

Grammar Teaching through Communicative Activities in EFL

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Abstract

This article proposes grammar teaching through communicative activities in EFL situations. It is generally believed that grammar provides a powerful tool in language learning. However, traditional grammar teaching, which is often the grammar-translation method, does not seem to be effective in developing communicative competence in the target language. This is partly because grammar teaching generally does not focus on the pragmatic aspects, which are an integral part of grammatical structures. As an alternative method of teaching grammar, I suggest the use of communicative activities consisting of input and interaction, as well as the development of oral communication strategies so that learners will be able to attain procedural knowledge in EFL.

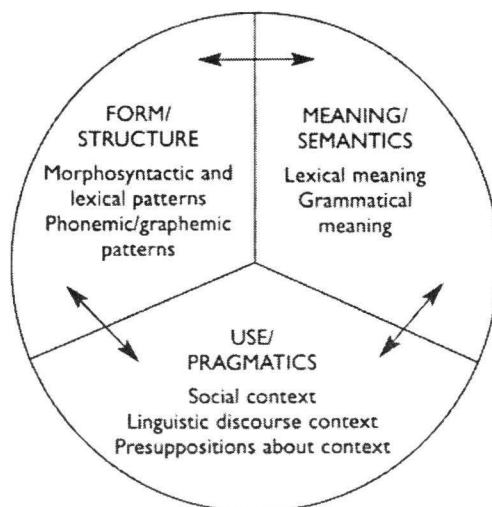
Introduction

“Japanese English learners have a good understanding of grammar but do not have communicative competence.” This is what we often hear as a description of Japanese English learners. They can explain grammatical points, but they cannot use the language. However, from my teaching experience in Japan, I have to say that the students lack grammatical knowledge that is good enough for basic communication in English. If they had a more explicit knowledge of English, they would achieve a much better score in the reading section of the TOEIC test. Many of the students have neither fair declarative knowledge nor procedural knowledge of English. Does it mean that they have to give up trying to communicate in English? The answer is “No.” Since the learners have already passed the critical period when they can acquire the second language like the first language, it is almost impossible for them to speak English fluently in a short period of time. However, I believe that English teachers can facilitate students’ learning in class in order for them to become independent learners and to continue to improve their skills individually. In this article, I would like to suggest approaches to grammar teaching through communicative activities as well

as oral communication strategies, which will support EFL students in their learning processes. In the following section, I will discuss why grammar teaching is effective for the students in learning English and how it should be dealt with in class.

Grammar teaching

English grammar has been taught almost exclusively by grammar translation in Japan. It was hoped that by comparing the two languages learners could appreciate their own language better, write in the native language better and grow more intellectually (Larsen-Freeman (2000) p.12). Grammar-translation has some advantages. However, my students tell me that they want to “use” English. They do not say that they want to be able to appreciate their native language more. Moreover, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Monkasho) proclaims a goal of communicative competence. English learners do not have the same objectives as before when grammar translation was highly appreciated as the method of language teaching. However, this does not mean that grammar teaching is unnecessary for them, because they do not have enough declarative knowledge yet, as I stated in the introduction section. Neither does it mean that the students simply need to be exposed to English as much as possible, because “when students receive only communicative lessons, with no instruction on grammar points, their level of accuracy suffers” (Fotos p.268). Grammar teaching is still necessary for students, but the ways to teach grammar needs to be modified from strictly grammar-translation. Grammar teaching should focus not only on morphosyntactics and semantics but also the pragmatics of structures, since “grammatical structures not only have form, they are also used to express meaning in context-appropriate use” (L-F (2001) p.252). The three dimensions can be considered as wedges of a single pie, as seen in the following chart.



[Pie-Chart (Larsen-Freeman (2001) p.252)]

According to Larsen-Freeman, the three parts are not hierarchically arranged. The arrows show that they are actually interconnected. By “not hierarchically arranged,” I understand that the three parts are equally important. It may also mean that the order of teaching can be interchangeable. However, in my opinion, the students I teach would understand better if I present the forms and the meaning first and deal with the use later. This order of presenting the three dimensions is similar to traditional English teaching styles’ often seen in Japanese junior high schools and high schools, where the forms and the meaning are presented primarily, and the use is taught only additionally. I believe that Japanese English learners would find it easier to process the three dimensions presented in the same order they are accustomed to, although this point may well be left to research. In the next section, I would like to focus on how to facilitate the understanding of pragmatics, which is often left out of grammar teaching in Japan.

Communication

As stated in the previous section, traditional grammar teaching lacks an explanation of when and why a certain grammatical structure is used. In addition, EFL learners do not have enough opportunities to practice what they learn since adequate access to communicative uses of English are not available in daily lives. Thus, classroom activities play a crucial role in learning the use of grammatical structures.

The classroom activities that promote grammar learning and improve procedural

knowledge consist of appropriate input and interaction activities, according to the input and interaction approach. It “takes as its starting point the assumption that language learning is stimulated by communicative pressure, and examines the relationship between communication and acquisition and the mechanisms (e.g., noticing, attention) that mediate between them” (Gass (2003) p.224). In addition, practice is essential for the students’ declarative knowledge to become procedural knowledge. “Whereas declarative knowledge or factual knowledge may be acquired quickly, procedural knowledge such as language acquisition is acquired gradually and only with extensive opportunities for practice” (O’Malley & Chamot p.24). Here, I would like to mention five kinds of language input activities and four kinds of interaction activities. I will then mix some of each and derive three classroom activities consisting of input and interaction. In addition, I suggest that learners should also practice oral communication strategies during communicative activities so that they will be able to negotiate the meaning in conversation.

Input

Language input is considered “the most critical requirement for language development” (Fotos p.271). However, in order for learners to focus on particular linguistic features of the input, language input may need to be modified. Ways to manipulate input are for example, “simplification of input, frequency of exposure, explicit instruction, implicit instruction, and consciousness raising”(Richards p.41).

Let me briefly explain how to introduce modified input in classroom teaching through an example of using the past tense, which is a very basic grammatical structure but one that many learners cannot use properly in communication. In the first class, verbs may be restricted to the past tense only (simplification of input). The teacher provides the input by having the students read a text where the verbs are in past tense forms only. While reading the text, the students are exposed to the past tense a number of times (frequency of exposure). Before having students read the text, the teacher may present past tense forms and tell the students how they are used (explicit instruction). Alternatively, the teacher may either raise the students’ awareness of the forms in the text and then have them induce the rules and usage of the past tense (implicit instruction), or have the students become aware of the past forms only, “without necessarily having to produce the features”(consciousness raising) (Richards p.41). Modified inputs highlight particular grammatical structures and make it easier for students to learn them efficiently. After receiving the inputs, learners should engage in communicative tasks so that the learning process is stimulated.

Interaction

Since “interaction refers to exchanges in which there is some indication that an utterance has not been entirely understood” (Gass (2005) p.2), I regard an interaction activity as a communication activity where people exchange information. Appropriate interaction activities would consist of information gap, reasoning gap, picture sequencing and role-play. The tasks I chose are in order of reproductivity and teacher-controlledness. In other words, learners begin with reproductive tasks, where language is “largely predetermined and predictable” (Nunan p.62) and then go on to more creative tasks in which learners “assemble the words and structures they have acquired in new and unpredictable ways” (Nunan p.62). In the following section, I will show some examples of interaction activities.

When learners have declarative knowledge and knowledge is inert, information gap tasks should be introduced first. “Information gap involves the exchange of information among participants in order to complete a task” (Larsen-Freeman (2000) p.148). Such tasks are simple enough that learners can focus on specific sentence structures. For example, each student working in pairs fills out missing information by asking their partner a question. On student A’s sheet, there are blanks after the words “apples, a hamburger, milk” On student B’s sheet, there are blanks after the words “pears, french-fries, orange juice.” The students ask each other if they had the food/drink on the previous day. Student A asks “did you eat apples yesterday?” and student B answers “No, I didn’t.” Student A writes “NO” after the word “apples” in the sheet. In this way, not only can learners review basic grammar and pronunciation through information gap tasks, but also they can gain procedural knowledge.

When the students seem comfortable with using different kinds of vocabulary and structures through information gap activities, reasoning-gap activities can be used. They require the learners to derive “some new information from given information through processes of inferences, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns” (Prabhu p.46). An example of a reasoning gap activity is “deciding which course of action is best for a given purpose and within given constraints” (Prabhu p.46). Students sort out pieces of information and make decisions on a reasonable travel route by determining which is cheaper or faster through negotiating with each other. Through this kind of task, the learners’ procedural knowledge is becoming more stable and solid while several cognitive processes are in action at the same time.

Although reasoning gap activities provide good preparation for more advanced

speaking activities, the outcomes are still reproductive since learners are either given a specific purpose or some constraints. In order for learners to produce more creative outcomes, I would give students picture-sequencing activities. In picture sequencing, learners are “each given part of a sequence of pictures and make up a story together” (Prabhu p. 45). Students are engaged in cognitive processes such as deduction and inferences to decide on the order of the pictures. In addition, the outcome can be more creative than reasoning gap because they use their imagination to make a storyline.

I chose role-play activities to follow picture sequencing, but the level of reproductivity and teacher-controlledness is not very different. Role-play activities involve creating a role for someone and testing out various ways of communication. Learners pay attention to the context and need to choose suitable expressions for the situation. For example, students can practice appropriate greetings depending on the person you are talking to. What is important is that learners consciously choose an expression from choices that have different meanings in social contexts.

Classroom activities

Finally, I would like to exemplify how one can create classroom activities consisting of input and interaction that focus on particular grammatical structures. The following table shows which input and interaction activities are combined to make up an activity and what grammatical structure is focused upon.

	Activity	Input	Interaction	Grammar
1	asking directions on a map	explicit instruction	information-gap	prepositions
2	finding a reasonable way to reach a destination	implicit instruction	reasoning-gap	comparatives
3	giving advice	explicit instruction	role play	modals

[Classroom Activities]

Let me explain each activity briefly.

1) Following instruction on the meaning and the use of locative prepositions, students fill in the missing information on their map in pairs. A student asks “Where is the bakery?” and the partner answers “It’s across from the bank.”

2) After a teacher shows some comparative forms as examples, students in groups decide which transportation they might want to use by looking at several tables of railroad fares and timetables. They use several types of comparative forms such as cheap-cheaper and expensive-more expensive. They also determine if they can generalize the patterns.

3) After a teacher explicitly presents the forms, the meaning and the use of modals such as “may, can and must,” students are engaged in role-play activities. For example, students can practice using modal verbs by giving advice to the person who is coughing a lot. If they suppose the person is on very friendly terms, students can say, “you should go home.” If they suppose the person is not someone so close, students need to change the expression to a more polite one: “you might need to see a doctor” for example.

Although the modification of input and the interaction types are different in each activity, students will be able to focus on the three dimensions of grammatical structures through communication.

Speaking strategies

During classroom activities that focus on a specific grammatical structure, students should practice the use of oral communication strategies as well. Oral communication strategies are the way to solve potential communication problems. I would like to introduce strategies that would be necessary for students to know in order to avoid a communication breakdown. According to Nakatani, the following categories are classified as achievement strategies: help-seeking, modified interaction, modified output, time-gaining, maintenance, and self-solving strategies.

Let me present some examples from Nakatani. Help-seeking strategies include appeals for help, “I’m sorry, I don’t understand” and asking for repetition, “I beg your pardon?” Such simple sentences would help Japanese learners, who are often silent or smiling when they do not understand. Time-gaining strategies would save a conversation breakdown as well. They give time to “think and to keep the communication channel open” (Nakatani, p.81), examples such as “Well, let me see...” “Um...” They are helpful for Japanese learners. Many of them mistakenly assume that they will not have to say anything when they are thinking about an answer, because that is acceptable in Japanese-speaking situations.

While the strategies may not be worth teaching to those who can communicate fluently, they are necessary for learners whose competence is not high enough to negotiate the meaning in conversation.

Conclusion

In this article, I suggested classroom activities that consist of modified inputs and interactions. In this way, learners can focus on grammatical structures and then practice the usage. As space is

limited, I could not show the activities in detail. Future studies should present more specific class designs. In addition, further research should follow to show how grammar teaching through communicative activities can be effective for learners in gaining procedural knowledge of the target language.

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