

TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR AT THE UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL: A GENERATIVE SYNTACTIC APPROACH

¹M.G. Lalith Ananda, ²Sujeewa Hettiarachchi, ³DLS Ananda

^{1,2}Department of English and Linguistics, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka

³Department of English Language Teaching, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka

mlalithananda@sjp.ac.lk

ABSTRACT: *This paper presents a model of teaching English grammar at the undergraduate level based on the Government and Binding theory of syntax proposed by Chomsky (1981-). The model covers sentence construction in terms of Argument structure of the verb, predicate type and complement selection, and teaching the lexical categories of noun, verb, adjective, adverbs. While presenting these phenomena in the light of the aligned syntactic framework, how each of these different grammatical phenomena can be taught is also illustrated in the form of teaching points and activities. Thus, each theoretical description is supplemented by instructions for teachers for its practical application in the ELT classroom. Since this is a presentation of a teaching model, to be experimented with undergraduate learners, it does not constitute an exact empirical study, and hence the lack of references to methodological steps and tools. Nevertheless, it attempts to answer the research question ‘how the insights of theoretical linguistics, mainly generative syntax, can be applied in the writing of a pedagogical grammar for undergraduate learners’ in a broader perspective.*

Keywords: English grammar, teaching, Generative-syntax, model, undergraduates

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching grammar in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom has been a topic of much discussion in ESL contexts. According to Ellis (2006), presentation and practice of grammatical structures has traditionally been labelled as grammar teaching. Further, he highlights that two main types of grammar instruction as explicit and implicit instruction have been practiced. Yet, when the communicative language theories were introduced in the late 70s, a shift occurred from explicit knowledge of grammar to implicit knowledge, and hence, teaching methodology too (Dakin, 2018). This was supported by other scholars as well (Ellis, 2002; Purpura, 2004; Larsen-Freeman, 2009; Iwashita, 2018). In contrary, Norris and Ortega (2001) argue that explicit grammar instruction and assessment are complementary components of a

learner's language education. Empirical research shows that learners who receive form-focused instruction learn at more accelerated rates and gain considerable levels of proficiency in grammar and pragmatics when compared to learners who do not receive such instruction (Lyster, 1994; Russell and Spada, 2006; DeKeyser, 2007; Ellis, 2008). According to Pawlak (2009), students are interested in learning grammar when more significance is attached to learning grammar as shown with each successive year of the study program of his subjects. Sopin (2015), says that all her participants firmly stated that grammar instruction was fundamental for them to learn English. According to Ellis (2006), grammatical competence is part of communicative competence, and therefore, teaching grammar in meaningful contexts enhances proficiency in language learning.

As briefly discussed above, grammar has become an essential component in language teaching and learning contexts. However, due to the availability of several conceptualizations of grammar, it is necessary to understand how it is interpreted in ESL contexts, and how the teachers go along confronting this task in their ESL classrooms.

Purpura (2013) divides grammar into grammatical knowledge, grammatical ability and one's performance in grammar. According to him, grammatical knowledge refers to representations of form-meaning mapping in long-term memory, the grammatical ability is the capacity to use knowledge of grammar, and grammatical performance is actual application of grammatical ability in language use. Therefore, whenever teaching or testing grammar is concerned, attention has to be given to grammatical knowledge, ability and performance. Dakin (2018) reduces grammar into structural rules, patterns, norms, or conventions that influence a learner's ability to use language in a variety of real-life situations.

When such theoretical stances are viewed against the actual practices, especially in the Sri Lankan higher education context, it can be observed that grammar teaching has undergone several shifts in terms of its significance in language teaching pedagogy and also in methodological orientations. At undergraduate level, both the explicit and implicit grammar instruction are adopted to varying degrees. Explicit instructions can be seen when grammar is taught deductively, with the main focus on teaching grammar itself. Implicit instructions can be observed when grammar is taught inductively as part of a reading, writing or speaking lesson. The lexical categories, noun, verb, adjective, and adverb are subsumed under parts of speech and teaching is largely based on notional/semantic criteria. Tense is viewed as a series of mechanical transformations of a sentence without making a clear distinction between tense and aspect. The sentence construction is centered on teaching the clause elements- subject, verb, object, complement, and adverbial. Different sentence patterns are seen as different combinations of these clause elements.

Over the years, the development of teaching methodologies has been supported by both language theories and language learning theories. For example, as cited in Richards, (1986, p. 9), the German scholar F. Frank expounded the psychological principles underlying the form-meaning relation in the target language which finally resulted in the Direct Method. The theory of language for the Audio-Lingual method

was provided by structural linguistics, while behavioral psychology provided the theoretical foundation of language learning. The Communicative approach had communication as its theory of language, and developing learners' communicative competence (Dell Hymes, 1972) was the goal of language teaching.

As such, different theories of language and language learning have influenced methodological orientations. Nevertheless, the question remains 'have we sufficiently captured the theoretical insights provided by theoretical grammars to write pedagogic grammars'? This is a valid question mainly in the context of the recent advances in generative grammar which have provided very useful insights into both language and language acquisition. To what extent can we accommodate such theoretical insights of generative grammar expounded by Chomsky (1957-), to write a pedagogic grammar, is the main research problem dealt with in this study. Therefore, rather than making any assessment of existing pedagogical practices, the purpose of the present paper is to propose a model for teaching English grammar based on generative syntax (Chomsky, 1981-) for the university undergraduates. Accordingly, the paper presents a syntactic perspective of sentence construction in terms of argument structure of the verb, predicate type and complement selection, and teaching the lexical categories noun, verb, adjective, adverb. This theoretical model is supplemented by a pedagogical model of teaching points, activities and instructions to the teacher for the practical application of the proposed model in the ELT classroom.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Scope

The scope of the study is limited to teaching English grammar, mainly the sentence construction and the lexical categories- noun, verb, adjective, and adverb. Sentence construction is examined in terms of argument structure of the verb, predicate type and their complement selection. Teaching the lexical categories focuses on morphological and syntactic criteria, rather than notional criteria. In contrast to more traditional, deductive approaches to the sentence where a discrete point teaching is adopted with different parts of speech taught separately, the model presented here incorporates such parts of speech in a more holistic manner with the verb as the central element in sentence construction. The teaching points and activities are aimed to guide the teacher in the application of the elaborated grammar-teaching model in the ELT classroom. As outlined above, the scope is too narrow to be called a comprehensive pedagogic grammar, but sufficient as a model that presents a syntactic approach to both interpreting certain grammatical phenomena and presenting them to the learner. Neither do I wish to call this a grammar model in the sense of traditional grammar. Since the term grammar itself eludes neat definitions, and the focus of the suggested model is totally different from any inductive teaching of traditional grammatical categories, this could be better termed as a syntactic model. Further, the proposed model is psychologically motivated too because the aim of generative syntax is not just descriptive adequacy with different languages treated as separate entities, but explanatory adequacy with its rich theoretical and empirical inquiry into language (Language faculty) and language acquisition

supported by Universal Grammar. University undergraduates are selected as the target group because the proposed model is cognitively challenging and therefore, undergraduate level is preferred, although the model does not presuppose a knowledge of theoretical linguistics from the learner.

2.2 Theoretical Approach

The proposed grammar-teaching model is based on the Government and Binding (GB) theory of Syntax (Chomsky 1981, 1982, 1986), which is modular in architecture. GB presents grammar as a system of modules which include X-bar, Theta, Case, Bounding, Trace, Control, Binding, and Government. The main thrust of GB is the Universal Grammar (UG) which is argued to contain a large portion of the grammar of any particular language. UG can be broken down into levels of representation and a system of constraints, where the rules pertaining to each module act as constraints. GB adopts a derivational model of structure-building with four levels of representation. They are the D-structure (underlying structure), S-structure (surface structure), Phonological Form (PF) and Logical Form (LF). The structure-building starts by accessing the lexicon which contains the idiosyncratic properties of lexical items. Lexical items are merged at D-structure (underlying structure), and the resulting derivation is then mapped into S-structure, the level of representation that reflects the surface order of the sentence. S-structure is not directly interpreted itself, but is factored into Phonological Form (PF) and Logical Form (LF). PF is the level of representation that interfaces with phonology. LF is the interface with semantics. Predication relationships, quantifier scope and the scope of operators are represented in the phrase structure at LF. Morpho-syntactic rules relate these levels and one single movement rule called Move- α maps between D-structure and S-structure with a similar rule mapping S-structure into LF (Black, 1999, p. 2).

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 The Model

3.1.1 Verb and its obligatory constituents (Arguments)

In this model, a sentence is viewed as a relation between the verb and other obligatory elements that the verb takes to complete its meaning. In syntax, these obligatory elements of a predicate are called arguments. Hence the verb is the most central unit in the sentence. What we try to do in sentence construction is that we select a verb and try to complete its meaning with minimum number of elements that the verb requires to complete its meaning. This generates simple sentences. Thus, the starting point for sentence construction is the verb.

Teaching Point: The semantics (meaning) of verbs (predicates) restrict the number of arguments/obligatory elements that can appear with them, as explained below.

- 1) a) Some verbs take only one argument. (Ravi smiled) (¹*smiled)
- b) Some verbs take two arguments (Ravi chased the cat) (*Ravi chased)
- c) Some verbs take three arguments (Ravi gave a book to Mala)
- d) (*Ravi gave/ *Ravi gave a book/ *Ravi gave to Mala)

¹ *indicates ungrammaticality

As shown above, the subject argument is always obligatory. This is due to an English specific rule which says that the subject cannot be dropped (in Syntax, this requirement is called Extended Projection Principle/EPP feature). The arguments that follow the verb are called its complements.

Activity: Give a list of verbs to the learners to complete with the argument structure. This will automatically generate some simple sentences.

Adjuncts:

At this stage, probably some students will come out with such sentences as ‘Nimal repaired his car in the garage’. Now we know that ‘in the garage’ is not an obligatory requirement of the verb ‘repaired’ to complete its meaning. Such constituents, which provide some extra information about when/how/where the action was performed are called ‘Adjuncts’. They are optional elements. In traditional grammar, these are labeled as adverbs/adverbial phrases/adverbials. This distinction between complements and adjuncts should be explained to the learner with examples.

Activity: Give some sentences to the learner to distinguish between arguments and adjuncts.

Verb and its complement types

The arguments that follow the verb are called its complements (remember, the argument that usually precedes the verb is called the subject argument). There is a special relationship between a verb and its complement.

Teaching Point: Show how different verbs restrict the type of the complement that can occur with them. Check in the following sentences how each verb restricts its complement to a particular phrase type. Whereas ‘Mary described the task’ is correct, ‘Mary seemed/glanced the task’ is incorrect, showing that the verb ‘describe’ cannot take any complement it wishes. This extends to other verbs too as shown in the examples.

- 2) a) Mary {described/ *seemed/ *glanced} the task. (Noun Phrase/NP)
b) Mary {*described/ *seemed/ glanced} toward the room. (Prepositional Phrase/PP)
c) Mary {*described/ *glanced/ seemed} thirsty. (Adjective Phrase/AP)
d) Mary {*described/ *glanced/ *seemed} (that it was late). (finite clause)
(Emonds, 2001, p. 37)

In generative syntax, such complement selection is called subcategorization. The verb subcategorizes for a particular type of a complement. This extends to clausal complements too, as shown in later sections.

Teaching point: The preceding examples show that the verbs have different properties. Just like the verbs are different in terms of meaning, they also differ with respect to their complement selection. This refers to, not only the number of complements they take, but also the type of complement they take.

Activity: Give a list of verbs to students to check the above for themselves.

Going beyond the verb: Other predicate types

We explained above that the verbs not only take arguments (obligatory constituents) but also certain complement types, which we called subcategorization. For example, many verbs take NP complements as in 'Ravi ate [a banana]'. Some other verbs take PP complements, as in 'I looked [at the picture]'. However, verbs are not the only categories that take complements. Other categories such as adjectives and nouns too take complements, as explained below.

Adjectives:

Adjectives may also subcategorize for complements, normally a PP complement (3-4)

3) Nimal is proud [of his new car]

4) Mary is faithful [to the party ideals]

Teaching Point: Explain to the students that when they examine the adjectives from this perspective, they will not omit prepositions that follow an adjective. Here, they consider the preposition as a part of the adjective complementation requirement.

Activity: Give a list of adjectives to the students to complete with corresponding prepositional complements.

When we examine the adjective in this way, they look like transitive verbs which take complements. However, there are some adjectives which do not take complements (5).

5) *Nimal is old [of his new car]

Activity: Give a list of adjectives to the students to select from them the adjectives that do not take complements.

Nouns that take Phrasal Complements

6) The student [of Linguistics].

7) The destruction [of the city].

Teaching Point: The pedagogical advantage of looking at these lexical categories in terms of argument structure and subcategorization is that the students will not forget to use the prepositions. This can solve the preposition-omission in their writing at least to some extent. Here, the preposition is not seen as a separate category, but part of the complement that the verb, noun, or the adjective obligatorily takes.

Clausal Complements

Teaching Point: Verbs that take clausal complements determine what kind of clauses they take (subcategorize).

Verbs taking finite sentential complements: know, believe

8) I know [that Nimal is a good boy]

9) * I know [to Nimal is a good boy]

10) Nimal believes [that Mary will retire from her job next year]

11) *Nimal believes [to Mary will retire from her job next year]

Verbs taking infinitive complements

12) I tried [to chase the cat]

13) *I tried [that the cat ate the cheese]

14) Nimal persuaded [Mala] [to sell her old car]

15) *Nimal persuaded [Mala] [that she will sell her old car]

Teaching Point: ‘try’ and ‘persuade’ take only to-infinitive clauses, not finite clauses, as their sentential complements.

Activity: ask the students to translate the above sentences into Sinhala; with ‘*kiyala*’ and without ‘*kiyala*’, (the quotative complementizer); or into Tamil with ‘*enru/solli*’ (or its dialectal counterpart) and without ‘*enru/solli*’ (or its dialectal counterpart). See which sentences are correct and then see their similarity with the English complement selection.

Activity: Ask the students to select some adjectives and complete those with finite, and non-finite sentences (finite/infinitive clausal complements). For example:

16). Nimal is happy [that Mala won the race] (Adjective taking a finite sentential complement)

17) The question [whether Mala should sell her old car] became an issue. (NP taking a finite sentential complement)

18) Nimal is likely [to win the race] (Adjective taking a to-infinitive sentential complement)

3.2 Teaching the Lexical Categories: Noun, Verb, Adjective, Adverb

3.2.1 The Noun

Traditionally, nouns are defined as persons, places, things etc., and a verb was defined as a word showing some action, thus based on notional criteria. In this sense, then ‘destruction’ should be a verb because it shows an action. But it is not a verb as we know. In the proposed model, the lexical categories are taught in relation to their distribution in the sentence and their morphological-shape.

Teaching Point: Distributional/syntactic criteria are more reliable than the notional criteria.

Distributional or syntactic criteria refer to where a noun can occur in a sentence, which words can precede it and which words can follow it etc. Morphological criteria refer to the structure of the word, what kind of affixes can occur in a word and in what order.

Syntactic/distributional criteria; (and some morphological criteria)

- A noun can be the subject or object of a sentence- **Ravi made a cake**
- A noun can be modified by adjectives- **pretty** girl/*pretty on/*pretty eat
- A noun may follow *the, a, this, that, these, those*. **this/a/the boy- *this on/*the eat**

- A noun has plural –s (cats, trees) with a few exceptions –children, deer, mice)
- A noun has possessive -s **Ravi's book, I*eat's/ *on's/*pretty's**
- A noun is formed by adding derivational endings like –ment, -ness, -er, -ity:
government, kindness, teacher, sincerity

Teaching Point: When a noun is taught in relation to its distribution in the sentence, it is not necessary to separately teach the articles, demonstrative pronouns, quantifiers etc. All these modifiers can be labelled as determiners or modifiers. Also, the learners see the nouns in context, as the nouns are distributed within the sentence, rather than in isolation. What is really necessary is not to make the learner remember a definition, but to train him/her to use the noun in a sentence.

Activity:

Give a list of sentences or a paragraph for the students to identify the nouns by their distribution.

3.2.2 Teaching the Verb

Verb is traditionally defined as a word that shows some action. In this sense, then the word 'assassination' should be a verb as it shows some action, but it is not so.

Teaching Point: Show that the distributional/syntactic criteria are more reliable than the notional criteria as shown below.

- A verb is modified by adverbs- **He -----fast (*on fast, *table fast, *tall fast)**
- A verb may follow an auxiliary- **He can/may/might--dance----** (*can at, *can tall/*can umbrella)
- A verb follows subject, precedes object- **He ----his lunch at 2 (*on, *tall, *fan)**
- A verb can be negated –**He did not take his lunch (*did not on/tall/umbrella his lunch)**
- A verb has past tense (-ed), aspect (-ing) endings: Ravi **played, is playing**
- A verb shows third person singular agreement –s (**Ravi plays cricket every evening**)

Teaching Point: When a verb is taught in relation to its distribution in the sentence, the learners see the verbs in context, as the verbs are distributed within the sentence, rather than in isolation. What is really necessary is not to make the learner remember a definition, but to train him/her to use the verb in a sentence.

Activity: Give a list of sentences for the students to identify the verbs by their distribution.

3.2.3 Teaching the Adjectives

Teaching Point: Traditionally: state, qualities, attributes.

In the proposed model, adjectives are introduced in the following manner.

Syntactic/distributional (and morphological) criteria:

- An adjective can follow very- **very pretty- (*very on/*very fan/*very play)**
- An adjective can modify a noun: **pretty girl (*pretty on/*pretty disappoint)**
- An adjective can follow a, the, an, (a/the pretty girl)

- Many words that end in –ous (famous), ary (supplementary), al (radical), ic(democratic) –ish; foolish, are often adjectives

Activity:

Give a list of sentences for the students to identify the adjectives by their distribution and morphological shape.

3.2.4 Teaching the Adverbs

Teaching Point: Traditionally modifier of adjective, verb, or adverb.

In the proposed model, adverbs are introduced in the following manner.

Syntactic/distributional (and morphological) criteria

- An adverb ends in–ly in many cases: **cleverly** (*atly/*runly/*umbrellaly)
- Some adverbs modify the verb: He will quickly find out (finding out will be done in a certain manner ‘quickly’)
- ***He quickly will find out**
- Some adverbs modify the whole proposition (sentence): He certainly will find out. (the adverb modifies the meaning of the whole clause- what is *certain* is *that he will find out*)

These two adverbs occupy different positions: the sentential adverb precedes the modal auxiliary while the VP adverb follows it and is therefore, is closer to the VP.

Activity: Give some sentences for the students to insert adverbs where necessary, and interpret them as sentential / VP adverbs.

Activity: Give the following poem and ask the students to identify the category of the underlined (and in bold) words based on syntactic/distributional (and morphological) criteria.

*Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.
"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!"*

(From Jabberwocky poem by Lewis Carroll: Through the Looking-Glass (1871))

4. CONCLUSION

The model of teaching English grammar presented here is not an exhaustive one. It did not cover some other important areas of grammar such as tense, aspect, mood, coordination, subordination etc. This was partly due to space-limitations. Nevertheless, the model can be extended to cover such areas as well. Also, it offers sufficient scope for the teachers of English to rethink their teaching models and practices. As briefly pointed out above, the model has several pedagogical advantages. In the first place, the starting point for teaching grammar is the sentence, and therefore, the model offers sufficient scope for the learner to see language in

context. Although the lexical categories (N,V,Adj,Adv) were taken separately, and they assume the shape of deductive discrete point teaching, this is not so. Here too, such categories were presented in context, mainly in terms of their distribution.

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