Problem Solving In Teaching Grammar

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Abstrak

Artikel ini memberikan suatu alternatif untuk pengajaran tatabahasa, yaitu teknik problem solving. *Teknik ini dipilih dengan mempertimbangkan banyaknya persamaan yang dimiliki dengan proses penguasaan suatu bahasa. Disamping itu, teknik ini juga dianggap lebih menarik minat belajar mahasiswa. Pada bagian pertama tulisan ini, akan dipaparkan bagaimana peran tatabahasa dalam berbagai pendekatan. Selanjutnya, akan dibahas konsep* grammar-consiuosness raising *dan bagaimana teknik* problem solving *ini diaplikasikan di kelas.*

Grammar Over Decades: A Brief Overview

The position of grammar in a foreign language classroom has become a debate over years. Regardless of the fact that no one denies the necessity of grammar for effective language use, the debate has been basically dealing with the way of facilitating language learners with adequate grammatical knowledge. The debate has been over whether or not grammar should be taught explicitly in the classroom, and how it is to be taught.

In the early period, when a foreign language classroom was oriented to the teaching of Latin -based on which *'the grammar translation method'* was designed-, the teaching of a foreign language put heavy emphasis on the mastery

of grammatical rules as well as direct translation from the target to the native language and vice versa. However, this method had evidently failed to enable language learners to use the target language. This eventually led to the emergence of '*the direct method*', which took an opposite position to the Grammar Translation Method. The direct method, following the naturalistic principles of language learning, avoided translation and explicit teaching of grammar. It advocated the inductive teaching of grammar and the exclusive use of the target language.[1]

With the increase of attention to find out the most effective way of foreign language teaching, in the 1950's '*the audio-lingual approach*' was proposed. This approach was based on the combination of structural linguistic theory, contrastive analysis, aural-oral procedures, and behaviorist psychology[2]. To this approach language learning is perceived as behavior formation. Thus, with a view to facilitating language learners with the ability to use the language, a correct model' of the target language use should be provided for students to imitate and practice before eventually becoming a behavior which may come out spontaneously when they are exposed in a real communication situation. The teaching of grammar should again be taught inductively.

This belief, however, was later challenged by the fact that humans do not process language input in such a way. Humans are facilitated with capability of working out the system of a given language rather than just meaningless memorization. The cognitive capacity of human being allows him to work out the rules of the language in order to produce an accurate language form. It was for this reason that the cognitive approach-based methods became flourished in 1970's.

Both of the direct and the audio-lingual methods are basically aimed at improving the language teaching method offered by the grammar translation method. Nevertheless, they are still marked by the production of grammatically well formed sentences as the purpose, with paying less attention to the form, meaning and function relationship. Classroom activities are characterized by a great deal of form practice activities. Consequently, they are still regarded as having failed to facilitate learners with an ability to use the target language effectively.

Since the teaching of a new language should be oriented to real and effective communication, experts in the mid '70's shifted to what was called a '*communicative approach*' or '*Functional Approach*' to language teaching which focuses on the language function and use rather than form[3]. To this approach, the

most essential aim of language learning is being able to use the language communicatively and fluently. The focus on grammar is thus set slightly aside or is kept to a minimum adequate grammar only[4]. As a result, the fluency is acquired fairly quickly and the accuracy comes more slowly.

In the beginning of 1980, Krashen[5] took even more extreme position against grammar teaching. To him, an explicit grammar teaching is of no necessity provided there is adequate input which is easily understood by the learners. Language will be automatically acquired from interaction and communication rather than formal learning of the rules. Learning a language means interacting and communicating using the language, from which adequate comprehensible input can be provided.

However, recent second language acquisition studies have proved the importance of explicit knowledge of grammar rules. Citing the studies done by Higgs and Clifford, and Long,. Celce-Murcia[6] suggests that "adolescence and adult learners do not master the grammar of a second language merely through using or understanding the language". Therefore, conscious attention to a specific rule in learning a language is undeniably important.

How can then grammar be best taught? The current issues of grammar teaching are closely related to what is called '*Grammar Consciousness-Raising*'.

Grammar Consciousness-raising

Rutherford[7] defines Consciousness-Raising (C-R) as "the drawing of the learner's attention to features of the target language". It can be any techniques and activities which give learners a chance to focus on a particular system of the given language.

The concept of C-R reflects the nature of language learning, what in fact a language learner does when learning. Learning is only successful when things to be learned are meaningfully related to things that are known. In other words the process should be from familiar to unfamiliar.

Although facing a completely new language, a learner who has acquired a native language unconsciously knows how to acquire another language. The very basic strategies will be employed by a direct translation from meaning to form. A learner will only utter the words that are intended to say in expressing what s/he

means. This means that since the first stage, a learner has made a link between syntax and semantic as tight as possible.

With regard to processing the language input, Rutherford suggests that a language learner does not build up a language through 'accumulated entities', whereby a learner is supposed to have mastered one feature of a language before going on to another. Learning language is an 'organic process' rather than 'linear process', characterized not by well-formed target language-like structures, but by more 'idiosyncratic' form of learners' own unique language. Through a 'grammaticalization' process, in which learners may employ several hypothesis testings on the target language systems, this form becomes gradually closer to the target language structures.

Hence, unlike traditional grammar teaching, C-R pays attention to the process of learning rather than the product. It functions as a facilitator or a means rather than an end. It serves as an attention getter of the differences between what has been familiar from those unfamiliar. In the practice of grammar teaching, its role is to provide adequate data which are crucial for learners to test hypotheses and form generalizations, since it is in this way the natural language acquisition takes place.

Problem Solving In Teaching Grammar

As grammar teaching should be positioned as close as possible to natural language acquisition, problem solving activities can therefore be seen and considered the most appropriate, for "The language learning is (basically) a problem-solving process... by which children figure out the grammar of the language around them...". In a problem-solving activity, a learner is provided with some examples of certain language use to be analyzed, from which s/he may induce the general rule of a specific system. This is, indeed, in line with the natural mental process of learning, whereby several hypothesis testings might take place before eventually a learner discovers a generalization of the system. In addition, the use of problem solving activities can be highly motivating and extremely beneficial for the students' understanding of English grammar[8].

Dealing with the procedure of problem solving strategy, Bourke suggests that it "is a simple recursion comprising three moves: 1. Read the next frame. 2. Form a current hypothesis 3. Test, and if necessary revise, your current hypothesis"[9]. Say for instance, a learner is asked to distinguish between *a / an* and *the* in noun phrases. Instead of being told about the rules, a set of examples of the use of *a / an* and *the* is given. Learners, then, will be asked to identify the usage of the article and later infer the generalization. The generalization will be tested by the next other examples of the usage which may confirm, reject or revise the first learners generalization or hypothesis.

Here are some examples of problem solving activities:

1) In the following example learners are assumed to have had knowledge of the various ways of expressing the future. These exercises are aimed at getting them to see the differences of meaning and use.

How do you refer to future time?[10]

A. Study these examples:

1. Goodbye. I'll see you tomorrow
2. Look at those big black clouds: it's going to rain
3. We bought our tickets yesterday. We're leaving at 4 o'clock this afternoon.
4. Beth may come to stay with us next weekend.
5. The weather might be better if we wait until July.
6. Our boat leaves Southampton at 10 am next Monday and arrives in New York next Friday evening.

B. Now write the numbers of the examples above in the appropriate columns:

The speaker is sure:	**The speaker is not sure:**

2) In this example, the learners are required to rewrite the underlined sentences in order to form the effected object construction

   1. *The army finally located the crash in a remote area. (find)*
      (...finally found the location of...)
   2. *They immediately inspected the crash area. (make)*
   3. *They didn't permit anyone else to visit his area (give)*[11]

3) The following more contextualized task is an exercise for students to learn the use of passive voice

> **Examine the following text and see where you think it can be improved by using the passive. Give reasons for the changes you make.**[12]
>
> "If it is true that one can tell an area from its notice-boards, then one can easily find out if one would like to live there. Of course, one has to interpret the messages very carefully, and also consider them as a whole. This necessary in order to avoid the situation where a minor piece of exotica takes you in, although it isn't representative of the notice as a whole. Equally one should not totally ignore the unusual notice, since this may herald a new trend in the area. While it is true that one swallow doesn't make a summer, one should remember that a change has to start somewhere. Often this affects older districts which people have neglected and allowed to run down suddenly, because these are often quite cheap areas to live in, some young people move into them, and this starts the change in the districts".
>
> **Changes to be made:** **Reasons:**

4) Another very good way of leading learners to discover grammatical rules is by presenting students' real common errors. For example, when being involved in oral activities, students make the following mistakes:

   You must to agree with me

People is always complaining
I haven't seen him yesterday
I am not agree

The teacher writes down these examples and gets the students to identify the errors and to rewrite the correct version.

This can also be done using students' compositions. The teacher may choose the one containing some typical errors, then wipe out the name of the writer, underline the errors and get the students to decide why the underlined pieces are wrong and how to correct them.[13]

Concluding Remarks

This article has presented problem-solving activities in teaching grammar, on the grounds that this kind of activities is regarded as closer to the natural process of acquisition. It is also beneficial in that it encourages language learners to discover grammatical rules by themselves, and therefore is challenging and motivating. However, this technique does not always suit all levels and kinds of students. Moreover, provided the instruction for the tasks is not very clear and therefore confuses the learners as to what to do with the tasks, these kinds of activities create problems of ineffectiveness and waste time. These shortcomings, therefore, should also be taken into account.

Endnotes

1 Richards, Jack C. and Theodore S. Rodgers (1986): **Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching; A Description and Analysis**, Cambridge University Press. Larsen-Freeman, Diane (1986): **Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching**, Oxford University Press

2 Richards and Rodgers, *Ibid.*

3 Finocchiaro, Mary and Christhoper Brumfit (1983): **The Functional-Notional Approach; From Theory to Practice**, Oxford University Press.

[4] Wilkins, D.A. (1979): "Notional Syllabuses and the Concept of Minimum Adequate Grammar", in C.J. Brumfit K. Johnson, **The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching**, Oxford University press.

[5] Krashen, Stephen D. and Tracy D. Terrel (1983): **The Natural Approach : Language Acquisition in the Classroom**, the Alemany Press.

[6] Celce-Murcia, M. (1990): "What Role of Grammar after the Communicative Revolution?", in **Language Teaching Methodology for the Nineties**, R.E.L.C., Anthology Series 24, p. 205.

[7] Rutherford, William E (1987): **Second Language Grammar Learning and Teaching**, Longman, p. 184.

[8] Harmer, Jeremy (1987) **Teaching and Learning Grammar**, Longman

[9] Bourke, James M (1989): "The Grammar Gap", in **English Teaching Forum**, July edition. p. 21

[10] From Ways to Grammar , Cited by Harmer, 1987, *Op.Cit.*

[11] From Rutherford, 1987, *Op.Cit.*

[12] Adapted from Dickins, Rea M. Pauline, and Edward G Woods (1989): "Some Criteria for the Development of Communicative Grammar Tasks", in **TESOL Quarterly**, Vol. 22, No. 4 December

[13] From Harmer, 1987, *Op.Cit.*

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