

The Holistic Approach to Teaching Syntax

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Abstract: This paper is focused on the holistic approach and techniques applied in Syntax class. The students are assisted to learn not only the form but also the practical application, “from Syntax to Syntaxing”, adopting Larsen-Freeman’s term “from Grammar to Gramming” (2003). Viewed from the students’ written evaluation, the varied kinds of learning activities and care attending to the affective aspect of the students seem to have worked well.

Key words: holistic, affective, variety, application, evaluation.

The undergraduate core curriculum of the English Department Petra Christian University generally comprises four main types of courses: Skill courses – Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, Structure -, Literature, Culture and Linguistics courses. Syntax as a branch of Linguistics is offered as one of the compulsory Linguistics subjects, dealing with “the organization of morphemic units into meaningful combinations larger than words” (Francis, 1958, p. 223), and “the rules governing the way words can be combined to form sentences” (Finch, 2000, p. 77).

Since it is a compulsory subject, every student in the English Department is obliged to take it. Accordingly, it may happen that students coming to the Syntax class are not internally motivated to learn it without realizing or trying to find out the course content and its application. In fact, when asked why they are in the Syntax class in the first meeting, students commonly reply that they have to take it since it is in the curriculum.

Considering that internal or intrinsic motivation plays a key role in the learning process, being “the powerful influences on learning” (William & Burden, 1997, p. 111), it is essential that students be internally motivated to do it. In particular in facing a formal study like Syntax, students need to have the will to learn it, to listen attentively to lectures dealing with concepts and theories, to read the textbooks and to identify syntactic constructions and do the syntactic analysis. It is also admitted

that “few students sustain their enthusiasm for learning, when the lesson focuses on the parts of language”, (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 7), Similarly, it is not easy for them to have and maintain their enthusiasm for learning syntactic structures and syntactic rules. Thus, it is really a challenging job for the teacher to make his/her Syntax class interesting and motivating.

It has been my concern and interest to promote the students’ interest in learning Syntax particularly related to the English language. The long term experience with the same subject has given me the opportunity to try out ways and shape my teaching approach and techniques. What has been applied in the Syntax class – the activities and learning experience provided for the students – follow the holistic approach to the teaching of Syntax. It involves the students’ whole being, attending to their affective and cognitive sides.

THE HOLISTIC APPROACH

The whole process is geared towards the students’ whole being, attending to both their cognitive and their affective sides. Considering that the students are the center of the learning process, it is crucial that they be properly motivated to learn, that they follow the course not because they have to take it due to some external factor, the curriculum, but also because they really want to. In fact, intrinsic motivation, coming from within the individual, is viewed as “especially important for encouraging success” (Harmer, 2003, p. 51). It was also added that “the chances of success will be greatly enhanced if the students come to love the process.” (p. 51). This is supported by Covington that: “When education is concerned, things go better when intrinsic motives predominate” (1998, p. 135). In this case, the teacher as one of the “sources of motivation” (Harmer, 2003, p. 52), plays a very important role in the classroom to help enhance the students’ intrinsic motivation by guiding them to see the benefit of learning Syntax, to arouse their curiosity to learn it and to put into practice what they have learned. This is to be accompanied by the teacher’s personal interest and enthusiasm towards the subject, the students’ learning process, while trying to promote a favorable learning environment, which is expected to be able to affect the students’ attitude towards the subject and the learning process.

The students are perceived as individuals who have certain psychological needs to be fulfilled, particularly the need to be accepted and appreciated. In relation to this, it is important to promote a cooperative and supportive learning atmosphere, which will enhance their self-esteem, specifically their “task self-esteem” (Brown, 2000, p. 146) to facilitate the learning process. This is supported by William and Burden that “teachers can affect learning in a range of ways that go far beyond the transmission of knowledge” (1997, p. 65). In addition, following Rogers’ humanistic approach to education” (1969, quoted by William and Burden), that “actual learning will only take place when the students are involved in active participation” (1997, p. 35), the students are actively engaged in various kinds of activities. The students are not just to listen to lectures, but to be actively engaged in various kinds of activities: brief reading, brain storming, group discussion, presentation, class discussion, individual work and group projects. Besides, new concepts are introduced on the foundation of known basis, what the students have known or experienced. The students are elicited to collect words and meaningful combinations as syntactic units to arrive at certain syntactic types. The whole learning process is parallel to the type of learning called “experiential learning”, which employs the learners’ “immediate personal experience” as the basis to approach and “organize the learning process” (Nunan, 1999, p. 5)

Thus, the holistic approach applied is focused on the students’ whole being including their motivation and emotional well being. In addition, the material taught is not treated only as a body of knowledge but also as skills to be put into practice

THE FIRST MEETING

Students attending the Syntax class on the first day may have some kind of anxiety towards the subject, the teacher as well as their classmates, particularly if they did not have a favorable experience in the previous linguistics subjects, i.e. Introduction to General Linguistics, Phonology, and Morphology; as seen in one of the students’ statements in her evaluation essay: “*At the beginning of this semester, I thought Syntax was a confusing lesson. I guess it’s because I don’t really enjoy studying Linguistics*”. Another student wrote: “*At first, I thought Linguistics is very boring and difficult. It is because I only got C+ for PLU (Pengantar Linguistics Umum/Introduction to General Linguistics)*”. It is important

for the teacher to anticipate this kind of situation in the first meeting normally faced by people coming into a new environment. This is the crucial moment for the teacher to attend to the students' affective aspect to make them feel welcomed and accepted in the class and have the assurance that they will get the proper assistance in the learning process.

Usually, I spend the whole period on the first day for introduction, students' reflection on their previous experience with Linguistics subjects, explanation on the course content, objectives, Basic Course Outline, and evaluation policy. The first thing to do is introducing myself showing my interest in knowing each of the students in the class, and let them introduce themselves. This is also carried out through ice-breaking activities as the starting point to build rapport to be maintained and developed to create a cooperative and supportive learning group.

The second thing is to make them think about the reasons why they should be in the class, although students are driven to do it firstly because of the Syntax grade for their academic record. It is at this point that students are given the explanation concerning the subject matter of Syntax, its position in relation to the other branches of Descriptive Linguistics, the benefit they can achieve by acquiring the knowledge to be applied in the perception and production in the target language, besides having the cognitive exercises in identifying, categorizing and analyzing linguistic units, which will sharpen their linguistic sensibilities and contribute to their language mastery. This is important to help them build their intrinsic motivation that they are in the class not because they have to but because they have certain goals to achieve out of their own free will.

As Syntax is not their first Linguistics subject for the students, they are given the chance to reflect on their previous learning experience in Linguistics and write down their impression, what they liked, what they disliked, the problems/difficulties they faced, what they expect to have in the Syntax class. They are also asked to write down how much they have known about Syntax. This serves a dual function: input for me to have a better understanding about the students, and as the students' first document to be filed. Having expressed what they expect me to do for them, they then listen to what I expect them to do in my class, to cooperate with me to help themselves since they are the masters of their own endeavor to learn Syntax. They are supposed to take full responsibilities of their learning process with my assistance and guidance.

The essential matters being made clear are expected to satisfy their anxious curiosity concerning the Syntax class, which may make them feel relieved and encouraged to come back the following week with more positive feelings about the class.

MOVING FROM THE KNOWN TO THE UNKNOWN

Each learning unit is organized based on what the students are familiar with, moving to the new concepts or patterns in focus, which is in line with the concept of “experiential learning” (1995, p. 5). Before the students are presented the basic syntactic structures based on Structural Grammar, for example, they are led to propose ten of their favorite words, from which they are to choose two lexical words each time to construct as many types of meaningful combinations as possible. From the constructions that they have produced they are led to identify different types of syntactic structures. It is through this process that the students are presented the basic syntactic structures, including their components and how they are organized to form each type of basic syntactic structures. Another example is when they are presented the subject component of structure of predication, they are asked to produce sentences with different types of subjects. Then they are led to see the possible parts of speech and syntactic structures which can function as subjects.

Similarly, when they study the phrase structure rules of sentences based on Transformational Grammar, they are asked to construct sentences and led to see the compulsory and optional elements of sentences to arrive at the phrase structure rule. In the same way they are led to discover the rule for Noun Phrase and Predicate Phrase through their own examples of various subjects and predicates.

By this inductive or “rule –discovery path” (Thornbury, 2003, p. 59) the students are prepared to learn new concepts through what they have known to facilitate their acquiring of the new knowledge. At the same time they are actively involved in the learning process, which will be further discussed in the following.

ENGAGING THE STUDENTS IN ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

To get the students to actively participate in the class, varied kinds of activities are carried out besides listening to lectures: reading, brain

storming, collaborative work, group discussion, presentation, problem solving and group project. These activities are moving and changing that the students will not get the boredom facing monotonous slow moving activities.

Although listening to lectures and having inputs from the teacher are important, it is more important that the students are made to focus and follow actively what they are listening to by giving proper responses and asking questions whenever necessary. That is why the students need to have the time to experience reading by themselves, which can be followed by brain storming exercises asking them to recite with their book closed what they have read or understood either in a sentence, a phrase, or at least one word. Each student is expected to give some information, contributing pieces to construct a puzzle, which is finally completed by the teacher's explanation to relate the pieces of information together into one whole "picture". Another alternative is to give the students some leading questions prior to the silent reading activity to help them make sense of what they are reading. Following that, students are given the chance to answer orally or make brief oral presentation.

While working on a unit of knowledge, the students can be involved in collaborative activities. The class is divided into several groups each working on a subtopic. While the group work is in process, the teacher moves from one group to another to listen and to give assistance when needed. The result of the discussion is presented to the whole class. When one group is presenting the other groups are supposed to pay attention and take notes. Question time is provided after each presentation. This is followed by the teacher's affirmation or clarification for unclear items. It is usually applied when the students are learning the four syntactic structures: structure of modification, predication, coordination and complementation. Each group will take one type of syntactic structure to discuss and present to the whole class.

Having been able to understand various syntactic types, the students are engaged in identifying, analyzing and constructing different types of syntactic structures, which is alternatively done individually and in groups. This can be either presented to the class or submitted to be checked. This process gives the students an opportunity to learn how to apply the syntactic knowledge in their real use of the target language, either recognizing and analyzing its use in authentic material and their own writing or learning to produce their own sentences based on the syntactic types they have learned.

FROM SYNTAX TO SYNTAXING

The term *from Syntax to Syntaxing* is adopted from Larzen-Freeman's term "from Grammar to Grammmaring" used in the title of their book *Teaching Language: From Grammar to Grammmaring* (2003). The idea is that the teaching of Syntax is not just to help the students learn Syntactic concepts and theories but also to engage them in the further step of applying what they have learned in their practical use – to perceive, identify and produce grammatical sentences particularly in the written form. The students are led to see the use of different syntactic types in the authentic writing in newspapers or magazines. More specifically they learn to recognize the types of syntactic structures commonly used in the real context by analyzing their syntactic constructions.

Also, they have the opportunity to look into their own writing to examine what types of syntactic structures are used, for examples in the types of subjects. Having been introduced to the possible parts of speech and syntactic structures functioning as subjects, they then analyze the subjects used in their own essay in their writing class. The same procedure can also be applied in the predicate phrase. Through these activities the students can evaluate their own styles to raise their syntactic awareness and help them to vary their own style in producing sentences.

The productive task is also given to construct sentences following certain syntactic patterning of subject and predicate, which can be carried out either individually or in groups to apply what they have learned about sentence components and their patterns. Another variety is giving the students the chance to explore the use of words and the syntactic structures used in creative writing, such as poems. This can be followed by their exercising of their creativity in writing a poem using their favorite words. Two of the examples created by the students are presented in the following.

Loyalty

Hold forever
as a coral in the sea
pure and gentle
Such a couple of pigeon
Once it started
never ending forever
How lucky I am
Having you in my life

Because of Love

Because of love we were born
 Because of love we can survive
 Because of love there is peace
 Love is the most beautiful thing
 God gives to us, HUMAN!!!

The poems created are further analyzed to see their use of syntactic structures in their own poems. These applicative tasks also contribute to the syntactic awareness that hopefully will help them to improve their grammatical acquisition.

STUDENTS' SELF-EVALUATION

Students taking the syntax course, to be given the explanation in the first meeting, are supposed to document their learning process starting from the first day through out the semester, based on which they write their evaluation essay. The essay also includes what they have experienced and achieved from the learning activities and propose a grade that they think they deserve to have. This is taken as one of the factors for me to grade them. Having them do this encourages them to be independent and take responsibility of their own study as they also have a part in determining their own grade. The students are usually good at evaluating themselves, and the grades they propose are not much different from the grades given to them. This evaluation is also valuable for me that I have some inputs concerning what has been carried out and what the students have experienced in their class.

Generally there are positive inputs that are encouraging, affirming that what has been done is beneficial and yields good results. The inputs are related to their first day impression, their learning process, the class atmosphere, their opinions concerning the teacher, their classmates, their class participation, their achievement and their awareness of the use of the acquired knowledge and skills. Some samples of the original comments are presented in the following.

- * *At the first time, I was surprised when the teacher asked the students to introduce themselves, and she tried to remember the students' names. I complete my promise on the first day of the class to work seriously from the beginning.*

- * *In this lesson, my friends and I also did some presentation. I think this method can make students become active because students not only wait for the teacher to explain the lesson, but also study the lesson first at home while preparing for presentation.*
- * *The atmosphere of the class is relaxed.. It makes me not get pressure but I get easily to understand the class.*
- * *The syntax class is quite fun, because we make our own sentence or word, create it ourselves, analyze it and criticize it together. I find that linguistics is no more boring and useless from all that I get in the Syntax class. Besides, I think it is an interesting subject. We can play with words by combining simple words in different ways, in making sentences, poems and so on.*
- * *The teacher and classmates really help me in following and enjoying the course .I think the teacher is a good teacher since she really supports and cares to the students. She follows the progress of every student in class and she approaches every student to ensure that he or she really understands the material*
- * *Joining this class shapes my analytic thought, because every week we were challenged to analyze sentences from the simple one until the most complex one. The sentences that we analyzed were not only taken from daily conversation, but also from poems. The analyzing habit in Syntax class finally continues in my daily life. Recently, I almost tried to analyze all things in my surrounding, especially before I made decision. By using that way, the decision that I made would be more careful.*
- * *I consider my achievement in this class very successful. Unlike the Linguistics classes I have taken before, Syntax is probably my best and favorite one*

Viewed from what the students have written in their evaluation essay, the holistic approach and the varied kinds of learning activities seem to have worked well. The students could learn well. What is more, they found the learning process interesting, enjoyable, useful and applicable.

CONCLUSION

Following the students' learning process in the class is a rewarding experience, seeing how the students are cooperating, supporting one another and making progress. The students are usually active and participative in the tasks assigned to them. Their comments and inputs in the evaluation essays give the implication that what has been applied in the class is worth continuing. This is also a great encouragement for me to keep developing and improving.

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