

Teaching Contextual English Grammar to EFL Student-Teachers

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Abstract:

In spite of being taught English Grammar through the English course for at least (8) years during their pre-University study, and being taught English Grammar as an independent subject for at least (4) years during their University study in the Department of English, EFL Student-Teachers are almost incapable of commanding English Grammar in general. This is quite clear when the communicative aspects of English are taken into account. To overcome such an obstacle, the researcher teaches them English Grammar contextually. At first, EFL Student-Teachers are confused about what English Grammar in context is. But after giving them an idea about it and being involved into it, they began to like it and found it not only interesting, but also important and beneficial. This is reflected in the Student-Teacher's answers to the questionnaire, in addition to sections 3.5 and 4 of the present study.

تدريس قواعد الإنكليزية في السياق للطلاب-المدرسين
الذين يتعلمون الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية

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ملخص البحث :

يدرس الطلاب في العراق اللغة الإنكليزية ثمان سنوات قبل دخولهم الجامعة ، وفي الجامعة يدرسونها في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية أربع سنوات. وعلى الرغم من ذلك ، نجد بان الطلاب - المدرسين غير متمكنين من قواعد اللغة الإنكليزية ، ولا سيما في النواحي التواصلية.

وللتغلب على هذه الظاهرة، قام الباحث بتدريس قواعد اللغة الإنكليزية لهؤلاء الطلاب من خلال السياق.

وقد لوحظ في بادئ الأمر أن الطلبة لم يكن لديهم صورة واضحة عن السياق ، ولكن بعد تبينه لهم وتمارينهم على تطبيق القواعد من خلاله ، اعتادوا عليه بعد أن أدركوا هذا الانسجام في إجابات الطلاب-المدرسين على الاستبيان فضلا عن القسمين 3.5 و 4 من الدراسة.

1. Introduction

Grammar teaching-learning process is not an easy task to do. It is also not too difficult to overcome. "Grammar is often highly problematic for students and teachers", (Gliserman, 1978:791). This is so, because "students often find the study of grammar dull, impractical, and irrelevant" (Lukenbill, 1965:277). In addition, "One student even said the study of grammar was used as a punishment in his high school" (Fitch, 1995:24). But in spite of that, teachers of grammar can still play their key role in this respect. Goba states that "the study of grammar, well taught, will give students an understanding of how language works" (1982:20). Moreover, one can even say that no learning of a language is guaranteed in the absence of its grammar. "You cannot learn a language without learning its grammar". (Widdowson, 1992:334). This is on the one hand.

On the other hand, EFL Student-Teachers are taught English Grammar through their English subject-matter for at least (8) years during their pre-University study. They also have been taught English Grammar independently for at least (4) years during their University study at the Department of English. Despite this fact, EFL Student-Teachers are almost incapable of commanding English well. This is quite clear when the communicative aspects of English Grammar are taken into account. To overcome such an obstacle, the researcher makes use of his EFL Student-Teachers 12-year study of English Grammar. "Students at an

advanced level have had a good deal of instruction in grammar”.(Allen and Widdowson,1979:132).

Although the way through which their study of English Grammar is traditional, the researcher tries to utilize it by restoring and reformulating the grammatical rules embedded in his EFL Student-Teachers memory. Such restoration and reformulation are done by presenting grammar contextually. “One of the principal aims of advanced language teaching should be to activate this competence, and to extend it, by leading the student to relate his previously-acquired linguistic knowledge to meaningful realizations of the language system” (Ibid). Thus, the aim of the present study is to investigate EFL Student-Teachers (henceforth STs) evaluation of the Traditional way of teaching English Grammar and the teaching of English Grammar in context.

2. Teaching English Grammar Traditionally/Contextually

In the Academic year 2002-2003, “Advanced Comprehension” was prescribed as a new subject-matter for fourth year EFL STs in the Department of English, College of Basic Education, University of Mosul. This subject-matter consists of three minor subjects: Grammar, Literature and Translation. To teach English grammar according to the traditional way is thought to be almost fruitless as usual. So, the researcher has decided to teach English Grammar contextually, instead, to satisfy not only the communicative needs of his EFL STs, but also the discorsal nature of the other two minor subjects: Literature and Translation.

By the end of the First Term of the Academic year 2006-2007, the researcher, investigates his EFL STs evaluation of teaching English Grammar traditionally and contextually for the second time. It is to be noted that the First Term is considered the corner stone for EFL fourth year STs Academic year as far as the teaching learning process is

concerned. In the following, the researcher will give a brief account on teaching English Grammar traditionally and contextually before describing the Investigation or Field study:

2.1 Teaching English Grammar Traditionally:

In the previous section, the importance of English Grammar for EFL STs is highlighted due to the fact that EFL STs are supposed to command not only the learning of EFL but also its teaching “Grammar is central to language learning and direct grammar teaching is needed by their EFL/ESL students”. (Farrell and Particia,2005:3). Such importance needs to be emphasized because English Grammar is generally seen as “lifeless sentences riddled with multitudes of mistakes that would take hours to meaningfully process”. (Anderson,2006:28). This impression about English Grammar results from its long-term traditional teaching or presentation.

It is to be noted that it is not intended, in the present study, “to criticize existing grammars of English”(McCarthy and Carter,1995:207). Thus, by the traditional teaching of English Grammar is meant the traditional way of English Grammar presentation used in the Iraqi Schools Since the adoption of the New English Course for Iraq (N.E.C.I) and extended largely to University level. Such presentation relies heavily on the Grammar-Translation and the Audio-Lingual Methods. Accordingly, “grammar is usually learned deductively on the basis of grammar rules and examples”(Dogett,1988:2). So, EFL STs are required to memorize the rules, then apply them to other examples after being presented by their Grammar Teacher. They are also required to learn paradigms such as verb conjugations...etc, where the EFL STs are supposed to substitute words to make novel sentences, once a given pattern is learnt such as subject-verb-prepositional phrase. Similarly, EFL

STs are involved in exercises on gap-filling, putting bracketed verbs in correct tenses...etc. In short, English Grammar is taught and learnt “as an isolated body of knowledge” (Hoffman,2003:4). This is on the one hand.

On the other hand, teaching English Grammar to EFL STs according to the above traditional way causes an inadequate recognition of the structural nature of English. Such inadequacy leads to a lack of specificity of the structural and semantic content of learning. This is so, because the traditional teaching-learning process of English Grammar does not “provide a natural basis for exercises in sentence creation” (Chaika, 1978:782). Moreover, “most of our students cannot distinguish adverbs from adjectives or prepositions from conjunctions” (Hoffman,2003:3). The above discussion shows that EFL STs “see studying grammar and mechanics as just one more way to be told that they are wrong-so they need an approach that addresses their weaknesses by giving them power to make meaning” (Anderson,2006:29).

2.2 Teaching English Grammar Contextually

It is thought that, by teaching English Grammar traditionally, things will be easier for the EFL STs. Rather, one can see that things have become rather complicated instead. The Teaching Staff in the Department always complain of their EFL STs terrible grammatical mistakes on their examination sheets. They also complain of their EFL STs spoken grammatical mistakes. Such mistakes are quite common during fourth year EFL STs practice period as well. To put an end to such a situation, the researcher teaches English Grammar to his above STs in context. “Over the past fifteen years or so, there has been a shift of emphasis from the formal properties of the code to the use of language in context” (Widdowson, 1992:333). In addition , “research methods relevant to

analyzing English in various contexts are highlighted” (The Open University, 2007:2).

At the end of 2.1 above, reference has been made that EFL STs need an approach which tackles their grammar weaknesses in a way that gives them power to make meaning. To realize this, “we assume that the students have some knowledge of how the language works, which derives from pedagogic grammar. We also assume that this knowledge will be consolidated as the students experience language used in meaningful contexts” (Allen and Widdowson, 1979:133). Similarly, Hoffman states that “pedagogy can most closely approach natural grammar teaching” (2003:2).

In addition, Language functions in relation to grammatical choices are taken into account when teaching Grammar in context. Consequently, EFL STs are encouraged to “draw conclusions about the interpersonal functions of different lexico-grammatical options, and to develop a capacity for noticing such features as they move through the different stages and cycles of language learning”(McCarthy and Carter,1995:217). Accordingly, “learners need to be given more grammatical choices if they are to operate flexibly in a range of spoken and written contexts” (Ibid:207).Moreover, EFL STs are involved in applying their inherent grammatical knowledge for participating in communicative everyday-life situations. So, they are expected not only to describe , and interpret texts, but also to apply their “grammatical knowledge and analytical skills as a means of judging and improving the communicative effectiveness of a range of everyday texts” (The Open University,2007:2).

Thus, to make full extent of his contextual endeavor in teaching English Grammar to his EFL STs, the researcher raises different grammatical questions of the following sort whenever possible: why is the past perfect used here? Can we replace it with the simple past instead?

If we do so, what difference in meaning will be expected?...etc. “when teaching grammar in context effectively , I always look for opportunities to extend a concept or the meaning of a skill by asking the question that often remains unasked in grammar instruction. I ask students why? What makes you say that? Where have you seen this pattern before? Do you see this new pattern in this text?” (Anderson,2006:33). Even in the realm of writing, Weaver thinks that “teaching grammar in the context of writing works better than teaching grammar as a formal system” (2004:8).

In conclusion , teaching English Grammar to EFL STs in context is characterized by the use of texts rather than invented sentences. This is so because, the individual, unrelated and uncontextualized sentences do not make sense in the absence of their context. As a result of such teaching, EFL STs have become “able to formulate their own grammar rules” after being inducted contextually. In other words, they are encouraged to become “classroom grammarians” (Lukenbill, 1965:227). Accordingly, EFL STs have become very confident of themselves, since they realized the fact that “the potential for making meanings with language is infinite , and not restricted to the generative capacity of grammatical rules” (Widdowson, 1992:334).

3. The Field Study

Generally speaking, the word “grammar” brings to the minds of many EFL STs a formal and often unpleasant feeling about the analysis of English. Hoffman believes that “students are annoyed and unhappy with language abstractness”(2003:5). This is on the one hand. On the other hand, the teaching of English Grammar is considered one of the most extensively investigated areas in the realm of EFL instructional pedagogy. It is also considered an essential ingredient of EFL instructional programme in the Department of English. Moreover, many

EFL grammatical studies have been carried out all over the world. Furthermore, “student evaluation of teaching is now recognized as a legitimate and expected University activity” (Neumann,2000:121).

In the present section, the researcher undertakes a small investigation intended to explore his EFL STs opinions of teaching English Grammar Traditionally and Contextually (see 2 above). Thus, the Field study involves 66(50 females and 16 males) EFL fourth year STs at the Department of English , College of Basic Education, University of Mosul. Their ages range between (22 and 25) years.

3.1 Aim of the Field Study

The Field study aims at exploring EFL STs opinions of teaching English Grammar Traditionally and Contextually before and after the researcher's contextual presentation.

3.2 Elicitation of the Information

The EFL STs opinions are elicited from their answers to a questionnaire consisting of only one item. This questionnaire is adapted from Fortune (1992:170). It is intended to draw EFL STs preferences and evaluation of teaching English Grammar Traditionally and Contextually.

The above STs are required to answer the questionnaire for two times. The first time is at the beginning of the First-Term of the Academic year 2006-2007, whereas the second time is at the end of it (see 2 above). The reason is to find out whether there will be any change in the STs views at the end of the First-Term or not. Before answering the questionnaire , the researcher reminded his EFL STs of the English Grammar Traditional Exercises (see Appendix I), besides supplying them with the new contextual ones (see Appendix II) as samples. After that, the STs are required to do these exercises, then filling in the questionnaire.

Furthermore, it is thought that answering the questionnaire for two times (at the beginning and at the end of the First Term) would supply more exact information than either technique alone.

3.3 Text of the Questionnaire:

The following is the text of the one-item questionnaire:

* Write (Yes) or (No) in the space alongside:

Learning English Grammar through “Advanced Comprehension” subject is better than the Old Traditional way:_____ . (Ibid)

3.4 Results of the Questionnaire:

Findings of the questionnaire are divided into two main categories: (Ibid:166).

(1) At the Beginning of the First Term:

The main findings are:

* 59 out of 66 EFL STs (i.e 89.4 per cent)

prefer the Old Traditional way of Learning English Grammar.

* 7 out of 66 EFL STs (i.e.10.6 per cent)

prefer Learning English Grammar in Context.

(2) At the End of the First Term:

The main findings are:

* 2 out of 66 EFL STs (i.e. 3.03 per cent)

prefer the Old Traditional way of Learning English Grammar.

* 64 out of 66 EFL STs (i.e. 96.96 per cent)

prefer Learning English Grammar in Context.

3.5 Discussion of the Results:

Before teaching EFL STs English Grammar in context, and before asking them to answer the questionnaire for the first time (i.e. at the beginning of the first term), the researcher gave them some sort of an idea about how the presentation of grammar will be. At first, they were confused not knowing what to say. The idea is quite new to them, especially the inductive part of it, since they have been taught English grammar deductively for a long time. Also, they could not imagine the idea of extracting the grammatical rules which are considered to be embedded in their minds. But, in the course of time, they began to like the idea very much and found it not only interesting, but also important and fruitful.

Thus, the reader can notice that the percentage of EFL STs who express their preference for contextual English grammar has notably risen from (10.6 per cent) to (96.96 per cent). The reader can also notice that the percentage of EFL STs who express their preference for the Old Traditional way of teaching English grammar has notably decreased from (89.4 per cent) to (3.03 per cent) only. Such increase in STs preference and evaluation percentage for grammar in context shows how far they are involved, convinced and taken by its teaching and presentation. “The increasing use of student ratings results for making judgments about the quality and effectiveness of teaching” (Neumann, 2000: 121). Such high preference and evaluation is clearly reflected, later on, in the above STs results in the “Advanced comprehension” course mentioned above including English grammar. This is on the one hand.

On the other hand, “those in the field of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of other language) would be quick to assert their opposition to textbooks that are written mainly to teach specific grammatical rules without much attention to meaningful prose” (Fitch, 1995:24). Fitch goes on to say, “the Old-fashioned way of teaching grammar has been

dropped” (Ibid:25). This means that the trend is moving quickly away from sentence grammar and towards discourse grammar. Accordingly, if we seek success in grammar teaching we are supposed to teach it “in context rather than as a separate body of knowledge” (Hoffman,2003:2). Similarly, Anderson states that “I want my students to learn the story of grammar's power to communicate meaning and beauty” (2006:28). After teaching them grammar in context, Anderson goes on to say that “Students created images with their sentences, and they didn't even know they were using participles or writing complex sentences”.(Ibid:29).

At the beginning of the course and, to his astonishment, some of the researcher's EFL STs did not even differentiate between nouns and verbs in spite of being taught English grammar for at least 12 years. Few of them, for example, considered the plural noun “fields” a simple present verb ending with the third person singular “S”! “As teachers we have all become frustrated with our students lack of knowledge of such basic parts of speech as nouns and verbs. It's not that they haven't been taught it, it's that they haven't really learned it”(Sugrue and Traeger, 2005:2). To put an end to such cases, grammar “should be fun because when a lesson involves the emotions, it engages the mind and it should be something that shows meaning rather than merely form” (Ibid:1).

Finally, in its prospectus entitled “English Grammar in Context”, The Open University states that when teaching grammar in context “we hope to continue to stimulate your enthusiasm for grammatical analysis by raising your awareness of some of the ways in which grammar may be applied to the practical world of work” (2007:2). In such a case, “students are able to formulate their own grammar rules” after inducting them from their context (Lukenbill, 1965:227). Consequently, EFL STs “will see grammar as a creational facility rather than a correctional one” (Anderson, 2006:34).

4. Conclusions:

To conclude , teaching English Grammar in context:

- (1) enables EFL STs to be aware of their errors. This awareness improves STs'ability to monitor and self-correct their use of English.
- (2) enables EFL STs to be aware of patterns in English Grammar. This awareness facilitates students' understanding of the way English language works.
- (3) consolidates students' understanding of grammar and provides the teacher with diagnostic information about their errors and needs.
- (4) enables EFL STs to become generative thinkers of English and fosters cognitive collaboration.
- (5) enables EFL STs to identify, recognize and induct grammatical rules, then reformulating them.

5. Suggestions:

when suggesting teaching English Grammar in Context , the following are worth mentioning:

- (1) Pedagogical Textbooks must be written on teaching English grammar in context rather than the Old-fashioned traditional textbooks in which grammar is dealt with as a separate body of knowledge.
- (2) EFL STs must be provided unconsciously with the ability to show meaning rather than merely form.
- (3) EFL STs need to be provided with the opportunity for reconsidering their knowledge about the formal structures of language.
- (4) EFL STs must offer meaningful choices as well as rules. This is done by involving their emotions into the teaching- learning process which results into engaging their minds.

- (5) EFL STs must be involved in communicating their thoughts. To do so, they must select the proper forms and put them in the correct order.
- (6) EFL STs' study of grammar must take on a new meaning. This means that they must be able to communicate not only meaning, but also beauty.
- (7) EFL STs must not only be able to analyze English contextually but also produce it.
- (8) Teachers of contextual English Grammar must integrate their EFL STs' tests into their grammar instruction and vice versa.

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Appendix I

English Grammar Traditional Exerciese

(from Fortune,1992:163-164)

Exercise B

Complete these sentences by putting the verbs into the *past continuous* or the *past simple*-.
 1 I.... television when the phone rang. (watch).

I was *watching television when the phone rang*.

2 When the ambulance came we him into it. (carry)

3 She.... her car when she suddenly felt ill. (drive)

4 When he saw me he off the wall. (fall)

5 We to the radio when it suddenly stopped working, (listen)

6 Why.... cards when he walked into the office? (you play)

7 you when you gave them the money? (they thank)

8 when you turned on the gas? (you smoke)

9 When I arrived, they hello but continued working, (say)

10 When I got to the hospital, she in the waiting room. (sit)

Exercise E

Mixed past and perfect forms

Complete this newspaper report by making correct verb forms from the words in brackets. Sometimes there is more than one possibility.

LOCAL COUPLE WIN LOTTERY PRIZE

Ron and Emma Wilson of Paisley (¹ have) a wonderful surprise last week. They (² discover) they (³ win) £200,000 in the Scottish National Lottery.

Emma (⁴ buy) tickets for the lottery for years, but until last week she (⁵ never win) anything.

She told our reporter: 'I (⁶ just talk) to Ron about our money problems when the postman (⁷ bring) the letter that (⁸ tell) us about our win. Of course, we're very happy!'

Until recently, Ron (⁹ work) at Oldfield Steelworks. But then an injury at work (¹⁰ force) him to retire. Indeed, the Wilsons (¹¹ think) of moving to a smaller house because their present house (¹² become) too expensive for them.

Emma said. 'All my life I (¹³ wonder) what it would be like to have enough money, and not have to count. Every penny. Now that this money (¹⁴ come along).

It's like a miracle!'

The Wilsons (¹⁵ already decide) on some of the things they want to do with their prize. In fact, last week they (¹⁶ try) to buy a big new house, but the owner (¹⁷ already sell) it. 'Now we (¹⁸ start) to look for another one, somewhere near the place we love best, the Scottish Highlands.'

Exercise D

if: special tenses, present and future situations

If you hired the following models, how much would it cost?

* a Vauxhall Astra for 3 days?

If you **hired** a Vauxhall Astra for 3 days it **would cost** £66.00.

1 a Ford Sierra for a weekend?

6 a Ford Orion for 2 weeks?

2 a BL Metro for 3 days?

7 a Vauxhall Nova for a weekend?

3 a BMW 316 for 2 weeks?

8 a Ford Escort for 4 days?

4 a Ford Fiesta for 5 days?

9 a BL Maestro for 2 weeks?

5 a BL Montego for a week?

10 a Vauxhall Cavalier for 3 weeks?

LONDON BUDGET RATES

Pre-discounted rate. Must be pre-booked

GROUP	SEATS	Specific car models cannot be guaranteed Manual transmission	SUNROOF	POWER STEERING	CASSTTE	RADIO	CARS MUST BE RETURNED TO BRANCH		
							DAILY UNLIMITED	WEEKLY UNLIMITED	WEEKEND* Fri 13.00hrs Mon 10.00 hrs UNLIMITED
A	4	FORD Fiesta VAUXHALL Nova BL Metro				• • •	£20.50	£108.50	£42.00
B	4	FORD Escort 1.3L VAUXHALL Astra 1.3L BL Maestro 1.3L			•	• • •	£22.00	£119.00	£47.00
C	5	FORD Sierra 1.6L FORD Orion 1.6L VAUXHALL Cavalier 1.6L BL Montego 1.6L			• • • •	• • • •	£25.50	£140.00	£53.00
D	4	BMW 316	•		•	•	£38.50	£199.00	£85.00

Appendix II

Contextual English Grammar Exercises

(from Fortune, 1992:164-166)

Exercise H

Sort these sentences into two groups. What is the basic structural difference between them? In what way are the two groups different in meaning?

- 1 Oh dear, I'm going to sneeze
- 2 Philip's coming to see us on Saturday.
- 3 I'm going to see my grandmother at the weekend.
- 4 I'm taking my exam in June.
- 5 He's going to be a ballet dancer.
- 6 I'm afraid it's going to rain again.
- 7 The children are starting School again next week.
- 8 Don't forget we're having dinner early this evening.

Exercise I

Study these examples.

- 1 Goodbye, I'll see you tomorrow.
- 2 Look at those big black clouds. It's going to rain.
- 3 We bought our tickets yesterday. We're leaving at four o'clock tomorrow afternoon.
- 4 Beth may come to stay with us next weekend.
- 5 The weather might be better if we wait until July.
- 6 Our boat leaves Southampton at 10 a.m. next Monday and arrives in New York next Friday evening.

Now write the numbers of the examples above in the appropriate column.

The speaker is sure

The speaker is not sure

Exercise M

These are some of the features that nouns can possess.

- 1** Can come after the.
- 2** Can come after a/an.
- 3** Can have a singular and a plural form.
- 4** Can have the singular form only.
- 5** Can have the plural form only.
- 6** Can come between the + noun, e.g. 'a baby boy'.
- 7** Can be made into a verb, e.g. 'to book'.

Look at the nouns listed below and place either ticks (✓) or crosses (✗) in the columns. For example, if a noun possesses feature 6, but not feature 7, then you tick column 6 and put a cross in column 7.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
book							
baby							
sheep							
news							
cattle							
peter							
scissors							
music							
furniture							