

Teaching Grammar Explicitly and its effects on Learners' Achievement in Learning English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract:

The following paper is an attempt to examine the way grammar is taught at the department of English, University of Batna and the benefits students could make from it when explicitly presented to them. We have started by a theoretical part where grammar is presented in relation to the different teaching methods, then we tried to distinguish between explicit and implicit grammar teaching. In the second part of the paper, we tried to carry out a field investigation where we administered questionnaires to both students and teachers to know about their preferences as far as grammar teaching is concerned. The results we obtained by the end revealed the necessity of teaching grammar explicitly in the language classroom for the great help it could have to learners as far as learning the foreign language is concerned.

الملخص:

يهدف هذا المقال لإلقاء الضوء على الطرق التي تُدرس من خلالها قواعد اللغة في قسم اللغة الانجليزية بجامعة باتنة، وكذا الفوائد التي يمكن للطلبة جنيها إذا ما قدمت هذه القواعد بطريقة مباشرة. بدأنا بجزء نظري حيث قدمنا ماهية القواعد وعلاقتها مع طرائق التعليم، ثم حاولنا إبراز الفرق بين الطرق المباشرة وغير المباشرة لتدريس القواعد وفي الشق التطبيقي الميداني قمنا بوضع استبيان للطلبة والأساتذة لمعرفة ما يفضلونه في هذا المجال .

Introduction:

When teaching a foreign Language, one major goal is to enable the learners to communicate effectively in a grammatically appropriate way. In this respect teaching grammar gained prominence among teachers as well as researchers.

In the department of English, University of Batna, teachers often report that their students have serious drawbacks as far as their written compositions are concerned. Evaluation of the written assignments set to students usually reveals that they do not master the basic rules of grammar. For this reason, the present paper purports to suggest a re-consideration of the importance of grammar so that teachers will not find themselves correcting form rather than content during examinations.

Most of the students are expected to work in the field of education after they graduate from the university. In many instances, those future teachers who learn plenty of modules at the university find themselves incapable of appropriately fulfilling their task.

The main objective we set to our work is to see to what extent explicit grammar teaching helps students achieve better results in learning English. Our hypothesis is, consequently, learners who receive explicit grammar instruction are most likely to achieve better results than those who do not.

I DEFINITION OF GRAMMAR:

In their definition of grammar, Fromkin et al. (1990) claim that: The sounds and sound patterns, the basic units of meaning such as words and the rules to combine them to form new sentences constitute the grammar of a language. These rules are internalised and subconsciously learned by native speakers. In brief, grammar represents one's linguistic competence. Therefore, Grammar is a set of components: phonetics (the production and perception of sounds), phonology (how sounds are combined), morphology (the study of forms, or how elements are combined to create words), syntax (how words are put together into sentences), and semantics or meaning. Because all languages are characterised by these components, by definition, language does not exist without grammar. The term grammar, in the past, referred to the art of writing, as compared to rhetoric, the art of speaking. Grammar is loosely understood to be a set of rules that govern language, primarily its morphology and syntax. But morphology and syntax are only two components of grammar.

II TYPES OF GRAMMAR:

II-1 Traditional Grammar:

Grammar, in the past, was based on two classical languages; Latin and Greek. Grammarians identified eight parts of speech: noun, pronoun, adjective, verb, adverb, preposition, conjunction and interjection, and classified words within a sentence as subject, object, verb and so on. They used prescriptive rules showing people the way they should speak or write. The important contribution of traditional grammar to foreign language learning lies in the fact that it provides the teacher with simple rules to teach the language. For this reason, the notion of traditional grammar is still influential in the teaching of languages.

II-2 Structural Grammar:

Structural grammarians believe that language is made out of a set of grammatical patterns in which words are arranged to convey meaning. This latter is determined by word form, function, word order and intonation patterns. Structuralists classify parts of speech according to their syntactic position. They were concerned with the structure of the sentences and their constituents. They developed the 'immediate constituent analysis' and the 'phrase structure grammar'. These varieties of structural grammar were concerned with performance not with competence. Meaning was totally ignored in this approach and remained as the main drawback in the structural grammar.

II-3 Transformational Generative Grammar:

This grammar was first proposed by Chomsky (1957) in his 'syntactic structures'. He assumes that language is based on a system of phrase-structure rules capable of generating an infinite number of sentences. This production is carried out through a process of transformations such as substitution, deletion, addition, combination...etc. Transformational generative linguists claim that grammar comprises rules that generate an infinite number of sentences. According to Chomsky (1965): Regarded as a theory of language; it is descriptively adequate to the extent that it correctly describes the intrinsic competence of the idealised native speaker. For

Chomsky's grammar shows how a native speaker would acquire the linguistic system of his native language. This type of grammar stressed the importance of meaning as a crucial aspect in language study to account for some ambiguous sentences. Chomsky distinguished between surface structure and deep structure.

II-4 Communicative Grammar:

The communicative approach appeared in the 1970's as a reaction to the structural approach. Widdowson (1990) views grammar as a device for mediating between words and contexts. According to him, learning grammar does not mean learning the intricacies of the device without knowing how to put it into use, but to know how grammar functions in accordance with words and contexts for the completion of meaning. He states that:

A communicative approach, properly conceived, does not involve the rejection of grammar. On the contrary, it involves the recognition of its central mediating role in the use and learning of language. For Widdowson (1990) The main characteristics of the communicative grammar are:

1-It involves the use of form and meaning of language items simultaneously. Grammatical forms are taught not for their own sake, but as means for carrying out communicative acts.

2-This approach does not focus on grammatical form, nor does it give abstract descriptions or definitions. Instead, it concentrates on the notions underlying these forms which are taught implicitly through manipulation of notions by functions. The main purpose of this approach is to help the learner build up a linguistic competence through use (implicitly), and not through knowledge of linguistic rules (explicitly).

Incorrect grammatical forms could be eradicated gradually through the negotiation of meaning that takes place when the language is used.

3-The various notions are introduced separately and in different situations in order to highlight their meaning and use. Thus items which are semantically linked are taught together, even if they are structurally different.

4-Learners are encouraged to identify by themselves forms as they are working out communicative tasks.

III- GRAMMAR AND THE TEACHING METHODS:

Grammar teaching was influenced by the by the different teaching approaches and methods which differed regarding the influence explicit grammar teaching has in the second or foreign language classroom. We are taking the examples of three methods to see the position occupied by grammar in these methods:

III-1 The Audiolingual Method:

This method was advocated by American structural linguists and based on behaviourism. It proposes that language performance consists of a set of habits in the use of language structures and patterns (Celce-Murcia, 1991). Grammatical structures are very carefully sequenced from basic to more complex, and students are not necessarily expected to understand grammar and grammar rules. Language learning is habit formation and pattern learning; it is seen as conditioning using repetition and reinforcement. Thus, mimicry of forms and memorisation of sentence patterns are used extensively to present rules inductively. A variety of drill types is practised to avoid errors, which are viewed as the result of interference from the first language and need correction.

III-2 The Cognitive Code Method:

In the early Seventies, there was considerable interest in the implications of the cognitive code theory for language teaching. This approach refers to any conscious attempt to organise materials around a grammatical syllabus while allowing for meaningful practice and use of language (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). Language learning is viewed as hypothesis formation and rule acquisition, rather than habit formation. Grammar is considered important, and rules are presented either deductively or inductively depending on the preferences of the learners. Class exercises are intended to give learners further practice with rule application. Errors are viewed as the inevitable by-products of language learning. Error analysis and correction can be seen as appropriate classroom activities from which both teachers and students can learn. The focus is still largely sentence-oriented, and materials writers often draw on Chomsky's work in generative grammar (Celce-Murcia, 1991).

III-3 The Communicative Method:

This approach views language as an instrument of communication. Thus, communication is the goal of language instruction, and the syllabus should not be organised around grammar but should be content-based, meaningful, contextualised and discourse-based (rather than sentence-based).

Communicative language teaching has brought a renewed emphasis on the role that semantics plays in the definition of language. Communicative language teaching is fundamentally concerned with 'making meaning' in the language, whether by interpreting someone else's message, expressing one's own, or negotiating when meaning is unclear. Role-playing and problem-solving tasks are used for the acquisition of specific functions. Among the proponents of this approach, there is currently some debate regarding the nature, extent and type of grammar instruction or grammar awareness activities, as well as opinions about issues such as whether, when, or how teachers should correct grammatical errors (Celce-Murcia, 1991).

IV- PROCESSES INVOLVED IN LEARNING GRAMMAR:

IV-1 Interpretation:

When learners attempt to understand input which refers to samples of target of language the learners are exposed to as a result of communication, whether oral or written. In so doing, they pay attention to specific linguistic features and their meaning. Interpretation involves noticing and cognitive comparison, and results in intake, which refers to data in input that are assimilated and used by the learner to promote interlanguage development.

IV-2 Integration:

This process occurs when learners are able to incorporate intake into their developing interlanguage systems. Not all intake can be integrated because learners are able to incorporate only those features for which they are developmentally ready as clearly stated by Ellis (1993): 'to manage the processing of the operations involved or the restructuring of the existing system which the incorporation of new features is likely to entail, this process may be accompanied by restructuring (Mc Laughlin 1990).

In other words, the incorporation of new linguistic items may cause the learners to recognise information in their existing interlanguage systems.

IV-3 Production:

This process relies on internalised knowledge, but it can be supplemented by explicit knowledge through monitoring. In other words, any learner could rely on his

internalised knowledge when communicating. The learner's output could also be checked for correctness if he activates his explicit knowledge.

Eisenstein (1987) claims that grammar teaching could be conducive to grammar comprehension only if the teacher takes into consideration the different variables involved in the presentation of grammatical aspects so as to make the processing of information easy and effective.

IV-4 Presenting:

Writing involves sharing and presenting. Students should be given the opportunity to choose pieces of writing they wish to present. Any piece that the teacher might select for presentation should be the result of a discussion with the student and ultimately should be the student's choice. Having a wider audience often leads students to take more care and pride in their writing

V IMPLICIT AND EXPLICIT GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION:

V - 1 Implicit Grammar Instruction:

According to Winitz (1996), this is a language learning process in which grammatical principles and lexical understanding are derived by the language learner from experience with the target language. In the first stages, the grammatical and lexical items are taught implicitly i.e. they are embedded in text, taught through the use of words and pictures, or modelling of actions. In the second stage, the lexical meaning is emphasised through the use of texts that contain: schema-based scripts, word fields, and paraphrases of sentences

V-2 Explicit Grammar Instruction:

Explicit grammar teaching refers to a language learning process in which the rules and structures of the second language are learned as formal statements. Lexical understanding is at first provided through translation of words and phrases from the mother language to the foreign language. This learning process is developed through the explicit teaching of grammar. The objectives of language teaching became more communicatively oriented, nonetheless, teachers still believe in the importance of teaching grammar. Some researchers are against the teaching of grammar. For Krashen (1982), subconscious acquisition of comprehensible input in a low-anxiety context plays a pivotal role in developing language fluency; he sees the learning of grammar as useful only as a 'monitor' and not an utterance-initiator. Krashen (1987) believes that explicit grammar instruction does not have any significant effect on the learner's interlanguage. This view was not shared by all linguists and researchers in the field of language teaching. Ellis (1985) claims that:

To deny that instruction can help learners to acquire an L2 is not only counter-intuitive but contrary to the personal experience of countless teachers and students.

Long's findings follow the same position. After examining twelve studies which dealt with the effect of instruction (learning) and exposure (acquisition), Long (1983) concluded that formal instruction in grammar did make a difference.

No matter how fruitful a concept the acquisition/learning hypothesis might be, there is no experimental research available to validate Krashen's learning/acquisition distinction. McLaughlin and McLeod (1983) propose an information-processing approach distinguishing between controlled processes and automatic processes claiming that 'complex skills are learned and become automatic only after earlier use of controlled processes.' Thus, in this approach, a learner will go through an explicit, conscious stage of learning grammar rules before he is able to control grammatical structures automatically.

Schmidt (1990): who dealt with psychological research and theory on the topic of consciousness concluded that 'subliminal language learning is impossible, and intake is what learners consciously notice'. He supported the notion that a consciousness-raising process is necessary for adults to learn language. Indeed, some studies (Canale and Swain, 1988), reporting that grammatical competence is not a good predictor for communicative competence, overestimate the role of unconscious learning. On the contrary, a thorough search of the literature reveals that a variety of research findings favours conscious grammar learning/teaching. Some research findings are worth mentioning here. Pienemman (1989) found that though psychological constraints exist on teaching the language, explicit grammar instruction can make a difference. He found explicit grammar instruction effective when teaching grammatical features that are stage-appropriate. For example, a learner will succeed in mastering structural forms of stage $x+3$ only when the current state of the learner is at stage $x+2$. Scott (1989), analysing data from oral and written tests taken by students of French, found that students who were taught the target structures explicitly performed better overall than those who had an implicit method of instruction. Other evidence points to the focus on form in error correction and feedback. Tomasello and Herron (1989) compared two methods for correcting students in the language classroom and found that learners performed better if their transfer errors received immediate correction by form-based comparisons. This result corresponds to White's (1987) claim that specific grammar teaching and correction can in fact be beneficial for acquisition. After carefully examining the role of explicit grammar instruction in the process of language acquisition, Terrell (1991) suggested ways in which explicit grammar instruction might be helpful in an acquisition-based communicative approach:

- 1- As an advance organiser to segment a 'text' to make the input more accessible.
- 2- As a meaning-form focus in communicative activities to make complex morphology more comprehensible.
- 3- As a tool to help learners acquire their own output in the monitoring process. As noted by Scott (ibid.), explicit grammar instruction proponents insist on the importance of teaching rules and grammatical structures consciously for the purpose of developing communicative competence. On the basis of their careful research findings, Canale and Swain (1988):73 defined communicative competence as follows: In our view, an integrative theory of communicative competence may be regarded as one in which there is a synthesis of knowledge of basic grammatical principles, knowledge of how language is used in social contexts to perform communicative functions, and knowledge of how utterances and communicative functions can be combined according to the principle of discourse.

VI-Field Work:

A research was conducted in the Department of English where questionnaires were administered to both students and teachers to know their views about teaching grammar and the most effective ways they judge should be adopted to achieve better results in the learning/teaching process.

Results analysis:

When asked about whether they prefer to receive explicit grammar instruction for it allows them to acquire correct language forms that are usually required by teachers during examinations, explicit grammar teaching helps them overcome their written expression difficulties. The main argument they put forward has to do with the fact that

their awareness of the rules of grammar helps them form a more precise idea about the formal rules that govern the foreign language they are learning. They assert that the grammar rules presented to them in the written expression course are better reminded because they are using them directly in practice and they could see their usefulness as soon as they are given a written assignment.

As for teachers, they also seem to agree that their students achieve better when grammar is deductively taught to them. Students need to be provided with grammatical rules before practice. Inductive grammar teaching, on the other hand, is considered as a more complex approach because students are not provided with the rules directly, but are left to discover them from practice. When asked about the role of grammar exercises in developing the writing skill of their students, the majority of our respondents asserted that grammar exercises help students improve their writing. They explain this by the fact that practice of grammar helps them get rid of most of their errors because they can see the usefulness of the rules they dealt with in theory. This practice also allows the teacher to provide students with the appropriate feedback in order to enrich their knowledge and ensure improvement of students in the written work. Teachers also say that explicit grammar teaching helps their students get rid of their writing problems. Their argument is that it helps students be aware of the rules of grammar and consequently allows them to avoid many errors they could commit without this rule awareness. This view is in total accordance with that of the students who asserted that the grammar rules presented to them in the written expression course are better reminded because they use them directly in their written assignments.

VII- Recommendations:

The above research finding led us to draw the following recommendations:

1-Explicit grammar instruction is often necessary because learners need to use it to communicate when words alone are not enough.

2-Explicit grammar instruction does not affect the route of language acquisition. However, its importance lies in speeding up the process of learning.

3-Formal grammar rules remind the learners of their queries and help create an environment for further language development. Therefore they play the crucial role of helping the teacher to avoid fossilisation of errors before it occurs.

4-Learners come to the university, as a formal learning setting, to learn the formal and correct language. Therefore, they need to receive explicit grammar instruction to allow them learn appropriately.

5-There is a need to focus on form with learners to facilitate accuracy because the principal goal of teaching is to focus on accuracy and develop fluency.

Conclusion:

We came to realise that explicit grammar instruction can be successful in promoting foreign language learning if provided to students with respect to the aims set to foreign language teaching. Explicit grammar instruction helps increase the language learners' knowledge of difficult grammar rules and facilitates the acquisition of the foreign language because they can learn how their utterances are linked structurally in accordance with rules of discourse. This combination of explicit grammar instruction and communicative language teaching enables learners to attend to grammatical forms and language code to respond to the communication requirements. Therefore, success of a grammar presentation comes from the context because it helps students explore discourse by noticing the language in use and develop as active learners as they make their choices on how to use the language.

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