Teaching Situational Grammar Items Effectively

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Abstract

Traditional Foreign language curricula at Armenian schools have mainly focused on the grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation of the target language. The disparity between the gained knowledge of a foreign language and university classes aimed at enhancing communicative English in different situations, confuses our students. Knowing a lot of grammar but being unable to use their knowledge for any practical communicative purposes seems difficult for them. Thus, the paper argues that situational grammar items have become an integral feature of the language. At the same time the issue centers on those situational grammar items of English, Armenian learners need most.

Introduction

Traditional Foreign language curricula at Armenian schools have mainly focused on the grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation of the target language. Sticking to the traditional methods of language learning, which do not pay much attention to the Listening and Speaking skills, our teachers encourage students to learn the grammar rules and vocabulary as the main components of language learning. Pupils who have finished school gain the admission to the university English departments after they have passed a rigorous written examination. The latter mainly checks the applicants' reading comprehension and explicit grammar, on the basis of which they are admitted. The disparity between the knowledge of the foreign language gained at school and during university classes, which are aimed at enhancing communicative English in different situations, confuses our students. Knowing a lot of grammar but being unable to use their knowledge for any practical communicative purpose seems difficult for them.

Teachers of previous generations are well aware of this approach of foreign language learning as it has accompanied them all their lives. Times have changed. The demands of learners and methods of teaching have changed, too. With the natural process of globalization, rapid acquisition of foreign languages has gained an unprecedented importance. Say, the CEFR (2001:2) is concerned to improve the quality of communication among Europeans of different languages and cultural backgrounds; moreover it tries to help "to convert the diversity from the barrier to communication, into a source of mutual enrichment and understanding" (CEFR 2001:1) describes in a comprehensive way "what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively."

Thus, this article touches upon the problems of situational grammar items in spoken language, their teaching and students' contribution to effective learning.

Ways of Implementing Spoken Grammar

As it is stated in CEFR (2001:109), "language systems are of great complexity, and every language is in continuous evolution in response to its exigencies of its use in communication." Within this system **grammatical competence** is the ability to understand and express meaning by producing and recognizing well-formed phrases and sentences (2001:113).

We certainly view the implementation of spoken grammars as one of the most challenging areas in the practice of language teaching today.

Nobody denies that grammar is too important to be ignored, that without a good grounding of grammar, learners' language development will be severely impaired. However, the issue now centers on those grammar items of English that Armenian learners need most. The good knowledge of the student's native language is also too important. Even subconsciously, it can be exploited both by the teachers and students to reach understanding, because the existing knowledge helps to cope with the most controversial problems ranging from Phonology to the most difficult grammatical items.

Good grammar teaching often involves the teacher's inventive and typological approach when introducing different rules. By presenting convergent and divergent features present in the linguistic units of both languages we try to facilitate the grammar learning process and reach maximum perception. One of the components of communicative language competence is the **sociolinguistic element**, which strictly affects all language communication (Timmis 2005). It is clear that if there is a corresponding matching between the languages with regard to any language phenomena, it is easily studied or transferred. This kind of transferable knowledge facilitates the learners' task by just making small adjustments in the knowledge they have (Rose, Kasper 2001).

Situational grammar items are mainly found in spoken language which is most commonly an interactive, face-to-face process. Meanings are often created by referring to shared knowledge or by an understanding based on meaningful context. It is quite natural that in informal conversations there are a great number of linguistic errors, in addition to any kind of hesitation features, slips of tongues and a very high proportion of simultaneous speech or overlapping (Carter 2010). Most surprisingly language is tolerant of their occurrence and is bound to happen continuously. On the contrary, perfect fluency in terms of spoken language usage can produce a wrong effect. Thus, the changes involved in morphological and syntactical levels as well as in grammatical semantics, which deal with the meaning of grammatical elements, categories, structures and processes, are not few. Situational grammar reflects the range of tense and aspect choices open to speakers to create appropriate interpersonal meanings.

Here are some examples of spoken grammar taken from our textbooks, mainly from Cunningham, S., Moor P. (2010) *Cutting Edge Advanced* (student's book). I would like to present them and draw parallels between English and Armenian wherever possible.

1. **Word order and positioning** in many casual conversations in English are generally more flexible, like in Armenian. Adjuncts may occur after tags, as in the sentence, *You saw her, the author of the book, didn't you, in the club? Դու տեսար չէ՞ նրան` գրքի հեղինակին, ակումբում:*

Armenian always employs a negative tag, and due to its flexibility the latter can be put before adjuncts, like in the situational patterns in English. Other examples of inversion which occur after the interjections *Boy! Wow!, Man!* are:

Boy, is it hot today!

Աղվա՞ծ իմ, ինչ շոգ է այսօր:

It's a rare quality, but man, do you know when you have found it!

Նա հազակի երևույթ է, բայց դու, հասկալապ, չգիտեիր այդ մասին, երբ նրան գտար:

2. **Singular nouns after plural measurement expressions**

   He's about six foot tall.

   In Armenian the noun is always in singular after measurement expressions.

   Նա մոտ վեց ոտնաչափի հասակ ունի:

3. **Double negation**

   He won't be late I don't think.

   Նա չի ուշանա, չեմ կարծում:

   Double, even triple negation is standard in both spoken and written Armenian. This occurs when negative adverbials such as *never-երբեք, nowhere-ոչ մի տեղ, no way-ոչ մի կ, nothing-ոչինչ* appear in the same context with a negative verb form.

   Nobody knew anything about it.

   Այդ մասին ոչ որք ոչինչ չգիտեր:

4. **Split infinitives** are very common in spoken and written English. We cannot split infinitives in Armenian, as they are synthetic inseparable forms.

   I had to put the phone down and phone up again to actually speak to a human. (Cunningham 2010).

5. **The use of progressive forms** with verbs which are not usually found in progressive contexts, for example:

   So your new film. When will we be seeing that? or *Will you be needing anything else?* or *I was wondering if you could recommend a restaurant.*

   Meanwhile, there is no differentiation between present simple and continuous in Armenian.

6. **The use of spoken contracted** forms such as *gonna* (going to), *wanna* (want to), and so on are not transferable in Armenian.

7. **The occurrence of "get-passive"** in informal spoken contexts is more frequent than the 'be-passive'.

   One guy got lost on his way to work the day after the experiment. He got stuck in the traffic. (not found in Armenian).

8. **Some words have quite different meanings** from their usual ones. For instance, *pretty* means *quite, class - style* or *skill, hot - sexy, cool - fashionable, babe - a very attractive woman, thing* in the meaning of *girl/woman* often collocates with *little*, the interjection *boy* adds emphasis to the sentence (Cunningham 2010), etc.

   All these words, I should say, have their corresponding equivalents in Armenian. However, if the **assimilation** appears quite easy in English, Armenian shows strong resistance to the integration of such words into Standard Armenian. These words might be found mainly in colloquial speech characteristic of small social groups.

9. **Conversational turns** which consist of separate words, phrases, or of clauses with subordination that are apparently not attached to any main clause, and so forth, are typical of both English and Armenian conversation. The picture is that well-formed sentences exist side by side with a variety of **elliptical units** and are as understandable as full-length sentences with traditional word order. In spoken language the status of words, phrases and clauses as independent units grows, whereas the role of the sentence as a main target unit for communication is downplayed (Carter 1997). This happens, because many items and speech patterns reflect the interpersonal dimension, apart from the fact that whatever the conversation refers to is physically and visually present before the speakers. The same phenomenon is observed in the Armenian conversation with ellipsis, omissions of main parts or incomplete clauses.

10. **Conversion** which involves changing a word from one word class to another has become very common in both oral and written situational patterns and continues to produce new forms. Besides the most common conversion of verbs into nouns or nouns into verbs (*to minute, to text, to email, to impact, a download*) other word classes are also involved in conversion: verbs from preposition and adjective (*to up, to wrong*); nouns from conjunction, preposition, modal verbs and adjectives (*a big if, ups and downs, a must; Would you come to a close please?*). Conversion of phrases into adjective compounds is also possible: *a good-for-nothing brother of his*, two *for-the-price-of-one*, *a fly-on-the-wall documentary, state-of-the-art construction,* etc. (Carter & McCarthy 2010). Armenian varies greatly in this respect, too, as such a word formation is rarely possible or admissible in this language.

11. **The usage of will/won't, could, would,** etc. in the if-clauses has become possible in both spoken language or in business letters which express polite requests, refusal and sometimes annoyance (Novogradec 2009).
Imagine the reality if you will. or
I would be grateful if you would send me information.
Being cut off from the English-speaking environment it's really hard to feel the difference between using future constructions and omitting them in **if-clauses**. Armenian conditionals are unlikely to take modals in if-clauses unless it is stylistically motivated.

12. **The use of sequences of two or more nouns** is becoming a very productive pattern for expressing new concepts. Increasing number of these constructions are found in the situational grammar, in different corpora. Structures like genitives or prepositional postmodifiers are giving way to N+N structures as compact packages of information. E.g. *distance learning, floor board, ocean floor, dinosaur bones, group sessions, bank insurance system,* etc. Longer sequences of nouns are also possible like *Yerevan State University Philology Chair* instead of *Chair of Philology of Yerevan State University* or *Corporate counsel association* instead of *Association of corporate counsel*. As a synthetic language Armenian creates such sequences exceptionally by means of cases.

Language Use through Corpus

Thus, the need to investigate spoken grammar is urgent within the language teaching profession as teaching keeps on being a way of facilitating the learning process. In ped-

agogical grammar there is more need for the individual judgment of teachers to what and how to teach. Methodological innovations in the teaching process are a norm. Communicative methodology stresses the importance of speaking skills. The important criterion here for spoken grammar is that irregularities and anomalies that may go against the grammarians' instincts concerning correctness or acceptability of this or that phenomenon should first be checked as to their distribution across speakers and contexts (McCarthy 1998).

Michael Halliday (1961:259) who considers the basic nature of language as probabilistic and not as "always this and never that", has recently refocused on this problem with the help of the corpus evidence, as searching a corpus continually reveals new insights into language structure and use. This approach proved to be very useful in adopting many forms and structures into Standard English. O'Keeffe, A., McCarthy, M. & Carter, R. (2007:8) define concordancing as a core tool in corpus linguistics which refers to using the corpus software to find every occurrence of a particular word or phrase. Such beginnings of using corpora also mark the beginning of incorporating them into the language classroom. Students are free to implement spoken grammars into their oral speech. They are able to see and define the problem due to wider interaction with international students worldwide. When, with the help of our students, a sufficient number of examples from different speakers in different contexts suggest that a feature sounds good and is quite widespread, then it should be accepted in the grammar, even though it may still be unacceptable in more formal contexts or in writing (Collins-COBUILD1990). A thorough examination of a spoken corpus side by side with a good, balanced, written one suggests that relevant differences can be revealed and entered into the grammar wherever necessary.

Conclusion
Following the recent research on corpus-based study of pedagogical materials and linguistic features presented in them, we can see the importance of teaching language on the basis of live materials produced through corpus-based findings. In order to evaluate the materials that we use in the classroom, it would be very helpful to see how some problematic grammatical features appear in more natural texts. Viewing the topic from different angles and perspectives with regard to teaching situational grammar items effectively, we have come to the conclusion that situational grammar items are an integral feature of the language, and the language system, regardless of our will, is tolerant to their occurrence.

1) The pluralingual approach, in conjunction with the typological analysis, helps to build up communicative competence, to which all knowledge and experience of the native language contributes, and in which languages interrelate and interact.

2) The lack of text authenticity in our grammar books has led to using the corpora, which provides natural examples instead of contrived ones.

3) Careful analysis of the corpora proves to be very useful both to students in learning specific language structures applicable to their needs and teachers in developing more interesting natural environment in the English language classroom.

Thus, the pedagogical grammar of the spoken language must therefore ensure that the full functional range of choices is described and made available to learners, who should not be artificially restricted by proscriptive rules based only on written data (Timmis 2005). Moreover, Geoffrey Leech (2000:715) guarantees that the evidence of lesser exploitation of grammar in conversation on various levels and the need for integration of new understandings of spoken grammar in a larger discourse is inevitable.

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Իրադրային քերականության արդյունավետ ուսուցում

Օտար լեզվի ավանդական դասավանդումը հայկական դպրոցներում սահմանափակվում է քերականության, բառապաշարի և արտասանության ուսուցումով: Դպրոցում ստացած գիտելիքի անհամատեղելիությունը համալսարանում անհրաժեշտ պրակտիկ հաղորդակցական հմտությունների հետ շշոքեցնում է մեր ուսանողին: Բավականաչափ քերականության և բառապաշարի տիրապետելով` ուսանողը դժվարանում է հաղորդակցվել: Հոդվածում քննարկվում է լեզվի անբաժանելի մաս դարձած իրադրային քերականական կառույցների ուսուցման անհրաժեշտությունը, որը հնարավոր է արդյունավետ կազմակերպել կորպուսի (բնագրային տեքստերի էլեկտրոնային ժողովածու) ուսումնասիրության, հայերենի և անգլերենի լեզվաբանական տիպաբանական վերլուծության և հաղորդակցական մեթոդիկայի օգնությամբ, որը կարևորում է խոսակցական հմտությունների անհրաժեշտությունը լեզվի ուսուցման գործընթացում:

Эффективное обучение ситуационной грамматике

Традиционные учебные программы иностранных языков в армянских школах, в основном, направлены на развитие грамматических, лексических и произносительных навыков изучаемого языка. Основная проблема заключается в несоответствии между приобретенными школьными знаниями и университетскими требованиями овладения коммуникативной компетенцией. Имея определенные грамматические и лексические знания, студенты, тем не менее, не способны их применять на практике. В статье рассматривается необходимость обучения конструкциям ситуационной грамматики, как неотъемлемой части языка. По мнению автора, это возможно посредством изучения корпуса языка, а также коммуникативной методики, в основе которой лежит развитие речевой деятельности при обучении иностранному языку.