

THE THREE APPROACHES TO GRAMMAR AND THEIR APPLICATION IN ANALYZING STUDENTS' ERRORS

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INTRODUCTION

It goes without saying that grammar is a key factor in helping students to acquire linguistic competence. Therefore, it is advisable that grammatical analysis be given great weight. It is closely involved with different approaches including generative grammar, systemic- functional grammar, and a lexical approach to grammar. Hence, understanding and applying these approaches to analyze students' errors are necessary to language teachers.

OBJECTIVES

This paper aims to explore in detail the three approaches to grammar: Generative Grammar, Systemic-Functional Grammar, and Lexical Approach to Grammar. Besides, some typical errors made by Vietnamese students will be analyzed in the light of those grammatical theories and principles. Lastly, it will indicate some sources of errors and suggest remedial work.

SIGNIFICANCE

This writing hopes to partly contribute to language teaching and analysis of students' grammatical errors, thus helping to improve students' writing skill.

LITERATURE REVIEW and DISCUSSION OF ERROR ANALYSIS

Generative Grammar

Noam Chomsky has developed an approach to language known as Government-Binding theory (theory of generative grammar) during the 1980s. It is "a type of grammar which attempts to define and describe by a set of rules all the grammatical sentences of a language and no ungrammatical ones" (Richards et al, 1992, p.154). In other words, "this grammar will have a finite number of rules, but will be capable of generating an infinite number of structures" (Yule, 1985, p.81). Therefore, recursiveness is one of the important properties of Transformational Generative Grammar, as in the example sentence:

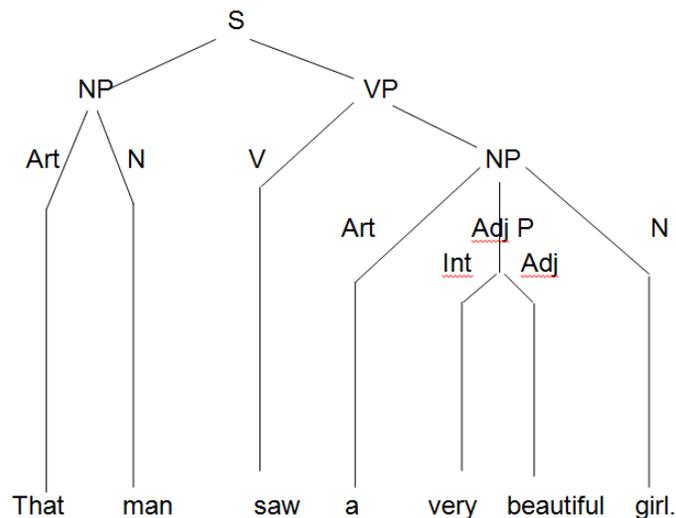
Ex: That is the girl that greets the man that has the dog that bites Mary...

Generative Grammar is based on syntactic description to see how all the constituents in a sentence work, and tree diagram helps illustrate different levels in the syntactic analysis.

The phrase structure rules "provide language with important property of recursion, and, within the structure which these rules generate, basic syntactic functions such as subject of the sentence and object of the verb are identifiable" (Hudson, 2000, p.104). There are four basic phrase structure rules: noun phrase (NP), verb phrase (VP), adjective phrase (Adj P), and prepositional phrase (PP).

Consider this sentence: *That man saw a girl very beautiful.*

Students make errors like this since they base the structure of this sentence on the word order in the Vietnamese language. The correct sentence should be 'That man saw a very beautiful girl.' and following is the tree diagram for it:



To help students analyze structures better, it is necessary to show them that a noun phrase consists of an article, an adjective, and a noun (an adjective is optional), whereas an adjective phrase consists of an intensifier and an adjective (an intensifier is optional).

Functional Grammar

“Functional Systemic Grammar is a way of describing lexical and grammatical choices from the systems of wording so that we are always aware of how language is being used to realize meaning” (Lewis, 1993, p.15). In terms of function, words play various roles, just like a noun can have many functions depending on its position in a sentence. Take the following sentences as examples:

Ex: - I don't like drinking hot water. (water: noun)

- They have a beautiful water fountain in the backyard. (water: noun playing the role of an adjective since it adds more information about another noun)

“A functional grammar is essentially a natural grammar, in the sense that everything in it can be explained, ultimately, by reference to how language is used” (Halliday, 1994, p.xiii). Thus, a rank scale is used to analyze and describe patterns of language. In this scale, the clause complex is the highest rank which is “a language structure that consists of one clause working by itself or a group of clauses that work together through some kinds of logical relationship” (Butt et al, 1999, p.32).

There are three different functions of language: representational function, interpersonal function, and textual function.

- Representational function encodes meanings of experience, and the set of terms used to describe the experiential function of language are Participant, Process, and Circumstance.
- Interpersonal function encodes meanings of attitudes, interaction, and relationship. “The two grammatical features which carry the main burden of interpersonal meanings are the Subject and the Finite” (Butt et al, 1999, p.66).
- Textual function encodes meaning of text development. Textual meanings can be realized by looking at the first element of a clause- the Theme, and the rest is the Rheme.

One typical error students often make is with word order as in the following example sentence:

He	is buying	a white <u>silk</u> <u>Italian</u> shirt.
<i>Participant</i>	<i>Process</i>	<i>Participant</i>

The order of parts in a nominal group is Deitic |Numerative |Epithet |Classifier. Thus, this sentence must be correctly put as ‘He is buying a white Italian silk shirt.’

Lexical Grammar

The lexical approach develops many of the fundamental principles advanced by proponents of Communicative Approaches. The role of cohesion and coherence in written discourse and supra-sentential linking is emphasized

in grammar acquisition. Lewis (1993) suggests that teachers be aware of the possibilities of making use of word grammar rather than sentence grammar in order to boost students' communicative competence. The lexical approach also puts an emphasis on word order, which is an essential factor to successful communication.

One typical problem students make in this approach is with prepositional phrase, as in:

- She thanks me with her heart.

The correction for that is 'She thanks me from the bottom of her heart.'

One more feature of this approach is that it encourages the use of dictionaries. Teachers can indicate the error by underlining it and encouraging students to check in a dictionary.

For small morphological errors, it is advisable to underline them and let students figure out themselves:

- That five-years-old girl plays the piano wonderfully.
- She washs dishes every weekends.

Sources of Errors

"Many mistakes are caused by vocabulary deficiency, and particularly by lack of collocational power"; in addition, "recognition of the centrality of lexis in language readily suggests that the teacher's response to student errors may need to be lexically rather than grammatically oriented" (Lewis, 1993, p.72)

Moreover, "the transfer of patterns from the native language is one of the major sources of errors in learner language" (Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p.165).

- Ho Chi Minh City is one of the biggest centers culture in Vietnam. (= Ho Chi Minh City is one of the biggest cultural centers in Vietnam.)
- I will very miss you when I come back home. (= I will miss you very much when I come back home.)

Although "error analysis has the advantage of permitting a description of some systemic aspects of learner language, it does not always give us clear insights into what causes learners to do what they do" (Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p.75). Some more possible linguistic sources of errors include interference and partial mastery. Last but not least, poor materials and teaching may also result in unexpected errors.

Remedial Work

"It is probably better to be selective to concentrate on the important errors and direct the learners' attention towards them only" (Ur, 1996, p.87). With that same view, Broughton also put forward that "errors in the overall structure of sentences are more important than errors affecting parts of sentences" (Broughton et al, 1980, p.137).

Errors are graded as serious "only if teachers are either unable to understand, or have considerable difficulty in understanding what the students have written" (Lewis, 1993, 170). However, there is no general agreement about the scale of error gravity so teachers should have an appropriate attitude to each particular case.

Furthermore, students need to be given opportunities to correct their written work so that they can develop a self-critical attitude. Teachers can use a marking code to indicate specific errors (e.g. SP for spelling, GR for grammar, and so on).

To put it briefly, correcting an error depends on what kind of error it is and how it affects the meaning of the whole sentence.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the grammatical theories, the structures of English sentences are presented in various forms: Generative Grammar, Systemic- Functional Grammar, and Lexical Grammar. These grammatical approaches are helpful for describing language and for error analysis.

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