The grammatical competence: Chapter 3

The grammatical competence belongs to the communicative competence. If you don’t master the code of a language, you don’t have the abilities to make your point and to read the point out of others communication.

When you learn your mothers tongue you hear the language every day for years and you learn the grammar unknowingly, but in learning a new foreign language you often don’t have this possibility and therefore you have to learn the structure of the language.

The elements of grammar are:

* The phonetics
* The morphology
* The syntax
* The vocabulary

The phonetics

The phonetics is about the pronunciation and understanding the sounds of the target language but it’s also about making and understanding the prosodic parts of phonetics, so as the rhythm, the stress and the intonation.

A major part of the phonetics is the pronunciation of the separate sounds (phonemes). There is very often difference between how the consonant- and the vowel systems are in the mother tongue and target language. For example in Danish the sounds of /p/ is different if it pronounces strong, like in ‘pakke’ or weak like in ‘hoppe’. In English /p/ always pronounces strong like in ‘happy’ and ‘pimp’.

The phonemes have the primary function to be foundation of meaning while the prosodic parts have the function of how the point should be taken and understand.

Some of the prosodic parts play a role of the referential meaning and can be very important in discourse and pragmatic matter. For example the English stress can be used to define word classes. ‘Address’ with stress on the first part is a noun while ‘address’ with stress on the last part is a verb.

Furthermore the intonation is used to signal the structure of grammar in the sentence. It can be indicated a question. It can be used to show an attitude.

The morphology and the syntax

The morphology is about the words, the parts of the words which symbolize the meaning. The syntax is about the whole sentence, how do we put the words together to make a point. The word order in Danish is for example SVO (subject – verbal – object).

The languages where the word order is important is called analytic language and the language where the affixs and the inflexion is most important is called synthetic language. Danish and English is mostly an analytic language where Latin for example is synthetic language.

Vocabulary:

Vocabulary is about the meaning of the words and to learn new words and phrases.

In the beginning classes you learn new words from what you can see and then name the thing or you make translations from the mother tongue language. But after that it is useful to know that the words belong to semantics networks. For example:

* Hyponym – as in apple is a hyponym of fruit
* Antonym – as in sweet and sour
* Synonym – as in beautiful and pretty
* Collocation – as in narrow street

It is important that the teacher and the pupils use these semantics networks in the work with texts and in situation with communication, they should use it context and that the pupils extend their language.

Grammar teaching

* Descriptive grammar – the grammar which teach how to use the language and how the language is built (passive)
* Interlanguage grammar – the grammar which the pupil has become themselves and use (active)

The latest studies tell that the way with interlanguage grammar has a big importance. The pupils make hypothesis and try them and by this way the pupils learn about the language little by little and learn how it works, this is an active and circular process which is controlled by the pupils themselves.

Grammar teaching in practice

If you want to teach grammar by including the new acquisition view, you have to consider this:

* The teacher will first talk about the grammar when it is necessary for the individual pupil. When the pupil has the need in his communication. This way the teacher has a reactive approach to the grammar, use it when needed - instead of teaching grammar before the need, which is proactive.
* The grammar should be used in context. It is easier for the pupils get the picture of the grammar as an integrated structure if it is used in the text work. Earlier grammar work was isolated and it was difficult for the pupils to draw the line between the form and the content.
* Grammar should be learned primarily by inductive teaching rather than deductive. The pupils should be the one through hypothesis and trial to make their grammar rules and the teacher should be the one to support them rather than be the one to tell them the rules.

This way of learning demands more from the pupils and can be very hard for the unsecure pupils and the one with a strong belief in authority, so it is necessary that the teacher in an early stage of learning teach the pupils to be more active and independent in the classroom.

Correction or repair?

Making mistake is at natural thing in learning a foreign language, but what should the teacher do to help the pupil? If we shall follow the way of interlanguage learning we shall not correct the pupils in their communication but rather try to repair the sentence. Look at the following example:

Pupil: the two girls play tennis?

Teacher: oh, do they play tennis every week?

Pupil: no, they don’t do it often. They play tennis now?

Teacher: ah, the girls don’t play tennis regularly, but they are playing tennis right now?

Pupil: Yes, they are playing tennis now

The pupil makes the mistake that she use simple tense instead of extended tense and the teacher help her clearing the mistake through communication rather than correct the mistake by point it out for the pupil. By doing it this way the teacher also reduce the asymmetric relationship and makes the communication more authentic in the situation.