STORY TELLING AS A TOOL FOR TEACHING PAST SIMPLE TENSE AT PRIMARY LEVEL

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Introduction

The aim of my article is to present story telling as a tool for teaching Past Simple Tense to students aged 11 – 13. Teaching grammar has always been the subject of my interest because English grammar is one of the most difficult language skills to be taught and at the same time to be learned. Especially tenses are those grammar items that English language learners find very difficult to learn. It is important for a teacher to choose, from a variety of options, such techniques for grammar teaching which would facilitate learning process as well as make it very enjoyable and rewarding. And story telling seems to be the technique that meets those two things because stories have a great learning value. Owing to them learners develop their abilities of analysis and expression. What is more, stories may also make the learners boost their confidence, which consequently ensures better emotional development.

As far as learners’ age is concerned I have chosen primary level, specifically students whose age ranges from 11 to 13, because in my opinion teaching grammar to those learners is particularly difficult. That is the main reason why I would like to take advantage of stories in my own teaching in order to encourage my students to learn grammar.

The role of grammar in English Language Teaching

Teaching grammar in English Language Teaching has always been the subject of interest for both teachers and theorists who deal with methodological aspects of foreign language teaching. With the development of communicative approaches and methods towards English Language Teaching there was not so much emphasis put on the teaching of grammar. It was more important to find out how people learn foreign languages and what they want to convey than to study the importance of grammar in ELT. What is more there were some theorists that believed that teaching grammar to language learners did not help them to use the language. According to them the main aim of ELT should be to make learners able to communicate in the target language. So it is enough to provide the students with certain functions such as requesting, introducing, apologizing and so on if they are to be understood by native speakers without the need for teaching grammar to them. But on the other hand, it cannot be forgotten that all the language functions consist of grammatical elements. As a result, the students do really need to learn grammar in order to become capable of performing language functions properly. That is the crucial reason why grammar should be taught because the knowledge of grammar rules enables foreign language learners to generate new sentences. Moreover, owing to grammar they organize the language into some categories, which makes learning grammar items more pleasant and enjoyable.

To conclude, the teacher should be aware of the fact that teaching English language cannot take place without grammar teaching because this aspect of language, according to Jeremy Harmer (1995:7), “[h]as a real and important place in the classroom.” It is not enough to pick up grammar through communication. The learners have to know it as well.

Teaching Past Simple Tense to learners aged 11 – 13

As far as language learning is concerned there are three groups of learners: children, adolescents and adults. Age factor is one of the most important factors that cannot be omitted in language teaching and learning. It is essential for the teacher to learn about her or his students’ personality if teaching and learning objectives are to be achieved successfully.

11 – 13 year old students represent the first group of language learners. Before children reach adulthood they have to go through different levels of cognitive development. According to Jean Piaget, who dealt with a study of the evolution of children's thinking, there are three stages of child's cognitive development:

1. The sensory – motor stage (0-2). At this stage children perceive and experience the world around them through senses and movements.
2. The pre-operational stage (2-7). At this level children's perception is still related to senses but they start to recognize and organize the data around them.
3. The operational stage (7-16). It is a very important stage because a transition from concrete operations to formal ones takes place around the age of eleven. Before this age children reason on the basis of concrete experience. They might be able to formulate a hypothesis in their minds but they still depend on the perceptual facts. When children are about 11 years old they reach the stage of formal operations, which means being capable of abstract thinking and conceptualizing. “[T]hey understand that ideas can be compared and classified, just as objects can. They shift from concrete operations to deductive reasoning, using premises common to their culture and experience” (Carole Wade & Carol Tavris, 1990:504).

The findings of Piaget's work give some implications for language teaching. First of all, as cognitive development is a cumulative process the teacher must regulate the level of difficulty. Secondly, with primary school children the formation of
Another factor that cannot be omitted when describing characteristic features of students whose age ranges from 11 to 13 is connected with neurological considerations. Because of the lateralization of the brain, certain functions are assigned to the right or the left hemisphere. It means that both hemispheres do not process the same function in a similar way and consequently language is not acquired similarly by the two parts of the brain. The teacher has to be aware of the fact that there are two types of learners in the class: right-brain dominant and left-brain dominant. Such division requires that the teacher must take into account different learning styles of students when planning a lesson.

Other important features of primary level students are openness to new experiences and eagerness to learn about something new. But on the other hand, 11-13 year olds have rather short attention span. That inability to concentrate on a task for a longer time “forces” the teacher to use short and varied activities if he or she does not want his or her students to get bored. What is more, 11-13 aged learners have also short memory span. The fact that primary level students learn quickly but at the same time they forget quickly demands that the teacher uses a variety of memory techniques such as repeating, questioning and pausing. Those techniques will prompt learners to think on material more sufficiently.

As for the material it has to be relevant in terms of students' age and their level of cognitive development. It is a very crucial aspect of foreign language teaching because “...[c]hildren best remember those things that appeal directly to their own experience and feelings” (David Fontana, 1988:136).

To sum up, successful foreign language teaching is not possible without the knowledge of the learner’s personality. The teacher has to be aware of character features of his/her students if he/she wants to achieve educational objectives. Moreover, the understanding of the students' personality may help the teacher to recognize their strengths and weaknesses, which plays an important role in teaching process. On the other hand, learners also take advantage of that knowledge because owing to it the teacher develops and improves his/her teaching techniques. That is why the issue of the language learner's personality needs to be taken into consideration if both teaching and learning processes are due to succeed.

**Story telling as a tool for teaching Past Simple Tense**

Grammar teaching techniques can be divided into two main categories: discovery techniques and practice techniques. The first ones are those where learners are provided with examples of language and asked to find out how they work. Matching techniques, text study and problem-solving are the most typical discovery techniques, whereas drills, interaction-based techniques, games and written practice belong to the second category. When using them the teacher makes his/her students practise language forms they are familiar with. Each of those techniques has its limitations in terms of students' age, their level of cognitive development and foreign language knowledge. But there is one grammar teaching method that seems to be suitable for all English language learners no matter how old they are and how much of English they already know. This is story telling which, as a pedagogical tool, has been used by many teachers and philosophers such as Jesus and Confucius. There are many reasons why teachers should take advantage of stories in their classes.

First of all, they give students opportunities of listening to grammar items in context rather than in pieces and bits as it takes place for example in drills. It is a very important aspect of story telling because students better acquire grammar items if they are contextualised. Moreover, the above mentioned items are often introduced within associated networks, which makes learning more comprehensible. The fact that learners have opportunities to deal with real language of communication, not a typical teacher's talk used in foreign language classes, makes story telling superior to other grammar teaching techniques. In fact, there are no other language materials that would use as a variety of language (from colloquial to literary) as stories do.

Secondly, when the teacher uses story telling not only do students practise and develop listening and reading skills but they also absorb new vocabulary and grammatical structures. Owing to the repetition of key words and grammar phrases they acquire the language in a greater way and as a result they start to master it somehow at the first stage of using stories, that is while listening to them.

Thirdly, when learners listen to stories they have to use their cognitive powers and reasoning processes in order to understand the meaning of a text. This makes them more involved, concentrated and at the same time more interested in
lessons. This active participation not only ensures better language acquisition but also gives a wonderful feeling of a task achievement that cannot be compared with a satisfaction when doing not very creative drills or other typical grammar practice activities.

Furthermore, stories have great educational values because they may provide students with the knowledge on various issues considering our life. Very often they contain a message that due to its timeless nature may make children change their beliefs, attitudes or behaviour for better.

Finally, using story telling in foreign language teaching can be beneficial for social and emotional development because thanks to stories students gain insight into characters’ motives. And this helps them to become more sensitive, understanding and tolerant towards other people.

All the above mentioned arguments show how learners can benefit from story telling rather than how it may come in handy for the teacher who is going to use it as a tool for teaching Past Simple Tense at primary level. As there are lots of aspects that make story telling a useful teaching technique the next paragraphs will present this method from the teacher’s point of view, that is how he/she can use and develop it in the classroom.

To start with, when introducing the story to students the teacher can use various techniques (e.g. reading aloud, using cassette tapes or CDs) and materials (e.g. pictures, realia). Such diversity of props and methods will definitely guarantee students’ involvement in classes. It may also enhance their learning abilities because different senses are activated at one time. What happens in the story students experience by means of their eyes (when looking at illustrations), ears (when listening to recordings) or bodies (when imitating characters’ gestures). There are not many grammar teaching techniques that take advantage of all the three kinds of senses (visual, auditory and kinesthetic) to such a great extent as story telling does. Even if some of them do, such as problem-solving or interaction-based techniques, they are not much suitable for primary level students because they are too difficult.

Secondly, there is a great number of stories in which the use of past for narrative is often. As a result the teacher has no problems with finding materials for classes. Moreover, he/she can choose such a story that, in terms of its length and complexity, would fit students’ needs.

Finally, there is also a great variety of activities the teacher can develop on the basis of stories. Not only do they help learners to acquire Past Simple Tense and practise it in many ways but also make lessons more attractive to them as well as more involving them. Since a large number of English language learners find learning and practising grammar boring, the teacher has to put great effort into the preparation of grammar exercises if he/she does not want students to get bored and discouraged. And story telling, due to its variety of interesting uses, can bring many benefits to the teacher. The most important are attractiveness of classes, students’ involvement and interest, and teacher’s satisfaction with a well done job.

In conclusion, teaching grammar is not a very easy task for the teacher because a great number of learners find this aspect of language very difficult to learn. That is why choosing the right grammar teaching technique may play a crucial role if the teacher wants to achieve his/her educational objectives successfully. Story telling, if used properly, can become a great tool for teaching Past Simple Tense to students aged 11-13 because not only is it an effective and enjoyable way of teaching language but also thanks to it children forget their worries and anxieties about grammar.

References