Discourse and Pragmatics in English Grammar Teaching

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Abstract. This essay aims to explore on what aspects discourse and pragmatics impact on grammar teaching. It focused on discourse and pragmatics application, attempting to describe the principle aspects of discourse and pragmatics which influence grammar teaching. It introduced the general idea of what discourse and pragmatics are. It then picked some points of discourse and pragmatics which are relevant to grammar teaching such as cohesion and coherence of text, principles of human interaction, speech acts, and the degree of politeness. Finally, it moved towards grammar teaching, giving an argument on whether grammar should be taught or not and explaining how grammar is taught.

Introduction

Since the foundation of communicative language teaching approach, it is clearly seen that grammar teaching moves “beyond the sentence level” as most of the grammar rules are based on context and only a few of them are context free. When grammar is relied on context, however, discourse and pragmatics seem to have some influence on it. The fields of discourse analysis and pragmatics focus on how language is used in real-life situations.

The Principle Aspects of Discourse and Pragmatics Which Have Impacts on Grammar Teaching

Discourse and Pragmatics

First of all, discourse and pragmatics is different from each other. Discourse is naturally occurring stretches of language, such as conversations, interviews, speeches, and newspaper articles. Discourse can be both spoken and written language. It also leads us to a distinction between sentence and utterance. A sentence is different from an utterance as a sentence has no context but an utterance is contextualized language which is actually used, so discourse consists of “utterance”. The study of discourse or called “discourse analysis” is concerned with how language users produce and interpret language in context in both spoken and written. It also involves “examining the relationship between a text and the situation in which occurs” (McCarthy, 2001:48).

Pragmatics is used and interpreted in context, or in other words any analytic approach in linguistics, involving contextual considerations. One of the most obvious tasks that pragmatics tends to explain how participants move from decontextualized (linguistically encoded) meanings of the words and phrases to a grasp of their meaning in context. It focuses on how people communicate more than what the words or phases of their utterances might mean by themselves, how people make these interpretations
and why people choose to say and/or interpret something in one way rather than another (Spencer-Oatey and Zegarac, 2002).

When it comes to the issues of any analytic approach in linguistics involves contextual considerations, it necessarily belongs to pragmatics. Therefore, “doing discourse analysis certainly involves doing syntax and semantics, but it primarily consists of doing pragmatics” (Brown and Yule, 1983: 26).

In reality, however, human communication is more than a sum of vocabularies and grammar. This is because sometimes when people communicate they tend to convey more than what the words and phrases in those utterances might mean in and of themselves, or in other words, there is a hidden meaning behind the utterance. For example, when a man says “I love David Beckham,” the semantic meaning of this utterance is that this man admires David Beckham, a famous British athlete as he is very good at playing football. Pragmatically viewed, this man could be a homosexual because David Beckham can be an “indirect reference, meaning of a linguistics expression whose default use is to refer to something else” (Cruse, 2004: 330). In other words, “David Beckham” is a metaphorical term of “Men”. However, this can only begin to be understood only when the context is taken into consideration. Any utterance, therefore, can “take on various meanings depending on who produced it and under what circumstance” (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000: 20). In addition, when it comes to teaching grammar, teachers normally tend to teach students to create compound and complex sentences instead of only one single sentence or a phrase in higher level, to lead them to be closer to the reality in communication. For example, in writing a piece of academic work, they would have to write it coherently and cohesively by using certain grammar rules.

Moreover, there are some principle aspects in the discourse analysis and pragmatics literature which are relevant to grammar teaching such as cohesion and coherence, principles of human interaction—the cooperative and implicatures and speech acts. These topics will be introduced in brief details below.

**Cohesion and Coherence of Text**

Cohesion is a term from the work on textual structure by Halliday and Hasan, given to the logical linkage between textual units, as indicated by overt formal markers of the relations between texts. In English, cohesion is maintained through devices like reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunctive relations. Each piece of text must be cohesive with the adjacent ones for a successful communication. The examples below are taken from Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000: 53).

1. Reference (pronouns, possessive forms, demonstratives and the like):
   
   *Paul bought a pear. He ate it.*
   
   “Paul” and “he” and also “pear” and “it” are coreferential and form cohesive ties in text.

2. Substitution (i.e. nominal *one(s)*, verbal *do*, clausal *so*):
   
   *A: Did Sally buy the blue jacket?  
   B: No, she bought the red one.*
   
   Here “one” replaces “jacket”, and they form structural and lexical/semantics tie and are coclassificational (i.e., refer to the same class of entities) but not coreferential.

3. Ellipsis (or substitution by zero)
   
   *A: Who wrote this article?  
   B: Bill*
In this context, “Bill”, standing alone without a predicate, functions elliptically to express the entire proposition: “Bill wrote the article.”

4. Conjunction

Christmas is coming; however, the weather seems very un-Christmaslike.

The conjunctive adverb “however” signals a tie between the clause that follows and clause that precedes it. This case means that the 2 evens somehow conflict or signal a counter expectation.

These are all discourse-sensitive areas of grammar which are commonly referred to under the rubric of “cohesion” (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000:55). A discourse also exhibits cohesion because the sentences hang together and flow smoothly from one to the next. Furthermore, they can be useful in teaching EFL (English as a Foreign Language) as it will lead students to make their language production more cohesive and to facilitate them to interpret new texts easier.

Coherence means the concepts and relationships expressed are relevant to each other (in reader’s/listener’s mind but they may not appear related on paper) and it is a way of talking about the relations between texts, which may or may not be indicated by formal markers of Cohesion as texts can be cohesive without being coherent and texts can also be coherent without being cohesive.

**Principles of Human Interaction**

The cooperative and implicatures

Grice (1975), the philosopher has developed the cooperative principle for conversation due to the fact that human beings want to communicate with one another successfully and want to maintain social harmony. Grice’s cooperative principle consists of 4 maxims as follow:

1. The maxim of quantity
   - Make your contribution as informative as required
   - Do not make it more informative than required.
   - This is about how much information is expected in conversational exchange.

2. The maxim of quality
   - Try to make your contribution one that is true.
   - Do not say what you believe to be false.
   - Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
   - This maxim is difficult when it comes to tell a lie or so called “white lie”, telling a lie to make others feel well.

3. The maxim of relation or relevance
   - Be relevant
   - This is to make the speaker contribute the communication relevant to the topic.

4. The maxim of manner
   - Avoid obscurity
   - Avoid ambiguity
   - Be brief
   - Be orderly
   - This means try to speak as clearly as possible, so miscommunication conversation will not happen.

Grice dose not, however, assume that all people should constantly follow these maxims. It is rather interesting when these maxims are "flouted" or "violated" (either the participant doing it on purpose or unintentionally) which would imply some other, hidden meaning.
Speech Acts

Celce-Murcia and Olshtain claim that speech acts are social actions performed via utterances and usually performed within a situation that provides contextual elements that help interpret the speaker’s intention. The utterances can be analysed in three levels. First of all, locution is the literal meaning of the utterance or can be understood as semantic level of meaning. Secondly, illocution is the intended meaning of the utterance or so called pragmatics level of meaning. Finally, perlocution is the action which is performed as a result of the interpretation of the utterance.

For example: A and B are in a restaurant
A: Your food looks nice.
B: Yes it is.
Here, B only understands the locution that his food looks nice.
A: Your food looks nice.
B: Yes, it is. Do you want to swap?
Now, B understands locution that his food looks nice and the illocution that A wants his food. The act of swapping the food is perlocution.

Therefore, language is not only the sum of vocabularies and grammar. It needs to be understood in the actual context in order to communicate well. This is the reason why grammar translation method has been replaced by communicative approach.

The Degree of Politeness

The degree of politeness is concerned as a part of pragmatics and it is very important to the grammar teaching. Thus, the rules of politeness will differ across cultures and speech communities. However, in English, for example, the way to express the degree of politeness is to use auxiliaries or modal verbs such as could, would and might. These can be used in polite requests and suggestions. The auxiliaries could, would and might can be used to express differing degrees of politeness as below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of Politeness</th>
<th>Auxiliary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>somewhat polite</td>
<td>Could</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quite polite</td>
<td>Would</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very polite</td>
<td>Might</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, might expresses the highest degree of politeness. For example:
Might I observe what you are doing?  Might I offer some advice?

There are indeed some difficulties in learning English, especially for students whose first language has no auxiliaries or model verbs (i.e. Thai students), as their ways in expressing the degree of politeness are different from English. Therefore, it is a challenge for EFL practitioners to adapt pragmatics to grammar teaching.

Grammar Teaching

The term grammar has multiple meaning. It is used to refer both to language users’ subconscious internal system and to linguists’ attempts to codify or describe that system. While the uses may differ in purpose and scope, “they seek minimally to explain the same phenomena: how words are formed (morphology) and how words are combined (syntax)” (Larsen-Freeman, 2001:34). Linguists distinguish grammar into 2 descriptive types, formal grammar and functional grammar. Formal grammars focus on forms and structure of language with little or no attention to the meaning or context of
language use (semantics and pragmatics). On the other hand, functional grammars tend to seek and explain why one linguistics form is more appropriate than another one in particular contexts and communicative purposes. The binary distinction between these formal and functional approaches is reflected in language education and it is widely accepted that most teachers and most students notice that grammar is instinctively important, so they tend to form grammar as an important part of a language course.

However, the question of whether or not grammar should be taught has been persistently debated in the field of language pedagogy and second language acquisition. Some researchers such as Krashen (1982) maintain that grammar is acquired naturally if learners are exposed to sufficient comprehensible input and that it does not need to be taught. On another hand, other researchers hold opposing views, arguing for the inclusion of formal grammar teaching. Ellis (1994) and many researchers adopted the weak interface model. They claim that explicit knowledge of grammar seems to assist learners at different stages of acquisition process of implicit knowledge and instruction is necessary and some grammatical forms cannot be acquired simply by exposure alone. Larsen-Freeman (2001) points out that even if grammar is acquired naturally, it does not necessarily follow that it should not be taught. Instruction can enhance the acquisition of grammar, and help speed up the process.

Moving to the methods in which English is taught; the most classic way of teaching grammar is so called “grammar translation method” (Ellis, 1994: 87). It is indeed still one of the most popular and favourite models of language teaching, but it has been found that this is not a very successful method. With hindsight, it could be said that the grammar translation method’s contribution to language learning has been lamentably limited and it views “grammar” as an exclusively sentence-level phenomenon. It focuses from the real language to a “dissected body” (Krashen, 1982: 101) of nouns, adjectives, and prepositions, doing nothing to enhance students’ communicative ability in the target language. The English language teaching tradition, however, has been subjected to change, especially throughout these decades and it is agreed that the needs of ability of communication is necessary. Therefore, communicative language teaching approach seems to replace the classic way of teaching. This is because the basic premise of this approach is to focus the components of communicative competence, not only grammatical or linguistics competence but engaging the learners in the discourse and pragmatics use of the language for meaningful purposes.

As it has been mentioned above, grammar is traditionally taught at sentence level, but according to Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000), the problem with traditional perspective is that there are few grammar choices that are strictly sentence level and completely context free. In English, there are context free and sentence based rules such as determiner-noun agreement, use of gerunds after prepositions and some-any suppletion in the environment of negation. There are, however, many more grammar choice which are sensitively based on context such as usage of passive and active voice, indirect object alternation, article/determiner choice, position of adverbials in sentences, “use of existential there versus its non use, tense-aspects-modality choice, choice of logical connector, use versus non-use of it clefts and wh-clefts” (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000:52).
Conclusion

As it is accepted, grammar teaching is very important and it has moved beyond the sentence level. The new grammar teaching method, the communicative approach is leading the teachers and the students to discover context. It is to say that discourse and pragmatics are very important among the new methodology. On the surface, discourse and pragmatics may not seem to be related to grammar, but when it comes to a decision concerning which forms are better to be used in certain situations, discourse and pragmatics are the most important factors to be considered. For example, the essay explored some aspects of discourse and pragmatics influencing grammar teaching. It was found that cohesion and coherence of text, principles of human interaction, speech acts, and the degree of politeness are all useful to grammar teaching in terms of explaining why one form is better than another form when students learn to use English grammar. It is because the first language of students is sometimes very different from English. The degree of politeness, for example, may be used wrongly as the auxiliaries or model verbs have never appeared in the mother tongue. Therefore, it is very important that teachers of EFL might have to understand the aspects of discourse and pragmatics in order to explain the usage of grammar to students better. In addition, as the two materials have been analyzed, it can be said that each of them have weak and strong points. The International Express has combined context and grammar together, but the way of explaining the grammar is not as clear as Murphy’s. While, Murphy’s has explained the grammar rules in a visualized way, using the time-line which can be useful to students whose mother tongues have no tenses. Therefore, it may be the best to have combinations of the two books, in other words, adding more explanation to the International Express as it is already well written in terms of discourse and pragmatics.

References


