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## **Application of comparative grammar in second language teaching**

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### **ABSTRACT**

There has been a long debate in teaching foreign languages as well as in teaching English as a second language whether grammar should be a main component of the curriculum or not, and whether it should be taught explicitly or just be introduced implicitly during the language course. Some methods have gone even farther and suggested that there is no benefit in teaching grammar in language courses. However, there is still a lot of controversy about how and to what extent grammar should be included in the curriculum.

This paper firstly elaborates on this debate, and argues in favour of the inclusion of grammar as a main component in language teaching curriculum. Secondly, it introduces a method for teaching a second language, called "comparative grammar method". In this method, grammar is a prominent and explicit part of the curriculum but the grammatical concepts and categories are not introduced in an abstract way. Instead, the grammars of both first and the target languages are compared categorically throughout the course. In conclusion, a case study is introduced where this method has been applied and its usability and efficiency in real classroom situation have been justified.

**Keywords:** Learning and teaching

## **BACKGROUND**

Teaching formal grammar in language curriculum has always had its own ups and downs depending on different theories and viewpoints. For example, during the 1960s, teaching grammar was not encouraged and most people disfavoured teaching it (see Ball et al, 1990). Back then, it was argued that teaching explicit grammar was not an efficient means to develop practical communication skills.

This dislike of grammar continued during the 1970s and 1980s and most methods were against teaching grammar. In these years, teaching syllabuses mostly involved rote learning of the dialogues, and the power of grammar as the central part of the curriculum was ignored. This ignorance of grammar was mainly a result of introducing the "communicative approach" (Brumfit and Johnson, 1979).

Although considering grammar as a main component in teaching foreign languages was underemphasized in those decades, it has always been regarded as an important part of teaching English as a second language all around the world. Thus, the debate of inclusion or exclusion of grammar usually did not involve teaching English as a second language.

However, this debate was revived again in the 1990s, when more and more people became interested in teaching grammar. A lot of discussion for and against teaching grammar took place in the field of applied linguistics (e.g. Hawkins and Towell, 1996: Doughty and Williams, 1998).

In general, there have been a lot of methods which have been tried in teaching grammar (Spada, 1997). Some of these methods favour explicit teaching of grammar and some others argue against it, and support implicit introduction of the grammatical items, instead.

It is certain that grammar teaching, as Mitchell (2000) says, should be practical and included within the activities and tasks and not in isolation and abstraction. Because of this, we use the "comparative grammar" method in teaching a second language, which will be discussed in this paper. However, before explaining this method we will give some general reasons to support teaching grammar and its importance in teaching second language.

### **IS GRAMMAR NEEDED?**

In a Workshop on Meta-linguistic Awareness and Target Language proficiency (29 May 2002) in the ADF School of Languages in Melbourne, there was an interesting debate among experienced language instructors about whether to teach grammar in a second language learning course or not. As an experienced language teacher and the writer of grammar books and dictionaries of Persian and as a multilingual linguist, my conclusion from the debate was that: most of the controversy in this area arises because of a mix up and therefore, a misunderstanding about different definitions of 'grammar'. What do we mean by teaching grammar? Is it just introducing grammatical concepts and categories in isolation? Is it just introducing the rules which govern the language?

As we know, there have been several definitions of grammar, each serving a specific practical purpose, and they are so different from each other. For example, generally, it has been argued that there are two different types of grammars: prescriptive grammar, which is also called traditional grammar. These grammars assume that the written style of a language is the most accurate style and the speakers are to follow it in communication and thus, they prescribe rules for the language. The second type is descriptive grammar in which it is assumed that the daily spoken style of a language is the most accurate one and the role of grammar is to discover the rules governing the daily communication. Thus, in this view, grammar is not a prescription for the language but it is derived from the real life situations and thus it is used in teaching a second language to the non native speakers.

## **DEFENDING GRAMMAR**

The art of teaching a second language is being able to give students an insight on how the language works in general. This is the practical grammar which should be introduced in the curriculum. It is not teaching just some abstract and strange concepts and names to the students but teaching the rules governing the structure of the language within the context. That is why teaching grammar is so important.

Imagine the case of a student, who has no experience in learning a second language: He would probably think that every language structure is the same as his own language and it would take a long time for him to see the difference in the structure of the two languages. However, when we talk about different structures within languages, this gives the student an insight about the second language. The need for this insight is evident when we compare the progress of monolingual and bilingual

students in the same class. Based on my experience with the language courses which are held in the ADF School of Languages, those students who have learned another language before, or are bilingual, progress faster and easier than monolingual students.

As mentioned earlier, grammar is a collection of rules governing the language. Thus, to teach the target language in an efficient and time effective way, it is better to introduce the rules and ask students to work on the language materials, getting help from these rules, rather than leaving them by themselves to discover the rules one by one; that is, leaving them to discover some rules, which already have been discovered. Therefore, as the popular proverb implies, if we teach the language material without introducing the rules, “we are just giving a fish” to students, but if we teach the rules, “we are teaching them how to fish”! If we teach a sentence to students, they would know just one sentence in the target language. On the other hand, if we teach them how to make sentences in that language, they will be able to make an infinite number of sentences. Using grammatical rules in teaching a language is just like teaching how to drive by a driving instructor, or teaching how to play music instruments by a music instructor, or teaching how to dance by a dance instructor. If these people do not introduce the rules, and leave their students by their own to go and discover the rules behind driving, playing music, dancing, and so on, it would take a lot of time and effort, even though they may eventually succeed in teaching the skill.

So, contrary to the arguments that: grammar instruction is good for short term learning but not for long term ones (Harley, 1989; Day and Shapon, 1991), teaching grammatical rules helps students to retain the language in a long term period by

reconstructing the structure. On the other hand, by teaching language via rote learning methods, we just prepare them for a short period to communicate in the language, and after a while they will lose the ability to recall the sentences and the structure.

It is obvious that learning a second language as an adult is completely different from learning it as a child. As most linguists and psycholinguists agree, in early childhood, children have a predisposition, which enables them to master the language quickly and efficiently. That is why they can learn several languages if they are exposed to, and the only help they need is to be exposed to the language environment.

However, this is not the case with adults, because this capability and predisposition goes away as the child grows up to adulthood. Thus, to learn a language as an adult, instead, we should use the grammatical rules for the language, and it is not enough just to be exposed to the language environment.

The difference between the teacher of the target language and a native speaker of that language is that: the teacher knows how it works and thus is able to teach these rules to students in a specific period. Otherwise, without introducing the rules, a teacher would not have any advantage over any native speaker in that language.

## **COMPARATIVE GRAMMAR METHOD**

Typological studies of languages have been an important part in the classic and modern linguistics. Through comparison of grammars and structures of different languages, there have been numerous generalisations about language rules. In fact, it

is the comparison of the structures of two different languages which enables us to know how those languages work. Therefore, the idea behind the "comparative grammar method" in teaching a second language is that: To make a second language learner aware of the structure of the target language, we should compare the structure of it to the native language, and the learner should be aware of the similarities and differences between the structures of these two languages.

However, this comparison takes place within the context, and not in isolation. In other words, we do not teach grammar explicitly in an abstract way, but we use it as a tool to teach the language. In this method, we choose a specific part of the grammar which is relevant to the text being taught and then we compare that structure in the two languages, explaining the differences and similarities to the students. In this way, students become conscious of the structure of the target language and thus they learn it with enthusiasm. By knowing the difference between these structures, they can create new sentences and phrases in the target language and this makes the learning task more enjoyable and gives them the confidence necessary to pursue the learning tasks.

As Mitchell (2000) suggests, it is impossible to teach whole the grammar of the target language explicitly, and we should try to select and prioritise the important parts of it. That is why in teaching the language we just introduce those parts which are different from the first language ones. When, the students know these differences, it is easier for them to learn a structure which is different from their native language.

Howkins and Twell (1988) also favour a cognitive view in teaching grammar which results in using language in the real life situations. In this method, we also do not teach grammar out of the context but it is always introduced within the context which is used in daily conversation.

Although it is argued that encouraging students to think in the target language is very effective, our experience with our language courses shows otherwise: Students as the native speakers of their first language automatically think in the first language, and asking them to think in the second language is not realistic and practical, and that is why it does not work most of the time. Unless students become proficient in the target language, they will not be able to think in that language. Thus, instead of forcing them to think in the target language, we want them to think about the idea they are going to express in English and then transfer it into the target language by using grammar as a tool. For example, first we ask the students to say the sentence in English. 'I went to his house.' Then, we ask them to identify the subject, verb and object<sup>1</sup> in that sentence, like this:

I        went            home

S        V                O

The segmentation of the sentence into subject, object and verb is taught to them beforehand and the word order in the first and second languages are introduced. Then we ask them to change the order into Persian (the target language in our courses):

I        home            went

S        O                V

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<sup>1</sup> The basic concepts like Subject, Object, and verb are introduced early in the course.

For a beginner in the language and in the early stages of learning, this approach is very effective. When there are differences in structure, we explain those differences within the sentences. An example of such a structure is the present simple tense in English, as in: *I am going*. When students translate this into the target language, they intend to translate the verb '*am*' and the verb '*going*' as two separate words, which results in a wrong sentence in Persian, as in:

I        am            going        home  
\* man hastam        miravam    xāne

To correct this, we explain to the students that: This is not a right structure in Persian. Instead of saying *man hastam miravam*, you just need *man miravam*, because in English this form of present tense has two parts: a **to be** verb (*am*) and a verb with **ing** (*going*) but in Persian it has just one part. So, to translate this tense into the target language, you just first think about the tense itself: Is it a past or present tense and then translate it into past or present in the target language and do not worry about the English form. Thus, since this sentence is in present tense, we just choose the present form of **go** in Persian, which will be a prefix **mi**, the base verb and the personal suffix. Therefore, the correct form would be:

man be xāne mi-rav-am

I am going home.

## **OUR COURSE STRUCTURE**

This method has been applied in teaching Persian (Farsi)<sup>2</sup> in different courses to adult students who are native English speakers. These courses are held in the ADF School of Languages in Melbourne. The objective of the course is to teach Basic Persian (Farsi) to the students in a very intensive program. The course duration is 12 weeks. It runs five days a week and six periods each day. Each period is 50 minutes.

The daily program is as follows: One period for introducing new materials, one period for reading and writing, one period for listening and lab lessons, two periods for speaking and conversation in small groups, and one period for grammar and revision of previous lessons.

The basic grammars of English and Persian are introduced in the first week of the course and later on, the components of the grammars of both languages are compared with each other throughout the course. The lessons are also introduced with an emphasis on the comparative grammar, and the structures of sentences in the lessons are compared. In reading and writing, the sounds of the target language are introduced first and then the script is taught. The new lessons are practiced in the language lab for listening and pronunciation. The conversation and expressions which are introduced in new materials are practiced in small groups, and students practice those sentences and expressions with each other in role plays.

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<sup>2</sup> Persian (Farsi) is an Indo-Iranian language.

**Assessments:** There is a continuing assessment schedule throughout the course, which is fortnightly for speaking, listening, reading and writing, and weekly for the structure and grammar. The final assessment is conducted at weeks 11-12, and is based on the ADLPRS test<sup>3</sup>, which is task based, assessing four micro skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. (A descriptor summary of ADLPRS is included in the appendix).

**Results:** The results of three consequent intensive 12-week courses showed that all the students achieved a level higher than the one first expected and aimed to.

The ADLPRS levels, which were aimed to at the start of such courses were as follow:

Speaking 1

Listening 1

Reading 1

Writing 0+

However, the ADLPRS levels, which were achieved by the students, were as follow:

Speaking 1+

Listening 1+

Reading 1

Writing 1

A couple students even could go farther and achieve level two for speaking and listening.

## **STUDENTS' FEEDBACK**

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<sup>3</sup> Australian Defence Language Proficiency Rating Scale

The students' feedback was very impressive, all were happy with the course, and they stated that their understanding of the English grammar improved as well.

## **THE METHOD**

The emphasis of this method is on comparing the structures of English and the target language. In this method, first the grammar of English is introduced. Most of the students do not have an idea about grammatical categories in English, although they are native speakers of the language. For example, they do not know what 'subject', 'object' or 'verb' means. Therefore, first we introduce these categories in English together with examples and exercises to help them recognise each category within the sentence. It usually takes one week for them to be familiar with the basic grammatical concepts in English.

After familiarising the students with the basics of English grammar, we introduce the grammar of the target language, and compare each category with the English one, together with the relevant examples.

Since second language learners have no conceptualisation of the target language rules in their mind, they usually apply the rules of the first language for the target language, and it takes a long time to solve this problem. However, by introducing the rules in the first language, and comparing the structures of the two languages, the learners will see the differences and similarities between these two, and thus will be able to understand how the target language works. Otherwise, they learn it in a subjective and abstract way like a parrot.

At this stage, we emphasise on the differences in word order between English and the target language. For example, we explain that in English the typical word order is Subject, Verb, and Object. On the contrary, this order in another language like Persian is Subject, Object, and Verb. So, a sentence like "I went home" becomes: "I home went." in Persian. Knowing this, it is easier for the students to conceptualise the difference between the two languages in their mind.

Some other examples in comparing the structures of English and Persian are as in below:

**Adjectival phrase:** We explain to the students that: In English the adjective usually precedes the noun as in: *good boy*. However, in the target language, i.e. Persian the adjective follows the noun. Thus, *good boy* becomes *boy good* or *pesare xub* in Persian.

**Possessive phrase:** In English, there are two different markers for possession. If the possessor noun is animate, we use 's between the possessed noun and the possessor noun as in: *John's book*, where the possessor comes first. If the possessor is inanimate, we use *of*, where the possessed noun comes first as in: *the leg of the table*.

Once the students are clear about English word order, we introduce the Persian order for possession. In Persian, there is just one marker for possession. It is *e* which always follows the possessed noun as in:

ketäb e Jän

book Poss John

John's book or

päye e miz

leg Poss table

the leg of the table.

After each of these lessons, we give exercises to the students. They are to write the Persian equivalents of the phrases and sentences in English, which contain the categories being taught.

To make the difference between the grammars of the two languages less confusing, we also give the students the literal translation of the target language sentence. Therefore, in writing the equivalents of the sentences or phrases, we use three lines as in the following example:

man be xäne raft-am

I to home went-I

I went home.

**Verbs:** To introduce verbs in the target language, first we give a simple definition of 'verb' and then provide some examples of English verbs. To make it simple, we just give examples in present continuous tense, like: *I go*. Then, we explain the difference: In English, we bring the subject and then the verb, as in: *I go, you go, he goes*, and so on. The only change for the verb is in the third person singular (he, she,

it), which takes (*e*)s suffix. However, in some languages, the verb takes a different suffix for each person. In Persian, there are six different suffixes for the verb, as in:

man	mi-rav-am	I go	am
to	mi-rav-i	you go	i
un	mi-rav-ad	he goes	ad
mā	mi-rav-im	we go	im
šomā	mi-rav-in	you go	in
unhā	mi-rav-and	they go	and

Then, we ask the students to learn and memorise these six different suffixes. Once they learn these suffixes, they can make any sentence using different verbs.

**Copular sentences:** Again, first we explain the verb *to be* in English and tell them how a copular sentence is formed: In English, there are some sentences, which are different from ordinary sentences. The verb in these sentences is a *to be* verb like *am, is, are, was, were*. In these sentences, instead of objects we have predicates. See these examples:

I	go	home
Subject	Verb	Object
I	am	hungry
Subject	verb	predicate

A similar structure exists in Persian for *hast* (to be) sentences:

man            be xāne            mi-rav-am

I                to home            go

I go home.

man    gorosne            hast-am

I        hungry            am

I am hungry.

**Tense:** We explain that the tense is not necessarily the same in English and other languages. For example, in English, we have simple present tense and continuous present tense, as in: *I am going* and *I go*. To form the simple tense, we use a *to be* verb like *am* and the main verb like *go* with *ing*. But for the continuous tense, we just use the base verb like *go*.

However, in Persian, we have just one structure for both continuous and simple tenses, as in: *man mi-rav-am*. The difference between continuous and simple can be understood just by adverbs, like *emruz* 'today', *har ruz* 'every day', and so on, as in:

man    emruz    mi-rav-am

I        today            go

I am going today.

man    har ruz    mi-rav-am

I        every day            go

I go every day.

**Direct and indirect objects:** We usually emphasise on those aspects of grammar where the two languages are different. We also emphasise on the aspects, which are important in the word order. For example, being familiar with the difference of word order for objects is important. Therefore, we explain the difference between direct and indirect objects first: There are two types of objects: Direct and indirect objects. The direct object is the one, which is directly related to the verb. For example: *I saw John.* *John* is the direct object because the action of seeing takes place on him.

On the other hand, an indirect object is not directly related to the verb and if we delete it from the sentence, the sentence is still meaningful. For example: *John went to the school.* Here *the school* is the indirect object and if we delete it, the sentence is still right: *John went.*

A sentence can have just one direct object but one or more indirect objects.

Then we introduce objects in the target language: In Persian, the direct object takes a suffix *rä* and the indirect object always comes with a preposition. The direct object in the sentences always comes before the indirect object.

man    šomä rä        dar bāzär        did-am

I        you                in market        saw-I

I saw you in the market.

In this sentence, *šomä* (you) is the direct object because it takes a suffix *rä* and *bäzär* (market) is the indirect object because it takes a preposition like *dar* (in).

### SENTENCE- MAKING AND TRANSLATION

To make a sentence in the target language, we ask the students to write the sentence in English first and then identify the subject, object and verb, and then write the word order number for each part of the sentence in English and then in Persian. For example:

I go to school

S V pp O

1 2 3

1 3 2

Thus, in this sentence, *I* is the subject, *go* is the verb and *school* is the object which has the preposition to. The word order in Persian is different because first the subject, then the object and then the verb comes in the sentences. Then, we ask the students to write their equivalents in Persian with the Persian word order:

man be madrese mi-rav-am

I to school go

I go to school.

### CONCLUSION:

The results of three different intensive courses which was held in the ADF school of languages show that a method of teaching a foreign language based on comparative grammar is very effective and useful. This method can be applied to many other

second language teaching situations, especially those which are involved with adult students.

## Appendix

### SUMMARY DESCRIPTORS

#### AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY RATING SCALE

<b>SPEAKING</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
<b>1+</b>	<b>The Linguist</b> can express tabulated information and simple narrative on everyday military and social topics to complete simple, routine transaction and instruction, eg to make a booking, purchase, or inquiry, or to request an alternative or improvement. Interacts by using simple sentences and the highest-frequency, complex, standard variety TL sentences.
<b>LISTENING</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
<b>1+</b>	<b>The Linguist</b> supported by suitable references, can process live or recorded monologues and conversations that comprise tabulated information and simple narrative, on everyday military and social topics. Completes tasks concerned with routine instruction and transaction, eg understand a simple public announcement, process general inquiries. Understands texts that comprise simple sentences and the highest-frequency, complex, standard variety TL sentences.
<b>READING</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>

<b>1</b>	<b>The Linguist</b> supported by suitable references, can process hand-written and typed texts that comprise tabulated information, on everyday military and social topics. Completes highly predictable military and social reading tasks, eg processes a one/two word warning sign or a base phone directory, by recognising and comprehending all printed letters of an alphabet, words/ideograms relating to: commonly listed items, familiar phrases, extending to simple sentences on familiar topics.
<b>WRITING</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>The Linguist</b> supported by suitable references, can express tabulated information on everyday military and social topics to complete highly predictable tasks, eg write down an appointment or compose a simple office note. Uses familiar words, ideograms and phrases that extend to highest-frequency, simple sentences in the TL standard variety.

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