English Grammar In Contemporary Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

The central part of any Language is its grammar which further branches out in syntax, phonology and semantics. Phonology is that aspect which deals with the sound, syntax with structures and semantics with meaning. This paper focuses on the structural aspect or the syntax. This should be of vital interest to any curriculum designer in language. The aim of teaching English as a second language in the SSC curriculum is for students to achieve complete proficiency in the language. So in the endeavour to achieve this proficiency a student who has enrolled in school is subjected to a completion of a course in English language. Many language teachers believe that teaching grammar is an important aspect in achieving linguistic proficiency. But a systematic review is needed to ask the question "What is the effect of teaching grammar in English' This perennial question has prompted this study. This paper reviews the order of L1 grammatical acquisition which leads to the conclusion that grammar must be taught only with the awareness of the syntax acquired at a particular grade.

Keywords: Grammar, syntax structures, grammar proficiency.

Introduction

The ultimate objective in teaching English as a second language is for students to achieve complete proficiency in the language. So in the endeavour to achieve this proficiency a student who has enrolled in any educational course, at one point or the other is subjected to a completion of a course in English language. Many language teachers particularly the teachers engaged in ESP (Teaching English for specific. purposes) believe that teaching grammar is an important aspect in achieving linguistic proficiency. Thus the English instructional curriculum in various fields has a section of grammar as one module. An FYBachelor of Engineering student of the University of Mumbai, thus studies grammar which includes prepositions, sydent of at Univer soun-ve agreement, one word substitutes, articles etc. A FBachelor of Commerce student of the University of Mumbai also studies the same component in the Business Communication course and so does

a FYBachelor in Management Studies student and a FYBachelor of Arts student.Generally assuming that proficiency in English language is arrived at piecemeal, in stages, over several years, as their knowledge of and exposure to the language increases grammar is taught at various grades, it would thus appear realistic to have limited objectives at the different grade levelsin school, instead of expecting complete correctness from the start. For instance, if there is an awareness of thesentence structures that are acquired according to age group and number of years of exposure to the language, thena teaching pedagogy could be designed according to the grade level of the student as the child goes from one grade to another, gaining proficiency in the language in stages.

The text-books, in this changed set-up would then,also provide goals according to the order of acquisition of grammatical structures as seen in practice among our students.

It is also necessary to note that learning a language is ever so much easier when it is done in a context and when it is not a learning of grammatical features in isolation. All children learning their native languages learn them in contexts of use, without explicit attention to form. When parents correct the child's language, it is usually for factual correctness rather than for grammatical accuracy. e.g., If a child says 'that a car, the parent is likely to say, 'no, that is a bus', correcting for factuality rather than for grammatical shortcomings. (Please note that even though they might use the correct form themselves, they are not correcting for it, but only for the factual point) When the child's learning agenda is ready for it, he/she will acquire the use of the existential 'be', but not before then. It is thus seen that our most successful language learners, children learning their native tongue, do not learn from explicit attention to grammar. In fact, if the parent had said to the child, 'no that is a bus' emphasising the word 'is' and making it repeat the sentence again, the child would not proceed so readily with the language learning process. At the present moment, the child's learning agenda is incapable of taking in this grammatical form. The form is, in fact, not necessary to convey the meaning and so the child does not waste its limited linguistic resources on anything which is not connected with meaning. Only,much later, when it is able to cope with many other aspects of the language, will it learn the use of the existential 'be'.

Like children, older learners also have a learning agenda, and they will produce the language only in accordance with this agenda. Following a route imposed by the curriculum which goes against its own agenda will not help - the learner will not learn, if by learning a language is meant the use of language spontaneously in natural contexts. Even if a child is able to formulate a pattern in class in language drills, it does not mean that he/she will be able to do so on their own in a normal context of speech. It is felt that language occurs in natural contexts, not in language drills, or in sentences meant to demonstrate a linguistic pattern. Language is concerned with communicating meaning in a social (or textual) context and that communication of meaning should be the primary focus in any language teaching endeavour. Grammar aids in promoting clarity in communication of meaning, but very often the meaning can be communicated even with very elementary or faulty grammatical tools. Thus, focus on meaning is primary and explicit attention to grammatical patterns does not help in the acquisition of the patterns being taught. However

much these may be drilled in, they will not be acquired for normal use in natural contexts unless the learner's mind is ready to absorb them. It is also somewhat ironic to note that the same grammatical items are prescribed for study again and again, at the various grade levels. The grammar that a stutent is expected to study at the fourth standard text book of the State board of Maharashtra is the same for the fifth, sixth, seventh and twelfth standard. This indicates quite clearly that the curriculum framers know very well that these are not going to be learnt at one grade only. Language learning is a gradual process over time, starting around the age of 12 months and leading to the acquisition of most basic structures around the age of 3. During this phase, a learner acquires different structures that form the building blocks of language: tense endings, plural markers, negative sentences, complements and so forth. Learners acquire some of these structures almost immediately; e.g., the order of placement of the subject, verb, and object.

Researchers, particularly in the 1970's and 'SO's were interested in trying to determine the order in which learners acquired the structure of the language. These studies became known as acquisition studies. Some of the studies were longitudinal as in the case of Roger Brown's study on three children who he named Adam and Eve and Sarah. Roger Brown,(1973). Some linguists studied a group of children at the same stage of development, and others studied groups at different stages of development. De Villiers and de Villiers, (1973). As a consequence of Chomsky's path-breaking work, linguists, psychologists and language teachers got activated to carry his work forward and explore its possible ramifications. In the field of language teaching, several researchers found that, in fact, instruction in teaching a language actually prevented the stimulation of, and interfered with, the natural order sequence or the unfolding of the linguistic agenda imprinted in the minds of children. Rod Ellis, (1994) indicated that many traditional language teaching techniques are extremely inefficient and that pedagogy restricted to teaching grammatical rules and vocabulary lists did not give students the ability to use the L2 with accuracy and fluency. Instruction was usually grammar-oriented, and not attuned to communication, which is the way a child learns its first language. If grammar is to be the basis of language teaching, its role would have to be completely recast to reflect the psychological processes of the acquisition of grammar in the child. A whole school of Applied linguistics developed where it was held that there is a natural order sequence of morpheme acquisition. (Bailey,Madden,& Krashen, 1974; Dulay& Burt, 1973,1974a, 1974b;Larsen-Freeman, 1975;Fathman, 1975). This cast doubt on the idea that students acquired the structure of a language in the order in which they were taught. This conclusion was reached after they found that all attempts to correct error according to a system pre-decided by grammarians invariably failed. One of the common ways of ordering the teaching of grammatical items is to start with a map of the grammatical features of the language. For example, the verb is an important part of the grammar, and tense an important part of the study of the verb. In drawing a map of the aspects of the verb, for example, the present, past and future would have to be distinguished. It would seem appropriate to begin with the present tense. In English, the simple present would seem to be the starting point, and then after that the present continuous and then the present perfect. With this kind of a map, teaching would have to proceed with first the simple present, next the present continuous and lastly the present perfect. Study of the past tense would begin either after dealing with the present or just before the present perfect. This would seem to be a good logical ordering. The unfortunate thing is that this is not

how children learn English. English-speaking children, invariably, start with an incomplete present continuous, such as, 'I coming', 'he running'. The auxiliary is omitted because in terms of meaning it conveys very little, and the child's mind cannot cope with what seems inessential matter at the very beginning. Neither can the child deal with the simple present because this generally deals with habitual or universal truths, which the child's mind cannot deal with right then. Consider, for instance, 'the sun rises in the east', 'I go to school everyday', 'she runs fast'. The child's mind rather deals initially with the immediate context, such as, 'she running fast' and so on.

Acquisition Studies gave evidence of an order in which learners actually acquire language structure. It was Roger Brown's longitudinal study of the acquisition of English as a first language that inspired L2 researchers to pursue the fact that there exists an acquisition order for certain English structures characteristic of L2 learners. Brown studied three unacquainted children whom he gave names Adam, Eve and Sarah. He analysed their speech collected at weekly intervals over a four – year period which revealed that all the children had a similar acquisition pattern for fourteen English morphemes. This pattern is presented below in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Order of L1 Acquisition of English Morphemes in R. Brown (1973)

RANK	MORPHEME
1	Present progressive (-ing)
2/3	in, on
4	Plural (-s)
5	Past irregular
6	Possessive (-s)
7	Uncontractible copula (is, am, are)
8	Articles (a, the)
9	Past regular (-ed)
10	Third person singular (-s)
11	Third person irregular
12	Uncontractible auxiliary (is, am, are)
13	Contractible copula
14	Contractible auxiliary

The first published study that investigated acquisition order for L2 learners was by Dulay and Burt in 1973 which was a pilot study of eight English morphemes acquired in the speech of six to eight-year-old Spanish-speaking children. The strikingly similar acquisition sequences and the results suggested the possibility of a universal or natural order sequence in which L2 learners acquire syntactic and morphological structures. With this background it seems fit that since there are studies which reflect children and adults learning in a sequence Grammar taught in schools should follow a sequence. Grammar as is studied now is chiefly studied in school as linguistic patterns in isolation and not as part of a communicative context. Students are forced

to memorize conjugation patterns and other grammatical rules. They are expected to develop knowledge of rules rather than an ability to apply these rules in connected discourse in a speech writing situation. And syntax therefore ends up being thought of as "mental gymnastics" and a channel to achieve high grades rather than being an integral part of learning English. The method commonly used focuses on form and not meaning. The rules are learned consciously and armed with these the student analyzes texts for the mechanics of the language, not the meaning. Hence, the traditional type of instruction through grammar taught in isolation is ineffective in improving student grasp of the language. Krashen pointed out as far back as 1982 that the learner's mind processes language in two different ways: with conscious attention to grammar and without this attention, that is, just processing language naturally in speech or writing in contexts of use. Conscious attention to grammar is difficult and requires academic skills. In conclusion this paper throws light on how ineffectively English grammar is being taught at various grades in different fields of education in Maharashtra. Insights on how pedagogy can be changed to achieve proficiency in English can be derived.

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