

Teaching Grammar Beyond the Borders of Sentence: An Integrated Approach to Grammar in Context

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Abstract

It is common knowledge that student perceptions of traditional teaching of grammar such as converting direct speech into indirect speech, passive voice into active voice, etc. are generally dry, dull, boring and unpleasant. Bardhan (2013) rightly argues that "Classrooms become boring with resounding questions like What is a part of speech? What is a noun? What is tense? What is

an interrogative? and so on. Furthermore, the format of most grammar exercises is: “Look at the following items. The first item is done for you. Do ‘likewise’ with the other items”. This sort of exercise, to use Jayaseelan’s (1989) argument, probably accesses only a student’s manipulative ability but does not access ‘any type of knowledge of language’ at all (p. 52). In fact such an exercise focuses the student’s attention on the formal properties of a structure.

From a functional point of view, supposedly, we teach grammar to facilitate communication in the target language. Therefore, the knowledge of grammar should not become merely a dry record of facts and rules. Taking this into consideration along with Ellis’ (2004) notion of ‘natural developmental route to learning’ (p. 63), Krashen and Terrell’s (1983) views on “communication as the primary function of language” (p. 19), Rivers’ (2000) premise that ‘communication derives essentially from interaction’ (p. xiii) and Glick’s (2003) ideas of teaching grammar in context (pp. 13-15), this presentation aims at demonstrating how the teaching of grammar can be taken out from its traditional structural view of teaching and broadened to an integrated framework of communicative contexts.

Introduction

Exchange, to use Wells’ (1981) remark, is the basic unit of discourse, which implies centrality of interaction in language learning situations (p. 29). As Rivers (2000) argues, students achieve facility in *using* a language when their attention is focused on conveying and receiving authentic messages, i.e. messages that contain information of interest to speaker and listener in a situation of importance to both (p. 4).

As Halliday (1999, cited in Bardhan 2013, p. 94) argues, language, as a semogenic system, is a resource for meaning making and the meaning is understood in functional terms, i.e. in relation to the social contexts in which it has evolved with the human species. The information in our head is a living resource that allows us to communicate and be understood. Supposedly, we teach grammar to facilitate communication in the target language. Therefore, the knowledge of grammar should not become merely a dry record of facts and rules but, to use Wallwork’s (1974) argument, it should rather realize the true nature of functions of language as an integral part of human life and society (p. 160). To elaborate, the teaching of grammar, as Krishnaswamy (1995) remarks, can only be natural and effective if it is presented in meaningful contexts (p. 34). Putting it differently, Scrivener (2005) argues that learning rules from a grammar book by heart is probably not learning grammar and, similarly, reciting grammar rules by heart may not be understanding grammar. Even doing grammar exercises and tests may not necessarily be learning grammar. There is no hard evidence that any of these lead to people being able to use grammar accurately and fluently in speech (p. 253). In this context, Thornsbury (1997, quoted in Scrivener, 2005, p. 253) suggests that we could open up our concept of grammar if we start thinking of it as not just a *noun* (i.e. the information), but as a *verb* as well (i.e. the active skill of using language). Putting it precisely, Tickoo (2003) rightly remarks, “Grammar is best learnt

when it grows from language in use rather than when it is taught as a system of rules which are not yet anchored in the students' own use of language" (p. 199).

Before getting down to illustrate as to how grammar could be taught as a language in use, it would be in the fitness of our discussion to briefly look at why is it needed to teach grammar in terms of an active skill of using language.

The Need to teach Grammar as a Dynamic Verb

A natural language, in the functional paradigm, is seen as an integrated part of *Communicative Competence* of the natural language user. Incidentally, a natural language, in the first place, is conceptualized as an instrument of establishing communicative relationships. Thus, if learners are to achieve a functional command of language, they will need to be able to understand and produce context-sensitive and context-effective language. Since the introduction of *Communicative Language Teaching*, there has been a lot of progress in the functional teaching of the four primary skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW), but the grammar teaching lagged far behind in this respect. Although some attempts (c.f. Weaver, 1996; Thornsbury, 1997; Mora, 2003; Elbaum and Peman, 2006; Thakur, 2013, etc.) have been made to make the grammar teaching contextualized, direct grammar teaching continues to be very common in ESL/EFL classrooms. A lot more still needs to be done to go beyond this movement and bring grammar instruction fully to life and make it purposeful and functional. *Grammar Instruction*, in most cases, is not integrated into the four skills of LSRW but given in isolation. Mostly it is teachers who formulate the grammar rules on the board. Grammar rules will be clearer and be remembered better when students formulate them themselves (inductive learning) than when teachers do them for the students (deductive learning). Furthermore, the rules will be better reinforced if they're put to functional use in language. Grammar should be taught for the language's sake and not merely for grammar's sake. Put another way, grammar teaching should not be restricted to a very narrow, non-communicative range that does not prepare students to use language in everyday life. Nunn (2013), in this context, rightly remarks that grammar is too complex to be explained explicitly or reduced to simple rules and grammatical theory is only useful to teachers as a theory of practice and it can have no value if it is not in some way applicable in some context (p. 31). In a similar vein, Krishnaswamy (2013) is also of the view that unless grammar is integrated with composition, oral as well as written, it is totally useless and a waste of time (p. 21). Thus, a language-use-based approach needs to be adopted in teaching grammar.

What follows next, after discussing the need for an integrated language-in-use-based approach to grammar teaching, is a note on communicative steps of an integrated-interactive lesson, which is followed by a sample grammar lesson. Let us look at communicative steps of the lesson first.

Steps in an Integrated Grammar Lesson

Based on Krashen's (1981) arguments on providing 'comprehensible input' and 'reduction of stress' as prerequisites to successful language acquisition, a communicative grammar lesson, as in teaching LSRW, should involve pre-, while-, and post-stages to provide integrated and interactive learning environments. In the pre-grammar stage, the teacher needs to connect grammar instruction with real life, stimulate students' interest in the topic, and raise awareness by discussing the purpose and use of learning. The while-grammar part should help students notice the new grammar point and provide meaningful input through context-specific pictures, videos, examples, and texts. And the post- grammar phase should provide sufficient opportunity for the learners to relate the grammar instruction to real-life situations and put it to meaningful use. Put another way, the while-stage clarifies the meaning, whereas the post-stage focuses on the productive aspects of the new structure. Thus, an integrated grammar lesson, to use Krashen and Terrill's (1983, p. 19) view, should focus on teaching communicative abilities with an emphasis on the primacy of meaning.

The following section deals with developmental applications of pre-, while- and post-grammar stages into teaching a sample grammar lesson.

An Integrated Grammar Lesson on the *Past Habitual Tense* in English

Area: Sentence Grammar of Past Habitual Tense

Objective: Teaching the use of Past Habitual Tense through 'used to be' situations

1. Pre-Grammar Stage

This stage offers an opportunity to exploit students' prior knowledge of the subject and set the context and mood for teaching a new grammar point.

- The teacher writes the theme "Changes over the Years" on the board and elicits/discusses various areas in which changes generally take place over certain periods of time such as changes from childhood to adulthood, changes from adulthood to old age, changes in people's behavior, changes in science and technology, changes in education, changes in environment and climatic conditions, etc.
- The teacher displays the pictures of various modes of transport used in different phases of development, i.e. from camels to cars, lorries and buses, from steam engine trains to electrical engine trains, from biplanes to jet planes, etc and draws students' attention to the fact that the modes of transport *used to be* different in the past as compared to the present. The teacher exploits student's prior knowledge and elicits possible differences using any two picture prompts that represent *past* and *present* mode of transport. The idea is to introduce and model 'used to be' phrase at this stage.



(Picture Source: Google Images)

2. While-Grammar Stage

This stage provides a context for teacher's input and an opportunity for students to notice new grammatical structure.

- The teacher tells the students that they are going to learn and use a new grammatical structure but does not mention the name of the structure for purposes of igniting a sense of curiosity and motivation.
- The teacher initiates a transition from the context created in showing the pictures of different modes of transport and discusses the possible differences between the two

pictures using *habitual past tense* ‘used to be’ for the past mode of transport; simple present tense ‘is’ for the present mode of transport (e.g. “The journey by camels *used to be* very slow and tiring”, but now “The journey by cars and planes *is* faster and very comfortable”); and ‘has/have changed’ to describe the changes from the past to present mode of transport (e.g. “The camel trains of the past *have changed to* the modern trains of the present”). However, in this lesson the teacher focuses only on the use of *past habitual tense* in order not to overburden the learners with three different types of tense structure in one session.

- The teacher then gives students a passage to read that describes how transportation *used to be* in the past as compared to the present time and how the transportation *has improved*. The students read the following text and attempt the given tasks.

Transportation *used to be* much slower than it is now

(Adapted from Peterson, 2000, pp. 84-86)



(Picture Source: Google Images)

For many years in the desert, camels used to be the only form of transportation. Before the age of modern trains, camel trains used to carry all the goods for trading between Central Africa and Europe. Traders sometimes used to put together camel trains with 10,000 to 15,000 animals. Each animal often used to carry as much as 400 pounds and it could travel twenty miles a day. This form of transportation used to be so important that camels were called the “ships of the desert”.

Now, modern trains travel across the desert in a very short time. One engine can pull as much weight as 135,000 camels. In addition, trains use special cars for their load. Refrigerator cars carry food; boxcars carry heavy goods; stock cars carry animals; and tank cars carry oil.



(Picture Source: Google Images)

Air travel has changed, too. The earliest planes were biplanes, with two sets of wings. The top speed of this plane was 60 miles per hour. The pilots used to sit or lie on the wings in the open air. The plane engines sometimes used to stop in the middle of a trip. It used to be impossible to fly in bad weather. In snow or in rain, the wings frequently used to become icy. Then the plane might go down.

Mechanical improvements during the First World War changed airplanes. Monoplanes took the place of biplanes. Pilots flew inside of covered cabins. Still, even these planes were small. Only rich people used to be able to travel in airplanes.

Now modern jets make air travel possible for all people. No place in the world is more than 24 hours away by jet. Further improvements have lowered the cost of flying, and they have made air travel much safer than it used to be. A modern 707 can carry 170 people and can fly at 600 miles per hour. People never used to eat, sleep, or watch movies on airplanes. Now these things are a normal part of air travel!

Task 1: Answer the questions in complete sentences.

- (a) What used to be the only form of transportation in the desert?
- (b) How many camels did traders use to put together in camel trains?
- (c) How fast did the camel trains use to move?
- (d) How much weight did the camels use to carry?
- (e) What did people use to call the camels?

Answers:

- (a) Camels used to be the only form of transportation in the desert.
- (b) Traders used to put 10,000 to 15,000 camels in camel trains.
- (c) Camel trains used to move twenty miles a day.
- (d) Each camel used to carry as much as 400 pounds of weight.
- (e) People used to call the camels “ships of the desert”.

Task 2: Read the passage and list the facts about the following in the past.

Example:

Airplanes—Airplanes used to be much smaller.

Camels—

Camel Trains—

Traders—

Planes—

Pilots—

The wings—

Poor people—

Air travel—

Answers:

- Camels used to carry all the goods between Central Africa and Europe.
- Camel trains used to be very important.
- Traders didn't use to keep food cold.
- Planes used to have two sets of wings.
- Pilots used to sit or lie on the wings.
- The wings sometimes used to ice up in bad weather.
- Poor people never used to ride in airplanes.
- Air travel used to be much smaller.

Feedback: Concept Check

- The teacher asks some *concept check* questions to make sure that the meaning of past habitual tense using 'used to' is clear to students:
 - (a) Did people use cars or buses or trains in the desert before?/Do people use camels in the desert now? (**Answer: No**)
 - (b) Did people use jet planes in the past?/Do people use biplanes now? (**Answer: No**)
- The teacher asks the students to formulate the rule on the board for the given sentences. Help is provided if needed.

(a) Air travel used to be very expensive.

(b) Pilots used to sit or lie on the wings.

S + **used to** + V 1

- The past habitual tense with ‘used to’ is used to describe
 - (a) a state or an activity that lasted for a period of time in the past.
 - (b) a state or an activity that will last for a period of time in future.
 - (c) a state or an activity that can last for a period of time in present.
 - (d) a state or an activity that can last for a period of any time.
- (Answer: a)**

3. Post-Grammar Stage

Post-Grammar stage is meant to provide students opportunities to use the learnt item in their speech and writing.

- The teacher asks the students to go back to their childhood and write the similarities and differences between their life *then* and *now*. The students may talk about their childhood through things and specific experiences, e.g. shoes they loved or hated; sweets they liked and fought for; house(s) they lived in; their favorite toys, games, music, friends, neighbors, family members, pets, etc.



(Picture Source: Google Images)

When I was a child I used to

Now I

-
-
- **Role play:** The teacher gives students a situation that they are meeting their classmates in their school's alumni annual meet after 20 years of leaving the school. They are supposed to remember and communicate some funny and memorable moments from the school days and also note the differences in each other over the period of 20 years. Each one has to speak for 5 minutes.
 - **Take-home Writing Task:** As an extension activity, students write a story or an essay on any one of the following using the past habitual tense with 'used to be' structure:
 - (a) The person I loved or hated
 - (b) My childhood mischiefs
 - (c) My past eating and sleeping habits
 - (d) My town/village ten years ago

Conclusion

In view of *communication* being the main goal of language teaching, grammar lessons—like the primary language skills lessons—need to be context-based, integrated and interactive for the purposes of better learner motivation, participation and language development. With this as a backdrop, grammar teachers should provide meaningful instructional input through relevant contexts and sufficient opportunities for students to relate the grammar item(s) to their real-life situations and to put them to authentic uses. One of the effective ways in which this could be done is through a smooth and organized transition of pre-, while- and post-grammar stages, as illustrated in this paper via the use of *past habitual tense* through certain real-life *used-to-be* situations.

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