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The CATESOL Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1gx3z73b>

Journal

The CATESOL Journal, 6(1)

ISSN

1535-0517

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Publication Date

1993

DOI

10.5070/B5.36590

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The Challenges of Teaching Grammar In the Advanced Classroom

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In many ways, logically, it seems that the process of learning languages is a linear one. Students at the beginning level look at certain functions or pieces of the language, and then, at the low-intermediate level they examine the next somewhat larger pieces. The students at these lower levels are united by a common interest, which is learning the language. Students maintain a bond through their enthusiasm for the language and learning. When the students reach the relative sophistication of the advanced level, a shift begins to occur. The task becomes larger than just learning more of the language, and the analogy of a learning line appears to fall apart when the issues of the advanced classroom are taken into account.

Students and Their Needs

Advanced students bring with them challenges which are particular to their level. Students have a whole set of needs which are not just linguistic, but also affective. Advanced students often have individual needs for the language, but these are rarely consistent throughout the group. The linguistic difficulties arise because students are already communicating quite easily in English when they arrive in the classroom. They are already capable and comfortable in English, and this may intimidate teachers.

It is important to begin by defining *advanced students*. Charles Curran (1976) offers a good overall description of them in his book *Counseling Learning: A Whole-Person Approach for Education*. He discusses the stages of growth for language learners. His description of Stage IV and V learners is a good model for advanced students.

Stage IV

1. The client is now speaking freely and complexly in the foreign language. Presumes group's understanding.
2. The counselor directly intervenes in grammatical error, mispronunciation or where aid in complex expression is needed. The client is sufficiently secure to take correction.

Stage V

1. Same as IV.
2. Counselor intervenes not only to offer correction but to add idioms and more elegant constructions.
3. At this stage, the client can become counselor to group in Stages I, II, and III. (p. 30)

The advanced student of ESL can vary remarkably depending on the setting. But these students are willing to work with errors in order to learn, and they are able to take on some of the usual roles of the teacher, or counselor, as Curran would say. While Curran limits this to working with clients at lower levels, it is important to step beyond those boundaries and have students take on more teaching responsibilities in the advanced classroom, and the way that grammar lessons are taught can be key to integrating these concepts.

The Role of the Grammar Teacher

A large shift comes for teachers at the advanced level because they need to integrate students with the learning/teaching process without unnerving them with the focus on individual errors. Teachers need to make students aware of the differences between their language level and a native speaker's, and then assist them in understanding the necessary route for improving their abilities. Helping students to develop their metacognitive skills is key at this level. It is not a question of new structures being learned, as at lower levels, but rather it is a question of a student's willingness to look at the differences in exactness and fluency which mark the difference between their performance and the ability of native speakers.

Another issue that grammar teachers need to be aware of is the variety of student needs and goals. In any advanced classroom, there are always a variety of goals and interests for many specialized areas of the language. The variety of student needs can lead to an apparent lack of focus for the teacher. There usually isn't a common sense of purpose in the advanced

classroom which is often felt, even if in an artificial sense, as a result of the common curricula goals set at lower levels. The extent of the diversity is a problem, since it causes the group to act largely like a set of individuals thrown together, instead of as a group united in their efforts to learn specific aspects of English. It is important for the teacher to be aware of this and help the group establish common goals, or to implement methods which help the group to focus on the language according to their individual needs. For example, during student-led discussions or videotaped presentations, the teacher can focus on error correction and bring student mistakes to the group's attention. (This should, of course, be handled in a way that does not lead to student embarrassment.) The student who made the mistake or another student should correct it. If students are unable to do this or explain the point clearly, the teacher could step in to do it. By so doing, she is working with the language that each student produces and focusing on individual error, but in a way that the group is able to be engaged in, in either a learning or teaching capacity.

Situational Information

It is necessary to describe my teaching situation. The students I teach are adults from around the world, mainly Asia and Europe, who come to study in intensive programs, and then, usually return to their own countries. Their purpose for studying English is to round out their education or to help themselves professionally. The programs are 25 hours each week, and all skill areas are integrated in the three-hour morning classes. Grammar, while not being the central focus of the advanced-level class, is nevertheless an important component of most activities. In content-based lessons which include all skill areas as well as student-generated discussion, grammar points are regularly discussed. Occasionally, I will present or ask the students to present a specific grammar lesson, but these rarely extend beyond 30 minutes.

My experiences teaching at the advanced level have influenced the assumptions and methods described in this paper, but the ideas proposed here can be modified to a variety of teaching situations or student groups.

Techniques for and Goals of Grammar Lessons

Lessons in grammar are very important in an advanced-level classroom, for they are a way to understand technical problems the students are having with their English. The students' use of English is loosely based on their knowledge of the rules and how to apply them. Though they often make mistakes in spite of knowing the rules, it is necessary sometimes to look again at the rules or grammar, even at the advanced level.

The best approach is to allow the students to try out their knowledge of grammar, and when there are problems or gaps in their knowledge, other students or the teacher can step in to assist them. This approach is based on allowing students to demonstrate what they know, so the teacher can pinpoint more quickly what it is that the students don't know. An example would be to give students an advanced grammar exercise to work on—one from a TOEFL prep book, a grammar section or a verb tense review from an advanced grammar book. After the students work on the exercise, the class reviews the answers. When mistakes are made, or when students are not sure about why they chose their answers, other students or the teacher can clarify rules or give further instruction and examples. This allows the class to skim over what they already know and then when discussion/questions arise, the students who understand the point can answer questions or explain the answers. The teacher steps in to clarify or articulate further only when needed. By giving exercises or activities which test performance first, the teacher provides grammar lessons which focus on the gaps in the students' knowledge and are thus more beneficial to the students.

The students are also being asked to further explain the rules for tenses, structures, and so forth, and the teacher can monitor for the correct rules or assumptions that the students have of the language. When students can explain and articulate a grammar point or structure, they are developing their metacognitive skills and broadening their role in the classroom.

While exercises can be chosen from grammar books, there are a multiplicity of other ways that this approach can be used. For example, it can be effective in a cooperative learning activity based on reading an English work of fiction. Modern fiction is written in a variety of American dialects, which can be confusing to ESL students. Taking a passage of a dialect and asking small groups of students to translate it into standard English can lead to an interesting discussion on the use of different structures (as well as vocabulary, meaning, etc.). Different groups usually take the same sentence and translate it into a variety of structures often using different tenses. Groups often disagree with one another, discussing which is the correct or least ambiguous translation. The teacher can work with them to help them understand which ones work and why different structures can be used and make sense. Students are able to work with what they know and begin to learn more structures from what others know as well, and the teacher is able to include an examination of structures into a discussion on literature.

This activity reverses the process of teaching grammar. At a lower level, the teacher may teach a new area of the language, help the students to integrate the new information into their pre-existing knowledge, and then allow the students to demonstrate what they have learned in an exercise of

some sort. In this way, the teacher can more easily see what students have learned and what needs to be reviewed or studied further. Simultaneously, the students can realize where the gaps in their knowledge exist. This usually provokes a willingness on their part to continue learning. At the advanced level, only after finding out what mistakes students are making, does the teacher or do other students step in to fill in the gaps or teach the points that students are lacking. Calling upon other students to first respond to a student question allows the teacher to check whether other students understand the point fully. She can help them to fine tune their knowledge on a subject, thus allowing a more individualized review of grammar.

Conclusion

By engaging and developing metacognitive skills, the teacher is helping the students to develop their ability to self-assess and -correct and be able to further study and develop their use of the language after they leave the classroom. Students are preparing for the stage when they will be independent from the teacher and must be able to continue using the language and learning on their own. It isn't just the language which is an issue but also the strategies for learning which help the student to become independent. By allowing students to step into the role of teaching, not only in grammar lessons, but in all lessons, the teacher is training them with the skills they need to step beyond the classroom.

This is often a transitional role for teachers, helping to foster a move by students to the point where teachers won't be needed anymore. It is a difficult role, yet it is key to this level. The students arrive in the classroom already capable in the language. The teacher, then, must assist them in focusing on the language while helping them to become more objective in measuring their own abilities. The teacher must help students to see that while they do know a great deal, they also are not aware of certain structures or problems. This is a paradoxical role because the teacher is helping students to learn new ways to evaluate what they already know.

This is also an illuminating role for teachers. The boundaries for students are much larger, and there is much more room for independence and creativity. The capabilities of students at this level are great, and they bring sophisticated expectations, sharing their ideas about the language and the content with the sophistication and depth that their abilities allow. So, larger boundaries are necessary and give the teacher a new classroom setting and relationship which she doesn't have at a lower level. ■