The Role of Grammar Teaching in College EFL

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Abstract

In the past, teaching grammar had been central to and often synonymous with teaching foreign language for the past 2500 years (Rutherford, 1987). However, with the advent of communicative language teaching, the necessity of grammar instruction has become the center of an ongoing debate. The role of grammar instruction in the classroom had moved from a position of central importance to that of an "outcast," and is now being brought back into the classroom to aid students' communicative competence. In fact, in any case, it is clear that no one should dismiss grammar instruction altogether, because there is no empirical evidence that to do so is ultimately more beneficial to foreign language learning. Instead, by forcing students into communication tasks beyond their grammatical competence would encourage pidginization and premature fossilization in the process of second/foreign language acquisition. Therefore, grammar instruction is necessary, even in the communicative language classroom.

To improve grammar teaching, three suggestions are presented. First, teaching needs to be informed by descriptions of grammar which accurately reflect authentic language and show how grammar is a resource for making and exchanging meanings in context. Second, grammar teaching needs to be integrated into the teaching of speaking, listening, writing, and reading skills. In other words, grammar should be seen as facilitating communication in all modes, not as an isolated area of study exemplified by "the grammar lesson." Third, grammar needs to be taught through engaging learners in meaningful and motivating activities.

Key Words: grammar teaching, functional English grammar, communicative language teaching

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Back to the time that we remembered, the teaching of grammar, the teaching of morphological inflections, function words, and syntactical word orders, was a central concern in English language teaching. In fact, what we meant to teach grammar, traditionally, had often been synonymous with foreign language teaching, especially during the days of grammar-translation approach. In this approach, as the name suggests, the primary aim of teaching was a thorough knowledge of the foreign language grammar. Hence, under the influence of this kind of teaching style, language teachers are commonly regarded as the "knowledge-imparting" dispensers, because their teaching hours are mostly spent in explaining grammatical rules or conducting activities for students to produce sentences containing the targeted structures. Students are considered to be the passive "knowledge-receiving" collectors, because their learning hours are spent in practicing patterns, memorizing grammatical rules and vocabulary as well as translation exercises (Yang, 1992).

Since learning a foreign language is almost equated with memorizing a myriad of grammatical rules and patterns drill, the learning process is no more than dull and boring and the learning results are far from being successful at all. One of the serious setbacks is students' communicative competence. It's not uncommon to find that students are frequently unable to use a given grammatical point correctly in spontaneous utterances even after repeated explanation, drill, and apparent mastery as demonstrated on tests. Still worse, with the advent of what has come to be known as the communicative approach, language teachers are misled to believe that paying attention to grammar actively would impede the effort to achieve communicative competence, because the learner's attention is deflected from the expression of meaning, which is the point of communication, to the consideration of form, which is not. It's the first time in centuries that the centrality of grammar either as content for language teaching or as the organizing principle for curriculum or materials development is challenged. Such a challenge is getting sharper and sharper, especially since the mid-1970s (Celce-Murcia, 1991).

Starting from the mid-1970s, the notion that language should be treated as

an instrument of communication instead of as a linguistic knowledge has been sharply brought into focus. Those who have applied this-philosophy to language teaching (e.g., Holiday, 1973; Wilkins, 1976) claim that communication is the goal of second or foreign language instruction. Thus, the syllabus of a language course should not be organized around grammar, but around subject matter, tasks/projects, or semantic notions, and/or pragmatic functions. In other words, language instruction should be content-based, meaningful, conceptualized, and discourse-based. The teacher's role is primarily to facilitate language use and communication. As for grammar instruction, there is little or no place in a communicative classroom. Supporters believe that students could simply absorb all the grammar they need from communicative activities. Also, if students want to acquire more grammar, they could easily learn it on their own through homework or reference books.

Unfortunately, existing research, which is not conclusive, strongly suggests that some focus on "form" may well be necessary for many learners to achieve accuracy as well as fluency in their acquisition of a second or foreign language (Long, 1983; Rutherford and Smith, 1988). Indeed as Richards (1985) points out that there is no actuarial empirical evidence that proves "communicative" language classrooms, especially those that preclude any learner focus on form, can produce better language learners than do more traditional classrooms. Moreover, researchers like Higgs and Clifford (1982) claim that the grammarless communicative approach may lead to the development of a broken, ungrammatical, pidginized form of the target language beyond which students can never really progress. Such students are said to have "fossilized" in their acquisition of the language. Thus, it's clear that grammar instruction shouldn't be dismissed altogether.

It seems that we as language teachers are confronted with a paradox: grammatical competence must be an integral part of communicative competence, but learning grammar doesn't seem to help students achieve either. Of course, no one argues that grammatical competence is irrelevant; the controversy is rather about how or even whether teaching can promote it. Obviously, language teachers today can be roughly split into two groups—those who believe that the grammarless communicative approach and those who believe that the grammar-integrated communicative approach. Supporters of the grammarless

communicative approach propose that all grammar instruction be excluded from the classroom since they feel that it does not facilitate language acquisition; at best it merely helps learners to monitor or become aware of the forms they use. Any grammatical errors produced by the learners will gradually self-correct as learners are exposed to even more complex, rich, and meaningful input in the target language (Krashen and Terrell, 1983). On the other hand, practitioners of the grammar-integrated communicative approach insist that explicit grammar instruction is not only necessary but also helpful to make language input more comprehensible as well as to facilitate language proficiency level and accuracy (Omaggio, 1986; Pienemann, 1984; Pica, 1983). Although each camp has its theoretical claims, no empirical research has been widely accepted as supporting or refuting either. As an English language teacher, I agree that grammar should be integrated in the communicative classroom.

Strategies for Grammar Instruction

As indicated by Celce-Murcia (l985), there are several guidelines that can assist teachers in deciding to what degree they ought to deal with grammar in their own classes.

Among the many factors that can influence teachers' teaching styles and syllabus design, the most important one is students' language proficiency level. If students are beginners, there is little justification in focusing on form, beyond presenting and practicing the obvious form-meaning correspondences in context. However, if students are at the intermediate or advanced level, it may well be necessary for the teacher to provide some form-related feedback and correction in order for the students to progress.

As for the beginners, teachers select the most basic rules of English grammar and teach only what is easily learnable as well as with high frequency value. The patterns suggested to be suitable for students at the beginning level include: basic sentence structures (e.g. declarative, Wh-questions, and tag-questions); adverb and adjective; prepositions (in, on, at), pronouns, verb tenses (present/past) and aspect (present perfect/present progressive), coordination (or, and), subordination (because, if), modal auxiliaries (can, may, must, will, and would), and phrasal verbs.

On the other hand, for the intermediate level, teachers should emphasize providing students with increased exposure to input that displays the use of the grammatical features in diverse settings. They also provide students with multiple opportunities to use the specific features. The grammatical patterns presented at this level are basically similar to those presented to the students at the beginning level. In addition, the following patterns should also be included: passives, relative clauses, causatives, conditional clauses, and subject/verb agreement.

Finally, for the students at the advanced level, teachers should not only review those specific grammatical features that students lack, but also introduce more specific grammatical detail to help students increase their communicative effectiveness. Hence, grammar instruction becomes more individualized and more academically content-oriented. Although the same grammatical features that were presented to intermediate students are presented to advanced students, more information is provided about these features, and they are presented in ways that require more sophisticated use of English. Also, other additional grammatical features are presented such as parallel structures, cohesive markers, troublesome verb forms, and adjective formed from-ing or -ed/-en participle.

The following is a chart that demonstrates to what extent language teachers can provide students with grammatical features in the classroom.

Beginning	1. Introduce the position of adjective
	(a) Most adjectives are used in 2 ways in English:
	    - before a noun; He is an old man.
	    - after be, seem, look, feel, smell, taste,
	    The man is old.
	    The lemon is sour.
	(b) We can use a few adjectives on their own after "the" to
	    refer to "the group as a whole"
	    The rich should pay more tax than the poor.
	    = Rich people should pay more tax than poor people.
	(c) Comparison of adjective
	    - common comparative and superlative forms
	    - use more/the most with all three-syllabus adj..

Intermediate	(a) Some adjectives before and after nouns may change their meaning The elect body meets once a year. (before the noun = specially chosen) The president elect takes over in May. (after the noun = who has been elected) (b) confused adjectives e.g. further/farther; older/elder (c) Irregular comparisons good/well better the best bad worse the worst little less the least
Advanced	(a) adjectives ending in "-ed" and "-ing"-We use"-ed" endings to describe people; use "-ing" endings to describe things or events John was interested in the story. The story was interesting. Compare: Gloria was interesting to be with. Gloria was interested in the story.

Learning styles are the general approaches students use to learn a new language. These are the styles they employ in learning many other subjects and solving various problems. Therefore, students' learning style is also an important factor to influence the need to focus on form. A sensible, observant ESL teacher knows that individuals learn in different ways, which would strongly reflect how they learn as well as how much they are successful in the language classroom. Some students, consciously or unconsciously, have an analytical style and learn best by formulating and testing rules. For this kind of analytical students, they tend to concentrate on contrastive analysis between languages, on rule-learning, and on dissecting words and sentences; but they often avoid more free-flowing communicative activities. On the other hand, other students have a more global, holistic learning style and learn best by social interaction, experiencing, and understanding relevant data, etc. Unlike analytical students, global students find it hard to cope with what seems to them to be grammatical minutiae,

such as anglicizing words, sentences, and rules.

In second/foreign -language acquisition, these two types of students might be designated as "rule learners" and "data gathers" (Hatch, et al., 1985, p. 44). Apparently, students with different learning styles will benefit from the different instructional approaches applied by the language teachers. In fact, it seems, then, if language teachers adopt a methodology which favors either a holistic or an analytical approach, the odds are that they'll not be equally effective with all of their students. Language teachers should be very sensitive to vary their grammatical instruction in order to accommodate all learning styles.

Learners' needs are also an important factor to consider. What does the students' need to be able to do in the target language? If the students' immediate goal is survival communication, formal accuracy is of marginal value; in contrast, if students' need is to use language to function in academic settings and professional. situations, a high degree of formal accuracy is essential. Considering the learning need for the majority of cadets in Taiwan, it seems that the abilities of survival and vocational communication are more important and urgent than those of academic, professional communication. Teachers should be sensible and skillful enough to balance grammar instruction and students' learning needs in the language classroom.

Finally, the instructionally objectives is another important factor to change the need to focus on form. A teacher who is teaching a receptive skill (such as listening or reading) may feel it is distracting and irrelevant to emphasize grammar unduly since these receptive skills require competence primarily in the area of word recognition and semantic processing. Although listening and reading may involve some focus on form (e.g. Better understanding and awareness of logical connectors can enhance both reading and listening comprehension, a teacher easily downplays the role of grammar during the teaching process. However, if the teacher is focusing on productive skills (e.g. speaking and, in particular, writing), formal accuracy can become an important concern because rules of pedagogical grammar are essentially rules of production.

Based on the four factors discussed above, it seems somewhat complicated but not impossible for language teachers to decide the degree to which it is appropriate to focus on form with a given group of students. A grid such as the following may be a useful visual aid to help teachers make a correct decision.

Factors	Less Important	Focus on Form	More Important
1. Proficiency level	beginning	intermediate	advanced
2. Learning style	global-centered	analytical-centered	analytical-centered
3. Learning need	survival communication	vocational communication	academic/ professional communication
4. Instructional objectives	listening reading	speaking	writing

The more factors the teacher identifies on the left side of the grid, the less important it is to focus on form; the more factors the teacher identifies on the right, the more important the grammatical. focus. Such a grid helps the teacher decide, for example, when teaching beginning-level students who are in need of survival communication and are studying reading skill, the focus on form is not a top priority. On the contrary, when teaching intermediate students who are analytical-centered and are studying reading and speaking, some focus on form is essential if the teacher wants to help students successfully meet their language achievement. Even though students may be, more on the left hand side of the chart, it doesn't mean that grammar instruction can be ignored. Rather, the teachers should continue to teach grammar, but it should take a secondary place to communicative competence.

Semantica Grammar Teaching

As the concept that language should be treated as a means to communicate with rather than as a knowledge to study with is getting popular and widely accepted, it has become increasingly clear that grammar is only a tool or a source to be used to facilitate language comprehension and creation of oral and written discourse. When learned as a decontextualized sentence-level system, grammar is not very useful to learn as they listen, read, speak, and write in their foreign language. But, how to introduce grammar to students so that they will not get bored is a great challenge for language teachers. When presenting grammatical rules, there are several ways that language teachers can choose from. For example, some teachers may prefer to teach specific grammatical features by means of

contextualized communicative activities, while others may choose to present rules by means of explicit, deductive/implicit, inductive instruction, or perhaps, the combination of either means mentioned before.

Contextualized Communicative Activities

Strongly influenced by the concept of communicative language teaching, grammar is now viewed as but one component in .the development of communicative competence, and thus it should be taught with reference to meaning, social factors, or discourse factors. Activities which can provide students with exposure to grammatical structures in the context of meaningful communication are what is meant by contextualized communicative activities.

In order to facilitate students' comprehensible input and motivation, language teachers' instructional technique should be varied according to the function of the specific grammatical features. For instance, if one is teaching medals of requests, the degree of politeness, tag questions, etc., the most useful techniques are dramatization and other dynamic, interact ional techniques that would allow students to make the connection between structure and social function. On the other hand, while teaching quantifiers, locative preposition, or medals of logical probability, the most useful activities may be demonstration, illustration, and TPR (Total Physical Response). These techniques allow the teacher to focus on contrasts, semantic systems such as sets of scales, of certain operations such as negation or inversion. Although these activities are static rather than role-play or dramatization, they do help students match linguistic form with semantic variables.

Explicit, deductive instruction

Both research and teaching experience tell us that many students benefit from explicit, deductive instruction. In such instruction, grammatical rules are made salient through teacher-directed instruction. Unlike the traditional grammar-translation teaching, which emphasizes discrete grammatical points with lengthy grammatical explanations and decontextualized grammar exercises, a language teacher helps students become aware of particular linguistic features by presenting explicit grammatical rules.

<u>Implicit, inductive instruction</u>

Although many students prefer deductive learning, many others may like inductive one. In inductive learning, students are asked to discover grammatical rules by themselves. They are given input and asked to make sense of it by discovering the rule. Since there is little research that suggests whether deductive or inductive learning is inherently better, it is best for language teachers to provide students with both inductive or deductive types of grammatical instruction to accommodate individual students' learning styles and learning needs.

Since mingling with the fact that the majority of cadets' language proficiency level is rather low and their learning need is to satisfy their survival and vocational communication, I suggest that the best way to conduct a grammar lesson will be that a teacher presents grammatical features either explicitly or implicitly first, and later design a contextualized communicative activity for students to practice them in a functional situation. Even though students language proficiency level is low, language teachers still need to conduct grammar lessons for students to build up their language ability and to use it as a source to express their thought more meaningfully and accurately. However, unlike the traditional grammar-translation instruction, this kind of grammar lesson has to be presented in a sequential and meaningful way so that students can efficiently develop their communicative competence.

Conclusion

In the past, teaching grammar had been central to and often synonymous with teaching foreign language for the past 2500 years (Rutherford, 1987). However, with the advent of communicative language teaching, the necessity of grammar instruction has become the center of an ongoing debate. The role of grammar instruction in the classroom had moved from a position of central importance to that of an "outcast," and is now being brought back into the classroom to aid students' communicative competence. In fact, in any case, it is clear that no one should dismiss grammar instruction altogether, because there is no empirical evidence that to do so is ultimately more beneficial to foreign language learning. Instead, by forcing students into communication tasks beyond their grammatical competence would encourage

pidginization and premature fossilization in the process of second/foreign language acquisition.

Suggestions for Further Research

As indicated in the results of related literature, grammar teaching is now very much on its way back into favor. However, it is important that there should not be a return to some of the practices of the past, which could lead to grammar teaching being again discredited. To avoid this, a number of things have to happen.

Firstly, teaching needs to be informed by descriptions of grammar which accurately reflect authentic language and show how grammar is a resource for making and exchanging meanings in context. This means that many of the rules of grammar still found in some of the textbooks used by teachers and learners will need to be jettisoned or radically revised, and that information from recent advances in text linguistics and functional linguistics needs to be more widely available and accessible to teachers.

Secondly, grammar teaching needs to be integrated into the teaching of speaking, listening, writing, and reading skills. In other words, grammar should be seen as facilitating communication in all modes, not as an isolated area of study exemplified by "the grammar lesson."

Finally, grammar needs to be taught through engaging learners in meaningful and motivating activities.

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