Teaching of ‘Tenses’ using Compare and Contrast Approach to Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

Most of the English Language learners in India, whose first language is not English, find the Communicative Approach inadequate as it fails to sensitize learners about English Language Structure. The case of undergraduate students who have studied in non-English medium schools requires a different approach. Compare and Contrast Approach is an attempt to understand the use of tenses in English language by understanding the differences in the usages. Instead of memorizing the rules for the tenses, learners would analyze the differences in the structure and as a result, differences in the meaning. This non-conventional approach to English grammar aims to help learners to understand the language subtleties and use them for proper communication.
Introduction

The context of English language learning in India presents a unique case. As English Language Teaching (ELT) in India stresses the need for Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the role of grammar in learning the language remains an intricate issue. Most of the learners, whose first language is not English, find the Communicative Approach inadequate as it fails to sensitize learners about English Language Structure. The feeling of inadequacy of English Grammar is a hindrance to effective communication among many young and adult learners (Watts Eleanor, 2004). At the same time, it would be of no use to teach them grammar using the traditional approach. Though the task based approach suggested by Dr. N.S. Prabhu could be an effective tool within Communicative Language teaching to shift the attention of learners on the meaning of their utterances (Prabhu N.S., 1987), the case of undergraduate students who have studied in non-English medium schools requires a different approach. They need to be made conversant with the basic English structures before getting involved in the task-based approach.

It is necessary to note that the ability of learners to use English effectively in real communication situations requires basic knowledge of the language structure or grammatical competency. Though proper interaction is the goal of CLT, it recognizes the fact that a sound knowledge of English grammar will help learners to be effective communicators. As pointed out by Eleanor Watts, in the Indian context, CLT loses its track at the primary level due to various facts and often fails to impart a proper sense of grammar to the young learners (Watts Eleanor, 2004). Moreover, as pointed out by Bax, Communicative approach needs to take into account the learning contexts such as learning styles, learning strategies, learners’ motivation, classroom environment, parents’ attitudes and behaviors, local environment, and social context (Bax. S , 2003). A majority of students in India complete their schooling in vernacular medium and teaching English to them using communicative approach at the undergraduate level poses certain problems. The ‘grammatical competence’, one of the major components of the desired ‘communicative competence’ (Hymes, D. H., 1972) often gets ignored in the classroom for a number of reasons such as heterogeneous group of students, size of the classroom and the assessment criteria. This would result in a sense of inadequacy among the learners - particularly non-English medium educated undergraduates - in terms of
‘English grammar’. We need to address this problem of developing ‘grammatical competence’ of the learners to make Communicative Language Teaching effective in the classroom (Shetty. P., 2011).

The following limitations of the present Communicative Language Teaching in India demand a need for a non-conventional approach to Grammar within CLT.

- CLT in India often ignores the context in which teaching and learning takes place (e.g. heterogeneous and large classrooms) and thereby it fails to get the desired objectives of CLT.
- Lack of knowledge of grammar on the part of both teacher and learner leads to miscommunication and may lead to trouble in real life communication.
- Majority of the undergraduate students do not actively participate in classroom activities due to lack of proper understanding of English grammar

In this context, a non-conventional approach (Compare and Contrast Approach) to teach English grammar in general and ‘tenses’ in particular employed by the teachers in undergraduate classrooms could help to bridge the limitations of CLT and traditional ELT approaches.

**Compare and Contrast Approach to English Grammar**

Compare and Contrast Approach is an attempt to understand the use of tenses in English language by understanding the differences in the usages. Instead of memorizing the rules for the tenses, learners would analyze the differences in the structure and as a result, differences in the meaning. By doing so learners would gradually recognize the right structure for the right context. Of course, it presupposes an elementary exposure to English language and its basic components, but the approach aims to help the undergraduate students who are already exposed to the language. Compare and Contrast Approach could be effectively used within CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) in India.

The purpose of the approach is to show from both theoretical and practical perspectives that grammar teaching can be made productive and useful in real life communication. Students will be encouraged to look at what the grammar does and where the meaning is - for example,
the difference in meaning when one uses a modal form and present continuous form to indicate a future event. The overall purpose of the approach will be to raise grammatical consciousness, an awareness of the communicative functions of grammar, and the ability to distinguish between different tense structures. This non-conventional approach to English grammar aims to help learners to understand the language subtleties and use them for proper communication.

**Use of Compare and Contrast Approach**

Compare and Contrast Approach to English Grammar aims to equip the undergraduate learners, who recognize the need of proper use of ‘tenses’ for effective communication, yet are unsure of learning English grammar in the traditional way on the one hand and shy away from participating in the CLT techniques on the other, with a sound knowledge of English grammar.

**Details of Compare and Contrast Approach**

Compare and Contrast Approach fuses certain techniques of Grammar Translation Method, Structural Approach to Language, and Communicative Approach. Like in Grammar Translation Method, students are asked to contrast the meanings of the sentences; like in Structural Approach, students are asked to identify the right structure and structural differences; importantly, like in Communicative Approach students are asked to arrive at the solution/answer by doing group work or pair work. The aim is to make students feel confident to generate their own sentences and know the exact effect of those sentences.

**Teaching Tenses through Compare and Contrast Approach**

For majority of students who do their primary and secondary school in non-English medium, use of right tense is a major hindrance in communication. Compare and Contrast Approach helps them to learn English tenses by pointing out the structural differences in sentences. Students could be divided into groups/pairs as in Communicative Approach and be asked to arrive at a conclusion about the right structure for a given context.

The following model is an example of teaching ‘tenses’ using Compare and Contrast Approach:
Is there a difference?

1. a). *She is going to Mumbai tomorrow.*
   
   b). *She will go to Mumbai tomorrow.*

Ask group / pair to identify the meaning of the two sentences.

Each group /pair must answer the following questions:

- Is there any difference?
- If yes, what is a) and how is it different from b)?
- When do you use q.a)?
- When do you use q.b)?

Explanation after discussion and presentations:

- Both refer to a future event.
- Sentence (a) - *is going to* - indicates future though it is present continuous in structure. It is *much* more definite than sentence (b) which uses a modal to indicate future.
  
  It is used when the future event / action is planned / fixed.

- Sentence (b) – *will go* is less definite than *is going to.*
  
  The emphasis is on the willingness of Subject to do something (Swan M, 1995)

2. a) When is she leaving?
   
   b) When will she leave?

Ask group / pair to identify the meaning of the two sentences.

Each group /pair must answer the following questions:

- Is there any difference?
- If yes, what is the meaning of a) and how is it different from b)?
- When do you use q.a)?
When do you use q.b)?

Explanation:

- You use sentence (a) – (present continuous tense) when you know that she will be leaving definitely but don’t know when. You are sure of her leaving but not sure of the date or time of departure.
- Sentence (b)- (modal) means you want to know whether and when she will leave. You don’t know whether she will leave at all.

You can detect a sense of despair in When will she leave?

3. a) When he arrived, the meeting began.
   b) When he arrived, the meeting had begun.

Ask group / pair to identify the meaning of the two sentences.

Each group /pair must answer the following questions:

Is there any difference?

If yes, what is the meaning of a) and how is it different from b)?

When do you use q.a)?

When do you use q.b)?

Explanation :

- The first sentence gives the meaning that two actions happened at the same time in the past. Therefore, simple past tense is used to show two simultaneously completed actions.

- Had is used to show which action happened first in the past. It is usually used when there are two past actions. Use of ‘had’ before an action shows that it was completed.
| first (past perfect) and the use of simple past tense shows the second completed action. |
| In q.b) he came after the meeting began. |

4. a.) She has not brought the book.  
   b.) She did not bring the book.

Ask group / pair to identify the meanings of the two sentences.

Each group /pair must answer the following questions:

- Is there any difference?
- If yes, what is the meaning of a) and how is it different from b).?
- When do you use q.a)?
- When do you use q.b)?

Explanation:

The two sentences are about the completed actions but mean two different things.

Qa.) is used when the action is relevant to the present. (Present perfect)

We cannot use any time-tag with ‘has’, ‘have’ forms.

Qb.) is used when we are speaking about some past occurrence. (simple past)

The above model can be used to teach all the tense forms in English. Different examples need to be given from real life communication. Students would identify the sentence structure easily as they would use them in different contexts. A sense of competition needs to be created among groups/pairs to come up with the right explanation.

Here, students compare and contrast the meaning and structure of two sentences. Like in Grammar Translation Method, they would try to figure out the exact meaning at first. This would lead them to identify the proper structure to attain the desired meaning. The recognition of the meaning through the structure would not be based on memorized rules, but on the basis of comparison. The entire activity would be conducted using the techniques of
Communicative approach where everyone is free to give their understanding of the given sentence.

**Conclusion**

Compare and Contrast Approach could be useful in bridging the gap between knowledge of English grammar and the use of English language in real life communication, especially for students who study English as a second language. Communicative Approach, as it is used in India falls short of its desired objective in spite of its merits. No doubt, the techniques used in this approach encourage students to use English language as they would use it in real life. However, it requires a whole-hearted participation of students and an exhaustive feedback by teachers to be a success. In the Indian context, majority of students (in a class of 80-100) shy away from active participation due to lack of grammatical awareness and most of feedback would fall short of logical explanation of the right structures (Shetty P, 2011). As a result students would not be in a position to know why a particular sentence structure is appropriate in a context and not so appropriate in another.

On the other hand, Compare and Contrast Approach would prepare the ground work for Communicative Approach. In an experiment conducted at an undergraduate college in India (Udupi, Karnataka), it is observed that students who are reluctant to take part in the language activities of the class (done under Communicative Approach), show a keen interest in the activities of Compare and Contrast Approach (Shetty P, 2011). Students not only try to find the right answer/meaning but also make an attempt to speak in the class. As the exercises/activities in this approach are drawn from the context they are familiar with, students tend to identify with the structure. At the same time, the idea of the right meaning challenges them to ask questions and come up with an explanation. Moreover, they would remember the right structure easily for a given context in their future communication as they would have understood the logic behind the structure. By using compare and contrast technique, this approach challenges students to analyze their grammatical comprehension. They would be made to see the logic behind the use of grammatical rules on English tense usage.

The advantages of using Compare and Contrast Approach for teaching ‘tenses’ in English is that students do not learn it as ‘rules’ but enjoy the act of learning the rules. In essence by
helping the learners to arrive at the answer on their own, it follows the CLT idea emphasized by David Nunan (1991), that language teaching must provide the opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the learning process itself. At the same time, it provides the cushion to the usually hesitant students to be a part of the process without the need to express themselves independently. Being a part of the group or pair, they would understand why a particular rule is applied in a given structure and when best to use that structure in real life context.

Compare and Contrast Approach aims to make Communicative Approach not only desirable but also convincing for learners. It could be further used to teach other grammatical components to bridge the gap between the knowledge of grammar and etiquettes of communication.

References