

GRAMMAR IN PROJECT BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING: A CASE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few decades, researchers and teachers of English have never been so divided over the issue of grammar in English as a Second Language/English as a Foreign Language (ESL/EFL)-how it should be taught, its methods and approaches and to the extent whether it should be taught at all or not. After the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method has been accepted all over the world as the most favourite method, the 'focus on form' approach is being questioned and PPP (Presentation-Practice-Production) method is receding fast from the classroom. Although the core of CLT method is to improve the communicative and socio-linguistic competence of the learners, many teachers are of the opinion that it should not be at the expense of grammar or over all linguistic competence of the learners with the logic that making meaning will be hampered without the use of appropriate grammatical forms and structures in both speech and writing.

This paper explores the role and function of grammar in Task Based Language Teaching as TBLT has become the cornerstone of language teaching. Tasks engage learners in their thinking process and help them to arrive at an outcome. Teacher of course, is present to control and regulate the process. This paper discusses how grammar teaching was integrated in a Project Based Language Teaching course in a Under Graduate (UG) level. After a regulated treatment for one semester, it was found that there was a significant improvement in grammar among the learners.

Keywords: CLT, Grammar Teaching, Focus on Form, Project Based Language Teaching, TBLT.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning of grammar has been a point of debate since long, especially after Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach has made its inroads into ESL or EFL class. Some of the questions which have been raised are, Is grammar teaching necessary and if yes, what are the appropriate methods and approaches? Which is to be emphasized more-Form or Meaning? What is more important-fluency or accuracy? Can fluency and accuracy be achieved together? Traditional grammar teaching was based on a notion of competence-the knowledge of rules and concepts of grammar whereas communicative language teaching is based on the use of language rather than on its form itself. Thus, for CLT, grammatical knowledge was performance, rather than competence, and grammar is considered as a sub-skill to

be learned- 'doing' rather than 'just knowing'. From CLT, there emerged more encompassing views of the learning processes, such as Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Cooperative Language Teaching, Content-based Instruction, etc. They all focus on action/performance and is learner-oriented. In fact, the misunderstanding regarding the place and position of grammar in CLT eclipsed attention to grammar to a large extent because teachers started to believe it was more important to build fluency than accuracy, to improve the sociolinguistic than the linguistic aspects of a learner. They pay little attention to the grammatical structure of their students' speaking and writing. The belief that CLT has no space for grammar teaching is a misconception (Spada, 2007). Although CLT syllabuses are organized according to categories of meaning or functions, they still have a strong grammar basis (Thornbury, 1999). This means the functions into which

CLT syllabuses are organized in consonance with their correspondent grammatical rules. As researchers and teachers, we all know that grammar is not only the core of a language, but a theoretical tool in regulating language. If a teacher teaches students in communicative training rejecting grammar and fails to help them identify the characteristics of sentences and compare it with other new sentences at a proper time, the result will surely be that the students will not fully understand the new sentence and mistakes will be unavoidable. The ignorance of form will affect meaning.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Grammar in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Although there has been a controversy regarding the role of grammar within any communicative approach, some of that controversy may be solved if we understand about two main types of CLT - the shallow-end approach and the deep-end approach to CLT (Thornbury, 1999). The former approach makes it necessary for the learner to learn the grammatical rules and then apply that knowledge in communicative situations and the latter approach lays emphasis on the communicative competence, where grammar is acquired unconsciously and claims that it is useless to teach grammar explicitly (Thornbury, 1999). In the shallow-end approach, grammatical structures are placed into communicative functions as per Hallidayan concept of grammar in which grammar is the study of linguistic forms (wordings) to realize meanings. Thus, both wordings and functions are studied by grammar (Halliday, 1997). In the shallow-end approach, grammar is considered as a means towards communication. In this syllabus, it is the way in which it is taught without losing the focus on the communicative competency of the learner.

In the shallow-end approach to CLT, grammar is dealt inductively. Learners are not presented with a list of grammatical rules that they have to learn by heart (Presentation-Practice-Production cycle) but rather, they are provided with examples from which they infer the rules by themselves. Teaching grammar means, as Larsen-Freeman put it enabling language students to use linguistic forms accurately, meaningfully and appropriately (Larsen-Freeman, 1991). Rutherford (1987) calls this inductive way

of teaching 'consciousness-raising'. By means of this consciousness-raising, the teacher makes the learners relate the new grammatical concepts to other grammatical knowledge that they already have, both from other grammatical concepts in English language or even from grammatical knowledge which appears in their L1 (first language).

The deep-end approach claimed that grammar should be acquired unconsciously, in line with Krashen's theories (Krashen, 1985) on Acquisition Model theory reflected on his Natural Approach, which has had a great influence on ESL. There is a belief that the teaching of grammar might be an obstacle for communicative competence, as it claims that conscious reflection about the rules of grammar affects negatively in the process and performance as learners knew a lot about grammar, but were unable to put that knowledge into practice. Thus, learning outcomes were not satisfactory. According to Lock, this approach rejected the very approach of rule plus drill methodology, typical of audiolingual or traditional grammar teaching (Lock, 1997). In the deep-end approach, the aim was not to teach grammar as it may be difficult on the part of the learners to integrate it within communication process. However, even when the claim and counterclaim about teaching grammar still exist in ELT, most authors and teachers attach a role to grammar, without compromising on the main objective of communication. The deep-end approach proved to be insufficient with regard to quality input not its focus on output. On the other hand, the shallow-end approach has provision for grammar teaching out of learners' needs. Of the post communicative approaches, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) considers the modification in the input and the interaction process, which can be combined with what Ortega terms as 'explicit grammar teaching' (Ortega, 2000).

1.2 'Focus on Form' Approach

In reaction to the limitations of communicative methodology, many teachers and researchers have proposed a 'Focus on Form' approach to grammar instruction. This approach however, is not exactly a return to the traditional approach to teaching grammar based on explicit explanations and drills. Instead, focus on form, as Long (1990) defines, is a teaching approach in which the

primary focus is on meaning and communication with the learner's attention being drawn to linguistic elements incidentally and only when there is a breakdown in meaning during interaction. Long's definition of 'focus on form' and Krashen's Monitor Model have some similarities. They both propose implicit language instruction with a primary focus on meanings and no overt attention to forms. A major difference is that Long's 'focus on form' temporarily and incidentally shifts students' attention to specific forms when a communication breakdown occurs.

1.3 Grammar in Task based Language Teaching (TBLT)

In this paper, Second Language Acquisition and Task Based Instruction, Skehan asserts that PPP is ultimately inadequate yet resistant to change because it is convenient and comfortable for teachers. He states that,

A PPP approach looks on the learning process as learning a series of discrete items and then bringing these items together in communication to provide further practice and consolidation. A task based approach sees the learning process as one of learning through doing – it is by primarily engaging in meaning that the learner's system is encouraged to develop (Skehan, 1992, p. 21).

Historically, task based learning seems to have gained popularity since the 1996 publication of Jane Willis' *A Framework for Task-Based Learning* and her paper *A flexible Framework for Task-Based Learning, and Challenge and Change in Language Teaching*. The task based lesson, based on Jane Willis' framework is structured as in Figure 1.

The objective of the task based learning framework, as shown in the figure is to create the appropriate conditions for language learning. Willis in this three stage framework identifies these three essential conditions are as follows.

- Exposure to the target language (stage- 1)
- Opportunities to use the target language for expressing meaning (stage- 2)
- Motivation to engage with exposure and use what they know (stage- 2)
- A fourth desirable condition is to Focus on language form to prevent fossilization (stage- 3)

In the planning stage, the teacher monitors and

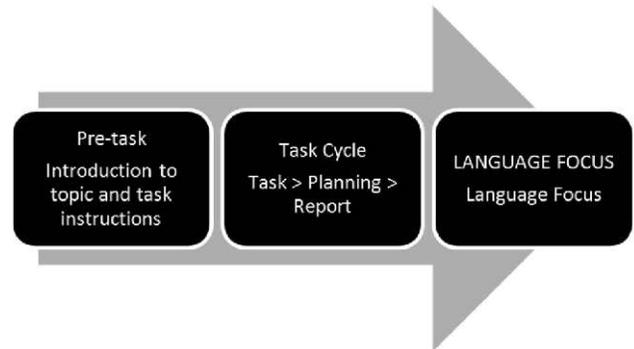


Figure 1. TBLT Framework by Jane Willis

encourages attempts to communicate meaning in the target language. While facilitating students to formulate what they want to say, the teacher does not correct errors. The focus is on spontaneity and fluency. In the language focus stage, the errors related to accuracy are taken care of with the help of activities and exercises. Explicit teaching of grammar is included in TBLT approach as without grammar making meaning is not possible.

First, the 'focus on form' would not be presented at the beginning of each task, in a pre-communicative stage, but rather it can be presented after providing relevant input, so that the communicative mood of the lesson would not be interrupted. Second, 'focus on form' approach would be complemented with communicative activities, which makes learners make use the linguistic forms in a communicative way (Nunan, 2007). Third, some grammatical items can be repeated throughout the syllabus instead of being presented only once, so that there is a constant review of them and learners will not have the feeling of studying the grammatical items in isolation. So, as a conclusion about the role of grammar in Task-Based Language Teaching, it attempts to deal with grammar teaching in a way in which the learners communicative skills are not affected but improved. Thus, grammar is considered as a means towards communication and not as the end itself.

The approach mentioned above tries to solve the difference-communication versus grammar by introducing some 'focus on form' within their communicative methodology (Doughty and Williams, 1999). 'Focus on form', as repeated by Doughty is paying attention to the form without going back to traditional teaching (Doughty,

2001). This is done by drawing the students' attention to their errors in using grammatical structures that they are supposed to be able to manage correctly—first explicit instruction and then making them conscious of the different meanings of the structure or integrated sequence paying attention both to form and function, simultaneously. All this is carried out by using activities that do not interrupt the communicative mood of the lesson (Doughty and Williams, 1999).

2. Objectives

This paper aims to:

- Explore the effectiveness of grammar teaching through TBLT.
- Investigate if shallow-end approach to grammar teaching hampers the communicative fluency of the learners.

3. Research Questions

- Is it possible to develop fluency and accuracy together?
- Is there a scope of grammar teaching in Task-Based Language Teaching?
- Can grammar be ignored completely?

4. Project (Task) based Language Teaching: A Case

An experiment was carried out with the undergraduate engineering students in their second year, a batch of two hundred students studying in one of the universities of Odisha, where the researcher was a teacher and the Head of the Department of English. A new course called Corporate Readiness through Live Projects was designed, which would run for a semester. In the semester, students in small groups would carry out live projects in and around the campus. The objectives of the course were to improve the sociolinguistic as well as the linguistic competence of the students. While designing the syllabus, it was kept in mind that the projects would not be too technical in nature. The students mostly drawn from vernacular medium were making too many linguistic errors in their speech as well as writing. During the four months, students in groups would give four presentations, such as Project Plan, Review Presentation, Pre-submission Presentation, and Final Presentation. As per the demand of the project, they were

engaged in discussions, were taking interviews of the stakeholders, people concerned, prepared questionnaire for students, faculty members, and the local people according to the aims and objectives of the respective projects. They would analyse their data and present them graphically before a panel members, which would consist of faculty members from the engineering streams and also Department of English. The engineering faculty members would evaluate the projects on the basis of the methods the students had applied to reach a solution. Teachers of English would monitor the communicative competence of the students. Throughout, the students were engaged in various activities/tasks in completing their projects. They would also submit a long format report on the completion of the project. Basically, students were engaged in projects/tasks which are complex and involved their analytical, sequential and communication skills. As per a baseline study, students were making wrong grammatical structures mostly in present, past tense, future time, subject-verb agreement, conditionals, modal auxiliaries, articles, voice change, reported speech, etc. Their grammar existing grammatical information was measured in the pre-communicative stage. It was also found that a few students from English medium schools were making less errors as they had developed a sense of grammar although they were also not aware of the rules.

4.1 Overall Observation

- Students showed good analytical skills being from science/engineering background.
- They were good in preparing charts and graphs.
- They were motivated and engaged beyond the classroom.
- Students were more comfortable in group presentation as it did not create a threatening environment as opposed to individual presentation.
- They had healthy competitions from the other groups.
- Being directly involved in the discourse process, their fluency improved.

4.2 Observation on Students' Grammar Use/Behaviour

- Students were making grammatical errors in speech as well as in writing.

- They were making less grammatical errors in their writing than speech.
- Common errors were identified as tense, modals, prepositions, conditionals, voice change, and reported speech.
- Some students had considerable procedural knowledge, but were unable to access it automatically due to lack of practice.

5. Methodology

This is an experimental design to measure the effects of grammar teaching in a Project/Task Based Language Teaching class over a period of four months. Of the batch of two hundred students, twenty seven randomly selected students were divided in three groups, consisting nine in each. They were the three experiment groups. The learners were from vernacular medium schools who exhibited frequent breakdown of communication with serious grammatical errors. Common errors were identified. First, their knowledge on the rules of grammar was tested through written exercises and oral activities. It was found that they showed less grammatical errors in writing than while speaking. They were explained grammar explicitly for four months with 'focus on form' and shallow-end approach at four various levels of their task. Language testing tools and evaluation were used. The exercises on grammar were prepared from their own oral contexts, the real-life tasks they were involved and written content.

6. Findings and Analysis

Table 1 shows the test score of individual as well as group

average of one group as a baseline study. Students in all three experimental groups did not score more than 40-55% marks in all five parameters shown in Table 1. After each presentation, the grammatical errors were noted down silently by the teachers and the students were later on explained rules and structures from their contexts. This post-communicative approach of grammar teaching helped them in correcting and also raising a consciousness. Sometimes recasting and reformulating what the students had said or written in a more accurate and appropriate manner helped them in noticing, correcting, and raising consciousness. Sometimes, the teacher had to help the learners recall their 'inert knowledge' which was not available in spontaneous use. Their knowledge was limited to classroom exercises, but was not transferred to the real-world contexts earlier.

Figure 2 shows a significant improvement of all three groups in written tests after each intervention. All three groups showed more than 100% improvement over their baseline score in all parameters. Their final score was compared with other two controlled groups' score, selected randomly who were not part of this sustained and regulated treatment. There was no improvement in the learners who did not receive the treatment. It was observed that grammar correction in speech takes longer period than writing as speech is more of a spontaneous activity. It was also observed that the students were now aware of their mistakes and were repeating the sentences after making corrections. Earlier, they were simply unaware of their mistakes. Students require plenty of oral practice in real world contexts to prevent fossilization of grammatical errors.

Group 1	Students	Tense	Modal	Written Test Score			Total (Out of 25)
				Sub-Verb Agreement	Preposition	Articles	
1	S1	3	2	1	2	3	11
2	S2	2	3	4	2	1	12
3	S3	1	3	2	3	1	10
4	S4	3	2	1	1	3	10
5	S5	2	2	3	1	2	10
6	S6	3	2	2	3	1	11
7	S7	2	2	3	1	3	11
8	S8	1	3	2	2	2	10
9	S9	2	3	4	1	2	12
Group Total							97
Group Average							10.78

Table 1. Baseline Score of Group-1

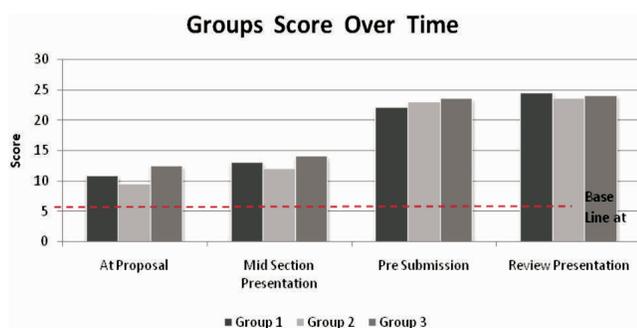


Figure 2. Three Groups' Score over a Period of four Months

Conclusion and Future Implications

The research, mostly explorative and interpretive in nature raises opportunities for future research, in re-building English Language Teaching (ELT) theory and practice with special reference to role of grammar in CLT and appropriate methods of teaching grammar. The first and the most important contribution of this research is to explore ways and means to teach grammar even if the focus is communication not rules of grammar. Another major contribution of the study is to find appropriate tasks depending on the age group of the learners, being clear on the learning outcomes and course planning.

Amidst all the squabbles over the role of grammar in CLT, this paper explores the possibility of grammar teaching in CLT and TBLT. It emphasizes that grammar teaching is an important resource in making meaning and cannot be ignored completely. In the learner-centred approach of CLT, learners may achieve fluency but may lack accuracy. This will lead to more and more fossilization of errors. Teachers need to fashion tasks carefully so that learners get sufficient opportunities to use language. They can keep monitor closely while learners are using language in a discourse. Grammar can be taught with a shallow-end and sometimes 'focus on form' method, drawing reference from the learners' contexts and making them notice and raising consciousness. Grammar can be embedded in the syllabus keeping in mind how the 'end and means' can meet, as suggested by Breen. TBLT draws from the same philosophy and is more a self-directed than teacher-directed. The method lays emphasis on self-enquiry, analytical and communication skills. Out of various forms of TBLT, Project Based Language Teaching involves tasks which

are 'stimulating, intellectually challenging... problem solving' (Long, 1990, p. 7). It was also observed that the grammar correction takes longer time in speech than writing. As the students showed high level of motivation, it can be inferred intrinsic motivation leads to internalization of rules, forms, and structures. Students, as in the above Task (Project)-Based Language Teaching, should get ample opportunities for language use in various contexts so that it becomes part of their spontaneous use and help improve fluency. Fluency and accuracy can be achieved together.

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