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**Communicative Activities for Teaching
Hypothetical Constructions**



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INTRODUCTION

As its title suggests, the book is centred upon communicative activities aimed at teaching the different forms of the Synthetic Subjunctive and the Analytical Subjunctive, the conditional sentences in contemporary English, also with specific reference to the different modal verbs used in hypothetical structures.

I have decided upon this topic as hypothetical constructions are used on a large scale in contemporary English, and the Romanian students seem to have certain problems in correctly assimilating and using them since the two linguistic and cultural systems in question do not overlap.

The book is structured into three main chapters; Chapter 1 deals with some specifications or guidelines in terms of teaching grammar in general, with its issues and implications. Chapter 2 is dedicated to strategies for teaching hypothetical constructions, with focus on a variety of techniques and strategies meant to engage the students. It is rounded up by a series of activities focusing on the Subjunctive Mood and there is also an analysis of errors with common and typical mistakes. Chapter 3 provides an analysis of coursebooks I use in the classroom, since coursebooks represent the basic and indispensable tool for both students and teachers.

CHAPTER 1

TEACHING GRAMMAR: SOME ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Grammar is defined as the study and practice of the rules by which words change their forms and are combined into sentences.

In 1622, Joseph Webbe, a schoolmaster and textbook writer, stated that “No man can run speedily to the mark of language that is shackled ... with grammar precepts “. He also maintained that grammar could be picked up through simply communicating: “By exercise of reading, writing, and speaking ... all things belonging to Grammar, will without labour, and whether we will or not, thrust themselves upon us.”

Webbe was one of the earliest educators to question the value of grammar instruction, but certainly not the last. In fact, no other issue has so preoccupied theorists and practitioners as the grammar debate, and the counterclaims for and against the teaching of grammar. Differences in attitude to the role of grammar underpin differences between methods, between teachers, and between learners. It is a subject that everyone involved in language teaching and learning has an opinion on. And these opinions are often strongly and uncompromisingly stated. Here, for example, are a number of recent statements on the subject:

There is no doubt that a knowledge – implicit or explicit - of grammatical rules is essential for the mastery of a language. (Penny Ur, a teacher trainer, and author of *Grammar Practice Activities*, 1988: 4)

The effects of grammar teaching ... appear to be peripheral and fragile. (Stephen Krashen, an influential, if controversial, applied linguist, 1985)

A sound knowledge of grammar is essential if pupils are going to use English creatively. (Tom Hutchinson, a coursebook writer, 1987: 2)

Grammar is not the basis of language acquisition, and the balance of linguistic research clearly invalidates any view to the contrary. (Michael Lewis, a popular writer on teaching methods, 1986).

“Grammar is not very important: The majority of languages have a very complex grammar. English has little grammar and consequently it is not very important to understand it.” (From the publicity of a London language school)

In the traditional model of ELT, grammar played a central role to the detriment of the other language components. The overriding importance attached to grammar was based on the assumption that accuracy (grammatical correctness) secured successful communication. The belief was challenged in the early 1970s with the realization that grammar knowledge was only one component of the communicative competence (alongside discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence). Consequently, grammar teaching was almost abandoned; it is only recently that grammar has regained its rightful place in an integrated approach to language teaching. (Murar and Trantescu 2016: 58- 59)

As Vîlceanu points out in one of her articles on teaching, “it is commonplace that teaching methodologies in the 21st century are student-centred and that quality training programmes underpin competence-based curricula, recognizing learning outcomes deriving from the academic context and the workplace alike”. (Vîlceanu 2013: 873)

Since so little is known (still!) about how languages are acquired, we will try to avoid taking an entrenched position on the issue. Rather, by sifting the arguments for and against, it is hoped that readers will be in a better position to make up their own minds. Let’s first look at the case for grammar. There are many arguments for putting grammar in the foreground in second language teaching. Here are seven of them.

The sentence-machine argument

Part of the process of language learning must be what is sometimes called item-learning that is the memorization of individual items such as words and phrases. However, there is a limit to the number of items a person can both retain and retrieve. Even travelers’ phrases books have limited usefulness – good for a three-week holiday, but there comes a point where we need to learn some patterns or rules to enable us to generate new sentences. That is to say, grammar. Grammar, after all, is a description of the regularities in a language, and knowledge of these regularities provides the learner with the means to generate a potentially enormous number of original sentences. The number of possible new sentences is constrained only by the vocabulary at the learner’s command and his or her creativity. Grammar is a kind of ‘sentence-making machine’. It follows that the teaching of grammar offers the learner the means for potentially limitless linguistic creativity.

The fine-tuning argument

The purpose of grammar seems to be to allow for greater subtlety of meaning than a merely lexical system can cater for. While it is possible to get a lot of communicative mileage out of simply stringing words and phrases together, there comes a point where ‘Me Tarzan, you Jane ‘ – type language fails to deliver , both in terms of intelligibility and in terms of appropriacy. This is particularly the case for written language, which generally needs to be more explicit than spoken language. For example, the following errors are likely to confuse the reader:

Last Monday night I was boring in my house.

After speaking a lot time with him I thought that him attracted me.

The teaching of grammar, it is argued, serves as a corrective against the kind of ambiguity represented in these examples.

The fossilisation argument

It is possible for highly motivated learners with a particular aptitude for languages to achieve amazing levels of proficiency without any formal study. But more often ‘pick it up as you go along ‘learners reach a language plateau beyond which it is very difficult to progress. To put it technically, their linguistic competence fossilizes. Research suggests that learners who receive no instruction seem to be at risk of fossilizing sooner than those who do receive instruction. Of course, this doesn’t necessarily mean taking formal lessons – the grammar study can be self-directed, as in this case (from Christopher Isherwood’s autobiographical novel *Christopher and his kind*, 1976):