English Academic Practice

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To teach grammar or not to teach grammar, that is the question. This question has been plaguing the community for years. Grammar teaching has been in and out as the trend of fashion has fluctuated back and forth. Research shows that grammar is the only substance in language teaching. They would equate language learning and teaching with grammar. Learning a foreign or second language is learning the grammar of that language. The traditional grammar-translation method is a typical example. If you can translate the target language according to its grammar into your own language, you are learning that language. So the debate about teaching or not teaching grammar is really about the purpose of teaching grammar. Do we use grammar to teach about language? Or do we use grammar as a means to enable our students to use language effectively?

What approaches and methods should we adopt in teaching grammar? Should we just prescribe the rules for second language learners to follow? Or should we use a descriptive approach in dealing with the target language grammar? I argue that we should present all the options available, be they prescriptive or descriptive in nature. The advantage for so doing lies in the fact that second language learners have the options to exercise. They will learn the prescribed usage rules and the descriptive grammar rules so that they can understand target language use in a variety of situations. Of course, this is an important pedagogical issue. I believe that any pedagogical grammar should be "eclectic" in nature since we may not know exactly which pedagogy works for whom. Therefore, flexibility is an important consideration for a sound pedagogical approach.

How then do we teach grammar? Do we want to teach about the language or do we teach the language learners to be able to use the language to become proficient communicators in the

target language? We are familiar with the past failures of grammar teaching in schools and some traditional methodologies that are obsolete in language teaching. In this regard, I am strongly in favor of Celce-Murcia and Hilles' suggestion that "grammar should never be taught as an end in itself but always with reference to meaning, social factors, or discourse - or a combination of these factors" (Celce-Murcia, 1991, pp. 466-7). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman view grammar teaching as "a communicative end" and as consisting of three interrelated or intertwined dimensions of "form, meaning, and use." In linguists' terms, these three dimensions refer to "(morpho) syntax, semantics, and pragmatics" (1999,p. 4). Meaning, social function and discourse are the purpose of grammar teaching. Grammar teaching for the sake of it will definitely lead us to the old path of "teaching about the language." As professionals, we ought to know the audience, the purpose, and the appropriate approaches and methods to teach grammar for the maximum benefit of enhancing language learners' linguistic competence. Any grammar teaching that deviates from these general guidelines in teaching practices is likely to repeat the past failures, which will give grammar teaching a bad name.

As part of the communicative competence grammatical or linguistic competence serves as a catalyst for accuracy and fluency in second or foreign language learning. Since adult learners cannot always physically attain accuracy in communication through a natural setting or exposure as children do, grammar, as a means of improving speech or written communication, can be utilized to compensate for this loss. Larsen-Freeman (1991,p. 280) noted:

We claim that linguistic accuracy is as much a part of communicative competence as being able to get one's meaning across or to communicate in a socio-linguistically appropriate manner. Thus, a more satisfactory characterization of teaching grammar, harmonious with the above

assumptions, is that teaching grammar means enabling language students to use linguistic forms accurately, meaningfully and appropriately.

In recent years, we may often have encounters with non-native English speakers almost anywhere in our society. When they speak, we can detect the foreign accent and a few grammar mistakes that are typical of a non-native speaker. For some adult learners, the foreign accent may be improved with time; for others, it will stay with them for the rest of their lives. While accent cannot be eradicated in most of the cases for adult language learners, grammar can be utilized to improve or correct some imperfect speech patterns as many adult learners may have acquired or learned their English through different means and under different circumstances. For example, some adolescent refugees first came to the United States at the age around puberty. They had been placed in the U. S. high school system, but had never been given explicit grammar instruction. They acquired their language competence in natural settings in the target culture. By the end of their graduation from high school, they had achieved the oral English proficiency almost equivalent to that of a native English speaker. Unfortunately, their written language presented many fossilized patterns, such as use of the inflected verb forms after modal auxiliaries, tense inconsistencies, and misuse of irregular past participle forms of verbs (Gao, 1999). Explicit grammar instruction in this case can make a difference. It will enable adult language learners to avoid using the incorrect word forms or tenses by consciously monitoring their speech according to grammar rules. Grammar can help them improve upon the use of forms to achieve fluency and accuracy in their language expressions.

Grammar instruction does not mean presenting meaninglessly structural information that learners cannot use. On the contrary, it serves as a tool to refine and further "build on what learners already knew and to give them opportunities to deductively construct new meanings"

(Hinkel, 1999, p. 18). The long-term effect of refinement in fluency and accuracy via grammar instruction is also a socio-cultural and socioeconomic one. According to Hinkel, "… fluency without accuracy may limit learners' opportunities for socio-cultural adjustment and, possibly, socioeconomic advancement." After all, immigrants coming to this country would like to advance themselves socially, culturally, and economically. The advancement in these aspects is the ultimate goal for almost all immigrants. If they cannot achieve that goal in their generation, they would like to see that the next generation will accomplish the task of conquering the language and become established as full-fledged members of the target society.

Grammar plays a very important role in language learning for adult learners. It provides rules and general guidance that facilitate better understanding of the structures of the target language. Since adult second language learners do not learn a new language the way children acquire their first, they can make full use of their already possessed assets. These include the language learners' worldly knowledge, maturation, and analytical power to figure out how a new language works by resorting to the readily available rules in grammar. The purpose of language learning is to be able to effectively communicate in the target language. Linguistic or grammatical competence is an integral component of the communicative competence. Explicit grammar instruction can enhance the development of the linguistic competence and improve on second language learners' fluency and accuracy so they can use the second language effectively to advance themselves in every aspect in the target language society.

The purpose of acquiring or learning a language is for communication. To achieve such a purpose, a native speaker or a non-native speaker alike will have to possess certain degree of competence. With regard to the nature of that competence, scholars and educators have been arguing and researching the issue for the past few decades. Chomsky (1986, p. 4) proposed

"competence" and "performance," which refer to a native speaker-hearer's internalized knowledge of the rules of a language and what a speaker actually says using that language. Later, Chomsky (1986) labelled them as the "I-language" (internalized language) and the "E-language" (externalized language) respectively. Hymes (1971) approached the competence issue from both linguistic and anthropological perspectives. He added a sociolinguistic dimension to the issue by arguing that "social factors not only influence the competence of individual speakers and the status of functional language varieties; there is also a social component at the heart of grammar" (p. 8). He believed that an adequate linguistic theory should include not only just linguistic competence, but also the social-cultural aspects, which are "so salient" in any linguistics proper. Hymes (1971,p. 12) claimed:

If an adequate theory of language-users and language use is to be developed, it seems that judgements must be recognized to be not of two kinds but of four:

(i) whether (and to what extent) something is formally possible;

(ii) whether (and to what extent) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available;

(iii) whether (and to what extent) something is appropriate in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;

(iv) whether (and to what extent) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails.

Hymes's argument may be representative of the sociolinguistic tradition in the development of communicative competence and most influential. Other traditions may include those of psychologists, communication specialists, and philosophers of language.

Although grammar is only one of the four elements making up the communicative competence theory, it is as important as any other components, without which the theory may not be complete. The communicative competence theory suggests to us that language learning for the purposes of communication should not focus only on grammar. Other factors should also be considered equally to achieve the ultimate goal of effective communication. It also provides us with some useful suggestions on the purpose and goal of grammar instruction.

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