

Teaching English Grammar in a Communicative Approach

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1. Introduction

Over the past several years, whether or not grammar should be taught explicitly or implicitly has been a controversial issue. Extensive grammar research has shown that grammar should be neglected in teaching English ever since communicative methodology appeared in the late 1970s. It was claimed that language should be acquired through natural exposure, not through formal instruction (Krashen, as cited in Nassaji & Fotos). However, recent research studies have demonstrated that grammar instruction enables learners to attain high level

of proficiency, both in accuracy and fluency. It was claimed that the teacher should provide learners with authentic discourse samples to illustrate all the contextually dependent grammatical rules (Ellis & Celce-Murcia, 2002). Florez (1999) in an article emphasized speaking skills using grammar accurately.

However, none of these studies provides any descriptive methods based on data that demonstrates actual application to the EFL classroom where communicative input is extremely limited and where grammar-based syllabi are the norm. In addition to the limited communicative input, EFL learners do not have the real-world needs for communicative functions in the target language as much as ESL learners do. Another limitation that previous research has not covered is that many non- native English speaking teachers who teach

EFL have a lack of communicative proficiency to teach grammar at the discourse level.

The present work will report on the reforms of English grammar teaching for communicative purposes in EFL countries, and present an applicable curriculum for communicative grammar in EFL classroom setting, which challenges and changes the role of EFL teachers. Furthermore, the role of L1 in L2 education will be discussed in this paper.

2. Communicative Language Teaching

2.1. Basic English Grammar for Survival

Purposes

Listening and speaking are the most used language skills both in and outside the classroom. Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information (Florez, 1999; Brown, 1994).

Kumaravadivelu (1999) demonstrated that discourse relates to the relationship between language structure and the immediate social context in which it is used. The social context helps classroom discourse look at the classroom activity as a social event and the classroom as a “minisociety” with its own rules.

Pennington (2002) suggested “action grammar” in which grammars of language should meet real use: “it must be interactive in nature and relative to specific discourse communicates and their communicative

practices.” Listening and speaking are not independent of each other so that at a lowest level, students produce sounds, gestures, writing for each other using basic grammatical structures for purposeful actions. Face-to-face conversation as the basic setting for language use is defined by the following characteristics: copresence, visibility, audibility, instantaneity, evanescence, simultaneity, extemporaneity, self-determination, and self-expression (Clark, as cited in Pennington, 2002).

Wiley and Lukes (1996) considered the basic English writing skills of university students who had low scores on composition, and asserted that it should be mandatory for students to learn the basic mechanics of writing, including spelling, punctuation, grammar, word choice, sentence structure and paragraph development and for the teacher to guide students through the writing process.

2.2. Academic Purposes in ESL/ EFL Classroom

According to Stewart's article (2004), a survey of the language needs of nonnative English speakers in U.S universities found that ESL students ranked formal speaking and listening comprehension skills as their two biggest problem areas. Students in academic programs need to be able to perform various academic tasks that require a number of language functions such as explaining, informing, debating, classifying, persuading and evaluating. Academic language has been defined as "the language that is used by teachers and students for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge and skills" (Chamot & O'Malley, as cited in Stewart, 2004, p. 9).

Florez (1999) claimed that students must be able to anticipate and then produce using the patterns

expected in the discourse situation so that they are required to choose correct vocabulary and accurate grammar structures. Discourse is referred to as “a coherent unit of language consisting of more than one sentence” (Schiffrin, as cited by Celce-Murcia, in Larsen-Freeman, 2002. p.122). Celce-Murcia illustrated grammatical sentences that combine the formal and functional perspectives to show how the sentences relate to form and meaning that relate communicative purpose. Fotos (in Larsen-Freeman, 2002) argued that structure-based tasks designed to promote awareness of target grammar forms are useful pedagogy for providing communicative grammar instruction. She also claimed that recent empirical evidence has shown that explicit instruction helps students to attain high levels of accuracy in the target language because explicit instruction not only activates their previous knowledge of

the target structures and but also draws their attention to the forms (e.g., Cadierno; Ellis; Lightbown; Lightbown, & Spada; Robinson; White, as cited in Fotos, 2002).

A research on grammar teaching through discourse in an advanced ESL class in Pennsylvania has shown that students have made progress gradually working to incorporate the forms into their oral language even though the lesson seemed confusing to students and they cannot retain all the grammatical structures (Shenk, 1999).

3. Grammar Instruction Curriculum

3.1. Grammar Lesson

Three Dimensions

Larsen-Freeman (2003) introduced three dimensions of language: form, meaning and usage. The

first dimension, the form of a language deals with phonology, morphology, and syntax. The morphological and syntactic subsystems are treated in second and third dimensions. Being able to use grammatical structures does not mean using the form accurately because students need to use them meaningfully in semantics and also appropriately in pragmatics. Yule (1998) presented the grammar rules in prescriptive and descriptive views of the language, explain basic meaning of grammatical structures, and show how meaning is shaped by context.

There is no doubt that some analytically-inclined students are aided by explicit attention and explanations of form, meaning and use, by these reasons or rules of thumb, especially when the reasons/rules are abstract or complex. (Larsen-Freeman, 2002. p.143)

Methodological Presentation in Grammar Teaching

Fotos (in Larsen-Freeman, 2002) suggested that a pedagogic grammar lesson should follow three parts: explicit grammar instruction, communicative activities, and summary activities. At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher gives students explicit grammar rules and explanation. Then, the teacher provides many communicative activities that contain uses of the instructed form. Last, in the summary activities section, students will pay more attention on the grammar form they have just studied and then perform communicatively.

Fotos (ibid.) stated that:

Tasks can supply the learner
with target language input that
is rich in communicative
usages of problematic target

structures, and task
 performance provides
 opportunities for the type of
 learner interaction suggested to
 promote language acquisition.
 (p. 138)

In other words, tasks can provide students with opportunities to produce the target language and receive feedback on the productions. The feedback is so important that the students can notice the gap between the target language that they want to produce and the limitations of their current interlanguage (Carroll & Swain; Kowal; Swain& Larkin, as cited in Fotos, 2002). Nassaji and Fotos (2002) in their article also described three types of structure-based tasks that have been recently proposed to promote learner awareness and

practice of target forms, which are communicative because of meaning-focused interaction. Asato (2003) defined task as “a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome” (p.19). He also proposed task-based learning (TBL) that provides the four conditions of language learning—exposure, use, motivation, and instruction.

3.2. Methodology

Ellis (2002) argued that “[t]here have been relatively few attempts to conduct a methodological analysis of the instructional options incorporated into grammar practice books” (p. 155). He presented three aspects of materials that relate to the analysis of methodological options in grammar teaching: (1) isolated, uncontextualized sentences; (2) sentence completion involving the adaptation of an unmarked lexical item presented in brackets; and (3) gap filling.

Explicit Description

Explicit description refers to supplied and discovers, which means whether the materials provide learners with an explanation of the grammar point or whether learners are required to develop their own explanations. Fotos (2002) strongly suggested that explicit instruction draws students' attention to the target form and raises their consciousness of it. Even though Corder (1973) argued that the methodological proposals in pedagogic grammar for teachers are more often implicit rather than explicit, he still said that explicit instruction could help students have the ability to interpret and produce grammatical utterances. (Sweet, as cited in Corder, 1973)

Roca (2002) emphasized teaching rules of grammar through explicit description and concluded that

it is important for learners not only to know the rules from the explicit instruction, but also to know why they exist because it helps make the acquisition of a language less mechanical. If ESL students know the reasons why a rule exists, they also know when it is possible to “violate” it in the meaning or use.

Data

According to Ellis (2002), data options are subdivided in terms of source, text size, and medium. Source shows whether the data provided authentic materials including real-life context or contrived materials designed for pedagogic context. Text size concerns with whether or not the text based on the data consists of discrete sentences and continuous sentences. Finally the text comprising the data can be written or oral. “Teaching is a matter of providing the learner with the

right data” (Corder, 1973) that can help students to develop the general ability to communicate producing grammatical sentences. In other words, giving the data means encouraging the learner to develop his own set of strategies for dealing with the task.

Operation

The operation in the methodological materials is classified according to whether they involve production, reception, or judgment. Production can be controlled or free. Controlled grammar activities have many types such as substitution, gap-filling, sentence completion, transformation, and insertion. On the other hand, free production activities concerns with whether the text produced is more personal in function. Students should have opportunities to practice these structures in oral or

written texts through production activities. (Ellis, 2002; Celce-Murcia, 2002)

Classroom Practice

Salies (1998) in his article showed a lesson designed to teach intermediate-level ESL students the usage of pronoun within a communicative approach using the target language. Students are invited to give examples based on the chant, and visual aids are also provided to make students understand the pronouns in the text form. To close the oral activities, the grammar instruction focuses on the explicit teaching of grammar and stresses only rules that can be activated during language production.

Shenk (1999) investigated teaching grammar through a lesson designed to teach advanced ESL students superlatives and comparatives, giving students three tests during the class: pre-test, post-test, and a

second post-test for data collection. He found out that concentrating on accurate grammar and pronunciation slows down students' progress in the target language because it takes their focus away from developing comprehension skills (Krashen & Terrell, as cited in Shenk, 1999).

In the article of Musthafa (2001), he brought up the serious challenge facing English education in Indonesia where the target language is seldom used in the classroom because Indonesian teachers of English tend to use their native language, which hinders the development of the students' communicative competence in English. For a communicative English classroom, he suggested that teachers should not only make explicit the objectives that they want their students to achieve from learning activities, but also consider relevant materials that will help students commit their attention to learning.

4. Pedagogic Grammar

4.1. Explicit Instruction

Krashen (as cited in Nassaji, 2002) argued against explicit grammar instruction saying that “explicit grammatical knowledge about structures and rules for use may never turn into implicit knowledge underlying unconscious language comprehension and production.” The value of explicit grammar instruction was also rejected by Truscott (as cited in Nassaji, 2002) asserting that grammar instruction alone may not promote what he called “genuine knowledge of language.”

However, Ellis (2002) suggested that when grammar instruction is extensive and is sustained over a long period of time, such instruction contributes to the

development of implicit knowledge and it promotes accuracy in the use of difficult forms in the target language. He strongly supported the need for providing communicative opportunities that contain instructed grammar forms and a combination of form-focused instruction and meaningful communication. In other words, learners need opportunities to both encounter and produce structures that have been introduced either explicitly through the grammar lesson, or implicitly through frequent exposure. (Ellis, 2002; Lightbrown, 2000; Swain, as cited in Ellis, 2003)

Pedagogical focus on form can be achieved in four different ways: focus on form through process or through design, reactively or preemptively (Nassaji, as cited in Nassaji & Fotos, 2002). Focus on form through process occurs in the context of natural communication when both the teacher and the learner's primary focus is

on meaning. On the contrary, focus on form through design is achieved through designing tasks which have deliberate explicit focus (ibid.). Long and Robinson (as cited in Nassaji) said that focus on form can also be achieved ‘reactively’ by providing reactional feedback on learners’ errors, or ‘preemptively’ by discussing grammatical forms irrespective of whether errors have occurred or not.

4.2. Implicit Instruction

The objects of grammars have been intended for the use of a language so that many scholars suggest less explicit instruction to present the “fact” of the language in form, but instead focus on more implicit teaching. The methodological proposals in pedagogic grammar for teachers are also focusing on implicit description rather than explicit explanation. Ellis (2002) who suggested

input and output processing, argued that students should be aware of two different steps when they receive input. First, learners can be made aware of the formal properties of the language as they experience these in input. Second, learners can be made aware of forming some kind of explicit representation of a target form (i.e., developing explicit knowledge). Finally, learners can have opportunities to try out their understanding of the target structure in a production activity. Dekeyser (as cited in Ellis, 2002) believed that the idea of explicit knowledge being converted into implicit knowledge by means of automatizing practice can be challenged. Fotos (2002) argued that the tasks should be implicit grammar tasks that are entirely communicative, with no grammatical content but requiring use of the target structure to perform the task. Thus, implicit structure-based tasks following grammar instruction can facilitate learner

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acquisition. (Ellis, 2002; Robinson, as cited in Fotos,
2002)

4.3. The Role of L1 and L2 in Grammar

Lesson

The use of learners' L1 is a controversial issue in L2 education. Language learners are usually discouraged from using their shared L1 in L2 classroom activities. However, recent findings suggest that the L1 may be a useful tool for learning the L2 (Anton & DiCamilla, Brooks & Donato, as cited in Wigglesworth, 2003). These empirical investigations have studied L2 learning processes within a sociocultural framework, examining L1 interactions used by learners as they participate in cognitively demanding L2 activities. The result showed that the use of the L1 provides learners with additional

cognitive support that allows them to analyze language and work at a higher level (ibid.).

Swain and Lapkin (as cited in Wigglesworth, 2003) investigated the use of L1 (English) by two 8th grade French classes and found that the L1 was helpful for establishing a joint understanding of the text, focusing attention on grammatical items, and enhancing interpersonal interaction. Wigglesworth (2003) finally concluded that there was a turnaround in the learners' behavior when they received explicit instructions to use their L1s, which shows learners are strongly influenced by the context in which they are working. The use of L1 can help students provide each other with definitions of unknown words more directly and more successfully. Teachers need to reevaluate views concerning the use of the L1 in L2 in group and pair work.

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