

DEVELOPING ESL/ EFL LEARNERS' GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE THROUGH COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

The real learning takes place when the learners start using the language items not when they notice them. Every English as a Second Language/English as a Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) learner needs grammar to communicate effectively and efficiently. Furthermore, they need opportunities to use grammar communicatively in meaningful contexts in order to develop their grammatical competence. Unfortunately, the present classroom atmosphere does not provide this since it merely focuses on the input, i.e. the presentation of language items. This paper argues that the communicative activities fill this existing gap in teaching grammar by providing learners with meaningful contexts, where learners not only practice grammar, but also use it communicatively. While practicing grammar through communicative activities, the learners understand the relationship between the form, meaning, and function of grammatical structures in meaningful contexts. The paper exemplifies how communicative activities can be used to develop ESL/ EFL learners' grammatical competence.

Keywords: Communication, Communicative Activities, Communicative Competence, Grammar, Grammatical Competence.

INTRODUCTION

In most ESL/EFL classrooms, grammar is neither contextualized nor integrated with language systems and skills. Furthermore, grammar input and practice go in parallel lines without meeting anywhere in the process of learning because grammar rules are given either directly to the learners or asked them to discover the rules from the given examples without giving opportunities to practice using grammar in meaningful contexts. Then only practice that the learners get is the traditional form focused discrete items and home work written assignment. It is viewed that learners should be allowed to experiment grammar in communicative contexts because the central part of learning grammar is trying out grammar in contexts. According to Scrivener (2005), learners need to transfer the learned items into a living ability to use the language. The simple knowledge of grammar rules will not develop learners' skill in using grammar. The learners need to have

opportunities to develop their competence in grammar and convert it into the available automatic output in real life communication. Grammar taught as rules without giving any opportunities to use them in communicative contexts will neither develop ESL/EFL learners' grammatical competence nor make them as communicative competent users of English. This paper discusses how communicative activities can develop the learners' grammatical competence within the communicative competence.

1. Grammatical Competence, Communicative Competence, and Grammar Teaching

Grammatical competence is the knowledge and the ability to use grammar in meaningful contexts. In other words, it is the linguistic ability to use the knowledge of the rules and system of language. Furthermore, grammatical competence is viewed as the building block of developing communicative competence. According to Canale and

Swain (1980) grammatical competence is the "knowledge of lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, sentence grammar semantics, and phonology" (p. 29) and a part of communicative competence.

Communicative competence is the learners' knowledge and skill that are necessary for communication in a speech community. According to Hymes (1972), it should be viewed as "the overall underlying knowledge and ability for language which the speaker-listener possesses" (p. 13). Canale and Swain (1980) and Bachman (1990) modified and developed the concept further. According to Canale and Swain (1980) communicative competence consists of four different components such as grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. The first two components go with linguistic aspects of communication while the last two go with the functional aspect of communication. Grammatical competence deals with sentence level grammar, whereas discourse competence deals with grammar of text. Sociolinguistic competence refers to the language rules and functions in socio-cultural settings. Strategic competence is either verbal or non verbal communicative strategy that the user uses to continue communication when the communication breaks down. Bachman (1990) modified the Canale and Swain's (1980) communicative competence and renamed it as language competence. In short, communicative competence is "everything that a speaker needs to know in order to communicate appropriately within a particular community" (Saville-Troike, 2006, p. 134). Since communicative competence consists of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence (Canale and Swain, 1980), grammar teaching should not be ignored in ESL/EFL classrooms. Similarly, Larsen-Freeman (1997) states that grammatical competency is as important as other competencies in communicative competence; therefore, grammar should not be neglected in ESL/EFL classrooms. Close (1981) claims that "communication can generally be achieved most efficiently by means of a grammatical sentence or by a series of such sentences logically related" (p. 14);

moreover, language cannot be used communicatively without grammar since it is an essential source for communicative use of language (Nunan, 1989). Brown (2007) argues that grammar has a significant role in the process of developing communicative competence. Swain and Lapkin (1998) demonstrated that learners were not able to gain accurate language from long-term rich and meaningful input without grammar.

2. Communicative Activities

The main focus of communicative activities is communication, (i.e.) two way communication between the participants. A communicative task or activity incorporates the actual processes of communication and engages learners in real life communication in meaningful contexts. According to Gao (2008),

By a "communicative activity", we mean motivated activities, topics, and themes which involve the students in authentic communication. In communicative activities, students will find themselves in various real-life situations where the target language must be used. Because the focus is not on learning specific language features but on putting the language to use as the circumstances require, students can learn and acquire the language subconsciously, most importantly, students can learn to use their ideas, pass on their ideas and receive ideas, in this way to enlarge their vocabulary, broaden their knowledge, and be more interested to read more and read better (p.14).

Communicative activities aim at improving learners' fluency by getting them to exchange information meaningfully in natural contexts. Scrivener (2005) states that communicative activities are designed to make learners interact with each other using the language that they have learned and are learning in natural contexts. Grammar communicative activities encourage the learners to use grammar in meaningful communicative contexts.

2.1 Types of Communicative Activities

2.1.1 Information Gap Activities

The term information gap refers to the absence of information among those who share information.

Information gap is the source of communication because if both sender and receiver know the information, there will not be any real communication. According to Scrivener (2005) in information gap activities, one has information but the other does not have it and it forces them to communicate. Information gap activities "require the exchange of information among all participants, each of whom possesses some piece of information not known to, but needed by, all other participants to solve the problem" (Doughty and Pica, 1986, p. 307). Grammatical activities with information gap provide learners with opportunities to practice using grammar communicatively and meaningfully in natural contexts.

2.1.2 Discussion

Discussion forces learners to speak and listen naturally in meaningful contexts. Furthermore, it makes learners more fluent and confident in using language. According to Scrivener (2005) "fluency and confidence are important goals" (p. 146) of discussion. Learners will get plenty of chances to use the learned and currently learning language items naturally and meaningfully. In addition, they can use their passive language actively and communicatively.

2.1.3 Role-Play, Real-Play, and Simulation

Role-play can be either guided or free. In guided role-play learners will get role, cards containing basic information about their roles such as name, age, appearance, personality, and point of view, whereas in free role-play the learners decide the roles and prepare role cards. Real-play is the variation of role play in which the characters and situation have been taken from the real life. Simulation is a large scale role play, in which all the participants get complete background information about the roles, actions, sequence of the actions, contexts, and other necessary information about their roles (Scrivener, 2005). Varieties of grammatical structures can be practiced and used meaningfully using role play, real play, and simulation.

2.1.4 Questionnaire

Questionnaires can be useful and worthwhile because they require both the questioner and respondent to exchange ideas with each other. They encourage the natural use of the language interactively. While using questionnaire as

communicative grammar practice, the teacher can either give the learners topics to prepare the questions or give them the skeleton of questions which is used as the prompt for the survey. Questionnaires can be used to practice all types of questions communicatively in meaningful contexts.

2.1.5 Dictation

Traditional monotonous and unpopular dictation can be used as an interesting, enjoyable, and learnable communicative activity by bringing varieties to it. Davis and Rinvulcri (1988) argues that dictation needs to be considered a broad method containing different interesting and motivating techniques that promote meaningful communication and provide opportunities to use language creatively. Kidd (1992) points out that "For a variety of theoretical and practical reasons, dictation is a promising general procedure for promoting both conscious learning and subconscious acquisition of L2 (Second Language) grammatical structures" (p. 49).

2.1.5.1 Dictogloss

Dictogloss is a communicative and interactive variety of traditional dictation. It is a kind of dictation in which learners listen and reconstruct the whole text rather than sentence by sentence (Thornbury, 1996). According to Wajnryb (1990) dictogloss is an interesting, motivating, and communicative ESL grammar teaching technique. Varieties of grammatical items can be practiced through dictation and dictogloss.

3. Need for Communicative Activities in Grammar Classrooms

Traditionally, the learners are given de-contextualized close practice of discrete items, such as fill in the blanks, correcting the sentences, choosing the correct options, changing the forms, and mechanical practice like drilling which deal with one language item at a time thinking that learners will learn "in a sequential step-by-step fashion" (Nunan, 1998, p. 101). However, in real life learners do not have to fill in gaps, change the forms, or choose the correct options, rather they need to engage in conversation, participate in discussion, write letters or emails, and so on.

Traditional passive grammar practice does not develop

active learning. It prevents the learners from applying grammar actively in communication. Since, it neither involves the learners in communicative tasks nor requires them to apply and use grammar in real life contexts. In fact, traditional grammar practice does not develop learners' grammatical competence, but only tests their grammar knowledge.

Since, the learners learn a number of things at the same time (Nunan, 1998), they need to be given tasks that allow them to use various learned and newly learning items. The best alternative in grammar classrooms is giving practice that integrates grammar with language skills not a "separate section of the test that deals with structure explicitly" (Larsen-Freeman, 2009, p. 533). Communicative activities not only integrate language skills and systems, but also combine forms, meaning, and functions. Furthermore, they stress meaningful practice and authentic communication.

Since grammar acts as the building blocks of communicative competence, the main purpose of teaching grammar is "to help learners internalise the structures taught in such a way that they can be used in everyday communication" (Ellis, 2009, p. 168). Canale and Swain (1980) argue that since the prime objective of grammatical competence is to communicate effectively through suitable grammatical forms, grammatical structures should be combined and blended with meaningful communicative contexts. Varieties of grammar items can be used in communicative activities and tasks like information gap activity, discussion, role play, real play, simulation, pair work, and group work since learners acquire grammar when they use it "unconsciously, automatically, and correctly in speech" (Kwakernaak, 2009, p. 337). Thus, traditional grammar practicing activities need to be transformed into communicative activities so that the learners can develop their grammatical competence by using language items communicatively.

Communicative activities make learners feel less worried and more relaxed while they learn and practice language items, since the main purpose of the activities is meaningful communication. They offer excellent opportunity for using

grammar without being afraid of making mistakes as they are focusing on the tasks and communication not on the form.

The gap that exists in learners' grammar learning due to the lack of appropriate opportunities to transform their in head grammar knowledge into grammatical competence within the communicative competence need to be filled by providing communicative activities in which the learners can develop grammatical competence by practice using grammar communicatively in meaningful contexts.

4. Context and Background

Communicative activities provide EFL Omani students with opportunities to use grammar naturally in meaningful contexts to develop their grammatical competence. The activities illustrated were designed for fifth and sixth semester students of English language and literature at the Department of English at Al Buraimi University College, Oman. The students who were given these communicative activities have studied English for more than 15 years and their language proficiency is intermediate. Furthermore, they have already studied two grammar courses such as Basic Grammar and Introduction to Modern Grammar.

5. Application of Communicative Activities in Grammar Classes

This paper is based on the author's classroom teaching experience with EFL Omani students. The activities are designed to provide the students with opportunities to use grammar meaningfully in communicative contexts. Therefore, the main objectives of the communicative activities in the grammar classes are as follows.

- To help the students to learn grammar without being worried about the mistakes;
- To remove the students' fear and anxiety in learning grammar;
- To provide opportunities to use grammar in meaningful contexts;
- To enable the learners to use grammar communicatively; and
- To develop the students' grammatical competence and communicative competence.

Two sample lessons are given to illustrate how grammar

can be practiced and used communicatively in meaningful contexts through communicative activities.

5.1 Sample Lesson 1: Dictogloss

The lesson focuses on practicing and using reported speech in natural context. Both the form and meaning are stressed in this activity. This activity also integrates grammar with listening, speaking, and writing skills.

5.1.1 Introduction

The teacher introduces the topic by chatting about the students' preferred weekend activities. He gets the individual students to talk about them.

5.1.1.1 Task 1 Weekend Activity

This task is a kind of warming up activity. The aim is to personalize grammar learning and practice. Since the students may have done different kinds of activities during the weekend, they can make good notes.

Instruction: Work individually and make notes on how you spent your last weekend.

My Last Weekend Activities

5.1.1.2 Task 2 Pair Work

The aim of this task is to integrate grammar practice with speaking skill. There will be real communication since the students have some real information to share with their pairs. Even the weak and shy students will be confident to speak as they have recollected their weekend activities. The teacher will pair the students.

Instruction: Work in pair. Share your weekend activities with your partner.

5.1.1.3 Task 3 Listening

Instruction: I am going to tell you how I spent my last weekend. Listen carefully and answer the following questions. Compare your answer with a partner.

"I got up late since it was the weekend. I decided to buy some fish, so I took the car key and drove to the fish market. I was driving to the market. When I reached near the roundabout, I found an old lady lying on the road and crying. So I stopped the car and went to near her. She was bleeding. I asked, "What happened?"

"A car hit me," she said.

"Are you alone? Where do you come from?" I asked.

Just as she was about to answer, she fell unconscious. I took her in my car and rushed to hospital. The doctor examined her and said, "No need to worry, it is because she has lost some blood. The injury is not serious. It will take two hours to be normal."

I decided to stay with the lady till she regained her consciousness. After two hours she opened her eyes and looked around. When she saw me, she started crying. "Don't worry nothing has happened to you. You can go home today," I said.

"My son is sick and he is in this hospital in general ward," she said, "I was taking food for him," she continued.

I looked for her son and found him in the general ward. I told him about his mother and took him to his mother. I left the hospital seeing both of them hugging each other.

(A) Write Short Answers

1. Where was the teacher going? -----

2. Who did he meet on the way? -----

3. What happened to the old lady? -----

4. Did he help her? -----

(B) Decide whether the following Statements are 'True' or 'False'

1. The teacher bought fish. -----
2. He hit the old lady. -----
3. He found the lady at the roundabout. -----
4. The old lady's son was working in hospital. -----
5. He couldn't find the son. -----

The teacher read the text in normal pace because the purpose is to get the learners to understand both general and specific idea of the text.

5.1.1.4 Task 4 Note Taking

Instruction: Listen to my story again and take notes in your own words. Pay attention to the dialogues that you hear because you need them in task 5. I will read the story twice. First time you listen and take notes and the second time you listen and check your notes.

The text is read at slower pace because the students are required to take notes in their own words by listening to the teacher carefully.

5.1.1.5 Task 5 Re-writing the Story

Instruction: Use your notes and rewrite the story using reported speech wherever possible.

The students need to reconstruct the text using reported speech without altering the original meaning of the text.

5.1.1.6 Task 6 Group Work

Instruction: Work in group of four. Listen to the story once again and check your work. Read your classmates' reconstructed texts.

It is a challenging activity because it requires the students to focus on the dialogues and meaning of the text. Furthermore, they are required to write reported speech based on their notes. As a result, there were variations in their answers. Since it was not mechanical dictation, they had to think creatively.

5.2 Sample Lesson 2: Simulation

The purpose of this lesson is to encourage the students to use both active and passive language items naturally in meaningful communicative contexts. The students need to use varieties of structures to communicate effectively. The activity forces the students to use not only the learned and the learning structures but also the linguistic structures that have not been learned yet.

5.2.1 Introduction

The teacher distributes copies of a newspaper article that reports the recent protest against the government's decision to lay gas pipe line through highly populated villages.

5.2.1.1 Task 1 Reading

The aim of this task is to integrate grammar practice with reading and speaking skills. First, they read the newspaper article individually, and then they share it with their partners.

Instruction: Read the article and discuss it with your pair.

5.2.1.2 Task 2 Simulation

This task is to involve the students in practicing grammar and engage them in speaking. The task can be played in group of five students. Each student will get role card explaining the roles to be played.

Instruction: The government has decided to acquire land from a highly populated farming village and give it to industrialists. The government officials hold a meeting to discuss the issue. You are in the meeting to present your position clearly and reasonably. Choose your roles and prepare your position.

Student A

You are a farmer. You are worried about your lively hood.

Student B

You represent the villagers. You fear that you have to leave the village as you would lose your houses.

Student C

You are a real estate businessman. You are happy because you think you could make a lot of profit.

Student D

You belong to the village youth. You are undecided as you predict the industry would give you job but you worry that would have to leave the village as the government is going to take the land.

Student E

You are a government official.

There are fears, concerns, and heated arguments and counter argument. In the middle of the role play the teacher gives the flash news that some government officials came and tried to survey the land and the villagers protested, which led to the police intervention and a brutal cane charge. Some villagers are reported to be seriously injured. This changed the direction of the meeting.

This activity gave the learners a reason to talk, argue, and

counterargue. The students chose the roles that they wanted to play which motivated them participate very actively.

Conclusion

Although practice using language is important in the process of teaching and learning grammar, the learners get no opportunity to practice and use it in meaningful contexts. In most ESL/EFL grammar classes, the teachers mainly focus on presenting grammar items either deductively or inductively because the presentation may have consumed the teaching time. Consequently, the practice that the learners get is classroom mechanical drilling and traditional homework written practice. However, these practices will not develop learners' grammatical competence within the communicative competence. Communicative grammar activities fill this existing gap in teaching grammar. Communicative activities like discussion, questionnaire, dictation, dictogloss, information gap activities, and role play provide natural, meaningful and real life contexts in which the learners can practice using grammar communicatively, meaningfully, and naturally.

Recommendation for Future Research

Since this article is based on classroom practice, further study could provide empirical evidence for the claims made in the article. Future studies could examine the effectiveness of communicative activities in promoting grammatical competence. Both the teachers and students' attitudes towards communicative activities in grammar teaching need to be explored. Challenges and difficulties in employing communicative activities in grammar classes could also be examined.

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