

To Make Grammar Meaningful

—A Contextualism Method for Grammar Teaching^{*}

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The author of the paper discusses the contextualism methods for grammar teaching based on the discussion of the definition of grammar and the importance of grammar teaching. Based on the distinction between situational context and linguistic context by J. R. Firth (1957), the author puts forward the notion of situational method and discourse method of grammar teaching and elaborates them with samples respectively, considering them as meaningful ways to teach grammar. Some issues as the roles of students, teacher, instructional materials, and language teaching in large classes have been discussed so as to apply the suggested method in a real circumstance of language teaching.

Keywords: grammar teaching, contextualism, situational method, discourse method

Introduction

As Stern (1992) considered it:

The term “grammar” is sometimes used very widely so as to include the entire analysis of a language, including phonology, morphology, and syntax, lexicology, semantics, and discourse analysis. In view of the close interrelatedness of these aspects it is not unreasonable to work with a wide definition, in which grammar is synonymous with linguistic analysis. (p. 127)

This is, certainly a modern definition of grammar, which has already gone beyond the traditional one.

Conventional grammars fall into three general, somewhat overlapping, categories and present language as either: (1) definition of terms and list of structures; (2) social prescriptions about appropriate language form; or (3) description of the abstract language system, which linguists term “competence”, stated in highly general and parsimonious terms. (Nattinger & Decarrico, 2000, p. xv)

The grammar discussed here in this paper is parallel to the first category. That is, grammar is considered as the structural system of a language. “The grammar of English language is organized into five ranks: the sentence, the clause, the phrase, the word, and the morpheme” (ZHANG, 2000, p. 35).

Traditionally, grammar has been the sine qua non of language teaching. Until quite recently, it was simply taken for granted. Today, however, grammar teaching in all its aspects is questioned. Should grammar be taught at all? Is it a hindrance rather than a help? Does grammar offer the best organizing principle for a language

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curriculum, or are there other principles of organization which are more suitable? If yes, what kind: traditional, structural, transformational, or any other school of thought? Just as communicative language teaching has cast doubts on the value of pronunciation teaching it has also led, even more forcibly, to similar doubts about grammar teaching (Stern, 1992, p. 127).

Richards, in the 10th chapter of his book *The Context of Language Teaching* (1998), pointed out the importance of grammar in language teaching:

Grammar has traditionally had a central role in language teaching. Particular theories of grammar and theories of learning associated with them have provided justifications for syllabuses and methodology on language teaching for thousands of years. Despite the impact communicative approaches have had on methodology in recent years, the bulk of the world's second- and foreign-language learners continue to learn from materials in which the principles of organization and presentation are grammatically based... The factors involved in knowing a language include grammatical competence, communicative competence, and language proficiency. Our view of the status of grammar in language teaching will reflect our understanding of the role of grammar in language use. This in turn will depend upon whether we adopt a linguistic, sociolinguistic, or psycholinguistic perspective on language. (p. 144)

The grammatical development of a native speaker (a native child) is partly a matter of growing "competence" (in the sense of underlying knowledge) and partly a matter of increasing "performance" (DAI, 2002, p. 155). In other words, a native speaker acquires his/her grammar mainly by a process called internalizing. As for a foreign student who learns English as his/her second or foreign language, things are quite different in that he/she must be taught in a language classroom. In general, he/she must learn the grammar of the language simply by memorizing all the grammatical rules and regulations, which makes the process very boring and sometimes unrewarding, thus the student becomes discouraged in the end or even halfway.

In order to achieve a successful grammar teaching, language teachers have been tried every method and the principles underlied.

Here in this paper, a more practical and more meaningful method is suggested by the author, which is called a contextualism method for grammar teaching.

Contextualism Methods for Grammar Teaching

Meaning of Grammatical Items

The meaning of a grammatical item is what is given in a grammar book dealing with all the functions of the grammatical item concerned. For example, in dealing with the modal "should", a grammar book may list its grammatical meaning under the headline as "Modals and modal meanings", and deliver it with sentences as examples. The following is just a sample (see Example (1)):

Example (1)

Should

(1) Obligation and necessity

You *should* do what your teachers tell you to do.

(2) Predication and predictability

They *should* be home by now.

(3) Willingness, intention and determination

Should I turn off the light?

(4) In specific context, the modal *should* can denote emotional feelings of sorrow, joy, displeasure, surprise, wonder, etc.

How *should* I know?
 That he *should* dare to attack me!
 Etc. (ZHANG, 2000, pp. 154-163)

From the above mentioned grammatical meaning of the modal *should*, and especially from the fourth one in Example (1), it is clearly seen that the use of the grammatical item *should* is somewhat very complicated and usually context dependent.

Therefore, the teaching of grammar is not a case to tell the students to memorize all the cases in which a grammatical item occurs and grasp the usage of it. We should try to make grammar teaching much more meaningful.

Contextualism Methods for Grammar Teaching

..., While grammatical rules cannot be ignored, the goal of language teaching is not just to teach abstract rules of competence, but also to get students to utilize these rules in comprehending and producing language successfully in appropriate contexts; and just teaching the underlying system of a language is no guarantee that students will learn to do that. ... While it is helpful to understand how language structure can be efficiently described, it is equally helpful to understand how language is actually used. (Nattinger & Decarrico, 2000, p. xv)

In the study of semantics, there is a view considering the meaning of a linguistic item (usually a word) as context dependent, which can be referred to as contextualism view.

During the period roughly from 1930 to 1960, linguists gave preeminence to the empirical or observable aspect instead of the theoretical aspect in their scientific investigation of meaning. This tendency manifested itself in an attempt to base meaning on context. It has attracted those linguists who have been working toward the ideal of scientific objectivity. They hold that meaning should be studied in terms of situation, use, and context—elements closely linked with language behavior. A representative of this approach was Firth, the leading British linguist of the period. He held the view that “we shall know a word by the company it keeps” and “by regarding words as acts, events, habits, we limit our inquiry to what is objective in the group life of our fellows” (Firth, 1957, p. 32). Firth had been influenced by the works of Malinowski, a Polish anthropologist, who proposed “context of situation” and of Wittgenstein, a German philosopher.

The contextualist view of meaning is based on the presumption that one can derive meaning from or reduce meaning to observable contexts. Two kinds of context are recognized: the situational context and the linguistic context (DAI, 2002, pp. 69-70).

Modeling on the contextualism view of meaning of words, the author of the paper puts forward the notion of contextualism method of grammar teaching, which may also be classified as situational context teaching of grammar and linguistic context teaching of grammar, the later is referred to by the author as discourse teaching of grammar.

Situational context teaching of grammar. Situational Language Teaching was once and maybe still is an effective method of language teaching, including the teaching of grammar.

Palmer, Hornby, and other British applied linguists from the 1920s onward developed an approach to methodology that involved systematic principles of *selection* (the procedures by which lexical and grammatical content was chosen), *gradation* (principles by which the organization and sequencing of content were determined), and *presentation* (techniques used for presentation and practice of items in a course). Although

Palmer, Hornby, and other English teaching specialists had differing views on the specific procedures to be used in teaching English, their general principles were referred to as the Oral Approach to language teaching.

The Oral Approach was the accepted British approach to English language teaching by the 1950s. It is described in the standard methodology textbooks of the period, such as French (1948-1950), Gurrey (1955), Frisby (1957), and Billows (1961). Its principles are seen in Hornby's famous *Oxford Progressive English Course for Adult Learners* (1954-1956) and in many other more recent textbooks. One of the most active proponents of the Oral Approach in the 1960s was the Australian Pittman. Pittman and his colleagues were responsible for developing an influential set of teaching materials based on the situational approach, which were widely used in Australia, New Guinea, and the Pacific territories. Pittman was also responsible for the situationally based materials developed by the Commonwealth Office of Education in Sydney, Australia, used in the English programs for immigrants in Australia. These were published for worldwide use in 1965 as the series *Situational English*. Materials by Alexander and other leading British textbook writers also reflected the principles of Situational Language Teaching as they had evolved over a 20-year period. The main characteristics of the approach were as follows:

1. Language teaching begins with the spoken language. Material is taught orally before it is presented in written form.
2. The target language is the language of the classroom.
3. New language points are introduced and practiced situationally.
4. Vocabulary selection procedures are followed to ensure that an essential general service vocabulary is covered.
5. Items of grammar are graded following the principle that simple forms should be taught before complex ones.
6. Reading and writing are introduced once a sufficient lexical and grammatical basis is established. (Richards & Decarrico, 2000, pp. 33-34)

Here the last two points are given preeminence in this paper, because they both concern the teaching of grammar. The author, in this paper, would like to deliver a sample of grammar teaching in a specific situation.

Sample 1: A situational method for modal verb teaching

Situation: The situation designed by the teacher is that one of your friends (Tom) wants to go for an interview for a position in a certain company, and asks you for suggestions.

Grammatical item: the modal verb *should*. The modal verb you use is *should*, in order to give suggestions or advice, expressing the modal meaning of obligation and necessity.

Activity in classroom: group work. The teacher groups the class and asks one student in every group to act as Tom and the other students try to give him their own suggestion to him, using the modal verb *should*.

Then the activity goes like the following:

Tom: What *should* I do to go for the interview?

Student 1 (S1): You *should* wear a suite.

S2: You *should* have a shave.

S3: You *should* polish your shoes.

...

Tom: Then what shouldn't I do?

S1: You shouldn't wear a T-shirt.

S2: You shouldn't chew gum.

...

Thus both the positive form and the negative form of the modal verb *should* have been practiced in the designed situation.

Then the teacher draws a conclusion of the usage of the modal verb *should* by writing on the board or by showing on a screen:

I/You/He/ She/ We/ They + should (n't) + base form of a verb (do)

And the students grasp the usage of one grammatical item (the usage of modal verb *should*) in the situation. It is better than just telling them the grammatical rules.

Generally speaking, there are certain stages (procedures) for the teacher to go through in presenting a situation in class. And the purpose of each stage is well defined:

Stage 1: *choral drilling*, the purpose of which is to help students to be able to say the language in a natural way;

Stage 2: *Controlled practice*, the purpose of which is to allow students to practice using only the new language without making mistakes;

Stage 3: *Establishing the situation*, the purpose of which is to give students a guide to what the language means and how it is used;

Stage 4: *Providing a written record of the TL (target language) for students to copy into their books*, the purpose of which is to give students something to refer to at a later date;

Stage 5: *Giving further examples of the TL*, the purpose of which is to enable students to see a pattern in the language;

Stage 6: *Asking questions to check if students have understood the TL (concept checking)*, the purpose of which is to check that students have understood the central meaning of the TL;

Stage 7: *Introductory activity*, the purpose of which is to engage students' interest in the topic;

Stage 8: *Freer practice*, the purpose of which is to give students the opportunity to use the new language with other language that they know;

Stage 9: *Eliciting one example of the TL*, the purpose of which is to give students the opportunity to give the language if they know it;

Stage 10: *Individual drilling*, the purpose of which is to check all students are able to say the new language.

Obviously, these are the procedures usually gone through by a teacher who teaches students new language points, including new grammatical items. However, they are not necessarily the definite procedures for every class, that is, they can be modified and revised by the teacher to suit a specific need of teaching of certain language points or grammatical items.

Discourse teaching of grammar. Another kind of presentation of new items of grammar or language points is presenting them via a linguistic context, which can be referred to as discourse method of teaching.

Sample 2: A discourse for modal verb teaching

A text titled as "Last Gasp for Smokers" is presented by a teacher to students in order to teach the grammatical items of modals. There are 15 places in the discourse where several modals are used as *were able to*, *had to*, *couldn't*, and *must* in the first paragraph; *can't*, *should* in the second paragraph; *can* (2 times), *may*, and *ought to* in the third; *won't*, *be able to* in the fourth; and *might*, *will*, and *have to* in the last paragraph.

First, the teacher delivers the handout with the text to each of the students, and asks them to finish reading it within, say, 15 minutes;

Second, the teacher delivers other handouts with the items in the Appendix and asks the students to finish doing them one by one as time goes on.

It is very natural that there are some procedures to go through in the teaching of modal verbs via a text/discourse. The following steps are usually used in such a class. And the aims or purposes of each of the steps are to some extent well defined and embodied in the cited exercises on the handouts in the Appendix:

Step 1: Warmer/Lead-in to the topic, the purpose of which is to raise interest in the text (as in ex. 1. “Grammar in Use” in the Appendix);

Step 2: Pre-teach essential lexis from the text, the purpose of which is to eliminate vocabulary distractions;

Step 3: Pre-set general comprehension questions about the text, the purpose of which is to focus students on reading/ listening (as in ex. 2. “Grammar in Use” in the Appendix);

Step 4: Students listen/read and answer the comprehension questions, the purpose of which is to ascertain students’ understanding of the context (as in ex. 3. “Grammar in Use” in the Appendix);

Step 5: Direct students’ attention to one example of the TL, the purpose of which is to focus students on the TL (as in ex. 1. “Rules” in the Appendix);

Step 6: Concept check the TL, the purpose of which is to focus students on the meaning (as in ex. 2. in “Rules” in the Appendix);

Step 7: Highlight the form of the TL, the purpose of which is to give students guidance on how to build the form; (as in ex. 3. and 4. in “Rules” in the Appendix);

Step 8: Drill the TL, the purpose of which is to give students help with forming sounds and build confidence;

Step 9: Students look for other examples of TL and follow similar procedure, the purpose of which is to reinforce the pattern of the TL;

Step 10: Continue with controlled practice, the purpose of which is to consolidate the meaning, form, etc. (as in the exercises in “Practice” in the Appendix).

The same as in the situational method for grammar teaching, the steps or stages of teaching activity in the discourse method can also be modified or even the order of all these steps can be rearranged to suit the specific needs of teaching.

Reflections

The aim of any methodology in language teaching is nothing but to find a more effective way to teach language. Such issues should be considered here as different roles of the learners (students), facilitator (teacher), materials, and the applications of the methods in classroom teaching (especially in large classes).

Different Roles of the Learners, Teachers, and Instructional Materials

Learner roles. As in Situational Language Teaching, the learners are required simply to listen and repeat what the teacher says and to respond to questions and commands in the initial stages of learning. The learner has no control over the content of learning and is often regarded as likely to succumb to undesirable behaviors unless skillfully manipulated by the teacher. To a certain extent, the learners’ role in the initial stages is somewhat passive in that cooperation with the teacher is firmly demanded. Later, more active participation is encouraged.

This includes learners initiating responses and asking each other questions, although teacher-controlled introduction and practice of few languages are stressed throughout. In the discourse method, the learners should also do what the teacher instructs and complete all the tasks rose by the teacher. During the practice phase of the lesson, students are given more of an opportunity to use the language in less controlled situations.

Teacher roles. The teacher's function is threefold. In the presentation stage of the lesson, the teacher serves as a model, setting up situations in which the need for target structure is created and then modeling the new structure for students to repeat. Then the teacher "becomes more like the skillful conductor of an orchestra, drawing the music out of the performance" (Byrne, 1976, p. 2), the teacher is required to be a skillful manipulator, using questions, commands, and other cues to elicit correct sentences from the learners. Lessons are hence teacher directed, and the teacher sets the pace.

During the practice phase of the lesson, while the students are given more of an opportunity to use the language in less controlled situations, the teacher is ever on the lookout for grammatical and structural errors that can form a basis of subsequent lessons. Organizing review is a primary task for the teacher according to Pittman (1963), who summarizes the teacher's responsibilities as dealing with:

- (1) timing;
- (2) oral practice, to support the textbook structures;
- (3) revision (i.e., review)
- (4) adjustment to special needs of individuals;
- (5) testing;
- (6) Developing language activities other than those arising from the textbook. (Pittman, 1963, pp. 177-178)

The role of instructional materials. Situational Language Teaching is dependent upon both a textbook and visual aids. The textbook (together with handouts) contains tightly organized lessons planned around different grammatical structures. Visual aids may be produced by the teacher or may be commercially produced; they consist of wall charts, flashcards, pictures, stick figures (and today power-point pictures and flash cartoons), and so on. The visual element together with carefully graded grammatical syllabus is a crucial aspect of Situational Language Teaching, hence the importance of the textbook (Richards & Decarrico, 2000, pp. 38-39). In principle, however, the textbook should be used "only as a guide to the learning process. The Teacher is expected to be the master of his textbook" (Pittman, 1963, p. 176).

In order to present a more effective classroom teaching, the materials used should be selected cautiously and arranged in a gradable sequence so that language points and grammatical items can be delivered step by step.

Application of the Method in Large Classes

Nowadays, language class in China is usually larger than normal, especially College English class, generally contains a number of students from 60 to 90, and sometimes more than 100. This makes language teaching difficult to carry out, especially with Situational Language Teaching. The teacher needs to group the students into small groups with six students, taking into consideration of the language proficiency of the individual member of students. It is also better to consider other elements as gender, age, and personality of the students in grouping so that every group can work smoothly under the instructions of the teacher during the whole process of teaching. Further suggestions should be given concerning large class language teaching with its practice.

Conclusions

The author of the paper discusses the contextualism methods for grammar teaching (including situational method of grammar teaching and discourse method of grammar teaching) based on the discussion of the definition of grammar and the importance of grammar teaching. Based on the distinction between situational context and linguistic context by Firth, the author puts forward the notion of situational method and discourse method of grammar teaching and elaborates them with samples respectively, considering them as meaningful ways to teach grammar. Some issues as the roles of students, teacher, instructional materials and language teaching in large classes have been discussed so as to apply the suggested method in a real circumstance of language teaching. Further reflections are also expected concerning all the issues in grammar teaching and much more work should be done to improve the teaching and learning of English.

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Appendix: Handouts for Students to Identify the Contextualism Method

Grammar in Use

1. Look at the title. What is the article about?
2. Read the article. What does it say about smoking in these places?
3. What do you think of the situation in the text? Compare it to your own country.

Rules

1. The text contains several modals verbs and their past and future forms
 - a. Find examples in the text.
 - b. Complete these sentences with modal verbs from the text.
 - 1) New York smokers _____ go out into the street.
 - 2) You _____ only find a few bars where smoking is allowed.
2. When do we use modal verbs? Complete the table. (Some modal verbs may have more than one meaning.)

ability
obligation
advice
probability
permission

3. Are these statements true of modal verbs?

The third person singular ends in -s.

They never have -ed or -ing forms.

They have no infinitive forms.

...

4. If we want to use *can* and *must* in the past or the future we need to use different verbs.

- a. Which verbs are used to replace *can* and *must* in the past and future?
- b. Find examples in the text.

Practice

1. Look at the following comments about smoking. Complete them with *can/can't*, *must*, *should/shouldn't*, or *ought to*. Sometimes more than one is possible.

- a. I _____ understand why people smoke. It tastes horrible.
- b. If people get ill from smoking, they _____ pay for the treatment. Why _____ I pay more taxes for it?

...

2. Complete the sentences, using this information and *will/won't be able to*, or *will/won't have to*.

export more to other countries	have children	put extra taxes on cigarette
look for new jobs	go outside	smoke while they're waiting

- a. People with illness like lung cancer are claiming compensation from the tobacco companies _____.
- b. Thousands of people are employed in the tobacco industry. If fewer people smoke, they _____.
- c. The cost of treating illness caused by smoking is rising. The government _____.

...

3. Think about times in your life when you had to do something that you did not like.

- a. Write down five things.

EXAMPLE

When I was younger I had to go to bed early, so I couldn't watch the TV programs that I liked.

- b. Compare your answer with a partner.

4. Here are some possible future developments.

- a. Discuss each one. Do you think we will be able to do these things? Do you think we should do them? What will we have to do to achieve/control/stop them?
- b. Choose one of the topics and write a paragraph about it. Include as many modal verbs as you can.