

The Necessity of Grammar Teaching

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Abstract

Mastering grammar is the foundation in the proficiency of a language. Grammar teaching is also an essential part of language teaching. However, with the communicative approach was introduced into China, many foreign language teachers gradually make little of grammar teaching. In terms of the theory of linguistics, this paper specifically explores the status of grammar in language learning, the characteristics of foreign language learning, theoretical basis of communicative teaching approach, and the practical effect of ignoring grammar teaching to reposition grammar teaching for a comprehensive understanding of the necessity of teaching grammar.

Keywords: Grammar teaching, Necessity, Theory of linguistics, Communicative approach

1. The status of English grammar teaching in China

Grammar, as a set of rules for choosing words and putting words together to make sense, plays a significant role in language teaching. Without grammar, language does not exist. Also, it is difficult for students to speak English well without learning English grammar. So, in the formal education, it is inevitable for teachers who teach foreign languages to teach grammar. However, with the development of the history of language teaching, the position of English grammar in language teaching has always been disputed. It is just as Peng (2007) has summarized that from a historical point of view, people began to learn English grammar in the 16th century, during which anti-grammar teaching ever occurred, and subsequently English grammar in language teaching experienced several ups and downs. As “communicative approach” was introduced to China in the 70s of 20th century, educational reformers in China tend to emphasize the students’ communicative ability to use the actual language. Some teachers simply think that is to dilute the teaching of grammar, without attention to grammar. Some teachers tend to neglect grammar teaching which is regarded as inherently “dull” or “old-fashioned”. Some are even going to extremes by avoiding talking about grammar under the supposition that grammar teaching does no good to students’ communicative competence.

Therefore, grammar teaching is in a state of crisis. Now it is essential and imperative to arouse foreign language teachers' attention to grammar. From the following different theoretical and practical arguments, our foreign language teachers will have a new understanding of grammar’s place in language teaching and learning.

2. The necessity of grammar teaching in terms of theory of linguistics

Linguistic theory is the basis of foreign language teaching. Principles and Methods of teaching are inseparable from linguistic theory. The following different theoretical principles show the necessity of grammar teaching in foreign language learning.

2.1 *The need of the components and basic features of language*

The components and basic features of language determine the need for grammar. In Yu (2008)’s latest paper he addresses that although people have objections on what is the language, contemporary linguists all agree that language consists of sound, lexicon and grammar, and these three elements influence each other, have interaction and constitute the material basis of the whole language system, i.e., the content of language can be expressed through sound, while sound has to use lexicon and grammar to achieve its function; grammar is “the sound, structure, and meaning system of language” (Hu, 2001, p. 115), and only through the grammar can sound and lexicon form meaningful language system. Therefore, linguists argue that grammar is the most important part in a language system. A complete language system cannot be constituted without grammar. Thus, we can imagine that grammar is just like a frame of a house. Without this framework, good materials and building blocks can not constitute a solid house. Many linguists also have incisive exposition on the importance of grammar. Bastone (1994) asserts that “language without grammar would be chaotic; countless words without the indispensable guidelines for how they can be ordered and modified” (p. 35). Chomsky (1965) explains that grammar can be thought of as a theory of a language. Thus, for foreign language teachers, grammar is an indispensable part in language teaching.

Meanwhile, linguistics is the basis of foreign language teaching. The formulation of the principles of foreign language teaching, the design of teaching methods and the choice of teaching methods should be associated with the feature of language. According to Yu (2008), one of the basic features of language is that language is a creative system, that is, learners can employ limited rules of language to create unlimited language forms of expressing meaning. Zhang (1999) also holds that “the object of foreign language teaching is speech of target language. Speech is the product of language. We cannot learn all the unlimited speech of the target language, but can only learn the limited language paradigm to obtain the ability to produce speech” (p. 108). It is better to teach a man fishing than to give him fish. Accordingly, grammar as rules of language in foreign language teaching is just like “language paradigm” and “fishing” which are certainly necessary and indispensable to be taught to obtain the ability of language in teachers’ language teaching.

2.2 The requirement of the standard of mastering a language

The standard of mastering a language embodies the importance of grammar teaching. It is often said in the real life that to master a foreign language is the need for social development. So, what should we learn to master a foreign language? On this issue, different people have different answers. Some people say that to understand a language is to understand its grammar and vocabulary well. Some say that it is to understand its grammar, vocabulary, and also to know how to use this language to do what we need. According to Liu (1999), to understand a language is to know grammar, vocabulary, text structure and rules of use in the culture, which jointly decide how to use decent language on specific occasions. Famous linguist Woods (1988) also addresses that when we say someone understands a language, we mean the person has obtained the ability to produce the target language that can be accepted in grammar. Although people have different viewpoints on the standard of mastering a language, there is a commonality, that is, to master a language must master its grammar.

2.3 The need of the feature of foreign language learning environment

The feature of foreign language learning environment decides the necessity of grammar teaching. The famous linguist Stern (1999) has defined such concepts as foreign language, first language, second language and native language. Accordingly, as Professor Yu (2008) in China has discovered, English is our foreign language in China that shows that there are significant differences from second language in learning environmental characteristics, learning motivation, learning interests, learning methods, etc., and second language can be learned subconsciously in a natural environment, while foreign language learning must be based on conscious classroom learning. If students leave classroom, they will be exposed to the sea of Chinese language and can’t stimulate and reinforce English level in a natural English environment. Therefore, according to Zhang(1999), in learning a foreign language in classroom learning environment, we should “have a criterion which is used to measure true and false and guide what to do and what not to do and this criterion is just grammar” (p. 106). Also, from a psychological point of view, when studying any knowledge, the mankind attempts to find law and order in the things, and this is human natural instinct. So, from the feature of foreign language learning environment we can understand that it is blameless for students to study English grammar for learning English well too.

As for Chinese students studying English as a foreign language, they have no more English environment to apply their target language after all. Only in English classrooms and English activities that schools launch can Chinese students just have an opportunity to be exposed to English language. Therefore, it is very difficult for them to judge and distinguish semantic characteristic and difference between the mother tongue and purpose language accurately and in time. In terms of this situation, grammar seems particularly important when being studied and taught. The correct grammar is the “walking stick” teaching themselves English. Students must be supported by English grammar in many aspects while studying English. So, grammar teaching is the important component of language teaching, especially in the environment of foreign language.

2.4 The requirement of the nature of the theory of “communicative approach”

The nature of the theory of “communicative approach” determines the need for grammar teaching. When we talk about “communicative competence”, we have to come to “communicative approach”. As Peng (2007) states, from the ancient times to the present, the foreign language teaching theories and approaches have always been in evolution, struggle and development in these two concepts of “language knowledge” and “skills (competence)”; in the history of foreign language teaching approaches, people have experienced “grammar translation approach”, “direct approach” and “audio lingual approach”, and after these teaching approaches, “communicative approach” stems from the late 60s of 20th century. With the development of functional linguistics, “communicative approach” receives teachers and students’ favor. The traditional teaching methods were gradually abandoned because of their limitations. Communicative approach has been adopted for more than 30 years in China. However, there are some dilemmas in current language teaching: some teachers always stress “communicative

competence” and neglect “linguistic competence”. Teachers and students are always in search for fluent oral expression, but reading and written knowledge is very weak. Meanwhile, Students often make errors in oral and written expression and lack basic knowledge of language. Obviously, this is the result of a one-sided understanding of communicative approach, so that foreign language teaching goes to an extreme. Therefore, we should have a comprehensive and all-sided understanding of the following theory of communicative approach.

The concept of “linguistic competence” is put forward by Chomsky (1965) on the basis of denying the language theory of behaviorism and defined as language knowledge system of native speakers’ internalization, including sound, lexicon, syntax, semantics and other rules, and the linguistic competence native speakers have enables them to understand and produce grammatical sentences they have never contacted before. With the development of sociolinguistics, in view of insufficiency of the concept of “linguistic competence”, American sociolinguist Hymes (1972) puts forward the concept of “communicative competence” and argues that “communicative competence” should include “linguistic competence” and “linguistic performance”, i.e. while the language is used, both sides of communication need to know not only whether the structure of communication words is correct or not, but also the feasibility, appropriateness and purpose of the communication words in the particular linguistic context, that is, there are four aspects in the concept of “communicative competence”: sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence and grammatical competence.

Obviously, as Liu (1999) has discovered, in these theories linguistic knowledge is the foundation and an abstract master of language system; in practice, linguistic knowledge is internalized, and in the automatic use, linguistic competence can be converted into linguistic performance. Namely, communicative competence requires that we should learn linguistic knowledge at first. As we know, grammar is an important part of linguistic knowledge and competence. Therefore, grammar is obviously also part of communicative competence and also the teaching content of communicative approach.

In other words, we can understand that communicative approach makes linguistic knowledge run through linguistic performance as a teaching purpose. Grammar teaching services linguistic performance. Therefore, we can assert that as an indispensable part of language teaching, grammar teaching should permeate through the whole process of linguistic performance.

3. The necessity of grammar teaching in terms of practical effect of foreign language teaching

The practical effects in foreign language teaching in the past require paying much more attention to grammar teaching. Practice is the sole criterion for testing truth. In terms of the past practical effects of English language teaching, ignoring and neglecting the teaching of English grammar is not conducive to the promotion of the teaching of English as a whole, and even affects students’ correct use of English.

Because of the lack of correct grammar, many students inside and outside the class can’t express accurate sentences. In oral and written expressions, Chinese-based English often appears. For example, many high school students still say “I think it won’t rain today”; “he is study hard”. In the English foundation stage, grammar’s weakness directly affects students’ grades and further higher education. After they go to high schools or universities, many students do not understand sentence structure and use of language difference. Some mistakes of translation and writing make teachers puzzled. Similarly, in the reading comprehension of long and difficult sentences, they also cannot correctly analyze sentence structure, only have a smattering of knowledge, and even become a “tail wagging the dog” or completely wrong. According to Yu (2008)’s latest statistic, about 80 percent of college students say that their reason for the unsatisfactory performance in English is that the concept’s ambiguity of syntactic structure causes problems of reading, grammar, translation and writing.

4. Conclusion

At any time, at any stage and in any circumstances, grammar teaching cannot be diluted. It ought to be an important part in foreign language teaching in China. This is the requirement of the basic characteristics and features of language learning and subjective environment for foreign language learning. Moreover, grammar is an effective way to train students’ communicative competence in English language teaching. Grammar and communicative competence should not be in opposition. Without grammar, language, communicative knowledge and competence are just “castles in the air”. With a good knowledge of grammar, students can fully improve their integrated English proficiency and promote the overall levels of their English. Therefore, teachers who teach the foreign language should try to reform the current conditions on neglecting grammar teaching in English education, and strive to explore grammar teaching methods to fully promote students’ English level.

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