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Vattamalaipalayam, NGGO Colony Post



COIMBATORE-641022, Tamilnadu, India

www.srec.ac.in

11th International Congress on English Grammar (ICEG 2014)
In association with Systemic Functional Linguistics

Grammar and Grammar Teaching: Changing Perspectives

Editor
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Inducing Intrinsic Motivation via Cognitive Dissonance To Teach English Grammar

J. T. Divya

Introduction

This paper focuses on the changing perspective of grammar teaching (from traditional dictating to self-learning) through cognitive dissonance (Leon Festinger). Cognitive dissonance occurs when an individual experiences some degree of discomfort resulting from an inconsistency between two cognitions: their views on the world around them, and their own personal feelings and actions. Cognitive dissonance promotes intrinsic motivation. It is defined as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:1 March 2014

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This article is inspired by the article of my teacher “Exploring cognitive dissonance in the ESL/EFL context”, which was presented in the All India seminar at the Regional Institute of English-South India, Bangalore, subsequently published in a refereed journal (Ram 2012).

Traditional way of grammar teaching may (only) help in learning “forms” and not much in learning “function”. But, the modern perspective helps both facilitator and learner to use English language. This paper focuses on teaching tenses, article and function of word, which are parts of grammar.

EXPERIMENTS WITH 1ST M.A., B.Ed. (ENGLISH) STUDENTS OF SASTRA SRC

CLASS 1:

Here, I narrate below what happened in 1st M.A., B.Ed. class, when I used cognitive dissonance as a teaching technique.

I asked the students to list the articles and they were able to list it. But when I asked them to divide these in terms of Definite and Indefinite articles, only some students were able to do it. So I taught the difference between definite and indefinite articles and gave the following sentences as examples.

e.g.: A girl teaches articles.

The girl teaches articles.

Through these examples, I provoked them to say which one was correct and why. Their facial expression and gesture clearly indicated that they were puzzled. They did not know which one was correct. Then I told them that both sentences are correct and asked them how it could be so. Some students were squeezing their forehead to get some idea. And finally, I explained to them that when both the speaker and hearer know the subject, we can use ‘the’ (definite article). Otherwise, we can use ‘a’, the indefinite article. Actually, I selected this example for definite and indefinite article, but it too created cognitive dissonance in learner’s mind. Then I asked them to give similar examples. A girl gave this example:

A peacock dances well.

The peacock dances well.

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I used this example to give the contrastive principle to generate cognitive dissonance. I gave the following examples, which refer to the generic or general characteristics.

1) The cow gives us milk.

A cow gives us milk.

2) A dog is a faithful animal.

The dog is a faithful animal.

Then I asked the students same questions. They thought that the answer for first question is applicable here too. Then I dismissed their answer. At that time, I could sense their cognitive dissonance from their silence. To explain the answer I used this helping example, “The dog is a Labrador.” Here, “the dog” refers to some dog or a particular variety of dog. But those four examples refer to any of the species of dog or cow and that is something universal. All peacocks can dance well but not all dogs are Labradors. Now some students started to relax.

CLASS 2

The second one is to make the students aware that there is no plural form for an uncountable noun.

To use the students’ previous knowledge, I asked the definition/meaning for noun and example for noun. They were not aware of countable and uncountable noun. So, I thought them the difference between countable and uncountable. And I gave some examples. They are,

1) Countable noun – A Ship, A Problem, Photos, Minutes, etc.,

2) Uncountable noun – work, water, music, butter, etc.,

I taught them how to use uncountable noun in sentences, that sometimes we use measurement.

E.g.:- a glass of water, a piece of music, some work.

They gave the following examples,

e.g.:- 1) I have some work.

2) Give me a cup of tea.

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I provoked them to use these nouns as plural in sentence.

At this time I gave the following examples which have plural forms of uncountable noun, contradicting the rule for the use of uncountable nouns. Those examples are,

1) Work

- a) Construction works are going on.
- b) Works of charity.
- c) His/the artist's works are famous.

2) Water

- a) Flood Waters entered Kumbakonam.
- b) We crossed the Indian waters.

When I gave these examples they readily counter me by saying that there is no plural form for uncountable noun. Some noticed it when I pointed out the difference. Then I asked them to see the words 'work' and 'water' in dictionary for different meanings, that is polysemy. They come to know that each examples given for uncountable plural noun has different meaning.

- 1) – a) Compounds building, b) An activity carried out for some purpose, c) Entire collection of such material by an artists.
- 2) – a) flood, b) large area of water body.

CLASS 3

The third one is teaching tenses. Make the students understand that there is no future tense in English.

I started the class by asking these questions, they are, how many tenses are there in English and give examples for each one. They gave these examples,

- 1) She speaks truth.
- 2) She spoke truth.

3) She will speak truth.

After this I gave my example with the use of the verb ‘come’.

E.g.: Present Tense: She comes here.

Past Tense: She came yesterday.

Future Tense: She will come tomorrow.

I asked them to translate the verb In Tamil (their L1), they said that,

e.g.: Nigalkaalam: Aval varugiral.

Eranthakaalam: Aval vanthal.

Ethirkaalam: Aval varuval.

Then I pointed out that there are three different tenses to three different time in Tamil and raised the question, “what about English?” They replied with dedication that in English also there are three tenses. At this time, I countered them by saying that there are only two tenses in English. When I said this they became passive and started thinking. And I pointed out that there is no future tense in English. We use two tenses to refer to three different periods/dimensions of time. Even then they did not agree with me by saying that the use of modal verb ‘will’ indicates the future tense. To explain this, I took the verb separate and put it like this.

Present tense – will – come

Past tense – would – came

Future - ? - ?

It took time for them to realize and unlearn thing which they learn in school. Finally, once again I said them that there are only two tenses in English to refer three different periods.

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CLASS 4

The fourth and final one is teaching different function of the word 'would' (as used for politeness).

I started the class with the question, 'would you like to listen to me?' As they are already motivated by the previous class they said 'yes'. Then I asked the learners to give some example sentences, in which 'would' should be used. They gave their own example and I added these examples too. They are

- 1) She would leave at 10.
- 2) They would surely have heard of it.
- 3) He would have his own way.
- 4) It would rain, just as we're setting out.

After giving these examples I asked the form of the word 'would'. They readily answer that the word is a modal verb in past tense. Then I gave the following examples and asked them what is the difference between these two sets of examples. They are

- 1) Would you ring her back?
- 2) I would suggest.....
- 3) I would like to meet you in the afternoon.

After seeing these 2 sets of examples, they bungled. Again they repeated that the word was a modal verb in past tense. Then I directed them to focus on the shift from past tense. They were unable to reach the answer. So I asked them what kind of sentence given above. They said that the first one is a statement. Then I tried to give some clue, so I asked them how do you approach your higher officials? Immediately a girl came out with an answer, 'request', at that time I provoked them to think of some other word for 'request'. After this the answer came out

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that is ‘politeness’. Then I explained them that a form may have more than a function. They got cognitive dissonance when I asked them to point out the difference. To give instances from day-to-day life I used an advertisement in which this kind of polite sentence used that is “I would recommend ‘sensodyne’ repair & protect toothpaste”. Here, the speaker has used ‘would’ to not sound assertive but sound polite.

STUDENTS’ FEEDBACK

After finishing these four classes I asked learners to give feedback about how they feel when contrastive views are introduced and other observation which they made. They said that whatever they learn now was something new which is contrasted with what they learnt in school. Irritation, sadness, upset, and shock are the feelings which they experienced at the time of cognitive dissonance. They got upset when they realized that the previous learning was faulty. Most of the learners were not able to accept the change immediately. They started to think that even apparently small things are complex then what about the other things which they have learnt earlier. They felt that now they are motivated to face any kind of situation in learning. As a teacher trainee, I too was motivated to get into any class with confidence.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that Cognitive Dissonance can be used as a technique in class room at primary, secondary and tertiary level. Teachers presumably use the technique not knowing what it is. This experiment focuses on teaching tenses, articles and tense as politeness marker in English. There is, of course, further scope for using the technique for teaching degrees of comparison, active and passive voice, simple, complex, and compound sentences, etc, in fact the whole range of grammar. Similarly, cognitive dissonance can be used as a technique in classroom at primary, secondary and tertiary level; also in teaching literature, mathematics, chemistry, physics, etc. Simultaneously, however, the individual teacher may have to develop a positive mindset and have empathy towards students.

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