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TEACHING THE USAGE OF PRONOUNS TO THE INDIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

English has always been a foreign language or the second language for the Indian learners though India has the second highest number of English speaking population in the world. As such, an average English-speaking Indian happens to make a lot of errors not only grammatically but also in using the vocabulary – especially when using the words that refer to a specific or neuter gender. The paper attempts to study the way pronouns are taught in grammar classes and the application aspects of them, in comparison with the ways the pronouns are used and the problems it creates for the Indian learners to comprehend. The paper also suggests ways to teach pronouns to Indian learners to interact with global audience.

KEYWORDS:

Pronoun, Indian Learners, Gender Specific, Neuter Gender.

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to learning a second language, especially English, through grammar, almost all English classes start with the introduction of 'parts of speech'. 'Pronoun' is one of the elements of 'parts of speech'. "Teaching pronouns is an important part of any beginning level English curriculum. It's important to teach pronoun usage during the early stages when students are learning basic sentence construction" says Kenneth Beare (2017). Among those that are taught in 'parts of speech', pronouns are supposed to be the easiest ones for the learners as it only involves words that can be used to replace nouns. Some examples include he, she, it, they, we, you, I. When these pronouns are taught to the Indian learners, the grammar teachers only say that the pronouns are words that refer to people, places, things and ideas. They are indeed correct and the learning also takes place. The learners use these pronouns the way they are taught. Even if the grammar classes on pronouns are too intense,

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where the learners get exposed to various classifications of the pronouns such as personal pronouns, possessive pronouns, indefinite pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, reflexive pronouns and interrogative pronouns, the learners' understanding of the pronouns still remains the same that these words are used to refer people, place, things and ideas. There is a widespread conception among the Indian learners of English; they believe that all languages function in the way that their mother-tongue works. Whereas, there are studies that evidence the cultural differences in languages; for instance, some languages have specific words for concepts whereas others do not. As a result, most learners fail to understand the culture and idioms of the language. There are instances where the sentences people make, though they are grammatically correct, make no sense. It can be seen in the example here "Go straight and turn to the left, the metro station will come". This idea is not expressed this way by a native speaker. Though the sentence is grammatically correct, native speakers find no logic in the part "the metro station will come" as the metro station is not something that moves from place to place. The reason for such errors that Indian learners make is that they translate their message from their mother tongue to English language. Similarly, there are problems that the learners encounter in understating certain contexts though they look familiar. One such item is the usage of pronouns.

THE PROBLEMS THAT PRONOUNS CREATE:

The learners are believed to have understood that certain pronouns are gender specific. For example, 'he' is used only to talk about a man or a boy and 'she' is used to talk only about a girl or a woman. Of course, it is correct. Most study materials also declare the same. " 'It' is used to refer to an inanimate object or a non-human, animate being such as a ball or a dog. 'He' and 'she' are used to refer to human beings, specifically for individuals who identify as masculine or feminine, respectively". Darr, Brandon and Kibbey, Tyler (73). It is evident that the texts and the teachers miss out to discuss the fact that 'he' can also be used to talk about anything that refers to male or manly and 'she' is also used to talk about anything that refers to female, feminine or certain other things like ship, country, though they are non-living things. Nevertheless, Indian learners of English treat both genders the same way at times. Furthermore, they are desperate not to accept the word 'cousin' which is unisex. They use the words 'brother' or 'sister' as a suffix to it and say 'cousin brother' or 'cousin sister' which is not the correct usage. Especially, in the present day scenario where a lot of importance is given for gender equality in all walks of life. Even governments send intimations to universities and institutions to avoid the use of sexist language. In other words, they need to avoid 'sexism' in the language they use, for the language used in an indication of the users' attitude towards gender impartiality which in turn has been acknowledged as a hint of negative attitudes toward the use gender-neutral language. (cf. Sarrasin et al., 2012). Similarly, learners do not often inquire which pronoun should be used for animals or other certain things. When Indian learners come across phrases such as, "I love my dog so much, he is friendly with people", "My cat eats a lot. One day she gobbled up a coin by mistake", "She looks magnificent. I haven't seen such a big ship", in movies or other English texts, they tend to get confused and wonder about the logic behind it. They seem to take for granted that using the neuter pronoun 'it' is apt. Again, the opinion is correct. The following examples would explain the reason and logic behind it.

- ✦ "My dog, whom I call Bruce, is my best friend. He loves me when I take him out for a walk"
- ✦ "I fed a street dog; it keeps following me"
- ✦ "What a lovely dog, how old is he?"

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What the learners fail to understand is that animals are referred as 'it' only when the relationship is not personal and pronouns such as 'he' or 'she' can be used if the animal is a pet and has a name. In addition, relative pronouns such as 'who' or 'whom' can also be used in such context instead of 'which' or 'that'. This usage is common among native speakers and has often been a confusing one for the Indian learners. In the first example, the dog, the speaker mentions is his pet and it has a name and hence becomes personal to the speaker. Therefore, using 'he' for a male dog or using 'she' for a female dog is allowed. In the second example, the dog is not raised by the speaker and there's no personal relationship with the dog. Moreover, the speaker is not concerned about the dog's gender. Hence, the speaker prefers 'it'. In the third example, it is obvious that the dog does not belong to the speaker and there is no personal relationship with the speaker and the dog. Yet, the speaker uses 'him' to talk about the dog in order to sound polite as the dog belongs to another human being who the speaker is supposed to socialize with.

However, not all grammar books suggest that 'he' or 'she' should be used for animals that are personally related to us. According to Gareth Rees (2009), using the pronoun 'he' or 'she' simply personalizes the animal. One can choose to use 'she' or 'he' as a pronoun no matter if the animal is a pet, a working animal or a wild animal. He argues that when it comes to pets, 'he' or 'she' is colloquially used and those pronouns become a literary style when it comes to wild animals. Rees uses Henry Williamson's words "The otter gave but a glance to the bird; she was using all her senses to find enemies." from the book *Tarka the Otter* to exemplify this idea. Therefore, in a work of literature, it is allowed to refer to an animal that is a character in the story as 'he' or 'she' (Rees, Gareth).

THE PROBLEMS OF NEUTER GENDER VS GENDER SPECIFIC PRONOUNS:

There are contexts where people use the phrase "We're pregnant". This phrase have been debated a lot even among native speakers but not on the linguistic aspects but on psychological and biological aspects. However, most Indian learners will be bewildered by this usage especially when a couple uses this phrase. It gives rooms to the Indian learners as to think how it is naturally possible for a male to be pregnant. This confusion takes place because of the lack of understanding of the connotative sense of the sentence. However, there are various attitudinal influences over the language which modified the thought process of people in using 'we' when they are 'the expecting couple'.

An article, 'When couples say 'we're pregnant', in Times of India (December, 2014), states that young couples accept the usage of 'we' as in 'we are pregnant' as it defines the depth in the relationship and adds more meaning to it. On the contrary, there are couples who argue that the phrase cannot be used as the very fact of it is biologically impossible. The article concludes with the point that both the arguments are justified based on their own logical reasoning and recommends using the phrase 'we are pregnant' not based on linguistic reasons but psychological reasons (TNN).

Likewise, phrases such as, "This is Mr Chandru", "That is Ms Menaka", breed further confusions among Indian learners who have had a very minimal exposure to English language. In almost all grammar classes, the educators teach that 'this' or 'that' is used to refer to things that are non-living i.e. 'This is a ball', 'That is a car' etc. Therefore, the learners tend to doubt how the pronoun 'this' or 'that' can be used to refer to human beings.

Such doubts and confusions shall be avoided by taking appropriate measures in teaching and learning process.

FEW POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO OVERCOME THE DIFFICULTY IN COMPREHENSION:

If the purpose of learning English is to make global interactions, the teaching and learning process should go in vogue with the purpose. Therefore, using the authentic sources, such as English movies, international books that are of works of native speakers, can be brought in classroom discussion so as to provide the learners an exposure to the practical usage and application aspects of things they learn, would make it possible.

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