Teaching Grammar in Situational Contexts

Durumsal Çerçevelerde Gramer Öğretimi

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Abstract

While there are many ways to describe or explain grammar, simply, it is defined as a set of rules about how words change their form and combine with other words to make clauses into sentences and sentences into paragraphs. Yet an important consideration, having an effect on the ways language teachers teach grammar is the teachers' personal ideas on the best way to teach grammar. In spite of many studies that have been completed in this field, the ideas of EFL teachers about presenting, practicing, and teaching grammar has not been studied in depth in Turkey. So, the aim of this article is to discuss the EFL approach to teaching "situational grammar" as a remedy to the teaching of grammar in the Turkish classroom.

Keywords: *English learning, solution, language, instruction, grammar teaching.*

Özet

Dilbilgisini açıklamak ve tanımlamak için birçok yol vardır; basit bir şekilde bu, kelimelerden cümlecik, cümle ve cümlelerden paragraflar oluşturmak için kelimelerin biçim değiştirmesi ve diğer kelimelerle birleşmesi ile ilgili bazı kuralların tanımlanması olarak belirtilebilir. Dil öğretmenlerinin dilbilgisi öğretiminde kişisel fikirlerini de dahil etmeleri, öğrenciler üzerinde bir etki bırakmaları açısından en iyi yoldur. Dilbilgisi öğretimi alanında birçok çalışma tamamlanmasına rağmen, Türkiye'de İngilizce yabancı dil öğretmenlerinin sunum ve alıştırma yaparak, dilbilgisel yapıları öğretmeleri hususları açık bir şekilde vurgulanmamıştır. Bu makalenin amacı; dilbilgisi öğretiminde, İngilizce yabancı dil öğretmenlerinin dilbilgisi öğretme yaklaşımlarını tanımlamak, durumsal dilbilgisi kavramını açıklamak ve çözüm önerileri sunmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *İngilizce öğrenimi, çözüm, öğretim, dilbilgisi öğretimi.*

1. What is Grammar?

There are various definitions of grammar. According to Cambridge Dictionaries Online, grammar is defined as, "[the study or use] of the rules about how words change their form and combine with other words to make sentences." The definition of grammar varies according to one's perspective on grammar. Also, teaching methods vary according to the viewpoint of the teacher. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines grammar as, "the rules by which words change their forms and are combined into sentences." Grammar is the study of semantics and structure. It not only determines the arrangement of words in a sentence but also the forms and meaningful structures of a language. Grammar gives harmony to sentences in terms of word order, and it helps to combine words syntactically.

2. Literature Review

Grammar education has become very important in the field of language pedagogy (Nassaji & Fotos 2004). According to Batstone & Ellis (2009), language-teaching scholars have defined grammar as an important part of language teaching and learning thanks to efforts of both teachers and students. However, despite its importance, the study and teaching of grammar is fraught with inconsistencies and thus a complicated matter in field of language education (Dekeyser 1995). New psychological theories and methods of teaching grammar have been the focus, whereas the rejection of grammar teaching and failure of various pedagogical theories have proven problematic, giving rise to the abandonment of the teaching of grammar altogether (Borg 1999). Grammar has been a vital component of language instruction, but completely ignored, as well, depending on the mood of educators and the academy. Keeping this in mind, it seems that language teachers themselves have distinctive views on the subject of teaching grammar that need to be considered (Alijanian 2012).

According to Ellis (2006), teachers need to teach grammar in such a way that the process not only engages students, but they will take the time to understand the forms of the language being taught and not forget what they have learned (Ellis 2006, 84). On the other hand, Ellis explains that:

First, some grammar lessons may be presented without practice while others may just entail practice without presentation. Second, students can also learn the grammar not just for passing the classes, but to be competent in the language for the benefit of themselves. Third, exposing students to input can help the students to learn the grammatical structures easily as they will be able to witness to an abundance of samples. Here, there is also not any presentation or practice. Finally, while students are carrying out some linguistic tasks, their mistakes can be corrected during the feedback session. (Ibid, 84)

3. The Place of Grammar in Language Teaching

Teaching grammar is one of the most important issues in language education field because it affects a learner's appropriate use of language. Teachers present structural patterns and practices based on their experiences and the materials they use. Another important factor in the ways language teachers use grammar in their teaching of language is their reliance on personal ideas about the best way to teach grammar, in particular. In spite of various studies

up to this point, the ideas of EFL teachers about presenting, practicing, and teaching grammar have not been taken very seriously by scholars or studied deeply in Turkey. The aim of this paper is to discuss EFL approaches to grammar teaching and try to remedy the problems.

Indeed, some still question whether grammar ought to be taught or not. The supporters of grammar teaching, together with opponents, have their own ideas on the subject, for and against. According to Thornburry (2001), a solid grounding in grammar provides students with potentially infinite linguistic possibilities to be creative. It is clear that a knowledge of grammar is likely to prove helpful in the production of a greater number of original sentences (Mukminatien 2008, 81). As well as being a sentence-making mechanism, grammar, according to Mukminatien, is also central because it plays an important role in increasing the awareness of the communicative side of language (Ibid, 81). This does not happen without a knowledge of grammar. The opponents of grammar teaching counter that the ultimate aim of language acquisition is to increase communication skills. They argue that linguistic skill ought to be gained by means of experiential learning, that is, learning by doing, not by a cognitive approach (Dewey 1938). If educators see their individual experiences as valuable to education, they may derive benefits in linguistic acquisition. They may face problems, too, such as evaluating their actions in the classroom and drawing lessons from those experiences.

Through our experiences it was clear that Turkish teachers generally follow a course book or another book on grammar. The textbooks vary from university to university. In some books, the structural rules are given directly. In some other books, grammar is presented in its context, that is, grammatical activities are contextualized.

It can be observed that, to some extent, most Turkish instructors and lecturers prefer to teach grammar without practical exercises, as required. So, their methodology and techniques may not be effective (Ezzi 2012, Mohammed 2006). That is to say that, language learners do not learn the so called language, as it pertains to writing and speaking.

With an insufficient knowledge of grammar, communication is still possible, but conveying intended meaning and undesirable effects are likely to plague such attempts. Ellis explains when and how grammar should be taught, and using the following:

a) Form and meaning, both, should be stressed; learners should have the opportunity to practice forms in communicational skills.

b) A stronger focus should be on forms that are problematic areas for the students.

c) Explicit grammar teaching is more effective from the intermediate to advanced levels than at beginner levels.

d) Both input-based (comprehension) and output-based (production) grammar should be conducted.

e) Deductive and inductive teaching approaches may be useful. It depends on the context and aim of teaching.

f) Focus on form is valuable in that it treats errors that occur while learners are

busy with meaningful communicative activities.

g) Feedback can help in acquisition of knowledge if it involves a mixture of implicit and explicit feedback.

h) Grammar activities and grammar integration into communicative activities ('focus on form') are possible, depending on the context. (Cited in Brown 2007, 421)

In recent years, as lecturers, we have had ample opportunity to become familiar with situational grammar as a method of teaching grammar, and in teacher-training seminars, in particular. In these seminars, problems of grammar teaching have been analyzed, as well as and prescriptive and descriptive grammars compared. We have been told time and again that teaching grammar requires a "situational approach" vis-à-vis new sentences and exercises which offer learners a chance to practice and familiarize themselves with language patterns. Teachers need to move from a controlled approach to one that is freer, where learning new language structures and creating new sentence patterns is accomplished using activities associated with reading and writing rudiments. Various learning activities associated with grammar teaching have been tabled and the guiding principles of teaching situational grammar spelled out. All that remains is for more teachers in the field of language learning to apply them in the classroom.

4. Teaching Grammar via Situational Contexts

Teachers would be wise to organize their lesson plans in conformity with the following, making sure that learners understand:

1. What it means. Students need to understand the relationship between meaning and context.

2. What it sounds like. Students need to know the relationship between natural pronunciation and spelling (phoneticization).

3. What it looks like. Students need to know how to form the target structure.

4. When and how it can be used. Students need to know the function of target phrasings.

Students will be greatly assisted in their language learning by the use of contextual passages because these provide them with meanings not necessarily available in the target phrasing. One of the best ways to explain meaning is through the use of situational passages. This can be done in many ways, including the use of pictures and real objects. However, situational teaching must be closely monitored by the teacher, at least in the beginning, and students ought to be engaged all the times. Situational teaching underscores the important relationship between context and meaning.

One may take the example of how the Past Tense might be taught using a situational approach—and in this case for students at the pre-intermediate /intermediate level.

Stage 1: Spend a few minutes in class discussing a remarkable event in someone's life. Ask students what kind of event it was. Ask questions and give students opportunities to express their ideas.

Stage 2: After students have named an event, offer some revised vocabulary related to the successful completion of a university entrance exam. Remind students of the new words they have just learned, using activities such as "Back to the Blackboard." The following vocabulary are a case in point: s*chool years, tiring exams, showing effort, happy end, etc.*

Stage 3: After new vocabulary has been revised and students feel confident to speak speaking on the topic of discussion that day, display the picture of a student on the board. Elicits ideas about this student from other students by asking questions like: *What do you think s/he is? Is s/he happy? Does s/he seem satisfied? Etc.* This will increase student discussion and verbal interaction, which is very important to language learning, of course.

Stage 4: When students have offered all of their observations about the student in question, or perhaps a picture of a student, offer your own, seasoned observations of the same. Explain that the student in question is very satisfied because s/he is now studying at a university and department of standing.

Stage 5: Finally, ask questions about the things this student may have done before entering university. Did s/he show great effort, for example? Record the student's answers on the board. Organize the classroom into pairs and ask students to attempt to reconstruct the past life of the student in question.

Using such an approach is a new way to teach grammar and what is meant by "situational grammar." Activities associated with situational grammar encourage more student feedback and involvement.

5. Conclusion

On the whole, situational teaching ought to appeal to language teachers who are interested in any and all structural language practices. It is applicable to the teaching of grammatical units and structures and has contributed greatly to the teaching of grammar in the classroom. It focuses the attention of students and teachers alike on the subject at hand. If situations are chosen wisely, they are certain to be memorable and meaningful. A simple explanation or definitional approach to teaching grammar is ineffective in most cases. Of course, a situational approach to the teaching of the past tense, for example, takes a little more time. Students do not benefit from a recitation of the "rules of grammar," as a general rule. Instead, classroom time is better spent if they are given opportunities to "practice the rules of grammar." Situational grammar provides such an opportunity to make perfect by practice, although it involves a greater expenditure of classroom time. It requires more from both teachers and students, too, the former required to come to class with a set of well-chosen and suitable visual aids, for example.

A situational approach to teaching grammar involves the employment of a vast array of linguistic props, to be sure. However, the strength of such an approach is the opportunity to contextualize new language forms and thus facilitate language learning. Students are not taught the rules, but arrive at an understanding of what they rules ought to be, or might be, which is ultimately a more meaningful and lasting experience. Students are more likely to feel a part of the process, too, as they actively participate in the creation of their own dialogues and linguistic interactions, which, at the same time, conform to the rules of grammar vis-à-vis a variety of situational contexts that are likely to produce greater fluency and linguistic refinements for language teachers and learners in the Turkish classroom.

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