

TEACHING GRAMMAR IN SECONDARY SCHOOL: ALTERNATIVE TO DEFINITION APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the teaching of grammar in relation to Nigerian classroom. The paper examines the controversy of whether or not to teach grammar to students learning a second language pointing out the arguments advanced by those in favour and against it. Two approaches to the teaching of grammar – explicit and implicit – were equally discussed highlighting arguments for and against each. The paper finally gives support to integrative approach to grammar teaching and recommends same for use in teaching grammatical structures in Nigerian schools.

Introduction

Language teaching over the years has been a subject of concern and interest to many educators for several reasons. One of such reasons is the strategic role it plays in the business of teaching and learning. Consequently, various aspects of language, particularly its teaching and learning, have been given a considerable attention, thus, a lot of materials have been accumulated in the discipline. One of such areas of interest has been the grammar of a language and its teaching. In Nigeria, English language specifically has been studied from the nursery to university level. The grammar of the language has received extensive study and teaching; yet, teachers still find a lot of problems in getting message about grammar across to learners while learners have a lot of

difficulties in absorbing information about grammar. One of the possible reasons could be the abstract nature of the concepts that are used in various grammatical books. Consequently, many teachers of grammar resort to definitions as the main method of conveying information about grammar to learners. For example, one of such definitions, which learners have been made to memorise from the primary school days, has been “A noun is a name of person, animal, place, thing or concept”. But the current knowledge about the grammar of various languages has seriously put the validity of such definition to question. Going through grammar via the medium of definition alone does not only make the teaching and learning of grammar cumbersome and uninteresting, it also makes the concepts fustier and further pushed away from the understanding of the

students. This paper argues for a method of teaching grammar that is interactive and integrative as an alternative approach to traditional definition method in order to facilitate better understanding of the workings of grammar among the secondary school students.

The Concept of Grammar

The term grammar means no more, at first, than the understanding of letters to the early Greek scholars who showed interest in language study. Much of what constitute early linguistic enquiries fell under the realm of 'philosophia' where language is considered as part of their general inquiry into the nature of knowledge (Lyons: 1968). But to the contemporary linguists, grammar means much more than knowing the letters of a language. After all, there are several languages in the world that have not been reduced to writing, therefore, going by the early Greeks, such languages do not have grammar.

Just as various linguists conceive language from different perspectives, what constitutes grammar vary from one linguist to another. For instance, Radford (1997) sees grammar as the study of the principles that govern the formalisation and interpretation of words, phrases and sentences. Palmers (1971) sees grammar as a

device that specifies the infinitive set of well-formed sentences and assigns to each one or more structural description. Speas (1990) on the other hand sees grammar as explicit theory of the mapping between form and meaning.

There is a need to comment on the above definitions. If we take Radford's definition, for example, grammar becomes rules, not only of constructing sentences but also of forming words. Therefore, at whatever level of language – phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic – there are rules in operation. These are grammatical rules. If grammar governs the formation of sentences as pointed out by Radford and Palmer above, a grammar of language should therefore be able to specify which word sequences are, and which are not, in the infinitive set of its sentences. In other words, Radford (1997) states that "the grammar of a language should be able to tell what is grammatical and what is not". The point of departure between traditional grammar and the modern grammatical analysis is the fact that the former focused on what is grammatical while the latter concentrates more on explaining what is ungrammatical.

Speas (1990) sees grammar as 'theory'. If that is so, it must fall

within the general goal of linguistic theory which Van Valin and Lappola (1997) explain, "is to describe and explain linguistic phenomenon as well as understanding the cognitive basis of language". Therefore, the grammar linguists produce should not only describe, but should also help to define the limits within which actual competence of grammar can be evaluated (Hudson 2001). The above explanations necessarily put the task of explaining the intricate workings of grammar and evaluation of such competence in students squarely on the shoulders of teachers of grammars and of language.

Positions on the Teaching of Grammar

As the definitions of grammar are diverse so is the argument in pedagogic cycle as to whether it is necessary to teach it. For instance, to DeBoer (1959), the results of the available researches have been consistently negative as to the value of grammar in the improvement of language expression. Therefore, to him, there is no justification in the available evidence for the great expenditure of time and effort still being devoted to teaching formal grammar in our school system. Elley, Barcham, Lamb and Wyllie (1976) and McQuade (1980) shared the same view of a waste of time in teaching grammar when they opined

that for most students the systematic study of grammar is not particularly helpful in avoiding or correcting errors in language use. In the same vein, Hillocks (1986) reviewed existing researches on effect of grammar on composition proficiency and concluded that none of the studies provides any support for teaching grammar as a means of improving composition skills. So he concluded that if schools insist upon teaching the identification of parts of speech, the parsing or diagramming of sentences, or other concepts of traditional grammar (as it is the case of teaching grammar in most Nigerian schools), they cannot defend it as a means of improving the quality of writing. If one is to uphold the arguments cited above, one could draw the conclusion that grammar teaching is completely useless.

Other educators, however, strongly contest the above position particularly in respect of second language learning. For example, Richards, Gallo and Renandya reported in Farrell and Lim (2005) believe that grammar is central to language learning and that teaching grammar directly would result in more accurate language use. Nancy (1997) also believes that there is a place for grammar instruction in our classrooms, but we need to refine our notions about how it is carried out.

As for Jeffcoate (2000), he is convinced that grammar is more fundamental to knowledge about language than any other element therefore its teaching is unavoidable. Halada, Bennett and Retherford (2004) in a study they carried out found that students who reported having been explicitly exposed to grammar performed better as a group in responding to different linguistic tasks than students who reported only incidental teaching of grammar or students who reported no grammar instruction. This result is indicative of the relevance of grammar contrary to the claim made by those advocating for no grammar instruction.

The question to ask at this juncture is whether we can throw out grammar from a Nigerian classroom. To answer the question, one needs to look at the scenario of teaching and learning English language in Nigeria. Aliyu (2001) aptly captures the situation an English teacher in Nigeria has to contend with when he observes that Nigerian students are inundated with all shades of English constructions in both formal and informal settings some of which are simply outrageous in all ramifications – pronunciation, vocabulary selection and use of grammatical patterns – and these multiple surrounding forms impinge on learners performances in their

class work, tests and examination. An English language teacher, therefore, has to sort out these forms in order to encourage the appropriate forms and dissuade the students from using the inappropriate ones. Therefore, a teacher of necessity has to take recourse to grammar instruction to facilitate the sorting business.

The second issue has to do with the status the knowledge of grammar occupies in public examinations. As observed by Aliyu (2001), official written declarations, deliberations during the marking/coordination sessions and classroom preoccupations all suggest that grammar has special recognition with WAEC (and by extension other public examination bodies) examiners. And this perversity for grammatical knowledge has been demonstrated not only in the demand each question puts on the candidates, but also a stock of the WAEC question papers show that questions that demand for direct grammatical knowledge outweigh other types of questions. Therefore, if a student is not well prepared in grammatical knowledge, he may likely perform poorly in English in public examinations with all the attending consequences. One of such consequences is that he may find it difficult to get admission into institutions of higher learning in

Nigeria as a credit in English is mandatory for admission. The picture painted in the last few paragraphs returns an emphatic no to the earlier question of throwing out grammar from Nigerian classroom. It will be to the academic peril of students if the level of their knowledge of grammar is not raised.

Perceptions on the Teaching of Grammar

Available literature revealed two major positions on how the teaching of grammar is approached. One of such approaches as explained earlier has been frequently used by average Nigerian teachers of grammar: resorting to definitions of concepts related to grammatical description – ‘a noun is a name of person, animal, place, thing or concept’, ‘a verb is an action word’ – which learners are made to commit to memory. Then drill exercises are prepared to enable learners practice the concepts they have learnt. This way of approaching grammar teaching has been given different names in literature: explicit teaching of grammatical structures (Nancy: 1997), formal learning of grammar (Seow: 2004), explicit grammar instruction (EGI) (Terrell: 1991), Halada, Bennett and Retherford: 2004), traditional approach to grammar teaching (Farrell and Lim: 2005), planned grammar instruction (Sepassi: 2006).

What this approach to grammar teaching generally entails is to have students memorise abstract definitions, do fill-in-the-blank exercises; label, parse and diagram sentences and find and fix errors. In such learning, the learner is quite aware of his conscious efforts to learn the rules of the target language (Sepassi: 2006).

The above approach to grammar teaching has drawn some reservations and criticisms from experts in language teaching. For instance, Nancy (1997) has observed that the imposition of a rule-governed, highly abstract, analytic system can be at odds with what one has acquired implicitly. Therefore, she argues that since the grammar of L_1 is implicitly learned, the imposition of the highly abstract and analytic system as done in traditional approach to grammar teaching may disturb the mental representations about that grammar that one already has in place. Sepassi (2006) on the other hand argues that although the method may not be ideal for teaching young learners, older learners, however, given the nature of the planned environment, or the classroom, and due to their cognitive maturity and adjustability to the infra-structure of the classroom, it is more successful learning the rules of L_2 using planned grammar instruction.

The second approach relies on learning grammatical rules implicitly. That is the learner is not bothered with long and winding definitions. Instead, grammatical concepts emerged from language use in context. The approach is hinged on the premise that language and its grammar exist to serve a purpose – communication – and that purpose, it is argued, cannot be detached from the nature of language including its grammar. For instance, Krashen (1982) argues that subconscious acquisition of comprehensible input in a low-anxiety context plays a pivotal role in developing language fluency. Advocates of the approach will argue that the concept of nouns, for instance, does not have a level of awareness in the mind. One develops that concept through years of exposure to and use of it in many ways (Nancy: 1997).

Others have argued for the use of indirect grammar learning from research perspectives. They argue that available research results have shown that learning grammar implicitly shows a high level use of grammatical structures. For instance, Seow (2004) in his study of young learners in Singapore investigated the instructional effect of formal (i.e., focus on rules and drills) and informal (i.e., communicative) classroom learning environments on Primary Two

students' understanding and use of personal and possessive pronouns on the premises that students from the formal learning environment will perform better than those from the informal learning environment. Two groups of learners followed a specially tailored course of pedagogical treatment of rule-learning and drilling for the formal classroom, and communicative activities among the students for the informal classroom. The students from the formal learning environment were exposed to conscious learning of rules governing pronoun usage through explicit pronoun instruction with little or no opportunity for exploration of authentic contexts for language experience and meaning-driven communication. The students in the informal classroom on the other hand were guided to understand and use the language globally and intuitively. After the treatment, a post-test was administered immediately after the lesson to the students in each learning environment to assess the impact of instruction. The result indicated that the students in the informal learning environment obtained better results than those in the formal environment.

The Way Forward in Grammar Teaching

At this juncture, it is appropriate to put the discussions above in Nigeria context in order to fashion out a more effective way of conveying information about grammar to students with the view to developing proficiency that will impart positively on the use they will put the knowledge to in daily communication. In doing that, there is need to take seriously the suggestion made by Nancy (1997) to dispense with the notion of a one-size-fits-all method to language instruction. This becomes necessary in Nigeria situation since approaches, students and our purposes for teaching grammar vary. The bottom-line of this discussion is that grammar should be taught in a way that is palatable, learnable, and teachable. Therefore, teachers should not be too quick in discarding a method on the assumption that it will not serve the purpose. Instead, what seems to work in one method should be picked and integrated with what seems to work in the other. That is why this paper is strongly advocating for an integrative approach to the problem of teaching grammar in Nigerian schools

Integrative Approach to Grammar Teaching

Integrative approach to learning found expression in curriculum integration movement which emerged at the turn of the last century. Burnaford (1993) defines curriculum integration as finding common bonds between subject areas. This has led to the evolution of such subjects as Social Studies and Integrated Science. The same experience has been extended to the teaching of language where attention has shifted from teaching individual language skills to a more holistic approach where skills are interwoven for maximum benefit of acquisition.

Consequently, different teaching strategies have been experimented along the integration line. One of the positive outcomes of such effort is that teachers are becoming more aware of the interrelatedness in various aspects of language. For instance, for learners of English as a second language, research suggests that extensive *reading* may promote the acquisition of grammatical structures better than explicitly studying or practicing such structures (Elley: 1991). Krashen (1993) expresses a similar view that extensive reading significantly promotes grammatical fluency and a command of the syntactic resources of the language in both first and

second language learners. This thus establishes a strong relationship between grammar and reading, a relationship that should be appropriately exploited in the teaching of grammar.

One of the methodologies that has evolved over the years using the concept of integrative approach to language teaching is known as Accelerative Integrated Method (AIM) (Lawless: 2005). The method uses gestures, music, dance, and theater to help students learn. The basic premise of AIM is that students learn and remember better when they do something that goes along with the words they are saying. McLaughlin and McLeod cited in Chen (1995) propose an information-processing approach based on the premise that complex skills are learned and routinized, hence, suggesting an integration between explicit and implicit learning of grammatical structures. In this approach, a learner will go through an explicit, conscious stage of learning grammar rules before s/he is able to control grammatical structures automatically using such structures in linguistic tasks. Darn (2006) discusses Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) an approach that has become the umbrella term describing both learning another (content) subject such as physics or geography

through the medium of a foreign language and learning a foreign language by studying a content-based subject. CLIL assumes that subject teachers are able to exploit opportunities for language learning. The best and most common opportunities arise through reading texts. CLIL draws on the lexical approach, encouraging learners to notice language while reading.

Another area of integration that will augur well for the teaching of grammar is computer interaction. The advent of computer technology has found a welcome embrace in foreign and second language education. Language instruction that combines computer technology has become popular and has had a tremendous impact on language education. Computers are very good at storing, manipulating, and retrieving large amount of information, making them particularly useful in the area of "data-driven learning" (Warschauer and Healey: 1998). This concept refers to giving students large quantities of language data and the tools to examine them. Students can then build their own explanations of how language works. Having discovered the linguistic rules themselves, students are more likely to remember and use them correctly. After all, that was how we learned our first language and their rules

(grammar). Chen (2006) reported several other researches that suggest that integration of computer technology can improve academic performance, enhance motivation, and promote learning. For instance, Lasagabaster and Sierra (2003) reported in Chen (2006) conducted a research study to examine the attitude of 59 undergraduate students toward Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) software programmes. The findings revealed that the students had a positive attitude toward learning language with computers. There are several researches on how effective environment can be created for effective use of computer in language classrooms. Egbert and Jessup (1996) in their research examine the classroom conditions needed in creating conducive environment for computer assisted language learning (CALL) and make far reaching suggestions on how to manipulate these conditions to bring about effective language learning. For instance, one of the classroom conditions that is very obvious in Nigeria situation is the availability of computers and power supply in our schools.

Necessity for Further Investigation

The discussions above have raised several questions that are of interest for further research in language

teaching in Nigeria, particularly in this part of the country where there is outcry of trailing behind in education. For example, some of the questions that we need to ask are whether the approaches that have been discussed above are practicable in Nigerian classroom? Can integrative grammar teaching work in our classrooms? Is there an enabling classroom environment to make integrative grammar teaching work? To what extent would the approach work? Would the approach really promote the grammatical knowledge among Nigerian students, thereby, leading to proper application where and when necessary? Would the students find the approach rewarding and stimulating? Can computer interactive programme be really applied in teaching grammar in Nigerian schools as suggested in literature? These and other related questions can never be answered satisfactorily without adequate investigation.

Finally, this discussion should perhaps be brought to a close by making reference to Gould (2004) who opines that since language is a medium for expressing the thoughts and events that occur daily, teachers are obliged to apply grammar to situations not only internal but also external to the classroom. He concludes that if students are

engaged with the language and have a vested interest in expressing themselves, and if they are given a format in which they can explore cultural and political subjects about which they are passionate, they will feel that they, as well as the teacher, have ownership of the English language. The writer agrees with him because such approach to the teaching of grammar will not only impact positively on the acquisition of grammatical knowledge in an integrative and interactive manner, but in turn, it will have positive ripple effects on the overall study and learning of language in a more beneficiary manner to all stakeholders in language education.

Recommendations

Following the exposition above, the following recommendations are provided to help grammar teachers prepare well for grammar lesson:

- a. Teachers should de-emphasise definitions of grammatical concepts particularly at lower level of secondary school since such definitions may not help learners identify and use grammatical structures in context.
- b. Adequate context should be provided for a learner to appreciate a grammatical

structure at work to enable them recall such structures when the need for their use arises in daily use of language.

- c. The teaching of grammatical structures should be integrated with other aspects of language skills so that learners will come to recognise grammar as an integral part of such skills. For example, grammatical structure of concern can be addressed when teaching reading or writing.
- d. Similarly, isolated drills for practicing grammatical structures should be de-emphasised; instead, practicing grammatical structure should be done in communicative contexts.

Conclusion

This paper examined issues in the teaching of grammar in relation to Nigerian situation. The paper examined the arguments for and against the teaching of grammar as well as two approaches to grammar teaching – explicit and implicit. The paper also presented some arguments in favour of integrative approach to grammar teaching. It is the conclusion of the paper that learners of language at secondary level will be better off if teaching grammar lesson is approached through integrative approach. Teachers of grammar too will find it easy to

explain grammatical concepts if such concepts are presented communicatively and in integration with other language skills. This paper believes that with little effort by teachers in the suggested direction, teaching of grammar will become fun instead of boredom.

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