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TEACHING GRAMMAR AND UNDERSTANDING MEANING IN CONTEXT

***Abstract.** This article deals with teaching grammar and understanding meaning in context, distinguish between prescriptive grammars and descriptive grammars, also understanding and catching the meaning from the context while learning and practicing the grammar.*

***Keywords:** meaning, relationship, expressions, shape, audio-lingual, communicative.*

No one who speaks English has any difficulty understanding the meaning of a sentence like 'It's warm in here'. We all recognize that it is a comment on the temperature in some place or other. But why it is being said, and what the speaker wishes to convey by saying it, depends entirely on two things: the context in which it is said and what the speaker wants people to understand.

Suppose, for example, that the words are spoken by someone who is either lazy, ill or in some position of power. 'It's warm in here' might then be either a request or an order for someone to open a window. If, however, two people come in out of the cold, 'It's warm in here' might well be an expression of satisfaction or pleasure. If, to give a third example, two people are trying to decide which room to use as their bedroom, the sentence 'It's warm in here' might serve as a suggestion to choose or not to choose the room. In each case, the sentence is performing a different language function (see page 76), e.g. requesting, suggesting, etc.

What a word means is also defined by its relationship to other words. For example, we can say that the word 'hot' is the antonym (opposite) of the word 'cold' - and this fact helps us understand the meaning of each word. When words mean the same thing (e.g. 'hold-up' and 'delay') we call them synonyms - though since one word can have many meanings (see page 63), it will depend on which meaning is being used. A speaker's knowledge of a word also includes an understanding of how the shape of that word can be altered so that its grammatical meaning can be

changed. We call the system of rules that determine how these changes can be made morphology. Using words appropriately means knowing these things and, crucially, knowing which grammatical slots (see above) they can go into. In order to do this, we need to know what part of speech a word is. Just as in English there is sometimes no readily discernible correspondence between sounds and spelling, there are frequent instances, too, where the same language forms can be used to express different meanings, or where a meaning can be expressed by many different forms. With so many available meanings for words and grammatical forms, it is the context the word occurs in which determines which of these meanings is being referred to. If we say, 'I beat him because I ran faster than he did', 'beat' is likely to mean won rather than physically assaulted or mixed (though there is always the possibility of ambiguity, of course). Likewise, the sentence 'I'm talking to the president' changes dramatically if we use these different expressions: 'at this very minute' or 'tomorrow at noon'. Word meaning can also be expressed in different ways. Even where words appear to have the same meaning - to be synonyms - they are usually distinct from each other. For example, we can describe an intelligent person by using a number of different words: 'intelligent', 'bright', 'brainy' 'clever', 'smart', etc. But each of these words has a different connotation (shade of meaning). 'Brainy' is an informal word and might well have a negative connotation when used by a schoolchild about a classmate. 'Bright' carries the connotation of lively and young. 'Smart' is commonly used in American English and has a slight connotation of tricksiness, and 'clever' is often used in phrases with negative connotations, e.g. 'too clever by half', 'He may be clever but he's not going to get away with it'. [1]

In teaching grammar in context the practice material should include a wide range of topics to reflect both everyday language use and the kinds of subjects learners might be studying in schools or colleges. Many learners are likely to use English to learn another subject during their education and the choice of text tries to reflect this factor. Some texts contain information which learners should find interesting or challenging. The intention in general is that language should have a familiar context and that learners should have something to use language for. The topics should cover in the exercises can be used as a starting point for a lesson, as a

subject for discussion, and as a means of helping to build students' vocabulary in useful areas. There is opportunity for individual study, group work and homework, plus testing, and so on. [2]

According to David Nunan, Grammarians distinguish between prescriptive grammars and descriptive grammars. A prescriptive grammar lays down the law, saying what is right and what is wrong. A descriptive grammar, on the other hand, sets out to describe the way that people actually use language. In recent years, the trend has been away from prescriptive and towards descriptive grammars. Each of the following statements would be judged ungrammatical by prescriptive grammarians. However, they were all produced by native speakers, and would therefore find their way into a descriptive grammar. In a recent study, the vast majority of native speakers and advanced non-native speakers of English judged the statements to be grammatically acceptable.

The gang were plotting a takeover.

Everybody is ready now, aren't they?

Neither Fred nor Harry had to work late, did they?

The place of grammar in the language classroom has had a rather checkered history. Thirty years ago, language teaching and grammar teaching were synonymous in most language classrooms. The primary aim of teaching was to ensure that learners mastered the grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary of the language. The dominant methodology at the time was audiolingualism, which, in fact, is still influential today. The principles underlying audiolingualism were derived from structural linguistics and behaviorist psychology. The behaviorists believed that learning was a matter of acquiring habits. A typical audiolingual lesson might look something like this.

1. Present the new language item to be learned, giving a clear demonstration of its meaning through nonverbal means such as by pictures or actions. (Do not give grammatical explanations.)

2. Model the target pattern, using a number of examples.

3. Get the whole class to mimic and memorize the new pattern following the teacher's model.

4. Introduce a substitution drill, first to the whole class, then with the class divided into two, and then with individual responses.

5. Repeat the first four steps, using negative versions of the target structure.

6. Repeat the first four steps, using interrogative (question) versions of the target structure.

7. Check for transfer, using previously unrehearsed cues. Solicit both whole class and individual responses.

The heart of the audiolingual lesson set out above is the substitution drill. Such drills are a stock-in-trade for most teachers, and remain popular to this day. Unfortunately, in many audio-lingual classrooms such drills tended to be rather mechanical. For example, the teacher might say:

“That’s a book. Pen!” and the students were expected to reply.

“That’s a pen.”

These days, teachers and textbook writers try to give a communicative and meaningful dimension to such drills. And I agree, because it is useful for learners understanding and catching the meaning from the context while learning and practicing the grammar.

Many grammar-based courses are relatively ineffective because they teach grammar as an abstract system, present the language as isolated sentences, and fail to give learners a proper context for the grammar point. Teaching was largely limited to the form of the new grammatical item. For example, when the passive voice was introduced, typically students were given a list of sentences in the active voice (“The boy broke the window.” “The dog bit the man.” etc.) along with a model of how to form the passive. (“The window was broken.”) The task for the students was to turn the active voice sentences into the passive. Such a procedure does not give students any insights into the communicative contexts in which they should use the passive rather than the active voice. However, the solution proposed by some -do away with teaching grammar altogether-is no solution. The solution is to present the grammar in a context that makes clear the relationship between the grammatical form and the communicative function. For example, when teaching the passive voice, show why

the passive voice is used to place the emphasis on the action rather than the doer, to hide the identity of the doer, etc.

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