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The Problems of Teaching/Learning Tenses

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Frequent Changes in Theory and Practice: Problems with Tenses

Theory and practice of language teaching is characterized by frequent changes. Teachers are expected to work within the rigid framework of the principles of grammar. In the field of Technical English in Engineering Colleges, the teachers' aim is to make the students acquire communication skills, listening skill, reading skill and for the use of English to meet the demands of business.

This paper focuses on the difficulties of teaching and learning Technical English especially tenses. Communicative language teaching enables students to perform spontaneously, but it cannot guarantee linguistic accuracy.

Tense errors are the commonest and are difficult to remedy. The students are also confused about the use of proper tenses and are demotivated.

This paper discusses how teachers of grammar can facilitate learning appropriate grammar and how we can enable the students to discover the rules of usage on their own.

Teaching Language versus Teaching Literature

Teaching language is viewed as a more difficult task than teaching literature. In literature, one has the freedom to explore into any genre and interpret it according to literary

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canons. But, when it comes to language, especially grammar, the instructor is expected to work within the rigid framework of the principles of grammar.

The instructor always focuses his / her attention on the basic forms of grammar. As a result, his/her enterprise gets drowned. When the students join the first year of technical courses, they are already exposed to the theoretical nuances of English grammar. Of course, there are also students from vernacular medium, who struggle to speak and write fairly good English.

Technical English for Engineering and Technology Students

The syllabus of their first year course of subjects includes English. It is called Technical English and the major part of their study is grammar. Communicative language teaching enables students to perform spontaneously, but it cannot guarantee linguistic accuracy. In learning grammar, students face a dilemma. On the one hand, they need to know the rules as that is what they are tested in their exams. On the other, there is a good need for effective communication in English. That is why; the instructors have to look out for the ways of combining form and meaning in teaching foreign language.

Students from Vernacular Medium – Errors in Tense

Many of the students of technical courses are from vernacular medium and it is found difficult to explain the syntactic and semantic structural aspects of grammar. Out of curiosity, they usually raise a question, “How many tenses are there?” The instructor keeps counting his/her fingers and makes a mess of the class room.

Tense errors are the commonest and are difficult to remedy. The students are also confused about the use of proper tenses and are demotivated. How can teachers of grammar facilitate learning in grammar and make the students discover on their own?

Tenses are the jewels in the crown of grammar. Every sentence has a verb, without which, there is no sentence. The tense of the verb can be present, past and future, with other divisions in each tense. The use of tense depends on the time that the writer or the speaker wants to refer.

The problem is that the students though know a great deal about the names of tenses, they find it difficult to understand the time aspect that each tense indicates. So, the focus is on the difficulties faced by an instructor and learner to understand the paradoxes involved in the study of tenses.

Tense in English

In English, only two tenses are marked in the verb alone; present and past. All the other tenses are marked by other words called auxiliaries. In the past form, the verb undergoes

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many syntactic changes. It is recognized by –d, -ed, -ied, -t inflections. Adding more to these inflections are vowel changes; take-took, bleed-bled. Some are without change like cut, put, shut. Besides the semantic structure of a sentence, a student has to have these syntactic changes in mind and they are bewildering.

Interchanging Tenses

There are occasions when simple present tense is used to indicate a future event that is a part of a plan or an arrangement.

The counsellor presides over the function.

1. When does the college re open?
2. We are enacting a play, next week.

If one considers these sentences, the tense in the above sentences indicate a future action. They substitute the future time with the time modules like “shall or will”. So, the present tense is mixed up with the notion of time and future tense appears to be an extravaganza in English grammar. In some contexts, the present tense is used to relate past events, which are still true and can cause tense confusion.

My father told me to grab the chances to help others. He is more conscious of the needs of society than his own.

Time and Tense Mix-up

The students are quite confused about the mix of the time and tense. ‘The father’ in this sentence may not be alive, but the character of the father cuts across the three times; past, present and future. This kind of semantic notion of time reference is puzzling to any learner of English language. The same thing happens with Historic present.

Shakespeare’s characters are created with a good psychological insight.

One finds the use of present tense to comment on a literary figure of a by-gone era. Here the present tense is a matter of form but it speaks about the past. This kind of inconsistent uses of tenses leads to many types of common errors. It happens when there is an occurrence of mixed present and past tense.

I told my daughter that only clouds give us rain.

The present simple in the second clause tells us that the thing has happened multiple times and is expected to repeat in future. In this case, the speaker gives an idea that verb tenses mainly convey an idea the way one feels about the situations.

Confusion about Perfect Tenses

The students tend to confuse between the use of present perfect and past tense. The students understand all the tenses; standing at the present tense. Present tense has a short interlude. By the time, we say 'now', the now will be gone. The present perfect tense is the present of the past. It is used for talking about situations continuing up to now, where one wants to say how long a state has lasted. In spite of the proper explanation, the students confront difficulties, when they are asked to write a job application letter. They are in a fix to select between the two tenses; Past and Present Perfect.

1. I completed my degree (or)
2. I have completed my degree.

Use of Past Tenses

In some instances, the students find the use of the Past tense in imaginary situations or improbable situations and get confused.

1. If I knew Hindi, I could read it.
2. It's high time we started the Project.

Tense in English is a Mixture

Tense is a mixture of all the three elements: Tense, Modality and Aspect. Modality means the way in which a speaker expresses his attitude towards a situation. In English, usually this is done by modal auxiliaries like 'can', 'may', 'shall' and their past tense forms which are generally used to indicate future tense. The term 'Aspect' stands for relation between an activity and the passage of time which may be either of completion of an act implying current relevance or duration. These two aspects (perfect and continuous) combine with futures of tense and modality in the English verb phrases.

Present Aspect:

1. I have read the Newspaper.
2. I had read the Newspaper.
3. I will have read the Newspaper.

Continuous Aspect:

1. I am reading the Newspaper.
2. I was reading the Newspaper.
3. I will be reading the Newspaper.

So, in a verb phrase like 'May have been writing', one has all the three elements and yet according to common grammar, the above phrase will be labeled as present perfect

continuous which is rarely used in academic writing. Because of the overlapping nature of tenses, the students are not able to have a clear picture of the uses of the tenses.

What Is Grammar Teaching?

There is an old notion that teaching grammar is like teaching rules of grammar (i.e.) form-based. But, if students need grammar for communication, it should be taught communicatively (i.e.) meaning-based. Since the students have both the needs, the instructor should connect form and meaning in grammar teaching in reference to proficiency-oriented curriculum.

The students should be able to learn explicit grammar rules as well as be in a position to practice them in communication (i.e.) realisable only through communicative meaning-based exploratory assignments. Some of the suggested activities are:

1. Collage Task.

In this task, the learners have three different parts of a story and they are supposed to combine the different pieces of information to form a whole.

2. Information Exchange Task.

In this task, the students are divided into two groups. The first group has one set of information and the second group has a complimentary set of information. They are supposed to find out the information of the rival group to complete the activity.

3. Problem-Solving Task.

In this task, the students are given a problem and they are supposed to arrive at a solution to the problem through discussions.

The instructor's role is to select, adapt and create the tasks themselves, thus forming an instructional sequence to meet out the learners' needs.

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