

TEACH GRAMMAR

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Learning grammar is a vital part of learning a second language. Indeed, it can safely be assumed that no one speaks any language without having learned the grammar of that language.

The significant question that arises from this is: "What does 'learning the grammar' consist of?" The answer, of course, depends on who the student is. If he is a linguist, who may not need to speak the language himself, learning the grammar may consist of assimilating a body of related facts about the signals that are used to show grammatical relationships. If he is a small child learning his first language, it usually consists of unconscious assimilation of habits for using and responding to structural signals. Similarly, for the student who wants to speak a second language, learning the grammar consists of acquiring a set of habits for the use of structural signals.

In English the word order of I can go signals, for one thing, a statement or a report. On the other hand, Can I go signals a question. The student who is seeking active use of a second language must learn to make and to respond to all such structural signals automatically. When he does this, he has learned the grammar.

In Spanish, for example, the inflection -aba shows that the verb refers to an extended period of time. Similarly, in other languages we find inflections showing that the verb refers to a point in time or a series of points in time or that the "action" of the verb has begun, has stopped, has continued, is desired, is planned, etc. In English some of these aspects of the verb are indicated by separate words, or by combinations of words. For example, I want to go, I began to go, I may go, I should go.

The student who is learning English as a second language must implant a habit for the automatic production of and response to these signals. In addition, he must implant a habit

for using one group of words with to and the simple form of a verb while he uses another group in the same capacity without to (e.g., want to go vs. should go).

Sometimes a grammatical pattern in the second language may correspond very closely to an analagous pattern in the student's native language. If this is true, he will probably have very little if any difficulty in production and response in the new language.

If the pattern is different from that in his language he will usually have to become consciously aware of the new pattern first and then establish it as a habit. If more than one device is used in order to show a grammatical relationship in the second language, then the student must know under which conditions this arbitrary grammatical division occurs.

With these factors in mind, we must find a type of presentation that is suitable for the assimilation of grammatical patterns into habits.

To this end we must effectively use points of contrast between the native and second languages as well as within the second language. To demonstrate these contrasts effectively usually requires that we strip any distracting adornments from the examples. In this way we can more easily focus the student's attention on the contrast. As an example, let us suppose that our student must practice the contrast of statement and question with words like can, may, might, must, could, etc. The first frame below demonstrates this contrast with the varied type of examples that are frequently given—sometimes allegedly for the sake of interest. The second frame shows the same contrast sharpened. Here the "interest" is that of learning the pattern for the immediate purpose of doing the following exercises and for the ultimate purpose of learning the language.

- (1) Perhaps we can learn to speak English quite well.
Can you or John possibly speak at the banquet?
We wouldn't think of refusing it.
Some people will always give you a clever answer.
Why can't these people get here at 8 o'clock?
Wouldn't you prefer to eat out occasionally?

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|-------|------|-------|----------------|
| | John | CAN | Speak English. |
| | John | MIGHT | Speak English. |
| | John | WILL | Speak English. |
| CAN | John | | Speak English? |
| MIGHT | John | | Speak English? |
| WILL | John | | Speak English? |

In the second illustration the point taught is clearer. In the preliminary oral work the student's attention can be drawn to the point at issue by telling him to observe can, might, will in statements and questions. After observing the examples he should be able to recognize the point to be learned though he may not be able to express it. Next he should be given summary generalizations to insure correct observation if he has not made them himself. For example: "(1) Can, might, will follow words like John, the student, etc. in statements. (2) Can, might, will precede words like John, the student, etc. in questions."

Then he goes immediately to the task of practicing what he has observed in exercises designed to elicit production of the pattern or patterns. The first part of each exercise should consist of a number of illustrative examples so that there will be no doubt concerning what is expected.

Teacher: I can study.

Teacher: You must go.

Teacher: Can you study?

Student: Must I go?

Teacher: They can go.

1. He can speak clearly.

Teacher: Can they go?

2. He can sing well.

Teacher: John may go there.

3. We should do this

Teacher: May John go there?

exercise. etc.

The examples serve as an introduction to the use of these patterns with other words which the student knows. They may also serve as an introduction to more difficult sentences using the pattern which is being learned. For example, if negatives have been used in previous patterns, the examples in an exercise may serve as an introduction to the use of negatives in this pattern: John CAN'T speak English. If the use of words

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like where and when in questions has been taught, the examples may illustrate can, might, will, etc. with these question words. This attacks the problem of using can, might, will, etc. in statements and questions in a wide variety of situations without having the attendant evil of subordinating the clarity of the contrast.

Ideally, a separate frame should be used for each point that is to be taught. If the fact that can, may, must, etc. are invariable in form with I, you, he, she, we, they, the student, the students, etc. constitutes a difference from the students native language, then we may want a frame to point this out. Similarly, we will want a separate frame to show the arbitrary grammatical division of the use of can, may, must, etc. plus the simple form of a verb (without to) to indicate a certain grammatical relationship as opposed to try, want, begin plus to and the simple form of a verb to show the same type of relationship.

This is a way in which the indispensable knowledge of the grammar of a second language can be taught effectively.

SELECTED REFERENCES

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