

The Role of Grammar Teaching in Writing in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

“Grammar is the sound, structure, and meaning system of language. All languages have grammar, and each language has its own grammar” (Beverly, 2007, p.1). People who speak the same language are able to communicate with each other because they all know the grammar system and structure of that language, that is, the meaningful rules of grammar. Students who are native speakers of English know English grammar, recognize the sounds of English words, the meaning of those words; and also can combine words to make meaningful sentences in different ways (Beverly, 2007). This paper will review literature related to the role of grammar teaching in writing in second language acquisition, which contains a) the role of grammar, b) current educational problems in Taiwan, c) the limitations of grammar in writing improvement, d) teachers’ perspectives toward grammar teaching in Taiwan, and e) students’ perspectives toward grammar learning in Taiwan.

The Role of Grammar

According to Azar (2007), the role of grammar is to “help students discover the nature of language, i.e., that language consists of predictable patterns that make what we say, read, hear, and write intelligible” (p.3). As Azar stated, without grammar, people would have only individual words or sounds, pictures, and body language to communicate meaning. Moreover, effective grammar instruction can help students use this knowledge as they write. Through the connection from oral language into written language, teachers can explain abstract grammatical terminology to help students write and read with better proficiency and confidence.

As Calkins (1980) suggested, the most helpful way to improve students’ command of grammar in writing is to use students’ writing as the base for teaching grammatical concepts.

Research also indicated that it is more effective to teach punctuation, sentence variety, and sentence patterns in the context of writing than to access the topic by teaching unorganized skills. Hillocks (1986) found that grammar instruction that is separate from writing instruction is unable to enhance students' writing competence. In other research, Weaver (1998) proposed a similar approach to teaching grammar in the context of writing. Weaver also mentioned five grammatical concepts that enable students to show progress in sentence revision, style, and editing. The five grammatical concepts will be described as follows: (as cited in Beverly, 2007, p.2).

1. Teaching concepts on subject, verb, sentence, clause, phrase, and related concepts for editing.
2. Teaching style through sentence combining and sentence generating.
3. Teaching sentence sense through the manipulation of syntactic elements.
4. Teaching both the power of dialects and the dialects of power.
5. Teaching punctuation and mechanics for convention, clarity, and style.

Rather than teach all grammatical instruction to all students, teachers should focus on the grammatical concepts that are more effective and essential for meaningful communication, and teachers should also be more sensitive to provide meaningful activities to help each individual student. In short, grammar plays a very significant role in second language instruction, especially in improving student's writing.

Current Educational Problems in Taiwan

English is a global language which plays an important role to link people from diverse cultures and countries. In view of the importance of this predominant international language, the Taiwanese government strived to motivate citizens to learn English over the past decades.

English teaching and learning have been highly conducted in the field of education in Taiwan. However, there have been many educational problems, such as traditional grammar translation, teacher-centered instruction, competitive and individualistic learning mode. These problems also caused the students' low motivation toward English learning in Taiwan (Yeh, 2004).

Grammar Translation Method (GTM)

According to Yeh (2004), there are several educational problems which greatly influence Taiwanese students' language learning. First of all, the traditional Grammar Translation Method (GTM) has still been dominant in most English classrooms in Taiwan. Most teachers focused on vocabulary explanations and text translations in language classrooms. For many students, learning English is nothing more than paying attention to memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules. Similarly, the tedious exercises and drill practices in the language classroom also frustrated many students' interest in learning English, especially in grammar instruction (Yeh, 2004). In short, GTM not only causes students to have negative attitudes toward grammatical instruction, but also reduces students' opportunities for language learning (Wang, 1999).

Teacher-Centered Instruction

Second, teachers dominate almost all of the students' learning processes in Taiwanese classrooms. In the classroom, the teacher is the one who is held accountable for most of the talking, while students are allowed only to sit quietly, to listen passively to the teacher's lecture, and to take notes to memorize the main points from the textbook. One negative example is that classroom interaction is limited to one-way communication in teacher-oriented language learning. The teacher-led learning mode offers little opportunity for interaction among students; thus, the target language is hardly used by students in a real situation for the purpose of

communication. On the other hand, students become over dependent on the teacher, regarding teachers as knowledge givers or information centers (Chen, 1998).

Competitive and Individualistic Learning Mode

Third, Students in Taiwan are educated under individualistic and competitive learning environments. Students compete against each other to receive teacher's attention, and to get high grades in all subjects, including the foreign language area. As a result, students are getting more egocentric, selfish, and self-centered in school learning. To cope with these aforementioned educational problems, an important educational reform was proposed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan. According to MOE (2000), the Joint College Entrance Examination (JCEE) was abolished in 2002. Instead of JCEE, the College Entrance Examination Center (CEEC) is now regarded as the basic component of application for entering into colleges or universities. Moreover, according to the nine-year curriculum design for EFL instruction stipulated by MOE in Taiwan, three main instructional objectives have been included as follows: (as cited in Chen, 2003, p.4)

1. To cultivate student fundamental communicational competency.
2. To foster student interest in English learning.
3. To enhance student multicultural awareness.

These significant educational reforms have opened a broader gate for students to have various options through multiple channels to select fields based on their interests. Effective English teaching and learning have been a major concern among educators at all educational systems in Taiwan. In order to promote and encourage the students' English learning, the MOE commissioned the Language Training and Testing Center (LTTC) to develop a reliable English test, called the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT). The GEPT includes five skill levels:

elementary, intermediate, high-intermediate, advanced, and superior. The test areas include listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, especially focusing on writing a composition. If the students failed on the composition writing and the grammar testing, then they need to retake the test again before attending the oral test in the same year. Therefore, from this point of view, it is easy to see how important grammar is in writing and in passing the GEPT, and how hard the MOE in Taiwan strive to enhance the students' proficiency based on the grammar instruction.

The Limitations of Grammar in Writing Improvement

According to Noguchi, R. R. (1991, p.4) there are two probable reasons which cause the failure of grammar instruction.

1. Formal grammar, being uninteresting or too difficult, is not adequately learned by students.
2. Formal grammar, even if adequately learned, is not transferred to writing situation.
3. Formal grammar, even if adequately learned, is not transferable to writing situation.

As Noguchi stated, teachers who have strived to present traditional grammar as a means of improving writing, will agree that three causes are highly reasonable. The first cause assumes that "because of a lack of interest or because of the difficulty of the subject matter itself, students simply fail to learn formal grammar" (p.4). The second cause assumes that "students fail to apply that knowledge to relevant writing situations because they are neglectful" (p.4). The third cause assumes that "students fail to apply the knowledge because that knowledge is irrelevant to writing situations" (p.4). Although there may be other contributing factors, these three probable causes seem to be the most important limitations in the failure of formal grammar instruction to improve writing skills.

Teachers' Perspectives toward Grammar Teaching in Taiwan

According to Sue (2004), most teachers in Taiwan who are teaching vocational high school students felt frustrated when grammatical explanation and word by word translation of the texts are the only two teaching strategies in the classroom. In view of vocational high school students, English was regarded as a minor subject compared with the core courses such as accounting, international trade, and business management. Therefore, subjects other than those among the core courses, such as English, were neglected. According to Lee (2005), some teachers in Taiwan may think that grammar is too difficult to learn and apply, especially for those as young as eleven or twelve years old. On the other hand, Lee also indicated that there are still other teachers who regard grammar as an essential component for learning English. The study showed that some teachers believed that grammar should be taught as early as possible because the students in Taiwan live in a non-English-speaking environment and have little exposure to English outside the classroom and in real-life situations. Expectedly, “learners encounter overwhelming difficulties in internalizing the rules and patterns of English. It will be more effective in terms of learning the rules if learners have access to explicit and systematic grammar instruction in the classroom” (p.5). To sum up, for these teachers in Taiwan who are working with such tight schedules with only three to four hours per week, they concluded that compared to all other skills, focusing on teaching grammar is the most useful aspect of language learning in the classroom.

Students' Perspectives toward Grammar Learning in Taiwan

In addition to the diverse opinion about grammar instruction among teachers, there is also a variety of perspectives among students. In Lee's study (2005), some students in Taiwan think that grammar often hinders their intentions to communicate, that is “grammatical accuracy

should not be pursued at the expense of fluency” (p. 6). Moreover, students also mentioned that grammar knowledge is complex and abstract that should be reserved for mature adults to learn not for children. Students even indicated that “classroom instruction will enable them to internalize grammatical rules to the point of being able to use them in real-life setting” (p. 7).

According to the pilot study findings from Wang (1998), which showed that Chinese students at the Pennsylvania State University awarded that grammar accuracy is the least important skill in English language learning, and listening comprehension is the most important skill to acquire. Although research showed that grammar instruction is necessary and essential for learners to achieve advanced levels of proficiency in school language learning (Azar, 2007), students may also think that the context in the language course is not related to their needs for future work. For college students in Taiwan, “the proficiency to use English skills in daily life and future situations would seem more important than acquiring linguistically fragmented knowledge from paper-and-pencil tests” (Wang, 1998, p. 12).

A finding in Savignon & Wang (2003) summarized data concerning the learners’ attitudes toward the classroom practices they reportedly had experienced in senior high school. Most students expressed dislike attitudes for form-focused instruction, which means grammar translation instruction. They disagreed with such statements as “learning English is learning its grammar” and “I believe my English improves most quickly if I study and practice the grammar.” Canale and Swain (1980) mentioned that college students in Taiwan may not realize that grammatical capacity is one important element of communicative competence. They may have never heard that grammar instruction could be learned through interesting and meaningful communicative activities. Actually, without the help of grammar instruction, they could not use English accurately.

A research in educational psychology (Cronback & Snow, 1977) suggested that any discussion of grammar learning must consider the type of learner, some certain learners benefit from grammar instructions, while others may suffer from certain types of instructions which depend on students' learning styles and interests are in conflict with the method being used.

Conclusion

Since different individual has different preference in learning style, language teachers prefer their unique teaching styles as well in the classroom. Some researches suggested that language teachers should combine diverse instruction methods to apply in their language teaching. These different instruction methods included learner-centered and teacher-centered; covert and overt; deductive and inductive; fluency-focused and accuracy-focused; direct and indirect, and form-based and meaning-based (Lee, 2005; Azar, 2007).

Most English teachers in Taiwan still prefer to use GTM in classroom teaching. Although there are increasing debates in using GTM as a predominant method, it is still popular for Taiwanese teachers to use it due to two reasons. One is the big sized classroom, the other is most of the Taiwanese teachers were educated to learn English through GTM. According to Liu and Littlewood (as cited in Lee, 2005), most Asian language teachers preferred to use grammar translation method as well as teacher-centered instruction. It means that for Asian language teachers, using their native language to teach English seems to make them more comfortable and more confidence due to most of them are non-native English speakers. Moreover Asian teachers seem to "highly value grammar instruction and consider overt teaching of rules as beneficial to the students" (p. 25). Lee also suggested that grammar-based instructional methods should incorporate grammar into communication-based classroom teaching due to this combination leads to positive results for meaningful and practical grammar learning. Similarly, Lightbown &

Spada (1994) supported that “an exclusive focus on meaning-based activities, to the exclusion of form-focused activities, may set a limit on the success of the programs, which could be passed if there were a better balance of attention to form and meaning” (p.576). Another study conducted by Hartnett (1974) also showed that the best grammar course is to incorporate both deductive and inductive methods into EFL class. Azar (2007) agreed the combination and stated that as follows: (p.1)

Focus on fluency or accuracy? Do both, in proper balance give the students’ needs and goals. Have students work with grammar structures inductively or deductively? Do both: you never know where any particular student’s “Aha!” is going to come from. Use authentic or adapted language? Students need both. Work with sentence-level vs. connected-discourse material? Both can have good pedagogical purpose and effect. Engage in open-ended communicative interaction or controlled response exercise? Both are beneficial for students. Explicit instruction or communicative exposure? Both

Helping students achieve their learning goals not only assist them completely understand the meaning and function of grammar but encourage them create their own learning style about grammar. By using the effective *combination* as mentioned above, students may be more likely to gradually and successfully apply what they learned into the real world situation to help them further advance their English ability in facing any challenges of language learning in the future.

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