Teaching of Grammar Rules

I am of the firm opinion that an activity-based or task-based teaching is most effective. Willis advocates TBLT (Task Based Language Teaching) in the language classroom as it is more student-centric with the principle of democracy being more evident. Further TBLT provides an inductive approach to instruction and encourages more meaningful learning experiences that are relevant to students. The types of tasks he speaks about include listing that has tasks like brainstorming, fact-finding, ordering and sorting (sequencing ranking categorising, classifying, comparing – matching, finding differences and similarities,

sharing personal experiences and creative tasks). Types of tasks according to Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993) include Jigsaw wherein learners combine different pieces of information to create a whole, Information Gap wherein learners have different information and they negotiate to find the other individual's information, Problem-solving wherein students must find a solution for a problem (typically there is one resolution), Decision-Making where students solve an open ended problem by discussing multiple options and choosing the best, and Opinion-Exchange where learners exchange ideas without needing to come to a consensus. Given the mindset of the generation of learners of today and their attitudes, it would be worthwhile to check what learning materials and resources are available to make the teaching of the grammar points effective. Lin Hong promotes the use of games in the language class especially when teaching grammar, but he cautions that not all games will work as we have to select activities that are appropriate for the goal on hand. Aydan Ersoz also reiterates the need for introducing games to teach grammar points. Learning a language requires constant effort and that can be tiring. Ersoz outlines two good reasons why games should be included in the classroom:

* Games that are amusing and challenging are highly motivating.
* Games allow meaningful use of the language in context.

Deductive or Inductive Approach

When teaching the rules of grammar there are two approaches a teacher can adopt , namely, the deductive approach and the inductive approach. The deductive approach is teaching through rules. The rule is provided first, by the teacher which is then followed by the provision of examples for the learner enabling the student to imbibe the rules of grammar. On the other hand an inductive approach involves teaching through examples. Students are provided with several examples from which a rule is inferred.

Intrinsic Motivation

The importance of motivation is definitely not to be under estimated because no ending of innovative teaching is going to help if the learner is uninterested. Joel Bacha stresses the value of intrinsic motivation and feels that this works better in the grammar class.

He is of the opinion that exposure to challenges and stimulation piques the children's natural curiosity and promotes more effective learning.

Teaching Prepositions

"Vampires!   Zombies!   Werewolves!"
"Where?!"
"Behind you!"

Thank goodness for prepositions. Imagine not knowing where the danger lay….

Prepositions tell us where or when something is in relation to something else. When monsters are sneaking up, it's good to have these special words to tell us where those monsters are: are they **behind** us or **in front of** us; are they **near** or **far**; will they be arriving **in** three seconds or **at** midnight?

Scenery on the Chalk Board

The module on prepositions was done very differently for the engineering class doing their first year at a private university. The classroom has a white board and students were given coloured pens to draw scenery on the board. Each student draws something and the next person adds to it. The scene on the board depicted a house with a path leading to it, replete with coconut trees, a rivulet along the trees and a sun atop the trees. It even had a board "Trespassers will be punished"! Next I had a student draw mice at all possible points on the board. Students had to write sentences with prepositions about the mice.

We had very many variations of the use of prepositions and the final reading of the answers was fun and a learning experience as well.

Since the students are engineering students the next revolved around an Experiment in the Chemistry Lab and a Machine in the Mechanical lab. The concept of *on* as being different from *through* was taught through the practical demonstration. Another variation was the use of a Fairy Tale like such as 'Ugly Duckling'. The students enjoyed the trek into the past when the fairy tale evoked old memories. The module threw up a variety of prepositions in
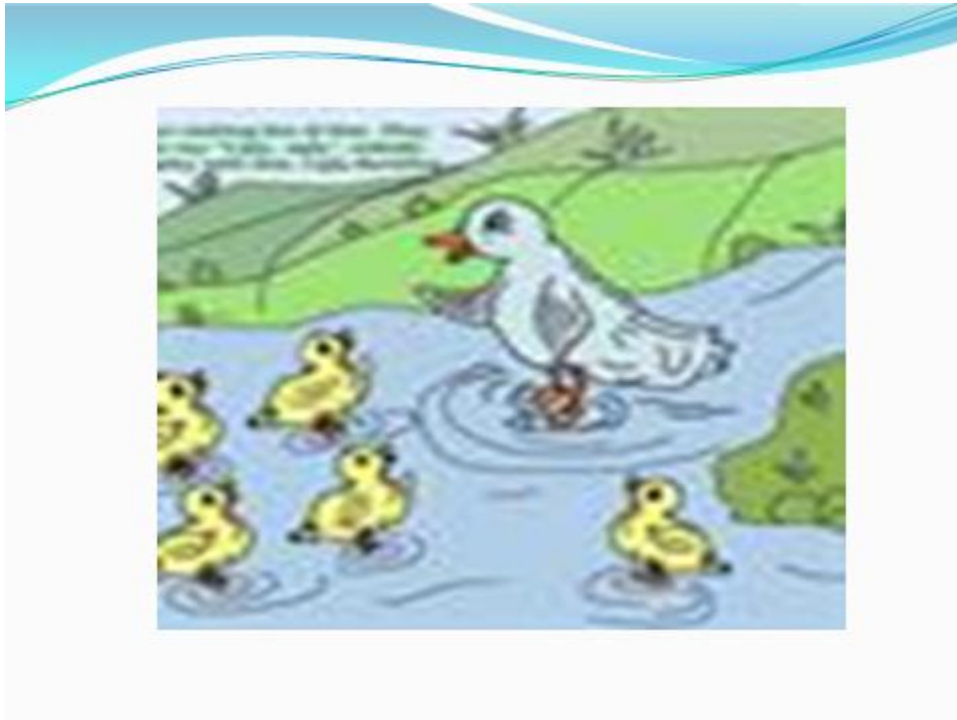
connection with the story being unfolded in class like the ducklings in the water, swimming in front of the mother Duck and so on.

Conclusion

The paper presented the importance of grammar for effective communication and argued for the importance of the same at all levels of education. It reiterated the point that grammar cannot be put onto the backburner as it is very crucial for effective communication. It stressed that the best approach has to be adopted bearing in mind the needs of the learners.

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