TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR TO LIBYAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: CURRENT SITUATION AND SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE

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الملخص:

فى ليبيا يبدأ الطلابُ يتعلمون اللغة الانجليزية كأحد الموضوعات الرئيسية في التعليم من سن 12 حتى المرحلة الجامعية. تبع المعلمون الليبيون الطريقة التقليدية القديمة في تدريسهم للغة الإنجليزية، التى هى تدريس القواعد النحوية بأسلوب الترجمة. و يستند هذا الاسلوب على تحليل القواعد النحوية متبوعة بترجمة الجمل والنصوص الى اللغة المستهدفة للطلاب وحفظ وتلاوة كم كبير من المفردات. ولهذا السبب، المعلمون يميلون الى استخدام اسلوب الترجمة بالتركيز على هذه الميزات. و فى ليبيا، يتم التدريس باستخدام اسلوب الترجمة، التى شددت على اكتساب المفردات من خلال القراءة. و نتيجة لذلك، تجاهلوا كل الطرق التواصلية وتقنياتها داخل الفصل، على سبيل المثال استخدام انشطة تفاعل مختلفة مثل الالعاب لجذب اهتمام الطلاب والمحافظة على بقاء اهتمامهم بالموضوع. اقترحُ النصوص الحقيقية **"authentic texts"** حيثُ أنها كُتبت للغرض التواصلي وهي اكثر متعة من النصوص التى أُخترعت خصيصاً لتوضيح استخدام ميزات اللغة المستهدفة؛ من المرجح أن المتعلمين ستجدها اكثر دافعاً للتعلم من النصوص المخترعة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القواعد النحوية بأسلوب الترجمة ، اللغة المستهدفة، الطرق التواصلية ، النصوص الحقيقية.

Abstract.

In Libya students start learning English as one of the main subjects from the age of 12 until the university stage. Libyan teachers followed the old traditional system, which was the grammar translation method. This method was based on analysing the grammar rules followed by translating of sentences and texts into the students' target language and memorizing large amount of vocabulary. For that reason, teachers tended to use the grammar translation method by focusing on these features. In Libya, the teaching was by using a translation method, which emphasized the acquisition of vocabulary through reading. As a result, teachers ignored all the communicative approach and techniques inside the class, for instance using different interaction activities such as games to attract learners' attention and keep them interested in the topic. I suggest authentic texts for the reason that they have been written for a communicative purpose and they are more interesting than texts which have been invented to illustrate the usage of some features of the target language; learners are thus likely to find them more motivating than invented texts.

Key words: Grammar Translation method, Target Language, Communicative Approach, Authentic Texts.

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Introduction

Traditionally, we know grammar as a set of rules that suggests dos and don'ts. The English curriculum in Libya is structurally based. Therefore we teach English as rules; what's the present simple tense, how to make questions / negative… etc. to a large class number with teaching methods which are not currently in fashion.

In this research paper, I will write about the teaching of grammar to EFL learners. I will divide this research paper into three sections. I will start by talking about grammar and its relation with rules giving the classic definition for grammar. Then I will discuss the varieties of grammar introduced by Leech; "students' grammar, teacher's and Learner's grammar". In the second section I will give an explanation of how I taught grammar in Libya and I will show how the items are presented to the students with examples. In the third section I will focus on the teaching of EL through the communicative approach. Then I will justify using authentic texts in teaching languages.

Grammar and rules

"Grammar can be briefly described as: a set of rules for constructing and for analysing sentences" (Leech, Deuchar and Hoogenraad 1982, p. 23). But what are **rules** and what is a **language**? Plainly, a language is a system of symbols, either oral or written, that is used to convey information. As a result, there are, in my opinion, at least two sets of rules: rules related to the sound system and rules related to the written system, i.e. learners learn rules of syntax, semantics and pragmatics.

- Syntax the study of form; the way words are related to each other in sentences. "Some people use the term Grammar to mean the same as syntax" (Tallerman 1998, p.1)

- Semantics "is the study of meaning communicated through language" (Saeed 1997,   p.3), since any language is a system of symbols. The semanticists explore the relationships between the symbols and the things symbolized.

- Pragmatics is the study of language use; the study of how different groups of people use words, syntax and sounds.

In addition to the above, Leech et al (1982) thought of grammar as being a central part of language which relates sounds and meaning. "The meaning of a message conveyed by language has to be converted into words put together according to grammatical rules, and these words are then conveyed by sounds" (ibid p.4). According to what is said above, I would append another system. The system of phonology:

- phonology is the study of the sound system of speech. Phonetics is a complicated science with rules of its own. It is not concerned with the meaning of sounds, but it is the science of sounds that distinguish meanings. The Egyptians, for example, have trouble distinguishing "thin" from "sin" because in their accent the / θ / sound doesn't occur. Consequently instead of saying "he is thin" they say "he is sin" and in this case the meaning is changed completely.

We have looked at what is generally referred to as grammar; let us now examine the relationship and the distinction between this as codified product, and grammar as conscious or explicit knowledge. Little (1994) points out that explicit knowledge of grammatical rules

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is useless unless we know some of the words whose behaviour the rules describe; and implicit knowledge of grammatical rules can develop only in association with a developing mental lexicon.

On the other hand, Westney (1994 p. 72) asserted that a simple division between pedagogical and linguistic grammars and rules is often made for grammars as products. Westney (1994 p.73) described how a three-way distinction of the kind Leech (1988) made, with descriptive mediating between theoretical and pedagogical types, is both more realistic and more practical. Both theory and pedagogical practice suggested to be relatively self-contained, each with its own aims and criteria. As a result, description tends naturally to be oriented towards one or the other, maybe both.

As to the knowledge of grammar, Leech (1994 p. 66) suggested three kinds of grammar: academic grammar (theoretical and descriptive: for university students), grammar for teachers, and pedagogical grammar (for learners). "Teachers' knowledge of grammar is seen both: as mediating between the other two and including specific requirements absent in the others" (Westney 1994, pp. 73-74). In that regard, Leech (ibid.) argued that teachers should know more, have detailed academic knowledge of the language, or of different things than learners at different stages. He claims that the problem of the necessarily indirect relation between academic knowledge and the way it can be put to use in the classroom is unsolved.

In relation to grammar for learners, Leech (1994) participating in the debate of learners need to become consciously aware of the grammar they know and acquire, comes to the conclusion that some kind of combination of explicit and implicit learning is necessary. Moreover, he claims that the method of discovery learning (i.e. arriving at generalisations on the basis of examples) is the appropriate way of coming to terms with fuzziness, whether they learn fuzzy grammar implicitly or through explicit study. While in the first stages of language learning inductive learning is implicit, at a later stage it can valuably be made explicit. The deductive method, on the other hand, is more fitted to the explicit presentation of grammar by 'rules of thumb'. Such 'rules of thumb' are useful for EFL learners only at early stages of learning about grammar, in order not to be confused.

I remember an incident that happened many years ago in one of my classes, when I was explaining the question tags. When I wrote: **I am late, aren't I?** with other examples on the board, one of my students raised her hand and told me that I made a mistake. She added, it must be **am** and not **are**. I explained to her 'this was an exception and that we could also say am I not?' But she insisted that she had learnt that – **'I'** as a pronoun - is always and only with **am** in all cases. That is because we as teachers explain the rules as 100 percent true. From my point of view, the right way when introducing grammatical notions is to use words such as generally and typical rather than 'always' and 'every'.

Traditional teaching grammar

The insight I present here derived from my practical experience of teaching basic English to university learners (maximum 60 students) aged 18 and above. Two hours per week for twenty-four weeks. The aim of studying this subject is not for communication: it is only one of the subjects the students are required to pass an exam in order to move to the 2nd year. Typically, a major component of such exams is grammar. Students have to know and apply the rules of English grammar in order to do well on such tests. So we (teaching staff) are

obliged to teach district prescribed syllabuses, which usually are structurally based. Rutherford (1987, cited in Leetch 1994, p.19) criticises grammar learning as accumulation of discrete 'grammatical points', or separate parcels of learning … that one often finds in textbooks. Furthermore, "grammar is often taught in isolated, unconnected sentences that give a fragmented, unrealistic picture of English and make it difficult for students to apply what they have learned in actual situation" (Celce-Murica and Hilles 1988, p.8).

In the syllabus I taught, each unit began with a dialogue or a text which provided a grammar item (e.g. present perfect tense), followed by exercises; (fill in, put in the right form, choose the correct form. make y / n questions, wh questions etc.).

I usually began the lesson by introducing and explaining the rule, e.g. the present perfect tense, using the grammar translation method:

I wrote a form on the board (e.g. I have done my homework) telling the students that is called the present perfect tense which is formed with: Subject + have / has + past participle form of the main verb. I asked the students: What was the verb have? Have, has and had. I put the pronouns by the verb so that we finally have the model,

I have, you have, he/ she/ it has, etc. on the board, and then review the past participle as the 'third part of the verb' and go through several verbs, writing the base form, simple past, and past participle on the board.

I explain to the students that the most important thing to remember about the present perfect is that it can never be used with adverbs which describe finished time periods, such as yesterday, five minutes ago and at five O'clock. If a time adverb is used with the present perfect, it should describe a time period which is unfinished. I wrote a table of finished and unfinished time on the board and the students had to learn them by heart. I gave examples to illustrate that:

 e.g. He has been to the market twice already **today**.

   *He has been to the market **yesterday**.

The first sentence is correct while the second is unacceptable according to the prescriptive rule that relates the use of unfinished time period with the present perfect.

I explained that the use of the present perfect to describe the duration (how long...) of a state which is true now.

I wrote two kinds of structures (present perfect and e.g. past simple – they had studied this tense before) on the board   to compare:

- I have lived here for three years. (I live here now)

- I lived in Benghazi for ten years.   (We don't know where I live now)

After a discussion with the students concerning the comparison between the sentences above, I explained to them that like all other examples of the present perfect, we are being told something about the present in the first sentence. The second sentence tells us only about the past, although we would probably assume that the speaker doesn't live in Tripoli now.

After I finish explaining the lesson, we turn to the exercises where the students asked to answer the questions individually. For example:

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Put the verb between brackets in the correct form of the present perfect tense:

    a. I (see) ………. the movie this evening

    b. He (read) ………… two novels this month.

Finally, the learners would do some further practice and comprehension exercises in their workbook as homework.

By the exercises EACH learner and I COULD check whether he or she knows the rules or how right his / her rules are. They told me whether the learner had yet learned the item.

This is the way I taught English as a foreign language. There was a sense in which the learners were merely passive receivers most of the time, with no influences themselves on the content of the lesson, which was totally directed by the textbook and me.

Authentic texts and the communicative approach

In the previous section, I described the teaching of English through structure to the university students. In this section I focus on the teaching of English language through the communicative approach, focusing on meaning or on form. Little et al (1989) claim that all language form and meaning are closely interrelated. Hence, the formal business letter for example requires accuracy. Little (1994) emphasizes that learners who have reached the stage of being able to compose an effective business letter in their target language are likely to display a large gauge of formal accuracy in conversational exchange.

Communicative purpose is to discover ways of enabling learners to understand more intensely how the forms of their target language are organized in the creation of meaning "Nevertheless, the communicative approach insists that on all levels of proficiency the purpose of communication is negotiation of meaning rather than the elaboration of grammatical form" (ibid, p.101). On the other hand, it will be abortive communication if words are strung together without consideration for grammatical rules. For this reason, Little (1994) emphasizes that grammar is as important to the communicative as to any other approach to language teaching. For instance, in communicative practice, the learners engage in communicative activities to practise the structure being learned: Activities that provide the learners with new information, new words, new meaning, relation between words, and perhaps new structures (Little 1991). For such activities I suggest authentic texts for the reason that "they have been written for a communicative purpose and they are more interesting than texts which have been invented to illustrate the usage of some feature of the target language; learners are thus likely to find them more motivating than invented texts" (Little et al, 1989 p.24). In a workshop in one of my lectures, students were divided into three groups. Students were in groups of four, as beginners, and they were given a jumble of twenty-one words and phrases in English that have been derived from an authentic text. The students first task was to identify the words and phrases (their meanings in English). That required them to think about words as individual tokens. They entered into discussions to identify those words and phrases and consider possible semantic and syntactic relations between words. The second task was to use the words to construct a story outline. When the story outline was complete, they were given the simplified version of the authentic text containing all the words they were given at the beginning of the activity. This procedure is very practical and interesting enabling the learners to gain a great deal more meaning from the authentic text. Furthermore, they learn a great deal more from it, than they would if they

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simply tried to read it (little, 1991). Dealing with such activity, Little suggests to begin by identifying and correcting the learners' errors. Then the focus could shift to thematic and discourse structure-further details might be added to the story and alternative orderings of the material considered (1994, p.99).

According to my experience in teaching English as a foreign language, I first taught the rules, elements of phrase and sentence structure and then the learners required to combine sentences into paragraphs and longer texts. In the contrary, in the above activity chain, the learners begin by devising a thematic outline and then elaborate their text.

I see clearly now that I was primarily teaching a class using old teaching methods. Therefore, I have to change things accordingly, and apply that on my learners. I, therefore, aim to use the target language most of the time during lessons and use authentic texts: newspapers, magazines, songs, poems...etc. This gives a chance to the learners to express themselves, enjoy themselves during learning, and use the reserves of their minds in order to start using the target language as much as possible.

Conclusion

In this paper, I displayed some systems closely related to grammar, which have rules of their own and are considered as part of grammar; syntax, semantics, pragmatics and phonology. Then I turned to the kinds of grammar argued by Leech who suggested that teachers should know more different things than learners. In relation to grammar for learners, a kind of combination of explicit and implicit learning is necessary for the learners to become consciously aware of the grammar they know.

I explained how I taught English in previous using the traditional grammar translation method through explicit learning by introducing the rules then going to the exercises.

Finally, I pointed out the importance of the use of communicative approach in the learning process through the authentic texts, newspapers, magazines, poems, radio and TV broadcasts…etc. Such texts have an effective influence on the learners, when they learn language through materials that they like or they are interested in.

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