

Blending Functions and Structures to Enhance Metacognitive Strategies

RAYDA OSMAN MOHAMMED TAHA
DR. MAHMOUD ALI AHMED
Sudan University of Science and Technology
Khartoum, Sudan

Abstract:

Lack of sufficient language skills has been observed by many tutors at university settings across the globe as a noticeable characteristic of EFL students where English is used as a medium of instruction. This situation is largely attributed to the students' previous experience with English language learning greatly marked by teacher-centered methodology reducing students into passive recipients and memorizers. The effect of such flawed environment of learning is firmly felt in the absence of critical thinking which is essential for developing metacognitive strategies needed for making decisions about their learning. Therefore, at Sudan University of Science and Technology-College of Languages, the Department of English has undertaken a preemptive step of designing a pre-university program to help undergraduate students improve their language skills in order to be better placed for receiving knowledge in English particularly at the science sections.

Key words: metacognitive strategies, critical thinking, language skills

1. INTRODUCTION

Almost all our fresh students at University are terribly lacking in sufficient language skills to cope with the new situation at

the university where Arabic is substituted with English. Tutors at science departments continued to complain about the students' apparent inability to grasp their lectures or participate in class discussion which is a feature very much essential for developing critical thinking which is an important step requisite for developing metacognitive strategies. What makes this so important is the fact that at university students are expected to develop all the skills necessary for independent thinking and reasoning to proceed with their learning beyond the classroom setting and to integrate themselves into the new learning environment.

Consequently, a rigorous pre-university program is called for to give boost to this ailing academic situation. Members of the English department are much concerned with the situation believing it to be part and parcel of their responsibility. Something must be done to improve the students' language skills in a way that help them develop critical thinking and metacognitive strategies. As an initial step a panel of experts in syllabus design from the university and other universities in the in the country has been formed to lay the foundation of a fundamental program to help provide the students with the essential tools required to pursue their classes and live up to the expectation of an academic edifice as the university.

Students of this university, where English is used as a medium of instruction, are of mixed abilities and most of them have come from rural settings where local customs can sometimes be detrimental for the very learning of English as is poorly conceived of. Students at intermediate and secondary schools were exposed to a kind of learning which was mainly intended to prepare them to score high marks in the final examination. So the teaching operation was greatly geared towards emphasizing those parts tested in the exam while ignoring very significant portions of the syllabus namely those

linked with the listening and speaking skills largely because they are hardly tested.

Upon coming to the university students were given a placement test to help assess their standards in English language and hence are divided into different groups according to their scores. This procedure is required by science departments as they give classes in English. Groups classified as poor or mediocre will be given special attention and handled differently. However, the entire last admitted batch to the university has been categorized as significantly poor which calls for quick intervention. This is because most of the newcomers have studied English at local public schools where English is inadequately taught. Those who have come from private schools in an urban setting are relatively better than their peers.

As most of the students are from Arabic medium schools and they have hardly had a good opportunity to learn English in a way to put them on the right track to cope with the needs of their new academic environment, a question was raised as to whether the pre university program is adequate enough to meet their needs. A group of expert teachers was assigned the job of tailoring a program that suits the needs of the students.

2. GRAMMAR-BASED VS. FUNCTIONAL-NOTIONAL SYLLABUS

A debate was raised amongst the members of the panel over the issue of grammar-based or functional syllabus. Those who favored functional-notional have argued that at university setting students actually need to integrate into the university community and therefore have purposes for using the language to express authentic communicative needs. It is the functional-notional syllabus that stresses the importance of learning to identify and express the communicative functions of language and the concepts and ideas. This in itself will further help learners express their own ideas and emotions. However, the

other group in favor of the grammar-based syllabus stated clearly and firmly that many students will not be able to think communicative functions beyond the stated contexts due to the abstract nature of functions and notions. Moreover, there are no hard and fast rules for expressing functions as one specific function can be expressed by more different structures.

On the other hand a grammar-based syllabus can be manipulated in a way that stimulates conceptual awareness of language structures leading to a greater understanding of grammar concepts and how they can be used communicatively. While functions and notions can be listed, grammar concepts scheduled to help students gain an understanding of the different structural concepts such as tense, adjectives, nouns, conditionals, co-ordinations and so on. These can be presented with little use of metalanguage. On occasions tutors may handle certain concepts explicitly for further clarification hence they may resort to defining or highlighting unequivocally certain grammatical terms as well as demonstrating clearly how the concepts work to bring about the desired meaning. Tutors should seek to present these concepts in language patterns to show their students how these can be used communicatively.

When it comes to considering grammar teaching the idea of form and meaning always assumes a central position in discussion. Incorporating grammar instruction into communicative language teaching would entail giving little attention to forms. However, both forms and meaning can be adequately blended in grammar instruction. So the program to be adopted for enhancing students' metacognitive language strategies and be successful in their university studies is a blend of structures and notions.

3. METHODS:

In order for this program to be implemented effectively a well-organized method of teaching has to be adopted. There are many significant factors to be considered in connection with the teaching of grammar these are directly connected with issues of accuracy vs. fluency, inductive or deductive teaching or the use of authentic or modified language. Students learning English as a foreign language truly need thorough clarification of every single point to be able to have a good grasp of the teaching-material. The fundamentals of the language need to be clarified. So for the teaching process to have a good pedagogical purpose and achieve its intended goals a good method of teaching has to be adopted. It should be broad enough to allow for the incorporation of one and the other. We need to integrate both explicit and implicit instruction of grammar as this is a significant step for the understanding of the varied grammar concepts. Again, to reinforce students' oral capabilities instructors have to opt for an open-ended communicative interaction coupled with controlled repose exercises. In grammar classes, instructors, therefore, are prone to focus on both awareness and performance. Our ultimate goal is to provoke conceptual awareness of the language structures as an essential step for the at least teaching of writing and reading comprehension in an attempt to develop metacognitive strategies in order to enable our students to work quite independently in an academic setting that lays the foundation for rigorous research work. Students who understand that sentences are made of words that have classes of verbs, nouns subjects, prepositions and are linked by means of cohesive devices are better than their peers who come without the slightest knowledge of these concepts. So integrating grammar into a task-focused approach through a predetermined nicely worked out grammar syllabus is the sole way to help students realize their intended needs and goals.

4. INTEGRATING THE BASIC SKILLS

The planning panel proposed intensive inclusion of the four basic skills as a fundamental prerequisite to meet the goals and needs of the students to be taught along with the structures. One salient feature linked with grammar instruction is that it enables learners to discover the nature of language. Students would start to gain insights into the different patterns of the language. These are the patterns that go into our oral language, writing or reading. Grammar is needed to combine our individual words into a cohesive whole or patterns. To teach writing effectively it would be important for the students to have a good grasp of the different grammatical concepts. Students with reasonable understanding of grammatical concepts are well-placed to use punctuation and cohesive devices correctly, to mention a few. Even in oral skills students with a faint understanding of the passive voice were observed to make such errors as I am *interesting* in for *interested* in. To explain how the passive voice works in English students who are well informed of the passive voice concept would rapidly understand the rule upon explanation.

In teaching speaking and writing students' mistakes will be taken to form the point of departure for the teaching of grammar. So in teaching grammar the grammatical text is first and foremost intended to develop the skills listening, speaking reading and writing and to provide grammatical information. The basic objective behind teaching grammatical patterns is to raise language awareness levels through developing communicative competence in all the skills and consequently build up metacognitive strategies.

5. INTEGRATING STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS' VIEWS INTO THE SYLLABUS:

All instructors were involved in designing the proposed syllabus as they are going to take an active part in implementing the course as well as providing a positive feedback to the planning panel when trying out the new teaching-material at classroom settings. Instructors' reports were of enormous importance to the planning panel as the ongoing modification processes were increasingly reliant on the practitioners' observation. Students were informed about the pre-university program partly to help them be attuned to the new instructional methods and mainly to broaden their understanding of the fact that their new academic milieu is largely different from the secondary school level and to inculcate a sense of responsiveness in them towards their new learning environment and experience the sense of truthfully transfer students. Students were asked to write about their new learning environment and how to become successful university students. The students came up with a host of extremely innovative ideas that they were taken to form part of the syllabus for the instructors to draw upon when assigning students writing tasks. So the students' opinions have shaped the bulk of the classroom activities. In writing classes instructors would refer to the students writing and select one of their views and expectations as university students and the future career they aspire to. Their writing reflected their expectations and how they were prepared to achieve their future goals.

A further important step in this direction has been taken by the planning panel in analyzing and assessing the needs of the students as shown in their writing. The information drawn from the process of assessment is used in designing a learner-centered curriculum. This has the effect of deciding on the kind of topics to be incorporated into the syllabus.

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