

## **Integration of Critical Thinking Skills into Grammar Curricula**

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**Abstract:** High standards are intended in all curriculum guidelines and it is not different in most of the guidelines. In this paper, the language arts curriculum is put under the spotlight and an in-depth analysis is provided on most benchmarks. Many suggestions are made to further improve the curriculum and particular focus is placed on implementation. The problems in teaching grammar is highlighted and remedies are offered. How to integrate the critical thinking skills in a grammar course is clearly outlined and offered to teachers who look for answers to the problems in almost every classroom.

### **Introduction:**

The objectives of this paper are to provide insights to develop a powerful linguistic command of the English language grammar on the intermediate level. Successful learners construct meaning through the interactive multi-media presentations, peer and group projects. It is our mission that students not memorize grammar formulas but try to see and comprehend the frameworks of grammar in context. Recognizing the interrelatedness of the language skills, simultaneous development of two selected basic skills (speaking, and writing) would be promoted.

If you have ever taught ESL Grammar, appropriate methods of teaching grammar cannot be overemphasized! ESL students are actually the victims of wrong techniques and strategies if they cannot understand, learn and internalize grammar. "No other aspect of the English language has suffered from incorrect assumptions as the teaching of grammar." (Last, 2001) particularly in today's highly technological world of learning, you are doomed to fail if you are not using the right tools that would attract the students' attention to your subject matter. Bored students never appreciate your hard work and never go home with something they are eager to review.

### **Literature Review:**

In this model classroom, the Language Arts teacher is actively using multi-media to present the grammar units. The objectives of the course are to get the students to think the grammar subjects a part of their daily lives, to visualize the abstract concepts in context and to make the complicated grammar points easier by means of visual aids.

According to the Wisconsin Language Arts standards, thinking skills targeted in this course are: "gathering information, organizing information, analyzing information, generating information, integrating information, and evaluating information." (Last, 2001) Different teaching strategies and techniques would be developed to incorporate those skills into the learning process such as: "Effective interpersonal communication skills, including active listening and sensitive feedback..." (Farquharson, 1995)

I think most of the grammar teachers fail to teach grammar effectively because of wrong methodology. "No other aspect of the English language has suffered from incorrect assumptions as the teaching of grammar." (Last, 2001) They fall into the pitfall of explaining theory with another theory.

Abstract terms cannot be explained with abstract methods. Like all other abstract sciences, the ultimate result of teaching abstract subjects is having a bored audience. They do not think what is taught but why they need to learn this.

Moreover, all of us speak; read, listen and we never think or care about the grammar. But if you are a foreigner, you need a framework to build other language skills on. "Unlike native speakers, ESL students do not have intuitions about how English works, thus affecting their ability to construct and reconstruct the language." (Last, 2001) In that case we certainly need to know grammar.

Students in a typical ESL classroom would be ten to twelve. Pair and group work are most encouraged, for students are learning more from each other in efficient ways. All students have a minimum of pre-

intermediate Grammar level. Their spoken proficiency is ranging from pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate. An intermediate level of Grammar instruction is intended to instruct. There are two native languages spoken: Spanish and Chinese. Most of the students have been in the States for more than four or five years. Two third of them are graduated from an elementary school.

Almost all of the students' families are helpful at home with the assignments. Homework assignment topics are particularly selected from daily life to increase the cooperation at home. "Successful teaching must be embedded in community contexts and connected to students' lives." (Hammond, 1997) The problem, as I mentioned above, is how to make it worthy to spend time on it in the eyes of learners. How do you have them visualize the topic? How do you get them to ponder about the unit later on in their daily lives? "The brain friendly classroom helps all the students to make connections between what they already know and what they yet to learn" (Moffet, J, 1968) How do you get them to be self-productive? What are the possible ways to have them to internalize the terms, concepts and intricate grammar points inductively and effectively? How do you have them care about it, like it and use it?

In the meantime, Grammar is somehow isolated with the values of society. The contexts that the problems addressed are far from being experienced out there. So here comes the critical question: How do you connect what you teach with what is going on in the society? Obviously, you cannot cut it if you cannot show the ways to the students how your teachings are valued by society. "Education is a value based activity, engaging individuals in experiencing or accepting what is valued by society" (Ornstein, Hunkins, 1998)

The dilemma could be resolved with a well-prepared curriculum that gives the teacher to make the class attractive and useful. "For a century, with few exceptions, the all but exclusive focus of this (language) has been the structure of the English, most usually traditional usage and grammar." (Andrews, 1997) It is not possible to be creative at all times. Therefore a detailed curriculum offering solutions to overcome the nature of teaching grammar would be the ideal solution to meet the high standards.

#### **Method of Evaluation for Student Learning:**

Holistic approach would be used to assess the student progress. Assuming that each student would have different weak and strong points, no rubric or a certain percentage would be predetermined as the evaluation criteria. Some of significant methods of evaluating students in Grammar course are to observe the following performances:

- Evaluating what thinking skills they are able to use.
- How effectively are they used to understand the grammar points in writing and when they speak?
- In class participation of classroom discussions, peer and group work
- Written essays
- Self assessment

#### **Extension and Enrichment Suggestions:**

Students should read at home on a regular basis and try to talk about the topic with the family members. While they are speaking, the student should see what grammar points are used in the daily life situations.

#### **Procedures to Use to Implement the Curriculum**

Here are some ideas that could be easily implemented as the curriculum implementation procedure: Need and the relevance of the new program would be fully explained to the faculty in in-service seminars and at the department workshops. Clarity of the plan would be demonstrated by presentations and head teachers who will do model classes for the faculty. Realistic goals set by the new curriculum would help to overcome the complexity of the program. The quality of the program would be assured with the computer programs and multimedia presentations. Parents should be informed in advance about their roles that their participation is vital to work the program. Video cameras used in the classes would be used to evaluate the in-class performances of the teachers. This will also be used to give feedback to the department about what works and what does not.

**The Curriculum Development Process:**

Nontechnical-nonscientific approach would be appropriate to use as the model for curriculum development. As each student's evaluation based on individual criteria, subjective, personal, aesthetic aspects of curriculum development should come forward. As all language skills should be regarded as "one", holistic, ever evolving, method of nontechnical-nonscientific approach should fit best to develop a child-centered grammar curriculum. Some of the more concrete steps of the development process might be as follows:

Having implemented the curriculum for one quarter, the branch teachers start immediate modifications on the curriculum. The feedback from the students is regarded as critical. Surveys and teachers observations might be the tools to diagnose the problem areas. The drawbacks of the curriculum should be discussed in depth in the department meetings and remedies should be suggested based on first hand observation. Instructional stuff and methods are scrutinized to make sure they are all backing up the accepted aims and goals. The learning activities should be readjusted and reorganized if their contents are not deep enough to saturate the frameworks of the topics. Students who fall behind should be marked and more after school activities should be conducted with those to make up the first quarter units.

**Program Evaluation and Conclusion:**

Program evaluation will be based on the yearly student gain. Initial level of the students will be recorded at the beginning of the year and compared with the year-end performances. A pre-test and a Post-test would be useful to have statistical data. The intended skills, listening and writing, will be monitored and assessed with the teachers and the program will be revised based on their evaluations. External and internal assessment tools, such as teacher observations, student participations during the classes, and surveys, would set the criteria for the success of the program. If the intended goals specified in the concept and the standards are met, the program would be regarded successful.

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