

WHY SHOULD WE TEACH GRAMMAR?

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Annotation: In this article gives information about why we should teach grammar. The article provides some arguments for putting grammar in the foreground in second language teaching.

Key words: grammar, structures, arguments

Grammar is rules of a language. –Grammar is a system of meaningful structures and patterns that are governed by particular pragmatic constraints||. In another definition –grammar is a description of the rules for forming sentences, including an account of the meanings that these forms convey. In foreign language acquisition accurate understanding of the language structures is the key part so teaching grammar is an essential aspect of foreign language instruction. There has always been a debate about the most effective way of teaching grammar. Grammar instruction through context positively affects learners' competence to use grammatical structures accurately in language skills. It is always useful for learners to see how language works in sentences or paragraphs; therefore, teaching grammar in context will give learners opportunities to see how grammatical structures function in sentences. Teaching grammar in context will help learners to acquire nature of the language which will facilitate their understanding of the language.

Why should we teach grammar? There are many arguments for putting grammar in the foreground in second language teaching. Here are seven of them:

1) The sentence-machine argument Part of the process of language learning must be what is sometimes called item-learning — that is the memorisation of individual items such as words and phrases. However, there is a limit to the number of items a person can both retain and retrieve. Even travellers' phrase books have limited usefulness — good for a three-week holiday, but there comes a point where we need to learn some patterns or rules to enable us to generate new sentences. That is to say, grammar. Grammar, after all, is a description of the regularities in a language, and knowledge of these regularities provides the learner with the means to generate a potentially enormous number of original sentences. The number of possible new sentences is constrained only by the vocabulary at the learner's command and his or her creativity. Grammar is a kind of 'sentence-making machine'. It follows that the teaching of grammar offers the learner the means for potentially limitless linguistic creativity.

2) The fine-tuning argument The purpose of grammar seems to be to allow for greater subtlety of meaning than a merely lexical system can cater for. While it is possible to get a lot of communicative mileage out of simply stringing words and phrases together, there comes a point where 'Me Tarzan, you Jane'-type language fails to deliver, both in terms of intelligibility and in terms of appropriacy. This is particularly the case for written language, which generally needs to be more explicit than spoken language. For example, the following errors are likely to confuse the reader: Last Monday night I was boring in my house. After speaking a lot time with him I thought that him attracted me. We took a wrong plane and when I saw it was very later because the plane took up. Five years ago I would want to go to India but in that time

anybody of my friends didn't want to go. The teaching of grammar, it is argued, serves as a corrective against the kind of ambiguity represented in these examples.

3) The fossilisation argument It is possible for highly motivated learners with a particular aptitude for languages to achieve amazing levels of proficiency without any formal study. But more often 'pick it up as you go along' learners reach a language plateau beyond which it is very difficult to progress. To put it technically, their linguistic competence fossilises. Research suggests that learners who receive no instruction seem to be at risk of fossilising sooner than those who do receive instruction.

4) The advance-organiser argument Grammar instruction might also have a delayed effect. The researcher Richard Schmidt kept a diary of his experience learning Portuguese in Brazil. Initially he had enrolled in formal language classes where there was a heavy emphasis on grammar. When he subsequently left these classes to travel in Brazil his Portuguese made good progress, a fact he attributed to the use he was making of it. However, as he interacted naturally with Brazilians he was aware that certain features of the talk — certain grammatical items — seemed to catch his attention. He noticed them. It so happened that these items were also items he had studied in his classes. What's more, being more noticeable, these items seemed to stick. Schmidt concluded that noticing is a prerequisite for acquisition. The grammar teaching he had received previously, while insufficient in itself to turn him into a fluent Portuguese speaker, had primed him to notice what might otherwise have gone unnoticed, and hence had indirectly influenced his learning. It had acted as a kind of advance organiser for his later acquisition of the language.

5) The discrete item argument Language seen from 'outside', can seem to be a gigantic, shapeless mass, presenting an insuperable challenge for the learner. Because grammar consists of an apparently finite set of rules, it can help to reduce the apparent enormity of the language learning task for both teachers and students. By tidying language up and organising it into neat categories (sometimes called discrete items), grammarians make language digestible. (A discrete item is any unit of the grammar system that is sufficiently narrowly defined to form the focus of a lesson or an exercise: e.g. the present continuous, the definite article, possessive pronouns).

6) The rule-of-law argument It follows from the discrete-item argument that, since grammar is a system of learnable rules, it lends itself to a view of teaching and learning known as transmission. A transmission view sees the role of education as the transfer of a body of knowledge (typically in the form of facts and rules) from those that have the knowledge to those that do not. Such a view is typically associated with the kind of institutionalised learning where rules, order, and discipline are highly valued. The need for rules, order and discipline is particularly acute in large classes of unruly and unmotivated teenagers - a situation that many teachers of English are confronted with daily. In this sort of situation grammar offers the teacher a structured system that can be taught and tested in methodical steps.

7) The learner expectations argument Regardless of the theoretical and ideological arguments for or against grammar teaching, many learners come to language classes with fairly fixed expectations as to what they will do there. These expectations may derive from previous classroom experience of language learning. They may also derive from experience of classrooms in general where (traditionally, at least) teaching is of the transmission kind mentioned above. On the other hand, their expectations that teaching will be grammar-focused may stem from frustration experienced at trying to pick up a second language in a non-classroom setting, such as

through self-study, or through immersion in the target language culture. Such students may have enrolled in language classes specifically to ensure that the learning experience is made more efficient and systematic. The teacher who ignores this expectation by encouraging learners simply to experience language is likely to frustrate and alienate them.

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