THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF TEACHING GRAMMAR

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Abstract. Grammar is the system of a language. People sometimes describe grammar as the "rules" of a language; but in fact no language has rules. If we use the word "rules", we suggest that somebody created the rules first and then spoke the language, like a new game. But languages did not start like that. Languages started by people making sounds which evolved into words, phrases and sentences. No commonly-spoken language is fixed. All languages change over time. What we call "grammar" is simply a reflection of a language at a particular time.

Problem statement. Grammar is the set of structural rules governing the composition of clauses, phrases, and words in any given natural language. The term refers also to the study of such rules. Speakers of a language have a set of internalized rules for using that language and these rules constitute the grammar of that language. If a person is a native speaker, the vast majority of the information in the grammar is acquired not by conscious study or instruction, but by observing other speakers. Grammar was considered the most important of all language aspects. However, even in the period of utmost popularity of communicative approach, grammar was not neglected; it occupied an important place in the foreign language syllabus. With the development of cognitive linguistics and its study of speech generation interest to grammatical rules was revived. Accordingly, teaching grammar became topical again.

Analysis of research and publications. The research was based on the analysis of a number of theoretical sources and practical handbooks of teaching foreign language, grammar reference books and English as a second language course books. Theoretical sources include the works by such prominent methodologists as S. Thornbury, J. Harmer, P. Ur, and others.

Purpose of the article. The present research is aimed at describing and analyzing various approaches to teaching grammar.

Main material. From a grammatical perspective, many foreign language programmes and teaching materials are based on a linear model of language acquisition. This model operates on the premise that learners acquire one target language item at a time, in a sequential, step-by-step fashion. However, such a model is inconsistent with what is observed as learners go about the process of acquiring another language. However, there is an alternative to the linear model, which is an organic approach to second language pedagogy.

Grammar teaching has always been one of the most controversial and least understood aspects of language teaching. As S. Thornbury says, few teachers remain indifferent to grammar and some are even obsessed with it [1]. P. Ur states that most people agree that knowledge of a language means, among other things, knowing its grammar; but this knowledge may be intuitive (as it is in the native language), and it is not necessarily true that grammatical structures need to be taught
as such, or that formal rules need to be learned.

She quotes several scholars expressing different points of view on the problem of importance of grammar. Two quotations are from P. Newmark’s work ‘How not to interfere with language learning’. They are as follows:

1) The important point is that the study of grammar as such is neither necessary nor sufficient for learning to use a language [2].

2) The student’s craving for explicit formulization of generalizations can usually be met better by textbooks and grammar that he reads outside the class than by discussion in class [2].

S. Thornbury states that grammar is conventionally seen as the study of the syntax and morphology of sentences. If we put it in another way, it is the study of linguistic chains and slots. That is, the study both the way words are chained together in a particular order and also of what kind of words can slot into any one link in the chain.

It is clear that the term “grammar” has meant various things at various times and sometimes several things at one time. This plurality of meaning is characteristic of the present time and is the source of confusions in the discussion of grammar as part of the education of students. There have been taking place violent disputes on the subject of teaching grammar at a university.

Grammar as a term can be defined in a number of different ways. In the 19th century grammar is described as the science that teaches the proper use of letters, syllables, words, and sentences, or which treats the principles and rules of spoken and written language.

Grammar in teaching by different approaches. Robert Lado wrote that language functions owing to the language skills. A person who knows a language perfectly uses a thousand and one grammar lexical, phonetic rules when he is speaking. Language skills help us to choose different words and models in our speech so that we can achieve maximum effectiveness in communicating our message [2].

In order to understand a language and to express oneself correctly one must assimilate the grammar mechanism of the language studied. The learner may know all the words in a sentence and yet fail to understand it if one does not see the relationship between the words in a given sentence [2]. And vice versa, a sentence may contain one, two or even more unknown words but if one has a good knowledge of the structure of the language on he can easily guess the meanings of these words or at least find them in a dictionary. There are two examples to show how failure to perceive certain grammar phenomena hinders understanding the message. Without knowing grammar it is hardly possible to understand the following, although all the words are familiar even to elementary level learners [2]:

*We saw him book a ticket.*

*It made me return home (or It made me happy).*

Therefore, the importance of teaching grammar may be summarised in the following points:

1. It is believed traditionally that direct instruction in grammar is a necessary step in developing second and foreign language linguistic competence.

2. Another reason for encouraging the learners to study grammar is the fact that it is assumed that they can acquire language in a short span of time by learning and practicing grammar via becoming grammar conscious, having some theoretical background, and developing the ability and skill of analysing and generalizing.

3. By a two-direction approach to working with grammar (from form to meaning and function, and from function to form) a communicative competence of learners is developed.
4. Grammar is not a value in itself. No communication is possible without the knowledge of grammar rules and the ability of applying them. Grammar is indispensable for the use of all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing.

Common difficulties in mastering English grammar. It is widely believed that the main difficulty in learning a new language is that of changing from the grammatical mechanism of the native language to that of the new language. Thus, the fact that should be first of all taken into account when teaching grammar to learners of any level is that the grammatical systems of Russian, Ukrainian and English are fundamentally different.

English is an analytical language, in which grammatical meaning is largely expressed through the use of additional words and by changes in word order. Ukrainian, on the other hand is a synthetic language, in which the majority of grammatical forms are created through changes in the structure of words, by means of a developed system of prefixes, suffixes and endings.

While teaching English grammar the teacher of English might face the following difficulties working with students of different levels.

First of all, there is not enough time for practice. In secondary schools usually learners have one or two lessons of English per week, which is not enough to teach new material and have enough time for practice. Teachers tend to solve this problem in two ways usually – either by spending a minimum time for presenting and explaining, which can result in half the class not understanding the new grammar item; or they can expect pupils to practice at home which is not a good way out, as not some time passes between the grammar item is presented and starts to be practiced.

Secondly, verbal explanations may be unclear to students, and presenting it with visual or other techniques may take some time. The possible way out is to combine somehow these two ways of presenting grammar, looking for some techniques that are not much time-consuming, but clear enough for students to understand. The teacher is supposed to know and understand his students well enough to foresee their reaction to different methods he or she plans to use.

Thirdly, the use of terminology sometimes becomes an obstacle to proper understanding the new material. This became a problem when Ukrainian schools started using foreign textbooks for English classes. Such terms as Present Simple, Present Indefinite and ‘теперішній неозначений’ should be explained to pupils, and it takes time. On the other hand, some grammar reference books and course books include the terms which are not very likely to be presented in school books. These are terms like agent, predication, predicative etc.

Conclusions and suggestions. The students consider grammar not to be as important as other subjects or aspects. Others facing difficulties feel discouraged by them. Finally, they may simply find grammar boring.

Obviously, the teacher should consider changing her attitude to delivering and practicing grammar in this group. She might start with considering adding some more effective and motivating activities, for example apart from ‘dry’ grammar exercises she might try adding communicative grammar activities.

References:
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