RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Does It Matter Whether Schools Teach English Grammar?

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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 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 language curriculum designer. 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 the 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'? Is there any of its effect on the accuracy and quality of 5 to 6 year-old's written composition? This perennial question has prompted this study. This paper presents scripts and an analysis of the syntax acquired at Std V and Std VI 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

Many language teachers particularly the teachers engaged in English language teaching believe that teaching grammar is an important aspect in achieving linguistic proficiency.

Thus the English instructional curriculum at the different Standards has a section of grammar as one module. A Std V student of the SSC board, which is the dominant curriculum in the state of Maharashtra, thus studies grammar which includes prepositions, synonyms, antonyms, noun-verb agreement, one word substitutes, articles etc. A VIII Std student also studies the same component and so does a Std X student and a Std XII 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 levels in school, instead of expecting complete correctness from the start. For instance, if there is an awareness of the sentence structures that are acquired according to age group and number of years of exposure to the language, then a 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.

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 '80'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.

With the above review it seems that while research has proved that grammar cannot be taught in isolation and grammatical structures develop as a child matures, there arises a situation where grammar in the current curriculum must be revamped.

DISCUSSION

Identification of Grammatical structures in the writing of a student at a particular standard could provide a basis to know what the child is capable of producing at that standard. Accordingly, the teacher can design the classroom instruction towards achieving proficiency focusing only on those structures.

Below are scripts of the writing of Std V and Std VI. The essay , "Do you like going for tuitions?", was allotted by the respective English language teacher in one session of 45 minutes.

STD V

STUDENT 1

S1 al Yes, I like tuitions because the teacher is very good10] and b[she is very hard working 5 does not beat us 5] but she shout on us if we have not done our homework.

STUDENT 2

S1 a[Yes I like the tuitions] because of help of teacher because it helps in our studies. S2 teacher is very loving6. S3 There are many students 5. S4 a[so I like the tuitions very much7] and [I also do my studies in my tuitions 9]. S5 that is why I like the tuitions very much.9

At Std V, in the first script the student is trying to get all his/her thoughts in one segment by the use of "and" as a co-ordinator. The attempt at three clause sentence fails. Due to the fact that there are too many uses of "and" and "because", the attempt at producing a complex sentence is unsatisfactory. The students here have produced more of simple sentences co ordinated. The students have started the process of reasoning with the use of "because" in the essay of Student 1 and the use of "that is why" in the essay of Student 2.

STD VI

STUDENT 1

S1 I don't go for tuition. 5w S2 I study at home. 5w S3 My mother teaches me very well 6W. S4 Because /1 study at home/, I take very good marks in exams/.12W IC2 S5 l will go for tuitions after 2years.7W S6 When / study at home,/ I and my mother /play and study /(CCO3).13W S7. Because tution.8W CC2. S8 My mother tells me/ that /like my brother, /I can also go for tuitions.14W CC2

STUDENT 2

S1 I like to go for tuitions/ because/ it is very fun 11W IC2... S2 My tuition timing is 2.30 to 4.30 p.m.8W S3We go to tution every afternoon.6W S4 My teacher's name is Kitty Sw S5 I don't like to study after 4.45/ because /it is my playing time. CC213W S6 When I don't understand any word/ she tells us the meaning of that word. CCo2 14W S7 All my tution friends go for overnight picnic. SW S8 I love my tution very much.6W

At Std VI, the student is comfortable using the complex clause. In case of student 1,

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the student has used reasoning with the words "because" and "because of that". The adverbial of time has been used with the word "when". This student has been one of the few who has attempted and produced correctly the noun clause with the subordinator "that" (cf. S8). In case of Student 2, this student also has used reasoning with the use of the word "because" (S5) and the adverbial of time by the use of "when" (S6). In comparison with the writing of Std V, it can be seen that there is some complexity and variety with the noun clause being introduced.

With such a difference evident in two students writing it is possible that if the writings of the students is observed and analysed over the years from Std V to Std X, there will be an increase in terms of variety and complexity over the years. Research strongly suggests that the most beneficial way of helping students improve their command of grammar in writing is to use students' writing as the basis for discussing grammatical concepts. Researchers agree that it is more effective to teach punctuation, sentence variety, and usage in the context of writing than to approach the topic by teaching language in terms of isolated skills (Calkins, 1980; DiStefano and Killion, 1984; Harris, 1962).

One method of teaching that could be adopted is to make students produce a piece of writing and then editing it themselves or exchanging scripts and getting pairs of students to edit each other's work. While students edit their own or each other's writing, teachers can provide grammar instruction that guides students in their attempts to identify and correct problems in sentence structure and usage. For example, a teacher who sees that many students are writing single-clause T- units can present a mini lesson on generating multi-clause T-units, using examples from student writing.

Integrating grammar instruction into the revising and editing process helps students make immediate applications, thus allowing them to see the relevance of grammar to their own writing.

Writing is a complex and challenging activity for many students and therefore teachers should focus on the grammatical concepts that are essential for the clear communication of meaning. Research conducted since the early 1960s shows that grammar instruction that is separate from writing instruction does not improve students' writing competence (Braddock and others, 1963; Hillocks, 1986). Through detailed studies of students' writing, Shaughnessy (1977) concluded that the best grammar instruction is that which gives the greatest return for the least investment of time.

Therefore, teachers should encourage students to examine grammatical errors in their own writing. Teachers should not overemphasize grammatical terminology to the detriment of students' ability to understand and apply the concepts.

The English language text-books, therefore, need to be re-visited in order to further understand the teaching-learning process and how it can be made effective to language development. With this awareness of sentence structures it is easy to have limited objectives, while teaching the students.

Such a profile of student ability in English provides a realistic standard/ goal for the teaching of English at Std VI in other English-medium schools as well. Being based on actual data, realistic goals can be held out for students and not something that they cannot hope to achieve. On the basis of this, a teaching methodology can now be proposed in order to achieve this goal.

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