

Difficulties of Teaching and Learning English Language in an EFL Context

Sreeja S Nair

Introduction

Instruction of grammar in EFL context has been a major issue for teachers and students alike over decades. The English teacher is often portrayed as an "unattractive grammar monger" whose only pleasure in life is to point out the faults of others" (Baron, 1982, p.226). Students often have a feeling of discomfort and terror at the mention of grammar. Teachers put in a lot of efforts to make grammar classes interesting, imaginative and fruitful. In order to make grammar classes effective, it is very important to find out the difficulties faced by teachers and students in the teaching and learning of grammar.

Mother tongue interference

The first and the foremost difficulty in learning a second language is the interference of one's mother tongue. Mother tongue or native language is the speaker's dominant or home language. Mother tongue interference refers to the influence of the learner's mother tongue on the acquisition of the target language. Target language is the language, the learner aims to learn. Here the target language is English. Out of the four-fold language skills i.e. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, mother tongue interferes much on the speaking skill. Mother tongue interference affects a person's thought process in a way that he thinks in his mother tongue and expresses in the target language. Since they are influenced by the sound pattern of their mother tongue, they tend to pronounce English words in the same way as they pronounce their mother tongue. Students sometime use words from their mother tongue during their communication

in English. In mother tongue, the child first listens to the elders' speech, and then he starts imitating them by speaking certain words, followed by reading and writing. But this natural order is not followed in English learning. So, the primary aim of any language, i.e. speaking is unattainable.

Most of the English instructors use their mother tongue to teach English language in the classroom. Non native teachers find it easy to teach English language in their mother tongue and they translate the whole lesson into their mother tongue. Even the vocabulary and grammar are translated to the first language. Students find it easy to comprehend the text but the real aim of teaching English is forgotten. Moreover, it is not possible to translate each and every item into the mother tongue. Translating English idioms and phrases will change or destroy the meaning completely.

Exceptions to the Rules of Grammar

English grammar, as we all know, is a bit confusing and monotonous. Most of the rules are complex and many of them have exceptions. Some have no particular logic and must be learned blindly. A student should be taught 'subject verb agreement' as a part of basic grammar. When we teach them the agreement between subject and verb, the first rule is that 'if a subject is singular, the verb is singular and when a subject is plural, the verb is also plural'. The next moment we tell them that this rule is not applicable to the subjects 'I' and 'You'. So, the students find it difficult to follow the rules blindly. A lot of exceptions to the rules of grammar could be found in English Language.

Lack of English-speaking environment

Lack of English-speaking environment is a major issue that Indian students face in their day to day life. Many students coming from households, where English is not spoken regularly limit their exposure to the language. Pupils learn a language through conversation and interaction and lack of such an environment hinders effective communication. They do not develop active skills i.e. speaking and

creative writing. Since they don't have any opportunities to practice and make mistakes, Indian students lack confidence while speaking in English. In mother tongue, children resort to listening, mimicry and adaptation in the beginning. They hear an expression, deduce its meaning from the contexts, and then they repeat it. Later they change or add new words to their vocabulary. This is how language is acquired in mother tongue but for English language, we start with reading and writing.

Un phonetic Language

English is not a phonetic language. A phonetic language is the one which is read as it is written. In English we have 26 alphabets, but we can't connect all these alphabets to the sounds we need to produce. There is no one to one correspondence between an alphabet and the sound it produces. So, we have 44 sounds in English. Some words can have the same spelling but different pronunciation. For e.g., in the sentences, 'I have read (red) the book' and 'I like to read' (ri:d), the word 'read' is spelled alike but pronounced differently. In the same way in the sentences 'I have read (red) that book' and 'Red (red) is my favourite colour', the words 'read' and 'red' are spelled differently but pronounced alike. Similar is the case with silent letters. The letter 'b' is silent in 'doubt' and 'debt' and 'p' is silent in 'psychology' and 'pneumonia'. This also poses a lot of problems to the non-native speakers.

Complexities of tenses

'Time' is a dimension covering three areas; present, past and future and that every action or process will be set in at least one of these time frames. In English language, again these tenses are subdivided into four categories i.e. simple, continuous, perfect and perfect continuous tenses which arouse confusion among students.

Absence of Evaluation of Speaking Skills

Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing are the four-fold language skills. Out of these, speaking and writing are active or productive skills and listening and reading are passive or receptive skills. Examinations

give importance only to the writing skill. Writing of the students is the only skill which is tested in the examinations. Getting a good grade or rank is considered to be the ultimate aim. For that, students merely mug up the answers and reproduce it exactly in the examination paper. Language is primarily speech. But the speaking skill is not tested and the real aim of language learning is completely forgotten.

Synonyms of English

English language has got a lot of synonyms. A synonym is a word that means exactly or nearly the same as another word. But the problem with the synonym is that it is not always possible to substitute one word in the place of another. For example, the word 'start' is synonymous with the words 'begin', 'commence', 'initiate' etc. We can say 'Let us start the exam' and substitute the word 'start' with 'begin' and say "Let us begin the exam" but we can't say 'Let us begin the car' instead of 'Let us start the car'.

Conclusion

In the light of the above discussed problems, it is evident that the role of the English teacher is vital. By employing different methods of teaching, the teacher can create interest among the learners towards language learning. The teacher should create a learning environment where students could practice the language skills and use language with ease and comfort. The motivation given by teachers to use language freely without fear is very important. Regular feedback given by teachers makes the student more confident. Students should be given maximum exposure to language by conducting group discussions, role playing, and language games.

Works Cited

- Al - Mekhlafi, Abdu Muhammed and Ramani, PerurNagaratnam.
"Difficulties in Teaching and Learning Grammar in an EFL Context".
International Journal of Instruction, Vol. 4. No. 2, July 2011, 69-92.

- Denizer, Elif Nur, "Does Mother Tongue Interfere in Second Language Learning". *Journal of Foreign Language Education and Technology*. 2017. <https://www.jflet.com/articles/does-mother-tongue-interfere-in-second-language-learning.pdf>
- Jyotsana, "Problems of Teaching and Learning English in India and a Role of a Teacher". *International Journal of Creative Research Thought*. <https://ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT2110170.pdf>
- Moothathu, V.K. *Concise English Grammar*, Oxford University Press, 2013.