THE PRESENT GRAMMAR SYLLABUS AT THE UNIVERSITY: KNOWING OR DOING?

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ABSTRACT

The present paper sets as its main objective the elaboration of a pragmatically sensitive grammar-teaching model. The model aims at enabling the intended population of university students of English as a foreign language in Algeria to manage the structure of clause appropriately, i.e., to understand clauses as formal entities and use them appropriately to communicate. This will be taught through a discourse framework, an area of language use which extends its scope of inquiry beyond sentence boundaries. A specially adopted methodology is suggested, presenting learners with relevant discourse and pragmatic input through ad hoc materials and activities, and providing them with instances highlighting features of language use. Once the input is sufficiently provided, students are expected to understand and produce discourse elements and routines on a pragmatic basis.

Views on language teaching have changed significantly over recent years. An outcome of these changes has been a variety of methodological innovations with varying degrees of focus on the different language components. One of these components, grammar, has sometimes been dealt with as an integrated part of language teaching, that is taught within the framework of other skills, listening and speaking, for example (as is the case with the pattern-drills method) (Rivers & Temperley 1970). Sometimes it has been taught as a separate area of language teaching (Bright & Mc Gregor 1970). A multitude of methods have therefore been adopted and implemented in teaching English grammar. These methods, of course, differ as to the way they are carried out, curriculum guidelines, the syllabi and materials they select, the objectives they set and a myriad of other parameters (Hubbard 1983, Woods 1995).

THE PRESENT SITUATION

Despite the tremendous body of literature in the field of English grammar teaching, students of English all too often have difficulty in achieving the results expected i.e. those in relation with their desire to communicate using the language they are learning. The fault lies very often not in deficient knowledge of grammatical notions, rules, functions or even labels for different communicative acts, but in the lack of a well-defined grammar teaching framework which consists of linguistic elements and those derivable from relevant features of the context of situation.

Research into FL pedagogy (Widdowson 1972, 1973, 1978, 1983) has shown that grammar instruction has adopted a methodology which favours the sentence and neglects discourse, focuses on the formal aspects and undervalues the pragmatic dimension. To become grammar-sensitive is, thus, more crucial and more rewarding to teachers and students than being pragmatically aware. Likewise, students were assessed on mere formal grammatical criteria.

The rationale for this methodology was that learning the TL was guaranteed by mastering the grammar rules of that language. Yet, classroom research has not been in favour of this thesis. The structural input did not prove successful in enabling students to be effective in using these rules appropriately in various FL contexts.

On the other hand, while considerable works on FL discourse and pragmatic research have been carried out to adjust the balance towards an unbiased, much broader account of language, grammar instruction has not yet duly benefited from such relatively new insights.

This is due, in the main, to the fact that different trends in the field of language teaching have emphasized some component at the expense of another. As a consequence, learners have not been fully involved in the process of interactive and cognitive learning (Woods 1995).

Besides, many early applied linguists, among whom Widdowson (1972, 1973, 1978), have expressed their dissatisfaction with the way language is taught. He (ibid) suggested that language should be taught as discourse within which grammatical competence is to be conceived not as a separate entity but as one among other types of competence.

Many learners when moving up to higher educational levels seem to have some formal knowledge about, say, the notion of 'adjective', the rule of 'passive' transformation, the function of 'imperative clause' and perhaps also 'how to greet an unknown person'. But when they come to be asked to use this piece of knowledge as a whole to go beyond the sentence realm and communicate appropriately, they are likely to face difficulties.

This failure in allowing grammar instruction to play its prominent role in building up learner's communicative competence can be traced back to two main factors. Firstly, various trends in grammar teaching, applying their respective theories, have focused chiefly on the *code* (linguistic usage) neglecting the *use of the code* (language use), i.e. teaching language in its communicative context (Allen and Widdowson 1975). Others have claimed to do the reverse, i.e. they gave much more prominence to the use of the code (Halliday 1967/68, 1970, 1973; Wilkins 1978 Brumfit and Johnson 1979 Brumfit 1984) and neglected the code itself. Secondly, many practitioners all too often believe that there can be a direct relationship between a *scientific grammar*, i.e. the formal description of language, and a *pedagogical grammar* i.e. instructional grammar (Allen 1975; Roulet 1975, 1978;

Widdowson 1972). Thus, they apply straightforwardly some formal type of analysis which appeals to them in teaching grammar.

As for the application of the different theories, this is quite clear in the different textbooks and grammar reference books adopted by classroom teachers at pre-university levels in Algeria. One should make the fair point that pre-university stages have often been those where different theories have been tested. Moreover, some teachers tend to teach the way they were taught. Some university teachers, for instance, still teach grammar in the pattern-drill way paying scant regard to the communicative dimension, judging it more useful to help students store rules and linguistic patterns. A few adopt a rather holistic view by presenting their students with 'chunks' of functional language without allowing them to proceed analytically in understanding and using the language.

Further, methods and techniques have shown a great deal of limitation in establishing a comprehensive and coherent model of grammar teaching. This is due, in part, to the fact that some teaching component, say, a structure, is over-emphasized at the expense of others. Besides, in many classroom situations teachers are still inflexibly wedded to one approach instead of being eclectic, and thus failing to '…instill in students an awareness of the full range of its [of the language] expressive potential' (John 1986: 19)

A corollary to this is that when learners are confronted with language in use, they often realize that they are unable to react appropriately to the target situation despite the wealth of grammatical input they possess. As Widdowson (1972) points out

'…the problem is that students, and especially students in developing countries, who have received several years of formal English teaching, frequently remain deficient in the ability to actually use the language, and to understand its use, in normal communication, whether in the spoken or the written mode'. (Widdowson 1972: 117)

This is most noticeable at university level where students, after many years of instruction (before and at university), still need a great deal of communicatively-oriented grammar instruction, so as to be capable of coping with language in use in spite of the structurally-oriented grammar instruction they receive.

RATIONALE

Considering the deficient methodology, on the one hand, and the lack of a pragmatically-led grammar instruction on the other, students' grammatical competence remains limited and they remain unable to cope with various communicative needs. In fact, these two concerns for an interactive methodology that motivated the present study.

Both cohesion and coherence are dealt with here. We choose these components of discourse development on account of their prominent role in the field of grammar looked at from a communicative point of view. On the other hand, they contribute, as *standards of textuality* (Beaugrande and Dressler 1981), to getting with grammar beyond the realm of mere sentence to the world of texts and stretches of texts, *viz.* connected discourse.

Following the same line of development, the learner is regarded as a discourse analyst and a negotiator of meaning who possesses appropriate tools to observe, analyse and negotiate any grammatical pattern and its meaning in context. (Widdowson 1978, 1979, 1983, Celce-Murcia & Olshtain 2000, McCarthy & Carter 1994)

In this connection, learners, here considered as upper-intermediate should be initiated to ask questions like the following[1]:

-Why does the addresser use such or such a grammatical pattern in a particular discourse situation?

- Is the addresser's intended meaning?

-Why is a form of a particular pattern used rather than another in some discourse?

-Under what conditions does a particular pattern occur?

-What are the roles of the participants in some piece of discourse?

and a host of other relevant questions which will provide the learner, under the guidance of the teacher, with strategies that promote better understanding and using language in appropriate situations. Besides, such questions will open up for the learner new perspectives through which he will look at contextual clues for an act, say, a *directive* to be fulfilled.

Learners should be made aware of the fact that an utterance is fulfilled to do something, to perform an act. They ought to be aware that when they make a statement, ask a question, or make a directive, they will be performing acts. These acts are not to be distinguished only on mere formal surface features (cohesive devices) or even on semantic criteria but also on pragmatic properties.

For instance, the producer of the following fragments of discourse

1- ' *It's no time to make a change.*

2- *Just relax, take it easy.*

3- *Why think of everything you've got?* '

  (Cat Stevens, '*Father and son*' in McRae & Boardman 1984: 1)

bears in mind a set of contextual elements concerning all that is related to his utterances as well as to his addressee.

In performing every act, learners ought to be aware that a set of conditions are to be satisfied if the aforementioned acts achieve the purposes they have been intended to achieve, *viz. illocutionary* and *perlocutionary* meanings.

In the first instance, the addresser (the father) makes a statement and commits himself to its truth, by telling his addressee (the son) that fact. The latter would normally take the statement produced under particular conditions as to conveying a fact (a proposition). Also, this utterance may be interpreted as an indirect directive whose direct counterpart can be[2]:

'*It's no time, don't make a change*',

  or

'*Don't make a change, it's no time*'.

depending on which item the producer of the utterance wants to keep in prominence[3].

On the other hand, in fragment (2) the addresser changes the nature of his communicative strategy and adopts another speech act, *viz.* a plain directive by means of an

imperative clause. The addresser, here, thinks, after putting forward a truth in the previous fragment, that it is convenient to urge his addressee (the son) to fulfil an action, to behave in a particular manner in conformity with specific conditions. Unlike his attitude towards the previous act (statement of fact), the addressee, when directed or instructed to perform a given act, he may comply with this act or reject it altogether depending on various factors (e.g. roles, statuses of interactants; setting, purpose of the exchange, etc.)

In fragment (3) the addresser intends perhaps to elicit information from his addressee by choosing another speech act, namely a question. In so doing, the addresser believes, if he really wants, that his addressee will provide him with a reply depending on conditions mentioned above; or he may have produced this act without requiring his addressee to answer his question (rhetorical question[4]). Instead, he wants to impress or affect his addressee.

Now, if we try to see how the addresser shifts from one act to another, we realise that the three utterances are related to one another by means of their respective propositional meanings (what sentences are about), for each one takes on value in relation to the other. Accordingly, to be fully understood, proposition (1) is to be linked to proposition (2) and (3). Resulting from the first interpretation of proposition (1), proposition (2) is produced to provide, as it were, an alternative to a given situation '*just relax and take it easy*'. Whereas, proposition (3) is to be interpreted as a back-up argument to the foregoing proposition. All that is said here is linked to the addresser's intended meaning.

We notice also that despite the absence of overt surface linking devices between the three sentences, their interpretation does not constitute a serious obstacle to the addressee[5]. This is due to the underlying meaning which relates them to their illocutionary value. It is this that makes them coherent, covertly connected. It may be assumed that what is meant in utterance (1) "It's no time to make a change " (a situation in which there is no change) leads to what is meant in utterance (2) "Just relax, take it easy" (a situation of relaxation and taking it easy). Utterance (3) "why think of everything you've got?" is said to mean a comment on what was meant in (1) and (2).

Cohesion and coherence, as sketched out above, seem not to be sufficient for the preparation of FL-learners to play their roles appropriately in the TL situation. Another inherently related component should be added, i.e. pragmatic acceptability[6].

Once engaged in the process of inferring[7] and interpreting[8,??relying??on??other??elements??such??as??common??knowledge??   shared??knowledge??,??socio-cultural9

background, roles and statuses, the addressee will react to the utterances directed to him appropriately. This appropriate reaction is assessed to the extent to which s/he succeeds/fails pragmatically.

The three areas, cohesion, coherence and pragmatic acceptability are then considered as criteria for written discourse development.

It is noteworthy that statements, interrogatives and directives can be realized by a wide variety of clausal forms. For instance, the following utterances, which serve a function of *requesting*, have the force of *directing* the addressee to accomplish given acts:

4- *Could you show me the way to the post-office? (Show me the way to the post-office)*

5- *Will you have a seat? (Have a seat)*

6- *I wonder if you could stop smoking (stop smoking)*

Although the criteria for the characterization of clauses set briefly above are primarily of pragmatic nature, they are significantly bound to their grammatical (formal) counterparts. This link is not negligible as long as it contributes for learners to provide for one of discourse levels, viz. cohesion. It is not, yet, to be taken as decisive in the performance of *speech acts* for there is no one-to-one relationship between these acts and grammatical forms they embody.

Such notions as declarative, interrogative and imperative are to be known by learners. They are constructions which 'dress' speech acts. They constitute ingredients of a learner's grammatical competence. In practical terms, and no matter what discourse type to choose, these ingredients ought to be signalled to the learner in a full account. When it comes to teaching such surface structures, one important factor should be underlined. They are better comprehended by learners if a systematic step-by-step analysis is introduced, paving the way to a discoursal analysis.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

Materials (texts, dialogues, etc.) are chosen on the basis of their being suited to the purposes of the study *viz.* their providing motivating learnable sources and maximizing students' opportunities to get involved as active participants in the process of language use.

As to methodology, two procedures of equal importance are chosen here. The teacher can begin eliciting ideas from his learners and urge them to do likewise in order to provide a maximum of background knowledge about the fragment of discourse and situate it in its appropriate context. This is top-down processing. So, he proceeds downwards to lower elements i.e. how the piece of discourse develops: how its building parts are linked together, how its different meanings are related to make up a whole and so on. Or he can proceed upwardly i.e. from the lower-order elements (linguistic ones) to contextual ones. This is bottom-up processing. The aim is to see to the ways discourse builds linguistically and contextually.

To begin with, the teacher, as a facilitator, sets to elicit ideas from his learners and urge them to do likewise in order to have at their disposal the maximum of knowledge about how the fragment of discourse develops: how its building parts are linked together, how its different meanings are related to make up a coherent whole and so on. Later, patterns of clauses are selected, their functions identified and the act(s) they serve are made clear. This stage, also, includes the provision of any information likely to bring about further understanding. As a follow-up activity, learners may be asked to expand the piece of discourse they are handling by supplying rejoinders (second-pair parts), for example, to statements, questions or directives. The following examples illustrate the point and in which (Bs) are regarded as second-pair parts.

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1- A- *It's a lovely day*. (Statement)

   B- *Yes, (it's a fine day)*. (Statement)

2- A- *Tell him how very glad I am*. (Directive)

   B- *I'll tell him*. (I will) (Statement)

3- A- *What have you been doing all day?* (Question)

   B- *Nothing in particular*. (I have been doing nothing in particular) or (Nothing) (Statement)

Next, learners may be asked to exemplify the items they have been presented with, from their own stock of knowledge. Drilling can also be carried out by means of an extra piece of written discourse (a text or a dialogue) to lead learners to manage longer and more complicated stretches of discourse. An additional home assignment can be devised in order for learners to consolidate what they have been learning in class.

All in all, what we would like our learners to do is to be engaged in managing these structures not by appeal to 'grammar book' analysis alone but to pay attention to what is beyond these structures, and to their combination. This entails creative endeavour from learners, a task which involves them in a process of working out propositional (cohesion and coherence) as well as illocutionary (pragmatic) development of discourse.

<u>NOTES</u>

1-There are, obviously, parameters to be taken account of when selecting materials. Some of them are: learners' needs, their age, motivation and past learning experience.

2 - This task may seem, at first sight, to go beyond learners' level of proficiency. We assume, however, that after being acquainted with basic grammatical notions and categories from their- pre-university learning experience or by means of some preliminary grammar course along training sessions at this level of study, learners can be led by stages to the point where they are capable of initiating such questions and providing relevant answers.

3- It is to be signalled, here, that most utterances are multifunctional, in the sense that there is no one-to-one relationship between a structure and a function. An utterance can have many functions, and a function can be achieved by many structures.

4- For the organisation of items in the clause and in the text, we will refer to the works of Halliday (1967/68, 1970 and 1976) and Quirk *et al* (1972).

5-Rhetorical questions are' …sentences [which] resemble questions in their structure, but they are used as if they were emphatic statements. The speaker does not expect an answer.' (Crystal 1999: 218)

6- When there is a communicative act, the addresser assumes that his addressee shares with him a common knowledge. This common knowledge helps the addressee to infer and interpret the addresser's intended meaning.

7- The term refers to a situation where learners comprehend and produce utterances that are appropriate, with their conditions being fulfilled.

8- *Inferring* or *inferencing* is the process of providing additional knowledge by the addressee to make sense of what is not explicit in the addresser's message (Yule 1996).

9- *interpreting* is a mental process whereby a learner builds the world of text and discourse (Mc Carthy 1991)

10- Any relevant explanation of a cultural or social nature should be given briefly to help learners get more involved in the world of discourse in hand.

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