Using Simple Poems to Teach Grammar

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Teachers have been debating on what method is the best for teaching grammar for generations. A few prefer the old style discrete and explicit explanations of the English syntax while many prefer the Communication syllabus and the implicit teaching of grammar. This paper will discuss a blended approach and the use of simple poems to teach and reinforce grammar points as well as language structure

Introduction

Not many Malaysian English teachers relish the thought of teaching grammar due to the complexity and irregularities in the syntax of the English language. Teachers often ask what exactly is the best way to teach grammar? In the early days of grammar teaching, the grammar translation method required students to do the tedious tasks of translating sentences into English based on grammar rules. However, many critics found fault with this method as it was too methodical and arithmetic. Thus, students may end up constructing sentences that are grammatically correct but would be perceived as 'unacceptable' by most native speakers. (Howatt 1984)

In the 1940s and 50s the audio-lingual method was popularized by behavioural psychologists such as Skinner and Watson. Teaching grammar was simply making students learn language habits through numerous drills and pattern practices.(Brown, 1994). But again, there were problems with this method as there was no focus or emphasis on "the intentions, thinking, conscious planning and internal processes of the learner" (Stern, 1984, p.305).

In the 1970s and 80s the Communicative Approach propelled by sociolinguists and the collective works of Krashen, Halliday and Hymes, replaced the audiolingual method. This approach focuses on meaning rather than form (grammar rules) as it was believed that it is meaning which drives language acquisition and development. Ellis (1994) noted in his review of research in the 1970s that much of the Communicative L2 teaching focussed on meaning only. In the 1980's Malaysian schools embraced this communicative approach and Malaysian educators' own conundrum began. While the Communicative Approach simplified the teacher's task, schools began seeing hordes of students who could provide 'meaningful' sentences but which were often riddled with grammatical mistakes. The question teachers now often ask is whether a return to grammar teaching is necessary. If so, should grammar be taught implicitly or explicitly? Research indicates that a combination of form and meaning may be the best teaching approach. A research by Prabhu (cited by Beretta & Davis, 1985) showed that students who received meaning-based instruction did well on the meaning-based test but poorly on a discrete-point grammar test. Spada & Lightbrown (1993) postulated that "form focussed instruction and corrective feedback within the context of communicative interaction can contribute positively to second language development in both the short and long term" (p.205). This is supported by Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell (1997) who suggest that the integration of form and meaning is gaining importance in what they refer to as the 'principled communicative approach.' Musumeci (1997) went on further to say that students should learn grammar explicitly but should also be given the opportunity to practise them in communicative and authentic / simulated tasks.

For Malaysian students for which English is a second language, for effective communication, a knowledge of the rules is sorely needed. Pavel V. Sysoyev (2003) stresses this need for L2 students to receive both form and meaning, which he labelled as Integrative Grammar Teaching. Both fluency and accuracy are desirable and cannot be taught in isolation. This paper will discuss an integrated or blended approach to teaching and reinforcing grammar. For each kind of poem, specific teaching points will be highlighted. Classroom experience and management such as immediate feedback and correction will also be discussed.

Types of Poems Used in the Writing Class

The Intensive English Program at UNITEN is a preparatory, proficiency course designed for school leavers who wish to enroll in UNITEN. In the writing class, a series of poems were used to review and reinforce grammar rules the students should have 'learnt'

while in school. This was deemed necessary as most of the students have limited to average English proficiency. The majority were Malaysians but there were three Arab speaking students from Sudan and Yemen.

The following are writing activities adapted from Holmes and Moulton's "Writing Simple Poems ."

Adjective Poems

Teaching Points

- Adjectives
- Adjectives after linking verbs
- Basic sentence structure
- Dictionary usage

The first few classes focused on parts of speech, and word class. The lesson began with a revision of the basic structure of an English sentence. To help them students use the structure, the adjective poem pattern was shown to them.

Pattern

Line 1 : Noun
Line 2 : Same noun + is or are + adjective
Line 3 : Same noun + is or are + adjective1, adjective 2
Line 4 : Is or are + adjective 1, adjective 2, adjective 3
Line 5 : Adjective 1, adjective 2, adjective 3, adjective 4
Line 6 : New related noun/

The following is an example of an adjective poem written and revised by a student :

Coffee

Coffee is bitter
Coffee is bitter, marvelous
Is bitter, marvelous, satisfying,
Bitter, marvelous, satisfying, splendid.
Coffee Bean

(Nur Asma Hussain, 18)

As the students wrote their poems, the teacher monitored their work and pointed out problems with the structure and subject verb agreement. It was also observed that many had problems with adjectives and used nouns to modify the subject.
A typical mistake would be : *She is success*.

Adjective Placement Poem

Teaching Points

- Adjectives
- Placement of Adjectives
- Subject Verb Agreement.
- Present Progressive Tense

To help students learn the placement of adjectives, an adjective placement poem was used. The lesson began with the exploration stage in the Integrative L2 grammar lesson. The teacher gave each group of students three sets of cards consisting of adjectives and a noun. They were then given time to sort the adjectives out in the correct order and to explain what grammar rule was used. After

some discussion, they were shown the correct way to order adjectives:

Order of Adjectives

1. determiners
2. possessive words
3. ordinal numbers
4. cardinal numbers
5. general description
6. size, height, length
7. shape
8. age, temperature
9. colour
10. origin
11. nouns as adjectives
12. head noun

(Holmes & Moulton, 2003)

To write the poem, students were told that they were going on a long trip and must decide what to bring to keep them happy. After the writing stage, they were asked to exchange papers and check the correct order of adjectives. This was done to introduce to them the concept of peer editing which is an integral part of any process writing class. As this was happening, the teacher went around to monitor the activity and asked students to correct grammar mistakes in their poems as necessary. The following is an example of an adjective placement poem :

Hawaii

I'm taking a trip to Hawaii
And I'm taking along my favourite things :
My *sporty, new, brown Camel Active* shoes,
A *big, plasma* TV,
One pack of *Pokemon* cards,
A comfortable, black, German sweater,
A pair of sexy, old swimming trunks,
And most important, my *beautiful* grandmother.

(Muhd. Zarif Kamrdin, 18)

Alphabet Poem

Teaching Points

- Verbs
- Past Tense
- Dictionary Usage.
- Cooperative Learning through group work

An alphabet poem can be used to teach parts of speech or sentence structure while reinforcing dictionary skills. Since this kind of poem is rather long, students were put into groups to write two kinds of alphabet poems. This group poem required the students to use their dictionary extensively and to work together to collate group ideas into one group poem As a warm up , each group was asked to list on the board all the things that could be found in a teenager's closet alphabetically. To write the second poem, students had to start each letter with a verb in the past tense. This enabled the class to revise their verbs in the simple past tense while writing some wacky and often hilarious group poems :

What I Did The Last School Holidays (Verbs)

Accessed information from the internet
Babbled with my friend
Conversed with my principal
Donated some clothes to the orphanage
Escorted my best friend to see her boyfriend
Fought often with my sister
Gave my football cards to my friends
Hacked into the computer system
Insisted on colouring my room pink
Joined the army for a week
Kicked my neighbour's dog
Learned how to cook
Murdered my brother's girlfriend
Nagged my neighbour's daughter
Opposed my parents' plans to go to Langkawi
Puzzled why my parents went to Langkawi without me
Qualified to join the Newboyz group
Rebuilt my tree house after my brother threw stones at it
Sold my hand phone because it was broken
Took my young brother to his friend's house
Unfertilized the soil behind my backyard
Vandalized a bus stop with my friend
Waited for my girlfriend at the bus stop which I had vandalized
X-rayed my body
Yelled at the field
Zapped my discipline teacher's car.

(Mohd Zarif, Mohd Khairy, Nur Dalila, Mohd Khairul, Nur Syahida)

Adverb Poem

Teaching Points

- Verbs
- Adverbs
- Articles / Determiners
- Phrases
- Clauses
- Dictionary usage

Logically, the next class focussed on adverbs and how they are used to modify verbs. The students were shown that adverbs often end with *–ly* but may also take other forms such as ***often, fast,*** an***d high.*** After the class discussion, they were shown the poem pattern which was very similar to the adjective poem. To restrict topics and to help students overcome that " Have no idea, teacher " phenomenon, students were asked to give some nouns which were written on the board. As they wrote their poem, the teacher assumed the regular role of monitoring their writing and helping them correct their own mistakes as necessary. Common mistakes noticed and corrected were **subject-verb-agreement** and the **omission of articles** before the noun. Students also asked the difference between '**a** frog' and '**the** frog.' The following is an example of an adverb poem following the pattern shown below :

Pattern

Line 1 : Noun
Line 2 : Same noun + verb + adverb 1

Line3 : Same noun + verb + adverb 1, adverb 2
Line 4 : Verb + adverb 1, adverb 2, adverb 3
Line 5 : Adverb 1, adverb 2, adverb 3, adverb 4
Line 6 : Phrase or clause showing condition, time or place.

Example :

The Goat

The goat bleats *happily*,
The goat bleats *happily, disturbingly*,
Bleats *happily, disturbingly, weirdly,*
Happily, disturbingly, weirdly, calmly,
When it sees a female goat.

(Mohd Khairy Effendy, 18)

"I am" or "We Are" Poems

Teaching Points

- Sentences
- Subject Verb Agreement
- (Subordinate Clauses)

After the numerous lessons on parts of speech and word class, the last lesson discussed in this paper is a longer poem which students write in pairs or threes. This poem required students to use complete sentences and write three stanzas. To begin writing, the students were given an interest web aimed at generating ideas, words or phrases that described them.
Examples were also shown as a model to help the students write their poem.
This poem proved more challenging as it required creativity as well as grammar accuracy . The most amusing of the lot is the one below written by three boys : a Malay, a Sudanese and a Yemeni.

We Are

We are loving guys
We wonder about the girls and our families
We hear voices of ladies
We see beautiful girls
We want to get married
We are loving guys

We pretend to be fathers
We feel important about getting married
We touch the rings of our wives
We worry if our wives will find another husband
We cry if our children die
We are loving guys

We understand that marriage is a new life
We say that our plans will be true
We dream that we are having children
We try to make our wives happy
We hope to have a nice life with our family
We are loving guys.

(Hazimin Mohd., Abdul Aziz Rabea Omar Lashram, & Ahmed Elfadilfathal R, Taha)

Conclusion

The teaching of grammar is by far, the most challenging task any Malaysian teacher may face in his/her daily classroom. Many do not wish to teach grammar explicitly but are keenly aware that students need an understanding of the rules to achieve fluency as well as accuracy. The Communicative Syllabus in place in Malaysian schools frowns upon the teaching of grammar per se and emphasizes meaning through communicative activities. Unfortunately, many students leaving schools and entering universities do not have adequate English proficiency to excel in their studies. This is even more crucial in private universities where English is the medium of instruction. One possible solution is thus, the blended or Integrated approach to grammar teaching where there is a focus on the form but the activity is meaning based. It can be said that the first module of the writing class was partially successful as there were some marked improvement in some of the students' writings. This was more apparent in the weakest students and the foreign students. Those with average proficiency did not improve much. It was noted that they were able to identify their grammar mistakes when these mistakes were pointed out by the teacher. However, the students continue to produce the same grammatical mistakes in their writing. This would suggest a lack of concern for accuracy, perhaps an indirect effect of the Communicative approach. In any case, the students found the class challenging and interesting as evident from their poems. And that is in itself, a major success to breaking the traditional view of grammar classes as dull and immensely boring.

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