Implementing Explicit Grammatical Instruction in Thailand Schools

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Abstract

A great deal of research has found that, if well implemented, explicit grammar teaching will most likely result in learners' ability to write grammatically correct English and also speak it fluently. Contrary to this position, it is believed that English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) learners in Thailand are lacking in ability to write grammatically correct sentences and even speak English correctly and fluently.

This article is based on the hypothesis that one of the major causes of this problem is the wrong implementation of explicit grammatical instruction adopted in several Thailand schools and by a great many teachers of grammar. This article, therefore, seeks to present a step-by-step guide for teachers, first in Thailand and, further, in other countries where English is studied as a foreign language and not as a second language.

Key words: Explicit Instruction, Grammar, Implementation, EFL

Introduction

A lot has been said about the advantages of explicit grammatical instruction but how to implement this grammar teaching approach practically in the classroom may not have been a popular topic. Borg, (1998) declares that "... the teaching of grammar in the absence of well-founded guidelines is like a landscape without bearings", (p. 10).

It is widely claimed that many Thai learners of EFL may write fairly, grammatically correct English but speak English in manners inconsistent with the structure and conventions of contemporary English in spontaneous communication, even after many years of learning English grammar explicitly.

Chaturon (2005) posits that, most students' inability to communicate in English despite spending years learning the language points to a clear failure in English teaching in Thailand. It has become a matter of concern that a cognitive system that can engender some level of accuracy for the learner has been seen unable to generate fluency ability for the same learner. This is different from the position of the literature which is awash with evidence that explicit grammatical instruction in English as a Foreign Language-----if properly implemented----- is profitable for not only accuracy but also fluency (see R. Ellis 2002a, 2002b; Spada1997; Larsen Freeman, 2003).   .

Schmidt (2001) declares that instruction and attention are "…necessary in order to understand virtually every aspect of second language acquisition (SLA) including... L2 fluency..." (p. 3). Explicit instruction translates to implicit knowledge (comprehension and oral production) when learners receive communicative exposure to grammar points introduced through formal instruction. Learners also benefit when the grammar instruction is extensive and is sustained over a long period of time. Such instruction contributes to the development of implicit knowledge as measured by performance on production tasks (Dekeyser, 1994; Doff, 2000). In the same vein, a fairly sound knowledge of grammar may help learners perform some communicative activities, without which the performance appears to be very difficult, and it may help them to overcome gaps while communicating (Terrell, 1991).

The purpose of explicit grammar is to develop the rules capable of explaining how surface structures are generated from deep structures and to make them generalisable, having first stated them (Hillocks et al, 1971). This teaching approach which makes rule formulation its organizing principle is implemented in stages in the real classroom.

Implementation Components and Stages

What Ur (1988) describes as "general framework" (p. 7) for explicit grammatical instruction will be examined from not just a unilateral perspective but from a body of documented examen, research, hypotheses and theories. In order to generate both fluency and accuracy for the learner of English through explicit grammar learning, certain elements constituting its implementation procedure may need to be put in operation, including:

*Presentation***:**

(a) Identifying and isolating a structure, form or topic for instruction,

(b) Converting the complex structure into a simple one,

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(c) Formulating rules based on the simplified version (if deductive approach,),
(See Azar, 2007; Borg, 2003; Doff, 2000; Eisestein-Ebsworth, 1987, 1998)

(d) Giving extensive explanations with copious, relevant examples and illustrations,

*Feedback***:**

(e) Feedback elicitation and 'checking' (Scarcella, (1990).

*Practice***:**

(f*) Practice*: Giving learners opportunities for practice, that is, written exercises (Ur 1988, 1998) .

*Production***:**

(g) Encouraging independent learner production of the new structural item (Richards and Rodgers, 1996; Skehan, 1998; Ur, 1999; Celce Murcia, Donyei & Thurrell, 1997).

Follow-up:

(h) Testing and review (Ellis, 2002; Ur, 1988; Widodo, 2004; Eisenstein, 1987; Dekeyser, 1994; Mitchell, 2000).

Explicit Grammar Implementation Component One: Presentation by the Inductive and Deductive Approaches

Whether explicit grammar is to be taught intensively (over a period of time, and which could be a lesson, a unit or a series of lessons), or extensively (teaching a complete range of structures within a short period of time) (Ellis, 2006), the decision about how to present the material or structure to the learners is important because instructional methods employed make significant differences in learner understanding and performance (Karen & Ziemer, 2007).

Direct explicit instruction, that is, the *deductive* approach is one of the two ways of teaching grammar explicitly and it involves oral or written explanations of grammatical phenomena (Widodo, 2006; Dekeyser, 1994). Rules which are capable of explaining how surface structures are generated from deep structures are usually given as guide. Attempt is also made to generalise them having first stated the rules (Hillocks et al, 1971).

The deductive approach is also known as 'rule-driven learning'. Michael Swan (cited in Thornbury, 1999, p. 32) outlines guidelines for presenting the rules:

The rules should be true.
The rules should show clearly what limits are on the use of a given form.
The rules need to be clear.
The rules ought to be simple.

The rules need to make use of concepts familiar to the learners' experience.

One constant feature of explicit grammatical teaching is the formulation of rules from, perhaps complex structures and the demonstration of the functioning of same with examples, (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). In the deductive approach, rules should be personalisable, short and thoroughly exemplified (Ur, 1988; Widodo, 2006).

However, the second method identified for teaching explicit grammar is the *inductive* and is hinged on a reasoning progression that proceeds from particulars, such as measurements, data or observation, to generalities (which include laws, rules, theories or concepts) (Felder & Henriques, 1995).

In this regard, learners are involved in consciousness-raising tasks which enable them see the pattern of a structure so that learners can formulate rules from such patterns (Ellis, 1998; 2006). The following are patterns from which at least one rule could be derived:

(i) He travelled *in* January.
(ii) She started schooling *in* April.
(iii) He met them *in* November.
(iv) My birthday comes up *in* March.

Either the teacher or the students may formulate a rule from these, thus:
- Months of the year are usually introduced by the use of the preposition *in*, or
- Use *in* to introduce months of the year.

This inductive approach is also called, 'rule discovery learning'.

The inductive approach leaves an almost unforgettable experience with learners who may have had experiential participation in their own learning by formulating usable rules for the construction of standard and convention-compliant sentences. At the same time, it develops their mental strategies for handling tasks (Eisestein, cited in Long and Richards, 1987).

Both approaches have been found effective. While Selinger (1975); Fotos & Ellis, (1991); Fotos, (1994); Herron & Tomasello (1992) avouch that it is better than the deductive; N. Ellis, (1993); Robinson, (1996); Reber, (1989) and Hammerley (1975) declare that the deductive approach is better and more result- oriented. However, Rosa and O'Neill (1999) found no difference between the effects of inductive and deductive approaches. Perhaps it is for this variation in findings that Corder (1973) had advocated a mixed-bag approach: teaching with both approaches.

Component Two: Skill Practice

Grammar and grammatical instruction have been loathed and decried by learners who have been frustrated by the sheer mechanicality, systematicity and the seeming odious, dry, drab, jejune and lackluster rules which many learners in all corners of the

English – learning world, have found rather theoretically otiose and banally unexciting.

According to Ellis, 2006, there is "...some evidence that teaching explicit knowledge by itself (i.e. without opportunity for practising the target language feature), is not effective", p. 96. In explicit grammatical instruction, 'presenting' or teaching structures and rules alone, without providing a means of helping learners understand, internalize and produce the new language in real-life situations appears a half measure that confuses learners and the teaching is very likely to end up in drudgery and counter-productivity.

Richards, Platt and platt, (1992) aver that teaching grammar through drills, grammar explanation and other form-focused activities is a way of raising learners' awareness of the grammatical features of the language. This is contrasted with the traditional approaches to teaching of grammar in which the goal is to instill correct grammatical patterns and habits directly (p. 78).

According to Ur, (1999), the practice stage comes after the initial presentation and explanation when the learner is assumed to have perceived the material and taken it into short-term memory but cannot be said to have really mastered it yet.

Carroll (1999) expounds on the cognitive processes in listening that lead to the internalisation or processing of messages into the Long Term Memory and this takes place, at the practice stage. The concern is both for understanding and internalising, on the part of the learner because activities are reinforcers. In considering "… these events or stimuli (reinforcers) that follow a response and that tend to strengthen behaviour, say, to teach somebody something, we ought to attend carefully to reinforcers" (Brown, 1987, p. 63).

Situation in Thailand

In Thailand, the teaching of grammar has been without skill practice in most classroom cases. (Khunying, 2005; Arunee, 2001). Thai and other learners of English have ample opportunities to practise and produce the language while this may represent a clear departure from the tradition of complete reliance on language-focus exercises. An illustration below may describe the difference between *production* and *practice*. Practice exercises come in the form of:

(a) slot fillers:
He ---- good English. (speaking / speak/speaks OR,

(b) Transformation, e.g. Change the sentences below to plural
(i)This is a man
(ii) That lady is my friend.
(c) Multiple choice, e.g.:
There ---- man at the door, now

(i) and some (ii) are a (iii) is some (iv) are many OR,

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(d) Matching:

He		a bird
I		a teacher
She	{ is }	students
The girls	{ am }	a nurse
The Peacock	{ are }	a man

Exercises provide no opportunity to 'do' things although they help supply examples of the structures and as such, are not communicative. Therefore, piquant, picturesque, verisimilitude, amusing or game-like activities offer more learning value and are communicative. For Ur (1988: 7), the "… practice stage consists of a series of exercises done both in the classroom and for home assignment, whose aim is to cause the learners to absorb the structure thoroughly.

Component Three: Production

Production is the third P in the PPP pedagogic principle and it refers to the practical demonstration of new language items acquired by the learner. This is quite different from 'Practice' in that it is the juncture at which learners' understanding of the input is acted out in real life. Performance seems to follow understanding but it is risky to assume that learners usually understand teacher input. It may be difficult to say that learners can remember; that they have proceduralised or internalised the new knowledge, or, say they will be able to produce the new knowledge in real life, because, "… we cannot acquire what we do not understand" (Nunan 1989 p. 25).

For the practical dimension to grammar learning, Snow (2006) recommends choral drills, classroom chat, model-based dialogues, role-plays, surveys, interviews, cocktail parties, press conferences, pair or small group tasks, debates, and large group discussions.

A currently active tradition in language pedagogy research is task-based learning (Skehan, 1998). In principle, TBL may seem to have little to do with grammar but it offers a balanced approach in which grammar pedagogy is linked with communicative experience (Thornbury, 1997; Lynch, 1996; Pennington, 2002). Teachers are therefore expected, according to Snow (2006, p. ix), to see language as "… a major tool for communication and that communicative activity should play a major role in the language classroom".

The focus of teaching is authentic communication, extensive use of pair and group activities that involve negotiation of meaning and information sharing. This is necessary because, "… being able to talk about the language is very different from being able to talk in the language" (Cameron, 2001, p. 106).This is the case of formal grammar, which is described as "… grammar presented as form in isolation from its meaning in context" (Batstone, 1994, p. 136). This is against the spirit of explicit grammar implementation.

Learner practical involvement (alluding to the 'Present Practice Produce' principle) carefully guides learners to "… attend to grammar while retaining a measure of self expression and meaning focus" (ibid., p. 137). It is noteworthy that it was the lack of fluency and ease experienced by those taught by grammar translation that led to the development of CLT in the late 1970s and 1980s (Cameron, 2001). Learning grammar and its rules alone does not translate to, or guarantee, accuracy or fluency but practice does. Mitchell and Myles (1998) contend that competence and performance are closely related. In his participation metaphor, Sfard (1998, p. 6) says, "… in the image of learning that emerges from a linguistic turn, the permanence of having gives way to the flux of doing".

In this connection, Kagan (1989) advocates cooperative learning activities which involve group activities to ensure learner understanding but with the teacher spending a little more time explaining off the points, leaving little time for the "cooperative learning" experience. Moskowitz (1978) suggests that students be given the right to be heard. Also, having learners participate "… in a project immediately after its explanation can be very effective" (Scarcella 1990, p. 84). Producing grammar items may come in the form of free group discussions, semi-controlled small-group transactions, fluid pairs, chain, brainstorm, student-teacher exchange, teacher-student exchange, dialogues, play acting, role play, entertainment and visual focus (Lindsfors, 1987). Doing this will make the learning of grammar in the long term one of the means of acquiring a thorough mastery of the language as a whole, not as an end in itself (Ur, 1998).

Component Four: Feedback

Feedback is, accurately interpreting our students' reactions to our lessons and understanding our own methodology of giving feedback (Scarcella, 1990). In the course of a classroom lesson, learners are wont to make errors repeatedly with the same structures or forms. The fully professional teacher determines the source of the error: cause and course and effects a correction.
Here, we see feedback in the light of the fore-going where learners need to be corrected or put aright by the teacher during the implementation process of an explicit grammar lesson. Ellis (1998) examines theoretically motivated instructional options relevant to explicit grammar teaching among which is negative feedback. Whether as a component of a main lesson or as an alternative grammar teaching method, this method shows learners when they have failed to produce a structure in the correct form. Johnson (1988) argues that learners should be made to see for themselves where the structure may have gone deviant. Doughty and Varela (1995) aver that negative feedback is effective in the scaffolding process. According to Lightbown & Spada (1990), there is reduction in the incidence of particular errors during communicative lessons where negative feedback is demonstrated. Explicit grammar lessons are executed with feedback as one of the pillars that tailor the learner to success, and a few options are open to the teacher under the dispensation of explicit grammar teaching.

However, care must be exercised in administering correction during an explicit grammar lessons so that the process will not be counterproductive as the reaction of

Thai students is naturally different from that of other learners in other countries or cultures. Many teachers in France, as Dannequin (1977) observes, believe that students do not have the right to make mistakes, but must conform to the teacher's standards. This is most like the Japanese society, as reported by Thompson (1987), where much heed is paid to the correct answer, through dogmatic rule learning without regard to context. The Chinese education is also obsessed with correctness (Maley, 1986). It is therefore not surprising that French, Japanese and Chinese students, for example, do not feel comfortable with a lesson that fails to demand correctness and correction, of them.

Spotlighting----singling out a student and asking this student to perform or answer correctly before others) is common in the United States (Mohatt and Erikson, 1981). This method may not be successfully used with learners in Asia. This may be so because students in Asia are generally bashful. In Asia, students feel that if they give the wrong answer it not only humiliates them but also brings shame on their families (Sue 1983). Iwatake (1978) warrants that in Asia, teachers are accustomed to learners' reticence on this account.

Lyster and Ranta (1997) believe recast is the most common form of feedback (where recast refers to the reformulation of a learner's utterance or a part of an utterance according to target language norms by an interlocutor or teacher). They present four other types of feedback, including explicit correction which is a means by which the teacher or interlocutor gives the correct form or structure of a deviant form or utterance. Second is the 'clarification request' option where a teacher or interlocutor seeks more information on the deviant structure from the speaker. This automatically raises a red flag to the speaker. Many Asian students, including Thais are reluctant to request clarification (Sato, 1981). Third is the elicitation of the correct form of the deviant utterance by the interlocutor from the learner who is helped by the interlocutor's (teacher's) leading cues. Also identified is the metalinguistic feedback where learners are encouraged to pay more attention to language descriptions, using specific grammatical terms. Lastly, repetition of deviant structures also tends to notify the learner of an error which may be rectified by the learner.

In his "error gravity" analysis, Kiparsky, (1974) identifies two categories of errors that learners can make: local errors such as the omission of an auxiliary verb, e.g.

He ( ) my brother (for: He *is* my brother)
She ( ) go tomorrow (for: She *will* go tomorrow); and global errors such as faulty word order, for example:

(1) The English language rules forget many people.
The speaker intends to say:

(2) Many people forget English language rules.

Local errors are sentence-level errors while global errors are discourse-level errors, the latter being the worse source of miscommunication or confusion than sentence-level errors (Frodesen, 1991).

In attempting to correct learner errors in an explicit grammar lesson, Tomasello & Herron (1988) found two methods, first, the inductive where learners are exposed to many parallel examples and the 'garden path condition' where the teacher gives as many examples as in method one above and asks learners to apply the rule which the learners formulated . Other pedagogic correction interventions are, the 'reformulation technique' (Cohen, 1983), the 'interview analysis' (Wechsler, 1987), both applicable during oral (speaking) presentations while, for correcting written work, Knapp (1972) designed the 'underlining and error checklist'. Witbeck (1976) designed and prefers 'peer correction activities' unlike when learners are in the glare of the whole class, corrected, leading to perceived embarrassment. Teachers dispensing explicit grammar instruction may also wish to consider the use of audio cassettes which Farnsworth (1974) warrants will give learners access to the exact points the teacher is correcting, as that this can be played over and over for mastery.

The implementation procedure outlined above becomes important for every grammar teacher in Thailand and other countries where English is learnt as a foreign (not 'second') language. This is because implementing explicit grammatical instruction in partial measure (for example, neglecting the 'production' part of it) may result in a situation where learners are only able to write occasional correct sentences but are unable to make coherent, cohesive or correct oral production of sentences in real life communication. They may also not be fluent. By implication, all steps and components of explicit grammatical instruction are recommended for implementation by Thailand (and other practicing EFL) teachers in their grammar lessons.

Conclusion

Input is successful not when there is corresponding uptake but at the point where it is activated by the learner for profit. Understanding alone is not responsible for performance (Ellis, 2006) Input may be understood but later forgotten and, as such, cannot be utilised in real-life situations. This demonstrates the necessity for input retention, which is derived from the understanding of the explanation offered by the teacher.

With this in mind, it becomes imperative to take cognizance of a teaching process which is based on the premise that, for explicit grammar learning to be profitable for both accuracy and fluency, according to researchers' consensus opinion, the learner must understand input, convert input to uptake and retain uptake. In other words, uptake is useless when it becomes slippery. Students under this kind of EFL situation are expected to get more 'production' time in the class to practically act out the substance of the theoretical structure just learnt.

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