

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 11: 6 July 2011

ISSN 1930-2940

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A Form-focused Activity to Enhance Acquisition of Tenses

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Introduction

Grammar is regarded as an indispensable component of any language and linguistic competence cannot be achieved without proper acquisition of grammar. Hence it plays a crucial role in language teaching – learning process.

Traditionally, teaching of grammar involved teaching of rules of grammar which was accomplished using different methodologies which were also rule- based. It was mainly grammar-translation method where the rules were taught explicitly; rote learning of the rules was also encouraged. Such an approach was inadequate and acted as a constraint in achieving the ultimate objective of learning grammar.

Form and Use – Learn and Apply

For complete acquisition of language, grammar teaching should encompass form and use. In other words, it should be an embodiment of learning the rules as well as application of rules during performance or language production. In tune with this concept, research on grammar teaching has gained prominence and it has resulted in the formulation of plethora of theories and models for providing implications for classroom teaching. Grammar teaching has undergone a total transformation and gaining communicative competence has become the integral part of

grammar teaching today. Teachers employ different methodologies and strategies to facilitate acquisition. Innumerable approaches and procedures have been adopted by grammarians, researchers and teachers of second language.

Widodo's Five Steps

Handoyo Puji Widodo's five-step procedure for teaching grammar can be cited as an example: (Widodo, 2006)

1. Building up students' knowledge of the rule or rule initiation.
2. Eliciting functions of the rule or rule elicitation.
3. Familiarizing students with the rule in use through exercises or rule practice.
4. Checking students' comprehension or rule activation.
5. Expanding students' knowledge or rule enrichment.

Whatever approach a teacher uses, it is imperative that grammatical and language competence should be developed simultaneously. It is the prerogative of the teacher to concentrate on what and how of teaching i.e. the material and methodology.

Teaching of Tenses

Of all the grammar components, acquisition of tenses should be given primary importance as aptly echoed by Trudie Maria Booth,

"The verb is the most important part of the sentence. It expresses an action or state of the subject and indicates the time and mood of an occurrence. In order to be able to communicate in a language, you must know how its verb tenses and moods are formed and how they are used." (Booth, 2007)

Even though it is a crucial component, its mastery is rather difficult in English as a Second or Foreign Language situation. It is perceived that tenses pose extreme difficulties and its wrong usage creates maximum confusion during communication. It is also widely accepted by teachers of English that the acquisition of tenses is the most complex and challenging problem that second language learners of English encounter. This problem is also prevalent amongst the students in India, where English is taught as a second language.

Indian Situation – Reasons for Poor Performance

In India, though English is taught right from the school level to tertiary level and teaching of tenses is accorded an important place in the syllabus, it has been observed time and again, that the level of acquisition of tenses among the learners is inadequate. It is noticed that students do not make use of tenses appropriately, thus leading to errors in communication. Due to these

errors it is difficult to identify the time of action explained in any utterance and the message gets distorted by using wrong aspect.

The main reasons for poor performance in this domain are: the focus is on learning of rules rather than application of rules and grammar is often taught only at sentence level and not in a discourse. Sentence based grammar teaching does not result in any positive contribution to perfect acquisition of grammar.

Overcoming Tense Hurdles

If the problems in usage of tenses are reduced, communication will be clearer and well expressed. It is in the hands of the English teachers to address this issue and make the students competent in using tenses aptly while communicating by adopting various effective methods and strategies.

To accomplish proper communication, tenses should be taught not only as individual sentences but in a context and in a discourse as well. The teachers should make the students learn:

- the structure of the tenses in terms of time and aspect,
- the differences between tense forms and
- the usage of tenses in sentences as well as context

The Research Study

Teaching of grammar has been summed by Thornbury briefly as follows. ‘Grammar for teaching purposes has to go beyond reference grammar and involve learners in ‘grammaring’, i.e., applying their grammar in various contexts of use. Students should discover how the various grammatical systems (such as tense, aspect, mood, modality, and voice) operate and interact, and the main task of teaching should be to show "how to create the right conditions for students to ‘uncover’ grammar" (Thornbury, 2001).

In other words, teaching of grammar, while being rule-based, should also be application oriented and discourse focused.

The purpose of this research is to ascertain the outcome of rules based teaching, giving additional inputs in the form of exercises and the effect of introducing tenses in a discourse. The effect of introducing tenses in the form of discourse was tested by conducting an activity - ‘Identification of the same pattern’.

The Hypothesis

Apart from teaching and giving inputs like additional exercises, an activity and discourse based practice induces better acquisition of tenses.

Population and Sample Size

The research was conducted amongst 120 first year B.E / B.Tech students, who are pursuing their courses in an Engineering College affiliated to Anna University, Chennai. The students who had secured more than 70% of marks in English in the Higher secondary examinations were chosen for the study. They were divided into four groups comprising of 30 students in each group: Pre-teaching, Post-teaching, Exercise and Activity.

Experimental Design and Data Collection

The study was conducted with four groups. To test and validate the hypothesis, the data was collected by giving a questionnaire comprising twelve sentences covering all tense patterns as gap filling exercise for each group for testing the acquisition level.

Pre-teaching Group: This group was not exposed to teaching of tenses at tertiary level and their acquisition level was tested by administering the questionnaire.

Post-Teaching Group: This group was exposed to teaching of tenses for 3 periods of 50 minutes duration each. After teaching tenses and by administering the questionnaire, their acquisition level was tested.

Exercise Group: This group was exposed to teaching of tenses for 3 periods of 50 minutes duration each. After teaching, this group of students was given additional exercises for supplementing and reinforcing the rules. Then the questionnaire was administered to the students.

Activity Group: This group was exposed to teaching of tenses for 3 periods of 50 minutes duration each. After teaching and giving additional exercises for supplementing and reinforcing the rules, this group of students was asked to bring news papers to the class room for identifying the tense patterns. Later, the questionnaire was administered.

Material

Choice of effective and interesting materials to be used for language activities can be daunting for the teacher; it is here the work book and the ubiquitous Newspaper comes to the rescue. These were used as material for this study for exercise and activity group:

Exercise group: For familiarizing the rules and reviewing the grammar skills of the students', work books are widely used in English class rooms. Additional exercises at sentence level from a work book were given.

Activity Group: The fact that Learning from the real world has magnetic appeal for students and news paper as a perfect teaching tool is acknowledged by many language researchers. Newspapers not only provide information on various fields it also serves as an example for immaculate usage of language. The students of the activity group were asked to bring newspapers to the class room for expanding students' knowledge / rule enrichment and the activity – 'Identification of the same pattern' was conducted.

Activity employed

The Task that was employed for this research is 'Identification of the same pattern'. The students used news paper and they were instructed to do the following:

1. Read articles
2. Identify the tense patterns used in it
3. Underline the patterns
4. Justify / explain by labeling of tense and aspect

The main goal is to make them identify the patterns. This task was carried on for 2 periods, each of 50 minutes duration and on an average a student followed the instructions and completed the above mentioned activity for 50 sentences. Any approach or method that is different from the usual can break the monotony of learning. This activity also helped in creating and sustaining high motivational levels.

Analysis of Data

The data was analyzed to validate the hypothesis by checking the effectiveness of the activity – 'Identification of the same pattern' and discourse based practice for acquisition of tenses. Data analyses were done, authentically, at three levels for all four groups:

Level 1: The students' percentage of scores is segregated into above 50% and below 50% to assess the improvement in scores.

Level 2: The mean scores between groups were compared to quantify the differences.

Level 3: Test of significance of difference (t test) was calculated to check the significance of difference of one group over the other to observe the improvement in acquisition.

Results and discussion

The results of the groups were analyzed. Firstly the percentage of the marks of the students was tabulated as students who have scored below 50% and above 50% as in table –1.

Table – 1 Analysis of percentage of marks

Groups	No of students below 50 %	Total Percentage	No of students above 50 %	Total percentage
Pre teaching	21	70	9	30
Post teaching	14	46	16	54
Exercise group	11	37	19	63
Activity group	6	20	24	80

The result shows that in pre teaching group the number of students below 50 % is 21 and above 50 % is 9. The number of students below 50 % is 14 and above 50 % is 16 in Post teaching group. In exercise group the number of students below 50 % is 11 and above 50 % is 19. The number of students below 50 % is 6 and above 50 % is 24 in Activity group. The analysis of the data vividly shows marked difference in the scores.

Table – 2 Analysis of mean and standard deviation

Groups	Sum	Mean	Standard deviation
Pre – teaching	107	3.5	1.63
Post – teaching	140	4.6	1.62
Exercise group	164	5.4	1.8
Activity group	187	6.2	1.8

It is apparent from the above analyses that apart from teaching and giving inputs like additional exercises, an activity and discourse based practice induces better acquisition of tenses. The mean scores show improvement in acquisition and t test shows significant difference thus proving the hypothesis.

The analyses of the mean scores and test of significance of difference between groups demonstrates that the difference is significant. Sum, mean scores and standard deviation of all the four groups are presented in Table 2.

The scores of the students in the pre teaching group are lesser when compared to the scores of the students in post teaching group and thus determines the effect of teaching tenses in class rooms even at tertiary level. The mean scores are 3.5 and 4.6 respectively $t(30) = 2.61$, $P < 0.05$, so the difference between the pre teaching and post teaching group is significant.

The scores of the students in the post-teaching group are lesser when compared to the scores of the students in exercise group. This affirms that teaching of tenses alone is inadequate; acquisition level will improve if teaching is clubbed with additional exercises. The mean scores are 4.6 and 5.4 respectively. $t(30) = 1.79$, $P < 0.05$, so the difference between the post teaching and exercise group is significant.

The mean score of the students in exercise group is 5.4 and it is lesser when compared to the score of the students in Activity group which is 6.2. $t(30) = 1.7$, $P < 0.05$, So the significance of difference between the Exercise group and Activity group is evident.

The results highlight the effectiveness of an activity and discourse based practice in inducing better acquisition of tenses. This proves the hypotheses that apart from teaching and giving additional exercises, a form focused activity for rule enrichment results in better acquisition of tenses.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that an activity and discourse based practice induces better acquisition of tenses. This methodology of teaching can be extended to teach other grammatical structures as well. The success of language learning can be attributed to building a strong foundation of linguistic knowledge by grasping the necessary nuances of grammar. This in turn will have a profound effect in achieving communicative proficiency.

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