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Vattamalaipalayam, NGGO Colony Post



COIMBATORE-641022, Tamilnadu, India
www.srec.ac.in

11th International Congress on English Grammar (ICEG 2014)
In association with Systemic Functional Linguistics

Grammar and Grammar Teaching: Changing Perspectives

Editor
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The Role of Grammar in Communicative Language Teaching: A Study

Ms. Anupama B.N.

Introduction

The building blocks of the communication are grammatical points which make the structure of a language. It is probably impossible to communicate in a foreign language without knowing the grammatical rules and structures of the target language.

“No other issue has so preoccupied theorists and practitioners as the grammar debate, and the history of language teaching is essentially the history of the claims and counterclaims for and against the teaching of grammar. Differences in attitude to the role of grammar underpin differences between methods, between teachers, and between learners.”

(Thornbury, 1999:14)

Grammar in Communicative Language Teaching

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:1 March 2014
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Language instruction has long been plagued by an on-going debate concerning the proper role of grammar instruction. There is a widespread belief that Communicative Language Teaching does not include any grammar. However, Spada argues that the thought that “Communicative Language Teaching means an exclusive focus on meaning” is a myth or a misconception (Spada, 2007:275). In fact, the widespread belief that CLT eclipsed attention to grammar is only partly true, since although CLT syllabuses are organized according to categories of meaning or functions, they still have a strong grammar basis (Thornbury, 1999:23). That is to say, the functions into which CLT syllabuses are organized are connected with their correspondent grammatical points.

Focus on Several Types of CLT

Discussing the role of grammar within any communicative approach can be controversial, due to the misconceptions which ascribed no grammar role in language learning. However, when explaining the role of grammar specifically in CLT, some of that controversy may be solved if we do not talk about one single type of CLT. (Thornbury, 1999). A few post-communicative approaches such as Task-Based Language Teaching, Focus-on-Form, Cooperative Language Teaching and Content-Based Instruction can be considered.

Real Life Situations

Communicative language teaching makes use of real-life situations that necessitate communication. The teacher sets up a situation that students are likely to encounter in real life. Unlike the audio lingual method of language teaching, which relies on repetition and drills, the communicative approach can leave students in suspense as to the outcome of a class exercise, which will vary according to their reactions and responses. (Gerngross & Puchta, 1984, p. 92).

Gunter Gerngross continues to say that the communicative approach "puts great emphasis on listening, which implies an active will to try to understand others. [This is] one of the hardest tasks to achieve because the children are used to listening to the teacher but not to their peers."

CLT Classroom Situation

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A classroom during a communicative activity is far from quiet, however. The students do most of the speaking, and frequently the scene of a classroom during a communicative exercise is active, with students leaving their seats to complete a task. Because of the increased responsibility to participate, students may find they gain confidence in using the target language in general. Students are more responsible managers of their own learning (Larsen-Freeman, 1986).

Communicative activities include any activities that encourage and require a learner to speak with and listen to other learners, as well as with people in the program and community. Communicative activities have real purposes: to find information, break down barriers, talk about self, and learn about the culture. Even when a lesson is focused on developing reading or writing skills, communicative activities should be integrated into the lesson. Focus on form is an approach to teaching grammar vocabulary, collocation, pragmatics, and more, through helping students map forms, functions and meaning, in context.

Objectives of the Study

1. To find out the students' interest to learn grammatical structures of English language.
2. To find out the role of grammar in Communicative Language Teaching.

Background

First year MCA students of CMR Institute of Management Studies, Bangalore, come from various backgrounds. They are not very confident in oral or written communication skills. Most of them are uncertain whether the written sentences are grammatically correct.

With this background, a study was conducted to check the usefulness of teaching grammar in enhancing written communication. Pre-intervention test in writing was given to 17 MCA students. The results were not appealing to the students. The learners felt that there is a need for Communicative English classes to overcome their drawbacks in English language. They also realized the importance of speaking and writing grammatically accurate sentences in the academic scenario and at the job front as well. When the need was created by the teacher, students were eager to learn the grammar structures to avoid making grammatical errors while writing. The learner was motivated to learn something new.

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Importance of Grammar in Communicative Language Teaching

Canale and Swain (1980) suggested that communicative competence includes grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Thus, we can say that grammatical rules are one of the fundamental aspects of speaking skill.

Nassaji, H. and Fotos opine, “grammatical instruction has a significant effect on the attainment of accuracy....explicit instruction (presenting the structure, describing and exemplifying it, and giving rules for its use) results in substantial gains in the learning of target structures in comparison to implicit instruction (usually consisting of communicative exposure to the target form) alone, and that these gains are durable over time.”

A number of studies (e.g. Doughty, 1991; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Lightbown, 1991; Trahey & White, 1993; White, 1991) have examined the effectiveness of focusing on form and indicated that students with form-focused instruction outperformed those without instruction on the targeted forms. The results of these studies are very important, because they support the role of form-focused instruction. Some teachers think that form-focused instruction and communicative activities, where the focus is on meaning, should be separated.

Methodology

After the pre-test, six interventions were done to facilitate the learning process. Communicative activities were used to teach Subject-Verb Agreement specifically. After the intervention, another test was conducted to check the relevance of teaching grammar in Communicative Language Teaching. Benefits of using communicative activities are: more exposure to Target Language, more authentic opportunities to use the language, and fun for learners. CLT provides opportunity to use authentic materials. In Task Based Language Teaching 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. The results of both the tests and students’ response to whether grammar should be taught in CLT are as follows:

Results of Pre-intervention test and Post-intervention – I MCA Students

Roll No.	Pre-intervention test(20)	Post-intervention test(20)	Increase in Marks	Students' response to whether grammar should be taught in CLT.
1	6	13	7	Yes
2	8	12	4	Yes
3	4	13	9	Yes
4	9	18	9	Yes
5	11	18	7	Yes
6	7	15	8	Yes
7	7	13	6	Yes
8	5	15	10	Yes
8	4	17	13	Yes
9	8	9	1	Yes
10	7	12	5	Yes
11	9	14	5	Yes
12	7	17	10	Yes
14	8	18	10	Yes
15	11	17	6	Yes
16	8	14	6	Yes
17	7	15	8	Yes

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

The findings in this study provide important information that can be applied to all levels of language students. Students agree with the idea of including grammar explanations in a CLT classroom. They believe that explicit grammar instruction will help them receive good grades in tests; it will facilitate their communication with others. They believe that grammar teaching is necessary for students, and believe that CLT should include both speaking and writing. Every student insists on learning grammar structures. The increase in the marks, after the intervention, accentuates the importance of grammar in Communicative Language Teaching. On an average, the increase in the marks is 7.29. There is a considerable

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improvement in written communication after the effective teaching of grammatical structures in various ways.

Conclusion

So, about the role of grammar in Communicative Language Teaching, we may conclude that mere grammar instruction at any point of time would not serve the purpose of learning English language. Repeated practice and exposure to real life situations are viable in attaining accuracy in the target language. As Nassaji, H. and S. Fotos remark, “among the essential conditions for acquisition of grammatical forms are (1) learner noticing and continued awareness of target forms, (2) repeated meaning-focused exposure to input containing them, and (3) opportunities for output and practice. It is also recognized that, because the acquisition of grammar is affected by internal processing constraints, spontaneous and accurate production cannot be instantaneous but will naturally require time as learners move toward mastery.”

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