

SOME STRUCTURE-AWARENESS ACTIVITIES TO HELP WEAK LEARNERS OF ENGLISH IMPROVE THEIR STRUCTURAL KNOWLEDGE

San Shwe Baw*

Abstract

Not being able to construct structurally correct sentences is one of the major problems facing our students nowadays. Unless we teachers can help them overcome this serious problem with some effective methodology, our attempt to help them improve their proficiency in English, especially in writing skills, will not make much headway. Of the numerous ways that I have used to help my learners familiarize with English structures, the ones I am going to discuss in the article below have proved to be more effective without causing much boredom among the learners.

บทคัดย่อ

ปัญหาสำคัญประการหนึ่งของนักศึกษาปัจจุบันคือ การสร้างประโยคที่มีโครงสร้างประโยคถูกต้อง อาจารย์ผู้สอนจะต้องช่วยนักศึกษาโดยใช้วิธีการสอนที่มีประสิทธิภาพ มิฉะนั้นจะไม่สามารถพัฒนาความสามารถในการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษของนักศึกษาได้ โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งในด้านทักษะการเขียน ผู้เขียนบทความได้ใช้วิธีการต่าง ๆ เพื่อช่วยให้นักศึกษาเข้าใจโครงสร้างประโยคภาษาอังกฤษ และในบทความนี้ ผู้เขียนได้นำเสนอวิธีการที่ได้พิสูจน์แล้วว่ามีความมีประสิทธิภาพมากกว่าวิธีอื่นและไม่ทำให้นักศึกษาเกิดความเบื่อหน่าย

INTRODUCTION

Any teacher of English with a few years of teaching experience will definitely notice that students' problems with learning English are many-faceted, depending on the degree to which their native language differs from

English. Among them, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, differences between spoken and written English and varieties of English may be the most common ones. However, the most unfortunate of them all, which is being pointed at both by students and the teachers alike as being the most responsible factor

*Asst. Prof. San Shwe Baw joined Assumption University in 1995, and teaches English courses provided by the IELE. Previously, back in his country, he had taught English at the Rangoon University for twelve years. He is the Supervising Editor of ABAC Journal. He holds B.A (English), the Institute of Education, Rangoon; Advanced Diploma in ELT, Leeds University, UK; and M.A (TESOL), St. Michael's College, U.S.A. Six of his ELT articles have so far been published in America – three by the English Teaching Forum and three by Essential Teacher, a quarterly for members of TESOL.

for the students' learning problem, is grammar. That grammar is taking all the blame both from the students and the teachers is not surprising at all because most of our students' writings are almost grammarless to the extent that some students even do not seem to be aware of the existence of grammar at all. What our students are not actually aware of, however, is that their main seemingly insurmountable problem with learning English is not just grammar, which in most cases can be remedied. For example, their grammar problems may cover those involving the use of tense, aspect, and mood forms, functions of auxiliaries, modal verbs, idiomatic usage, articles, subject/verb agreement, etc. Though the level of difficulty with regard to these areas may differ from student to student, experience has told me that the students' weaknesses in these areas can be improved by using a combination of both traditional and modern approaches methodically. In fact, what our learners misconstrue to be as their main problem in learning English is not exactly grammar, but syntax – the rules and principles that govern the sentence structure of any individual language. We often come across a situation when a student's writing is full of errors, yet we cannot do much except underling most parts of the writing. This is because their writing is nothing more than a random gathering of words lacking order and organization, and the only way to improve this kind of writing is for the teacher to rewrite it himself or herself. Since a teacher cannot rewrite the essays of all the students in a class, the option of re-writing is a nonstarter, which leaves us with only one thing to do: to help our students familiarize with the syntax of English. The truth is if their sentences are syntactically less faulty, we teachers may not have much difficulty in

helping our students handle their grammatical errors in the areas mentioned earlier.

The Main Factor Responsible for the Students' Weaknesses in Syntax and Finding a Remedy

For a student learning English in an English-speaking country, his or her exposure to English is automatic because wherever s/he goes, English can be heard and seen. However, for a student learning English in an EFL country, exposure has to be created, either by going to places (like English clubs or conversation classes) where English is spoken, or by reading English books as often as possible. Not surprisingly, these two things will be the last two things most of our students would do willingly in their lives. So the outcome is they know a certain amount of vocabulary and grammar from their English classes, but the sentence they write is not in conformity with the English structure. Some of their sentences are the direct result of translating their thoughts in their mother tongue into English, which in some cases are almost unintelligible. For the sake of authenticity, let me cite one such example taken from an essay entitled 'Playing Sports vs. Playing Computer Games', a comparison and contrast essay a student wrote in her mid-term exam paper. Everything is the same except that only two of the four paragraphs are quoted to save space.

Playing Sports vs. Playing Computer Games

Nowaday, have many thing attractive ourself everywhere have the big poster advertisement for make people interesting such

as video games, new computer games or 3D animation Everything update follow the era and the boy the girl also our new generation it like the victim of the computer games.

Who like to playing sports, sports is the good activity that everyone must support and always teach our new generation transmission Sports is can give a lot of benefit moreover sports activity will help the family strongly and sports not spend a lot of money like playing computer games. Sport will help the body became perfect and mind became good also we will get the good shape and healthy by playing sports. Even inside or outside it will give benefit too. Somebody prefer to swimming inside but somebody prefer to play football outside even we don't like same thing but we can manage time for fulfillment in family and make everyone in family be healthy.

If we study the above writing, it is quite evident that the student has no vocabulary problem at all. Since this is the essay she wrote in her mid-term exam paper, she definitely had no way to rely on her talking dictionary. However, her writing cannot attract the readers' interest much because of poor organization and syntactically-flawed sentences. There are still many students like her and some are even worse. Needless to say, this student should be first and foremost given help with syntax before other grammatical errors in her writing can be explained to her. The rationale of my statement here is that the more serious problem should be dealt with first before the minor ones are remedied. In this connection, we need to think about what kind of remedial action can be taken in our part as teachers. The best thing should be to get the student immersed in English books and in English-speaking environments as much as possible. However, the saying "You can take a horse

to water, but you cannot make it drink" seems to be reminding us that what we can do as teachers is just guide them what to do, and whether they follow our suggestions or not totally depends on them. Anyway, it has become imperative for us that an alternative way should be explored in order to save those who are not very willing to let themselves exposed to the English (i.e. by reading books or joining places where English is used) available in their community. This thought has inspired me to design the following activities, which I have employed with some success while teaching English privately in my country years back. Here at AU, I have just used some of these activities on an experimental basis with one section and found out that most of the students follow the activities with enthusiasm. It will be difficult, however, to assess whether they are effective with other students here unless sufficient time required to do the activities can be allotted into the program.

Rationale behind My Structure-awareness Activities

The main reason why our students cannot write correct English sentences is because they themselves are poor readers who have difficulty understanding texts suitable to their level. Our students do not read much, and if we ask them why, their answer may be quite obvious: they do not understand what they read. Though a student may overcome most of his or her comprehension problems through reading persistently however daunting the task may be, and may thus be consequently able to improve their writing skills, the one who never reads will not make much progress in writing despite coming to English classes regularly. However, there is still a slim hope that a

student's interest in reading English may be revived if help is given to them with regard to some of the factors which make reading English difficult for them. Nuttall (1985) examines five reasons why a sentence may be difficult to unravel syntactically in her book "Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language":

- (a) Complex noun groups
- (b) Nominalization
- (c) Co-ordination
- (d) Subordination
- (e) Participial and prepositional phrases as modifiers

In the same book, she also mentions that the ability to chunk a text into sense units, each consisting of several words, is one characteristic of an efficient reader. She even shows an example of how we could get our students to recognize sense groups and take in longer groups with each eye fixation thus:

In this way
it is hoped
he will accustom himself
to taking in
increasingly long chunks of text
at a single fixation.

It is not my intention, however, to help the students with their reading and writing problems by exactly following the suggestions provided by Nuttall in her book. Definitely, my activities have their theoretical base on her suggestions but they are pretty much learner-oriented. By going through these activities, the students will be made to familiarize with the syntax of English, which self-motivated readers learn automatically and unconsciously in their process of reading. In other words, they could be helped to get personally involved in the structure-awareness activities designed in line with Nuttall's sugges-

tions, without having to bother with the terms such as 'Complex noun groups, Nominalization, Co-ordination, etc'. They are expected to absorb these concepts unconsciously as they do the activities.

The Activities

There are two types of activities, the first type to be done individually and the second type to be done by the whole class. In the first type, the students are given a paragraph with the sense groups in a jumbled order. The students are supposed to study each sense group and rearrange them into a proper sentence until they finally get a coherent paragraph. The following is an example:

Type 1

Rearrange the jumbled sense groups in the following paragraph to make it a coherent one.

Frank Wilcox /in Lansett County /has been chief of police /for 25 years. He /when he took the job /had just turned 30. He /has seen /murders. He /has seen /robberies. He /stuck in trees /has seen cats. missing children /He has found. Today /would be like /no other. It is /11:00 at night. Chief Wilcox /putting together /begins /his things. He is tired. He /wants /to go home. "Chief Wilcox", /walking quickly into his office/ calls an officer. It is /Officer Simpson. He /looks nervous. He looks like /he would like /to be anywhere /else but there. "What is it, Simpson?" /asks the Chief. "Holman's Grocery /at gun point /was just held up", Simpson says. His voice/ is shaky. He coughs/ his throat/ to clear. "Was anyone hurt?" /asks Chief. Lansett /is a very small county. The Chief knows/

who lives there /just about everyone. If anyone was hurt, he knows who it was/ there is a good chance. Maybe /Officer Simpson looks nervous/ that's why. "No one/ was hurt", says Simpson. "But / caught / we/ the suspect". "Ah, well, Simpson. You guys /can take care of that. I'm--", in mid-sentence/ Chief Wilcox / stops /. what is wrong /He understands. From behind Officer Simpson, his youngest daughter /the Chief sees, Devon. She/ is /in handcuffs. / gets a lump/ in his throat /Chief Wilcox. He /is /in disbelief. "How could it be?" he thinks. "Devon, what is going on /will you please tell me?" the Chief demands. does not/ Devon / look at him. The Chief / anger /growing inside of him /can feel /. He refuses /show /that anger / to let. "Take her back /for questioning", the Chief/ to Officer Simpson /says / in a calm voice. "Devon, whatever you do /, tell the truth", the Chief says. "I'm your dad. I love you. We will figure this out".

Finally, the students are expected to come up with the following rearranged paragraph.

Frank Wilcox has been chief of police in Lansett County for 25 years. He had just turned 30 when he took the job. He has seen murders. He has seen robberies. He has seen cats stuck in trees. He has found missing children. Today would be like no other. It is 11:00 at night. Chief Wilcox begins putting together his things. He is tired. He wants to go home. "Chief Wilcox", calls an officer walking quickly into his office. It is Officer Simpson. He looks nervous. He looks like he would like to be anywhere else but there. "What is it, Simpson?" asks the Chief. "Holman's Grocery was just held up at gun point", Simpson says. His voice

is shaky. He coughs to clear his throat. "Was anyone hurt?" asks Chief. Lansett is a very small county. The Chief knows just about everyone who lives there. If anyone was hurt, there is a good chance he knows who it was. Maybe that's why Officer Simpson looks nervous. "No one was hurt", says Simpson. "But we caught the suspect". "Ah, well, Simpson. You guys can take care of that. I'm--", Chief Wilcox stops in mid-sentence. He understands what is wrong. From behind Officer Simpson, the Chief sees his youngest daughter, Devon. She is in handcuffs. Chief Wilcox gets a lump in his throat. He is in disbelief. "How could it be?" he thinks. "Devon, will you please tell me what is going on?" the Chief demands. Devon does not look at him. The Chief can feel anger growing inside of him. He refuses to let that anger show. "Take her back for questioning", the Chief says to Officer Simpson in a calm voice. "Devon, whatever you do, tell the truth", the Chief says. "I'm your dad. I love you. We will figure this out".

The Expected Outcome

It will be too naive to expect that the students' writing skills will be improved overnight by doing this kind of activity. However, we cannot deny the remedial property of this activity which will have direct effects on our weak students. As discussed earlier, most of our students are not good at organizing their ideas in writings, and, even worse, they are not familiar with the rules and principles that govern the sentence structure of English – say the rules of syntax. By doing this kind of activity repeatedly, they will be aware that a

grammatically correct English sentence is composed of a number of sense groups which take their places in a sentence based on a certain principle. Though no explicit explanation is given by the teacher which rule governs how (i.e. subordination, participial and prepositional phrases as modifiers, etc), they will gradually become familiar with each structure as they practise more.

Type 2

The second type of activity is more like a game participated by the whole class. It is a game where the students will be practically playing with phrases and clauses. We can roughly say that if a student can use phrases and clauses properly in writing with few mistakes, his or her grammar is quite satisfactory. That is why we often explain to them both the forms and functions of these phrases and clauses, quite analytically in most cases. To admit frankly, most of our students are not very interested in such kind of analytical explanation, and our attempt often results in their becoming bored. The aim of this game is to help our students familiarize with each component of a sentence simply by participating in the game without relying much on the teacher. To do this activity, I prepare a set of about twenty or so sentences and cut them into pieces according to their category (i.e. noun clause/ noun phrase/ adjective clause/ adjective phrase/ adverb clause/ adverb phrase, etc). For example, the sentence 'The pickpocket who snatched my wallet last week will be tried in a local court' will be divided like this: The pickpocket /who snatched my wallet last week /will be tried /in a local court/. The number of sentences to be used in the game depends much on the num-

ber of the students in class. At the start of the game, the students are distributed with three or four pieces of paper containing parts of sentences and then they are asked to go about the classroom making matches with their peers to construct meaningful sentences. Depending on the focus of the grammatical unit to be taught, the numbers of the pieces of paper may differ. For example, though four paper cuttings are required to teach an adjective clause, a verb phrase and an adverb phrase in the example sentence above, only two piece will be needed to teach a compound sentence like. He is highly educated,/ but he is not proud. Whenever they manage to make a sentence (sometimes in cooperation with two students, sometimes even three or four), they come to the blackboard and write their sentence. The classroom looks a little bit chaotic during the game, but the fact that they are learning grammar enthusiastically by participating in the activity themselves a sort of makes up for the chaos. Roughly speaking, my students take about one hour to finish a game in which they require to make twenty sentences. But the time they take depends much on the complexity of the grammar being introduced rather than the number of sentences they produce.

Follow-up Activities

Very often, the activity is not finished even after they have written their sentences on the blackboard because they want to know whether the sentences they have constructed in collaboration are right or wrong. Every time this game is played, explanations with regard to the structures have to be made because there are errors resulting from the mismatches of the sentence parts. To cite an example of

such experience, a pair of students produce a sentence ‘**Although he is very rich, he lives in the city**’, whereas the correct combination should be ‘**Although he is very rich, he is rather stingy**’. In fact, the main clause ‘he lives in the city’ is to be matched with the subordinate clause ‘**Because he doesn’t like the countryside**’. One positive outcome here is that the analytical explanation of grammar works in this situation because they are fully motivated to learn. For example, though we may probably witness a lot of raised-eyebrows when we explain the students that the phrase ‘in the plate’ is adjective in the sentence ‘He ate the food **in the plate**’, whereas the same phrase is adverb in the sentence ‘He put the food **in the plate**’, it may require the students to make just one mistake in the matching before they become aware of the different functions of the phrase. Thus, the knowledge they gain by doing this kind of activity is profound because they are learning the sophisticated parts of grammar by being involved in the use of them. Of course, they may not be learning any of the grammatical terms being practised, but it is undeniable that learning the concept is more important than knowing their terms.

CONCLUSION

There may not be a particular method or approach which is universally liked and accepted by the students everywhere. Otherwise, the saying ‘One man’s food is another’s poison’ would not have come into being. I have tried the above activities with many senior students in my country, and found out that at least they are not bored with doing these activities. This is because they are mo-

tivated. If the students are motivated, they learn. When I do these activities in my country, I even encourage them to speak in English in trying to make the correct matches with the ones that their friends have. Situations like negotiation, argument, concession and the like are very common phenomena and it is natural that they use the terms and expressions relevant to the situations they are in while being motivated. In accordance with the saying ‘The proof of the pudding is in the eating’, fellow teachers are encouraged to try some of these activities in order to find out how much they can be supportive.

REFERENCE

Nuttall, C. (1985). *Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language*. Heineman