Displacement in the Practical Teaching of English: A Generative Approach*

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1. The Proposal

The purpose of this paper is to apply the knowledge accumulated in the field of theoretical linguistics called generative grammar to the practical teaching of English in the classroom. My specific proposal is in (1).

(1) The idea of displacement proposed in generative grammar should be emphasized to teach constructions to the language learners of English.

I will argue that the application of displacement to the practical teaching has two benefits. First, taking comparative constructions and verbal (that is, infinitive and gerund) constructions as examples, I will show that the account based upon displacement enables the language learners to get a better understanding of the syntactic and semantic properties of these constructions. Second, I will argue that the teaching of English in terms of displacement allows the language learners to obtain a deeper understanding of the clear relationship between the comparative and verbal constructions on the one hand, and other constructions on the other.

2. Comparative Constructions

Comparative constructions implicitly consist of two "sentences." For example, (2) contains the sentences my brother is tall and my father is tall, as in (3b). Under the displacement approach, in (2), tall undergoes displacement, as in (3).

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(2) My brother is as tall as my father (is). (Ishiguro 2002: 236)
(3) a. My brother is as tall as my father is tall.

b. My brother is tall as my father is tall

Similarly, in the than-constructions, displacement takes place. Thus, in (4), the displacement of fast occurs, as in (5a).
(4) His car is faster than my Porsche. (ibid.: 242)
(5) a. His car is faster than my Porsche is fast.

b. His car is fast + my Porsche is fast

3. Verbal Constructions

In verbal (that is, infinitive and gerund) constructions, the subjects of the verbs are missing. The missing subjects undergo displacement. Examples are shown in (6) and (7).
(6) I persuaded her [Sentence (her) to go out for lunch with him]

(Nakamura 2007: 260)
(7) He insisted on [(He) looking after the child]

(ibid.: 269)

It is important for the students to know the way to find the covert subjects or verb phrases since every English sentence consists of the subject and the verb phrase. If they know the explicit way, they have a better understanding of the structure of English sentences.

4. Other Constructions

I have so far focused on the comparative and verbal clause in the previous sections. However, there are many other constructions where the displacement of items takes place. These constructions are as follows: (i) passives, (ii) wh-questions, (iii) relative clauses, (iv) cleft sentences, (v) tough constructions, (vi) worth Ving constructions, and (vii) raising constructions. With the instructions that some item of these constructions undergoes displacement, the learners learn the common property lying behind them, which is often neglected under the current classroom teaching of English.

Works Cited
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