**The Big Picture View or a Holistic Approach**

**to Grammar Teaching and Learning.**

It is understandably difficult to deny that grammar constitutes an integral part of language instruction. Being the ‘backbone’ of a language, it is included in the syllabus of all major course books. The question of the importance of teaching grammar does not seem to provoke doubts among educators. However, the issue of how to approach the teaching of grammar still remains and has been the object of debate and research for many years.

While providing a framework for both teacher and learners, modern coursebooks have an effect of imposition (Tomlinson, 2003) and are therefore ‘potentially stultifying for both teachers and learners’ (ibid.: 4). This view is echoed in Bolitho’s views on modern textbooks when he emphasises ‘frameworks are useful as long as they don’t become straitjackets’(Bolitho, 2015: 7) I decided to take a different view of grammar teaching and employ a holistic approach which, ‘helps learners ‘to gain a ‘bigger picture’ of how various grammatical phenomena work’. Teachers need to introduce grammar with the focus on the meaning rather than the form, and therefore stresses the importance of raising awareness of the way in which people communicate in an authentic environment. Let’s first have a closer look at both approaches.

**A traditional approach to grammar teaching**

I discovered this poster in one of the classrooms and judging from the teacher’s remark on the top of it (‘Brilliant’), it seems that a student or a group of students produced a correct version of the Present Simple Tense. It looks neat and tidy with the ending -s- in the right place, but have a look at the examples. ‘She needs a bag for school. If Present Simple expresses regular actions in the present (keywords: always, usually, constantly, often), then the sentence suggests she does it (needs a bag) regularly. However, the verb ‘need’ in the Present Simple is used to talk about things you require but not to show the regularity of an action (Is ‘need’ an action verb at all?). What if we use ‘need’ as a modal verb, in which case it does not require -s-, can the example still illustrate the Present Simple rule?

The same can be said about two other sentences, ‘I love you.’ or ‘I don’t love you.’ When are these feelings (not actions) happening? Are they regular? Are they static? Consider ‘breaking the rule’ example where the verb ‘love’ is used as an action verb. What’s more, English in its spoken form is different from written and remains a very badly-behaved language. The truth is, I was taught by the grammar translation method and see its disadvantages. In my view, an analytic approach is beneficial to a certain category of learners, commonly called those who are ‘good at languages’, but disadvantageous for holistic thinkers. I agree that repetition of correct forms can help the learners to achieve automatic mastery of the formal elements of some structures (word order, verb endings, subjectverb agreement) but it does not help the learner to know why and when to use the structures. Some other features of a traditional approach to teaching grammar are as follows:

* Form-focused activities
* Adapted reading and listening texts
* Gap-fill and multiple-choice exercises limited to the use of grammar on a sentence level
* A traditional grammar syllabus (grammatical structures are learnt in a sequence that reflects their complexity)
* Test-focused (prepares for exams)

**The principles of a holistic approach to grammar teaching**

In his article (2011), Bolitho discusses an alternative method to teaching grammar – a holistic approach, one, which, unlike an atomistic approach, sees grammar as a whole and attempts to enable students to gain a ‘big picture’ view of how various grammatical phenomena work in real communicative contexts. One of the principles of holistic grammar teaching is that native speakers prioritise meaning over form. To illustrate my point, consider these different uses of the Present Simple:

*The class starts in five minutes. (timetabled future)*

*If she works hard, she will pass. (Conditional 1)*

*It says here that there will soon be a severe teacher shortage. (reporting verb)*

*Cats like milk. (universal truth)*

As seen above, none of the sentences utilises the Present Simple for regular actions. It can express many more meanings, and the examples above are the evidence of its multiple uses. Therefore, I believe exposing our students to instances like these in order to raise their awareness of ways grammar is used in real life is a very important element in the process of guided acquisition.

Other principles of holistic grammar teaching are listed below:

* Meaning-focused, awareness-raising activities
* Authentic reading and listening texts
* Speaking and writing activities which allow students to make a choice of grammatical structures depending on the context
* Following a holistic grammar syllabus (introducing grammar structures according to their use in communication)
* Communicative (prepares for real-life communication).

FINAL THOUGHTS

Understandably, I expect many of you to say, “Well, this is all right, but how do we teach grammar holistically when we have to use existing coursebooks which offer linear, brick-by-brick approach to teaching and learning grammar? And how about teaching exam classes?” I would suggest spending some time evaluating the coursebook just to see how you can adapt it by designing noticing and awareness-raising activities. I am merely suggesting ditching a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to teaching and learning grammar and employing a holistic one, which, while treating grammar as a backbone of the language, gives much importance to it as a ‘liberating force’ (Widdowson, 1990). Thus, a good balance between the meaning-focused activities which develop fluency and form-focused activities (accuracy) is necessary. There cannot be one right way to tackle grammar, and I am certainly not promoting a single ‘way’ to teach grammar here, but if you want to enable your learners to experience language by using it and to have fun while discovering it, then it is undoubtedly worthwhile trying it out. I would love to know whether it worked... or not.