An Exploration on Teaching 'Subject-Verb Agreement with Respect to Gender' Inductively in Telugu

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Introduction

Learning about language, mind and society awakened in me an interest in knowing more about the pedagogical implications of linguistics. The Chomskyan idea that humans have a hypothetical language acquisition device drew my attention and I wanted to understand more about how children acquire tacit knowledge. Such an understanding would be an asset that every teacher should leverage.

In a language classroom, children find "Grammar" classes uninteresting and dry as compared to a story or a poem. I wanted to understand why the grammar class of a first language could not be made interesting and so I wanted to explore how grammar could be taught inductively. Also, teaching learners what they already know in the form of rules is less exciting than making them come up with rules based on what they know.

In this article, I will attempt to shed some light on studies conducted in the field of first/second language acquisition and inductive/deductive approach to teaching grammar. I have also explored the possibility of teaching grammar inductively in the child's first language (Telugu) through a small task. In the end, some implications of such tasks in a language classroom have been suggested.

Through this article, I have explored the syntactic structure of subject-verb agreement in Telugu. In Telugu, the subject-verb agreement pattern for all singular inanimate, non-human animate and human feminine subjects remains the same. On the other hand, for all singular human masculine subjects, the verb gets conjugated. For instance, let us consider the verb of the word "doing" (*cheyadam*). In the former case of subjects, the verb would be *chesth-undi* and in the latter, it would become *chesth-aadu*. In the case of the task discussed earlier, only the gender of the subject has been changed in the sentences given to the child while plurality has been kept unchanged.

Inductive and Deductive Approaches to Teaching Grammar

Teaching grammar inductively refers to the practice of giving enough exposure of an aspect of a language to children to enable them to generalize or discover the rules of that aspect on their own. On the contrary, a deductive approach to grammar deals with presenting to the students, a set of rules and giving them exercises to familiarize themselves with those rules (Wagner, ms. p. 5). Inductive approach brings out the tacit knowledge a native speaker has acquired and makes him/her acknowledge

the rule they already know, thereby making the learner an active constructor of knowledge. A deductive approach would be helpful for those learners who need a pattern or a structure to help them learn a language (Wagner, ms. p. 5).

In the case of a deductive approach to grammar, the children may learn the grammar of the language (competence) without actually learning the language itself (performance aspects of speaking or writing). For instance, they may know that one needs to add the morpheme 's' to a verb in simple present form if the subject is a third person singular "Kamal run*s* fast". However, when they speak, they may end up saying "Kamal run fast". In other words, there could be a mismatch between competence and performance in a child's language. Inductive approach consumes time as different learners may take different times to discover and generalize patterns. To follow this approach in large classrooms is therefore a challenging task.

Both these approaches have shades of difference when teaching the first language or a second/foreign language. That brings us to the question of the need for teaching first language grammar to native speakers of that language. This seems to have been answered by Chomsky (1972), "a person who knows a language has mastered a system of rules that assigns sound and meaning in a definite way for an infinite class of sentences....Of course, the person who knows the language has no consciousness of having mastered these rules or of putting them to use" (p.91).

Formal grammar instruction in a student's first language is an effort to bring to his/her consciousness, the rules which have been mastered (Zhou, 2008, p.4). Let us look at the differences in first and second language contexts. Krashen (1982) points out the distinction between the terms acquisition and learning. He states that the term acquisition should be used when a language is naturally acquired (as in the case of mother tongue). The term learning, on the other hand, is relevant to learning a second/foreign language (Wagner, 2017 p.4). It may be tempting to conclude that an inductive approach would sail smoother in a first language acquisition context and a deductive approach in second/foreign language classrooms, given the nature of the approaches. However, there are studies that indicate that inductive approaches have been more effective than deductive approaches even in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms (Rokni, 2009). Also, some studies prove that integrating both the approaches would yield better results rather than choosing one over the other (Xin, 2012). Nevertheless, the decision on which approach suits a classroom is best taken by a teacher who knows of both the approaches as well as the learning styles of her/his students.

Task Conducted

The task that I conducted was partly based on Zhou's recommendation of how to teach grammar inductively (Zhou, 2008, p.6). It comprised of making children listen to thirteen erroneous sentences and asking them to correct the sentences if they felt anything in the sentence did not seem right to them. The sentences had inappropriate subject-verb agreement with respect to the

gender of the subject. The subjects included masculine and feminine proper and common nouns and non-human animate and inanimate things. All the subjects were in singular form. The objective of the task was to see if the children could:

a) correct the sentences

b) provide a proper reasoning for the correction

c) assess the rules of subject-verb agreement for different kinds of singular subjects

d) accommodate minor deviations from the intermediate rule they derived (at the end of the 5th sentence) and assess the modified rule in the last sentence

e) acknowledge the fact that the subject-verb agreement pattern for all singular inanimate, non-human animate and human feminine subjects is the same and only for masculine subjects does the verb agreement pattern change.

Background of the Respondents

Since there was no opportunity to teach the children in a formal setup and record the findings, I conducted and recorded one-on-one sessions with eight children, and documented the gist of their responses. Given that the interaction was brief, I did not make them frame the rules. Instead, I helped them in figuring out the rule by asking leading questions. Also, I asked them to assess whether the rules were correct or incorrect. Of the eight children, six were from Telugu-speaking homes and belonged to Grade 5.Six of them were studying in a school that followed the

CBSE syllabus. According to the school's policy, their second language of instruction was Telugu. The remaining two children were also from a Telugu speaking family that resides in the UK. In their case, although Telugu was spoken at home, they were more comfortable conversing in English. One of them belonged to Grade 4 and the other to Grade 3.

Reflections on the Responses

In the sessions, there were a couple of questions that the respondents found ambiguous. Four out of eight students gave an incorrect response to the first sentence—*"Shankar intiki vellindi"* (Shankar (singular, male) *ghar gayi (verb conjugation used for female) hai)*. The expected response was that they would correct it to *"Shankar intiki velladu",* thereby displaying their knowledge of the rationale that Shankar being a boy called for such a correction. Other confusions (4 or 5 out of 8 responses) around the rationale were in sentences where the subjects were tree, dog and monkey. The children who had difficulty in articulating the rationale were able to make the verb agree with the subject. However they had a problem in determining the gender of these subjects. Telugu, as a language assigns a neutral gender to all non-living things and non-human living things. This was something that the children did not seem to be comfortable with. Some of them said that a tree was a living thing which was neither a boy nor a girl, and hence it required *"di"* at the end. Other children said that it had a "*di*" because they spoke it that way; they could not explain it any further. A couple of

interesting, rather funny responses on the rationale for correcting the sentence "Dog is barking" are given as follows. The fifth child's response in particular gives an insight into how stereotypes are formed in children.

After reading five sentences, six of the participants belonging to the same school were asked to observe the pattern or commonality in the sentences. Most of them correctly pointed out that feminine subjects had masculine verb conjugations and vice versa. This showed that they were aware of the rule that human masculine and feminine subjects have different subject-verb agreement patterns. The second half of the sentences had a mix of subjects. At the end of the thirteenth sentence, I summarized the subject-verb agreement rulesand asked them if they agreed with me. Seven out of eight children were able to modify the subject-verb agreement pattern for non-human living and non-living things with the rule they had come up with at the end of the 5th sentence. It was interesting to

observe that one of the NRI children could not identify the errors in five out of thirteen sentences. This could be attributed to the fact that given a choice, she chose to speak in English and avoided speaking in Telugu. This indicates that English was her first language or language of comfort over Telugu.

On the whole, seven out of eight respondents were able to correctly assess the rules. When I summarized the rules, all seven children were able to correctly state the conjugated verb for each kind of subject. However, given that the test was based on just thirteen sentences, its reliability needs to be ascertained by conducting it on children belonging to different age groups and backgrounds.

Suggestions for Teachers

Similar tasks may be conducted in a classroom using an inductive approach to make the children aware of various aspects of grammar in a language. In bigger classrooms however, it will be a challenge to engage every student. In such cases,

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Child 5: Kukka moruguthondi is correct.

Interviewer: Why so?

Child 5: Because, it is a girl. Girl dogs bark more.

Interviewer: Is that so?

Child 5: (Nods in agreement)

Interviewer: So, boy dogs don't bark is it?

Child 5: No

Conversation 1

Child 4: Kukka moruguthondi.

Interviewer: Why so?

Child 4: Because, it is a dog, it should be followed by moruguthundi. If it was a boy barking, it would have been moruguthunnadu.

Conversation 2

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dividing them into groups and assigning group tasks would prove effective. This approach, as shown earlier, is not only beneficial for first language classrooms, but also for foreign language classrooms. If Telugu language teachers were to follow the inductive approach in their classrooms, it may be possible for a natural order to emerge in which children learn the rules instinctively (Wagner, p.5). For instance, learners may learn the subject-verb agreement rules in order of plurality, gender, tense, etc. An area (say gender) in a target language, say Hindi, could be complex for Telugu speakers to understand but not for Urdu speakers, owing to the similarity in the language family Hindi and Urdu belong to. The assignment of masculine/feminine gender for non-human things in Hindi is a feature that does not exist in Telugu. So, this could be difficult for Telugu speakers to master. But, for a Hindi speaker learning Telugu would not be as difficult. The reason being that in Telugu, all non-human things are assigned a neuter gender, removing the confusion of it being feminine or masculine. Based on the rules and features of the learners' native language and the foreign language being acquired, there would be differences in the ease with which a language is learnt. This in turn would change the natural order of aspects acquired by each group of learners (based on their native language).This natural order can be utilized in structuring classes where Telugu is taught as a foreign language. For children to be able to learn foreign grammar effectively and quickly, they must know native grammar (Wagner, p.9).

Conclusion

Designing small exercises to let children discover patterns in a language will eventually teach them to frame rules on their own and would lead to interesting ways of teaching grammar. In multilingual classrooms, if the teacher plays the role of a researcher and a linguist, the natural orders of learning different aspects of languages can be recorded. Insights from such observations would provide valuable inputs to curriculum makers (NCF,2005 p.27). Tasks facilitating the discovery of patterns in language would help children learn about the language and also learn the language simultaneously.

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