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RESEARCH ARTICLE



ACTIVITY BASED GRAMMAR TEACHING: TOWARDS A BETTER LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is intended to explore and suggest some interactive measures which can be employed in English Grammar classes in colleges at undergraduate level. The target clientele is non-native learners of English. However, here the learners are equipped with some knowledge that they have acquired during their school years. Learning abilities vary in each learner and each student prefers a different learning style. Since in an English class there are many a time more than fifty students, it becomes difficult for a teacher to employ all the styles preferred by the students. Here activity based grammar teaching can be employed which ensures highly interactive sessions in the classrooms where students are equal participants in arriving at conclusions/rules. As a result of the activities employed in the classroom the learners feel involved, and when they arrive at conclusions or rules with gentle guidance from the teachers there is a sense of achievement and learning is better. Thus immersion technique is employed where learning is also through interaction with other students. Learning any language, in our case English, requires command of the four communication skills viz., listening, speaking, reading and writing. Of these listening and reading are skills of comprehension while speaking and writing are skills of expression. The paper aims to show that through various activities involving all the above skills a better acquisition of grammar and consequently correct usage of English language is achieved. The paper also presents activities in their various steps which can be employed to teach certain items of English grammar viz., tenses or modals. At the same time the paper will also suggest how all the language skills are also acquired or improved along with the learning of grammar. Thus an activity based lesson plan will be achieved which aims at both learning of grammar rules as well as acquisition of communication skills in English.

Keywords: Activity, task, grammar learning, communication in English, communicative activity©KY Publications

Grammar forms an integral part of any language. It is an important aspect without whose acquisition, a language cannot be said to have been learned. English is the international link language and emerged as the global language in the closing years of the twentieth century itself. It is now consolidating its status of the global language for universal communication. Thus, there is a need for all citizens of the world to learn this language. Fortunately, this need has been recognized in our country and concerted efforts are being made to strengthen the teaching of English. The objective is to make the acquisition of English as natural as possible.

However, the global characteristic of English poses challenges too. In the area of English Language Teaching (ELT), one of the major challenges is with respect to *Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages* (TESOL). The usage of English worldwide has undergone a change. Languages have traditionally been taught from the point of view of the culture which they represent. But since English has become the representative of global civilization and as such the methodologies used to teach English should also be such as can ensure imparting of knowledge to a wider range of learners. In today's era of very quick information exchange, the most pronounced need of the learners as far as the global language is concerned is that they should be able to use English with felicity for its basic function i.e., communication. Activity based teaching especially that of grammar has proved particularly helpful in this regard. Activity based approach to teaching and learning language has evoked a lot of interest over the past twenty-five years. In this approach, the focus of classroom activities is on the task and ultimately on structure and meaning. In this approach, learners begin by carrying out a task, without any specific focus of emphasis on form and structure. After the task has been accomplished, there is a presentation. It is at this juncture that there is a specific focus on features of language form. Language is acquired using meaningful input, with no formal grammar instruction. It is assumed that ELLs will naturally acquire the forms of language when this approach is used (Hinkel & Fotos, 2002).

The task based approach allows the learners to use whatever standards of language they want. They are advised to focus on conveying their message, without being overly careful about the structure. This makes the activity based approach closer to real-life communicative situation. As a result of the activities employed in the classroom, the learners feel involved and when they arrive at conclusions or rules with gentle guidance from the teachers, there is a sense of achievement and learning is better. Learning/teaching through activities involves the employing of what we call Immersion Techniques, where learning is also through interaction with fellow students. Teaching through activities is a Learner-based approach which gives centre stage to language learners and to acquisition processes and learning strategies. Underlying some of these approaches is the view that a language 'cannot be taught' but can only be acquired by the learner, the teacher taking on the role of a facilitator of this process. Thus, grammar rules explained by the teacher give way to discovery of techniques and awareness-raising tasks by the pupil. (Newby, D. (1998))

Learning any language, in our case, English, requires command of the four communication skills viz. listening, speaking, reading and writing. Of these listening and reading are skills of comprehension while speaking and writing are skills of expression. Through various activities involving all the above skills, a better acquisition of the grammar of English language and consequently its correct usage can be achieved. In this paper, I am going to present a communicative activity in its various steps which can be employed to teach two very important items of English grammar viz. tenses and modals. At the same time an effort has also been made to suggest how all the language skills are also acquired or improved along with the learning of grammar.

However, before starting on the activity, let us first establish what is a communicative activity and what are the basic tenets of activity based learning. A communicative activity is a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focussed on meaning rather than form. According to N.S. Prabhu, the precursor of activity based communicative learning, an educational activity "should have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act." (<http://teachingenglish.org.uk>). Activity based learning is ideally student-centred. A teacher must ensure that the students can get involved in the activity. Further, it should be meaning-focussed so that students do not need to note down or learn any rules. Rather, they learn them through meaningful and interesting activities. Teamwork is a must for activity based learning. Learners must cooperate with one another for fruitful acquisition. For effective teamwork, the activity should have clarity.

The success of an activity lies to a great extent in feedback and evaluation. Students must be given a chance to report back for effective learning or future improvement. Lastly, an in-class activity should ideally lead to post-class informal discussion too. Thus can be ensured real learning.

And now we come to same sample activities which could be translated into constructive learning. Language teachers in our country do not get a very good infrastructure to ensure better learning on the part of students. In fact, most of the times we have at our disposal only the classroom, a whiteboard/blackboard, some pens/chalks and a group of learners. Thus the activities suggested require almost nothing more than a group of willing learners.

The first activity involves discussions. The class will be divided in groups of 6-8 participants, and each team will be assigned a topic for discussion. This activity requires a slightly large room so that the groups can be made to sit separately without disturbance from other learners.

The groups are then given time to discuss the topics assigned informally amongst themselves before the actual formal discussion which is ideally presented in front of the whole of the class. During the informal discussion, the teacher/instructor should listen to the learners speaking, but at this stage should not make any attempt to correct them. However, the teacher is advised to take notes. After the informal discussions, the groups will be invited one by one for formal discussion. Notice the use of language and grammar during this actual discussion too. The teacher should take note of the differences in language and grammar used in the two situations for all the groups. Such discussion makes a very good exercise for spoken skills. After each discussion, the teacher may tell the students about the errors that they have made during their discussions. Alternatively, the teacher input can be given after all the discussions are over. However, the teacher must point out the specific error(s) and tell the ways to correct it/them. This exercise was undertaken with both undergraduate and postgraduate students of Chaudhary Charan Singh Haryana Agricultural University, Hisar, Haryana (INDIA) and it was found that students were more careful while presenting the discussion formally. During the informal discussion, the learners also tend to use Hindi/vernacular/mother tongue. The postgraduate students were found to have greater command over language. However, both UG and PG students had little knowledge of the rules. After all the groups are through with their discussions, the teacher is sure to find a pattern and then can sensitize them to the errors committed and also suggest remedial measures through board and pen. For a class of forty students, this activity requires two hours. Through the activity of group discussion tenses and modals were taught in CCSHAU. As teachers, we should also sensitize the students on how to use correct language even during casual conversation. While using G.D. for grammar teaching and communication skills, care must be taken that the topic is interesting and appropriate to the age of learners. For new learners, topics of immediate personal concern can be given. The undergraduate students of the College of Home Science at CCS HAU were asked to discuss on 'Use of Mobiles in Colleges', while the senior students were involved in a brainstorming session on the suitability or otherwise of the course content in opening up job avenues to them. Through these discussions, students were taught tenses and modals in particular.

The same activity can be extended for use in later classes/sessions for further learning. All the students can be asked to write out an article or a report on the topic of their discussion. This becomes a test of their writing skills. In CCS HAU, Hisar; it was found that students tended to be more careful while writing, though they committed a large number of mistakes. Through discussions on these mistakes, the teacher can make the students arrive at the correct usage and consequently the rule. This makes for a constructive and strong learning. After the writing task, one of the students from each group can be asked to make a formal presentation of her/his group's opinions or conclusions. This way the learner will also learn how to speak at a formal occasion. Thus, this activity takes care of two very important communication skills – speaking and writing along with the teaching of grammar.

Another activity which can be taken up for the teaching of tenses is to ask the students to write their daily routine. They may be asked also to report what they did yesterday, or last week, or even today and what do they plan to do tomorrow or next Friday. We all can perceive that this activity will involve the usage of all tenses. And the teacher with the help of what the students have written and through resultant classroom

interaction teach tenses in a very interesting manner. The learning is sure to be more effective and enjoyable. This activity in smaller segments/groups can be used even when teaching text.

For teaching tenses and modals, a speech activity can also be used. The students in this activity are given a situation to enact in pairs, e.g. a dialogue between a mother and daughter when the daughter comes home late. Through the role play, the students could be taught the rules of tenses in English grammar.

Thus we see that activities can be very successfully and effectively used for teaching grammar and communication skills. However, only a few teachers are putting this method into practice. The reasons most often cited are time constraints, too much emphasis on the comprehension of prose and poetry texts, and lack of large rooms. Therefore, there is a need to review the status of English teaching and syllabi at all levels of teaching English.

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