

Fun Ways with Grammar

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Abstract

This article reports on the inclusion of grammar in a communicative class of English as a Foreign Language. Studying grammar involves learning the way a language manipulates and combines words so as to form longer units of meaning. This leads to the following question: What exactly do learners need to know in terms of grammar to be able to use it in a communicative situation? Basically, this work maintains that grammar should not be seen as an end in itself but as one of the means of acquiring a mastery of the target language. First, this article aims to define what is meant by “grammar as process” within a communicative classroom activity, and to provide a brief rationale for this approach. Second, it offers an account of techniques aimed to make students learn grammatical structures, and a description of class activities wherein learners applied such structures. This part of the work presents an analysis of whether the amount of grammar input received by students, the characteristics of the techniques used, and the activities performed in class were appropriate to make them feel confident when speaking. A third purpose is to mention some of the issues that could be problematic when teaching grammar and provide a basis for discussion. It is expected that the herein suggested techniques be useful for other language educators.

Introduction

The author of this article views the learning of a foreign language as the acquisition of “communicative competence” rather than “linguistic competence,” use of language and language in action rather than language as a system of symbols, ability and command rather than static knowledge. Namely, it accentuates communication over accuracy. However, this article proposes the insertion of grammar practice in classes aimed at developing communicative competence. Contradictory as it may sound, this work refers to communicative grammar practice in the foreign language classroom. This work contains three parts, the first one aims at defining what grammar is and how we teach grammar in the language class. Thornbury (2005) maintains the concept of grammar beyond a set of rules, i.e., grammar is not just a thing but is also something people create. He goes on to criticize the way grammar is taught in the class, “I, the teacher, will cut the language into lots of little pieces —called grammar— so that you, the learner, will be able to reassemble them in real communication (p.2).” What happens is that learners take those little pieces of language and still cannot produce accurate sentences because

that concept considers grammar just as result and ignores the process to get such result. So far there are two concepts related to grammar as a product, namely grammar as a set of rules that describe the way language functions and a grammar as a book containing such rules and descriptions. What Thornbury proposes, and this author adheres to, is a combination of grammar as product and “grammar as process,” considered in this article as a link between communication and accuracy. In the second part this article moves to a practical area: description of three classroom activities and analysis of application of grammar points in dialogues, and students’ comments. In the third part, we look at the relationship between grammar and communication, and discuss areas that might prove to be problematic and deserve further research.

What is grammar? How do we teach grammar?

There is a set of rules that govern how units of meaning may be constructed in any language. A learner who knows grammar is one who has mastered and can apply these rules so as to express what would be considered acceptable language utterances. Grammar, in itself, may furnish the basis for a set of classroom activities during which it becomes temporarily the main learning objective (e.g., making learners feel confident when using the language). The key words here are temporarily and application. This means that at an early stage we can ask our students to learn a certain structure through exercises that concentrate on particular manipulations of language but we should quickly progress to activities where learners are required to use the grammar meaningfully.

Purpura (2004) poses the question, “What exactly does a student need to ‘know’ in terms of grammar to be able to use it well enough for some real-world purpose?” (p. 50) The author of the present work is an advocate of grammar study and the question posed is how to practice grammatical forms before using them in communicative situations.

Why teach grammar?

Ur (2006) outlines the relationship between form and meaning for each of the main language skills (Table 1). The following caveats are offered support of teaching grammar.

1. To acquire the ability to use new linguistic forms communicatively, beginners need the opportunity to understand those new forms so as to feel confident, and to practice them not in a drill but in meaning-focused language use.

2. Beginners have difficulty in processing meaning and form simultaneously, so effort should focus on communicative activities designed for the practice of forms, so that learners gain confidence in using forms not during a mechanical practice but when interchanging meanings.
3. For the reason commented in the previous point and for the sake of accuracy, it is necessary to design activities that allow learners the practice of forms during a communicative activity.

Table 1. Aspects of the Teaching/Learning of Structures (Ur, 2006, p.6)

	Form	Meaning
Listening	Perception and recognition of the spoken form of the structure	Comprehension of what the spoken structure means in context
Speaking	Production of well-formed utterances	Use the structure to convey meaning in speech
Reading	Perception and recognition of the written form	Comprehension of what the written structure means in context
Writing	Production of well-formed examples in writing	Use the structure to convey meanings in writing

The organization of grammar teaching

Ur (2006) suggests organizing grammar teaching in four steps: (1) presentation, (2) isolation and explanation, (3) **practice**, and (4) test (p. 6).

Presentation - Present students with a text or video in which the new grammatical structure appears so as to get the learners to perceive the structure as something new.

Isolation and explanation - At this stage we move away from the context, and focus, temporarily, on the grammatical items themselves: what they sound and look like, what they mean, how they function.

Practice - This step contains exercises whose aim is to cause the learners to absorb the new structures thoroughly. This works focuses on this step. The function of this step is to familiarize students with the new material. Does it mean students are to concentrate on boring exercises? Some types of exercises (slot-fillers, transformations) are mechanical and simply help make the rules of form clearer and ensure that the rules are correctly applied. Another category of exercises still stresses production or perception of correct forms and there is also a link with meaning (translation, slot-filling or multiple choice based on meaning, matching). However, the

language is not being used to “do” things but to provide examples of itself, thus it is not a communicative practice. A third type of exercise is that in which the stress is on the grammatical process, and on the production or comprehension of meanings. Moreover, this works proposes some classroom activities for beginners that imply not only mental but also bodily involvement.

Test - Some kind of feedback so as to check that students have understood and can use the new structures properly.

Classroom work

In this second part we offer a description of three activities that were performed with Lao students studying English. When deciding the activities for grammar practice, the following characteristics were considered:

- be embedded in meaningful, communicative contexts,
- contribute positively to communicative goals,
- promote accuracy within fluent, communicative language,
- do not overwhelm students with linguistic terminology,
- be as lively and intrinsically motivating as possible,
- contribute to help students to feel confident when using the learned structures,
- contribute to accuracy

Specifically, the activities aim at guiding learners to practice structures within a communicative context.

1. Word order with paper strips. Students receive the components of sentences on paper strips and are asked to make complete and grammatically correct sentences with them. This activity is accomplished in three steps: first students receive paper strips in different colors for the subject, the verb and the predicate, in the second step subject and predicate are in one color and the verbs in another, in the third step all the sentence components are in the same color.

2. Possessive pronouns: “During the quake.” What would you protect in case of an earthquake? Learners decide what they would protect in case of an earthquake, write a noun on a piece of paper and practice possessive pronouns: each student shouts “my computer” and the others shout “his/her computer.”

3. WH questions: “Find someone with the answer.” In this activity the class is divided in two groups and each group receives a different set of WH-questions according to the level of the class. Learners go around the classroom asking questions until they get all the answers (Fig. 1).

What language do they speak in New Zealand?	
Who wrote Macbeth?	
Where is Teheran?	
How many legs does a spider have?	

Figure 1. Part of the worksheet used by learners

4. Present perfect: “Find someone who ...” In this activity the class is divided in two or three groups and each group receives a set of actions about which each learner has to ask using present perfect: “Have you ever ...?” and another learner should also answer using present perfect: “No, I have never ...” or “Yes, I have.” Learners wander around the classroom looking for answers from different peers (Fig. 2).

have a car accident Name:
write a letter to a newspaper Name:
sleep in a cave Name:
speak to a famous person Name:

Figure 2. Part of the worksheet used by learners: Find someone who ...

5. To practice present continuous, learners use mimes to describe action in progress. The class is divided in groups and each group receives a few simple sentences which they have to mime and the other groups have to guess (Fig.3).

You are opening a tin
You are making a cup of tea
You are trying to catch a mosquito
You are killing cockroaches

Figure 3. Part of the worksheet used by learners

Why focus on grammar forms?

The point of departure for practicing forms is to cover the need for accuracy. Even when learners are guided in performing a spontaneous and informal conversation they will want to use accurate structures and avoid making mistakes that their peers might notice. To gain confidence about an accurate use of the target language, users will feel the need to organize clearly what they want to say, use appropriate language and structures, and check that they are correct when listening to their peers using the same structures.

The activity component of a class helps students to develop fluency in the target language. However, in an informal conversation performed by learners, we foresee the following problems should activities be the only means of language development:

- Some learners could revert to using their mother tongue when things get difficult, when they do not find the right word, when trying to avoid mistakes, or when feeling uncomfortable because of keeping the partner waiting for an answer or a question.

- There may be a disruption in communication when one of the conversational partners is struggling in search of the right word, or thinking how to say what he or she wants to convey.

- Should learners be immersed in an activity and they do not feel confident about the structures and words to use, it is possible that the concern for grammatical accuracy surpasses the concern for interchanging meanings.

From our own findings, it is maintained that, at least during the starting stages of language acquisition, the process is to be *supported* by practice of forms, which should be attended to even when performing communicative activities. There are, however, some necessary remarks:

1. To what extent should teachers engage in focus-on-forms? A communicative lesson has two purposes: to help learners build their language competence and gain confidence in using the target language. By engaging students in communicative activities the teacher may be risking students' accurate production. By regularly paying attention to forms the teacher can create the conditions for an accurate acquisition but at the expense of fluency and spontaneity. The particular characteristics of the class as well as the learners' inclinations and general purposes of the course are to be considered when deciding how much "form" and how much "communication" to attend to.

2. Should focus on forms be conversational or didactic? Both: didactic focus on form furnishes learners with accurate tools and conversational focus on form ensures a communicative activity as it provides the means for solving communication difficulties.

3. Should focus-on-forms be explicit or implicit? Both: beginners need some time to acquire new pieces of knowledge and to analyze them, and then they need to use them in a real situation so as to become aware of the communicative usefulness of the structures. Attention to form prior to its communicative application ensures that during the course of a communicative activity students will feel more confident and will not disrupt the conversational atmosphere with a great deal of structural questions.

Biographical Statement

Cecilia Silva is currently teaching Spanish at Tohoku University, Sendai. She is interested in media literacy, critical literacy, literature, and cultural awareness in foreign language teaching and learning.

Conclusions

The traditional division between communication and grammar study should be replaced. In its place, we suggest an appropriate balance between (1) form practice aimed at accuracy, and (2) conversation practice aimed at applying such forms. This work thus does not advocate the grammar study as an end in itself but as a step toward boosting learner confidence. Ideally, we aim at avoiding repetition practice and instead strive for communicative practice.

References

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