

THE PLACE OF GRAMMAR IN LANGUAGE TEACHING: AN ATTEMPT TOWARDS A SYNTHESIS OF ITS TEACHING APPROACHES

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Abstract. The significance of teaching grammar to build students' communicative competence has been a controversial issue. However, recent understanding about the controversy has come to an agreement that the debate is not on whether grammatical competence is important but rather on how to teach grammar. Pertinent literature shows that there are three major approaches to grammar teaching: deductive, inductive, and consciousness raising. Each of these approaches has its own proper place in accordance with which part of grammar is used as the target of learning, how vital the grammar item is for comprehensible communication, and how much exposure is available to the students.

Keywords: grammar teaching, grammatical competence, consciousness raising

Along the history of second language teaching, the role of grammar has been an issue of controversy. According to Richards (2002), it has even been the most controversial. Thornburry (2001) asserts that in fact, no other issue has so preoccupied theorists and practitioners as the grammar debate. Roughly, the debate has brought about an extreme split of attitudes, namely, those who hold that grammar should receive a central attention in language teaching and those who hold that grammar should not be taught at all. The former is reflected in Grammar Translation Method and Cognitive Code Learning and the latter is applied in Natural Approach and deep end or strong version of Communicative Language Teaching. The other methods fall on somewhere in between.

However, as Richards (2002) says, in recent years grammar teaching has regained its rightful place in the language teaching. Similarly, Brown (2001) adds that today only a handful of language teaching experts advocate the zero option of no formed-focused instruction at all, as recommended by Krashen and Terrel (1983) in the discussion of the Natural Approach in language teaching. People have begun to realize that the debate has never really been about whether grammar competence is important but rather on how to teach grammar. In response to the controversial issue, this discussion is aimed at critically looking into different approaches to grammar teachings and attempting to synthesize them for more practical and more fruitful for the purpose of grammar teaching, particularly to the context of Indonesian EFL learning and teaching. First, the argu-

ments behind those who are for and those who are against grammar teaching are briefly reviewed. Then, the place of grammar in communicative competence construct and the distinction between the notion of learning and acquisition process are clarified. The different approaches to grammar teaching are also critically reviewed. Finally, from the result of the critical review, a step ahead is attempted through drawing a synthesis.

THE ARGUMENT BEHIND THE ADVOCATES OF FOR AND AGAINST GRAMMAR TEACHING

The advocates for grammar teaching as well as those against grammar teaching have their own arguments to support their own position. The first group has several arguments, two of which are sentence-making machine and advance-organizer argument, while the second group has also their arguments, two of which are the *knowledge-how* argument and *acquisition* argument (Thornburry, 2001).

The Argument behind the Advocates of for-Grammar Teaching

The argument supported by the for-grammar teaching position, as clarified by Thornburry (2001), is that grammar knowledge offers the learner the means for potentially unlimited linguistic creativity. Since grammar is a description of the regularities in language, knowledge of these regularities can function as a machine to generate a potentially enormous number of original sentences. Knowledge on language functions resulting from holophrase memorization and practice has limited use because to a great extent the students finally have to generate their own sentences to accomplish successful communication.

In addition to sentence-making machine argument, knowledge of grammar is also important because it can function as an ad-

vance organizer. Advance organizer plays a crucial role in the process of acquisition because the learners with grammar knowledge will consciously organize and notice the input exposed to them. This does not happen to the learners with no grammar knowledge. Items being more noticeable seem to stick and, otherwise, will be gone unnoticed. For this reason, they confirm that noticing is prerequisite for acquisition since it can make the exposed input stays better and accelerate the process of acquisition. Conscious grammar knowledge, according to this advocate, not only functions to monitor the speakers' own utterances, but also to notice the language input exposed to them.

The Argument behind the Advocates of against-Grammar Teaching

The against-grammar position argues that the goal of language learning is to develop the communication skills. As other skills, language skills should also be mastered through experiential learning or learning by doing, instead of cognitive learning. Much of the bad impression associated with this cognitive or intellectual approach to language learning—through the learning of copious grammar rules, for example—stems from the failure on the part of the learner to translate rules into skills. This will only lead to the students' knowledge about language but not their skill in the use of the language. This knowledge-how argument is in line with the argument of acquisition process.

Krashen (1985) introduced two distinct processes of language-rule accomplishment, conscious learning process and subconscious acquisition process. Based on Krashen's hypothesis, consciously-learned grammar can only function as monitoring, instead of productive ability. Productive ability like speaking can only be accomplished through natural exposure to comprehensible inputs. Monitoring overuse will only disturb the flow of production. Consequently, this gro-

up holds that formal and conscious study of grammar should be strongly rejected if the objective of learning the language is productive competence.

The Importance of Grammar along Different Language Teaching Methods

While Grammar Translation Method and Natural Approach fall on the end of opposite poles, some other methods are somewhere in between. Roughly, Figure 1 clearly indicates the relative importance of grammar or precisely the relative importance of explicit or conscious grammar teaching, in different methods as illustrated by Thornbury, (2001).

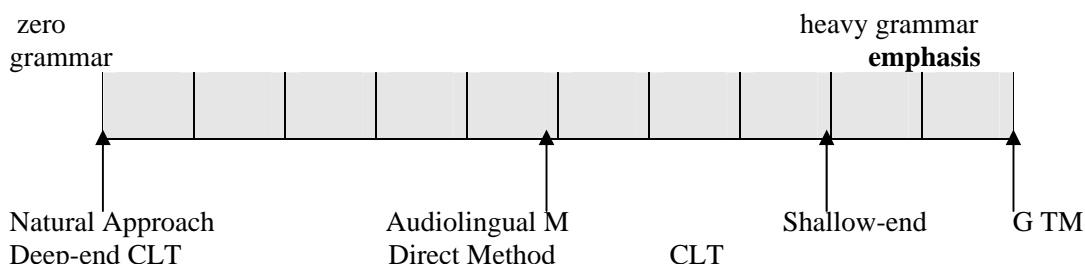


Figure 1: The Relative Importance of Grammar in Different Language Teaching Methods (Thornbury, 2001)

The figure describes the paradigm of the teaching of grammar from the totally implicit to explicit teaching (zero grammar), to conscious grammar teaching that exists in Grammar Translation Method (GTM). GTM used grammar as the starting point for instruction. The class under this method began with explicit grammar rules presentation, followed by practices involving translation into and out of the students' mother tongue. The syllabus used was structural syllabus.

In between the two poles, the Direct Method emerged to challenge the way Grammar Translation Method focused exclusively on written language. This method prioritized oral skills, and, although using structural syllabus, rejected explicit grammar teaching. Students were supposed to acquire grammar simply by being immersed in the language.

Similar to Direct Method, Audiolingual Method also believed in the primacy of speech or oral skills, and was even more strict in its rejection to explicit grammar teaching.

The students were supposed to acquire grammar through mechanical drills.

The syllabus followed by this method consisted of a graded list of sentence patterns, which was nothing more than structural syllabus.

Natural Approach and Deep-end Communicative Language Teaching, often called as Strong-version Communicative Language Teaching, strongly reject explicit grammar instruction. The proponents of the two approaches hold that grammar knowledge should be acquired subconsciously and naturally through direct exposure to language in use. The syllabus is not structural but more functional and task-based.

However, in later development, another version of Communicative Language Teaching Method, namely Shallow-end or Weak version, emerged because of the view that grammar was too important to ignore. This method did not reject grammar teaching out of hand and although functional syllabus was used in this method, grammar was, in fact, still the main component of the syllabus, even if it was dressed up in functional labels.

THE PLACE OF GRAMMAR AND ITS TEACHING APPROACHES

Since Audio Lingual Method was criticized as not credible to help second language learners develop their ability to communicate appropriately, some linguists and researchers began to develop a concept of communicative competence which was distinct from linguistic competence sought by Audio Lingual Method. For the first few years, in the minds of some researchers and practitioners, the notion of communicative competence became synonymous with a disregard for grammatical accuracy; and second language learners were considered communicatively competent if they got their meaning across to a listener, even if their grammatical accuracy was relatively low. It was very common, as Omaggio (1986) pointed out, to find the term “communicative competence” used to refer exclusively to knowledge or capability related to the rules of language use, and the term “grammatical (or linguistic) competence” used to refer to the rules of grammar.

In the classroom, as a consequence, the emphasis of teaching a second language began to shift away from the teachings of grammar. The emphasis was focused on the teaching of language functions and communicative activities. Even some supervisors forbid teachers to teach grammar.

However, there was more moderate trend among a group of researchers. They no longer saw communicative competence as distinct from grammatical competence, but incorporated grammatical competence as a part of communicative competence. Canale and Swain (1980), for example, defined communicative competence as consisted of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Furthermore, Wilkins (1976) tried to ensure that language teachings do not lose sight of the fact that linguistic forms provide a means to an end

and that end is communication. He argued further that our knowledge of grammatical systems of language provide us with a means to structure language learning in a more systematic way than language functions and notions. For the sake of systematic second language teaching, pragmatic aspects of communicative competence should be seen as complementary to grammatical competence, not as an alternative so that there is a balance between fluency, accuracy and appropriateness. In addition to that, grammatical competence can have potential contribution to improve the students’ productive skills as grammar constitutes a description of the regularities in language which can provide the learners with the means to generate a potentially enormous number of original sentences. Grammar is a kind of ‘sentence-making machine’. In addition, some researchers suggest that learners who receive no grammar instruction seem to be at risk of fossilizing sooner than those who do receive instruction (Thornbury, 2000).

Learning versus Acquisition

Krashen (1981) and Dulay et al. (1982) proposes a hypothesis distinguishing the conscious learning from subconscious acquisition process. Conscious learning is characterized by formal setting, focus on form and frequent error correction, while subconscious acquisition is characterized by natural setting, focus on message, and rare error correction. He claimed that only acquired grammatical knowledge can give contribution to productive ability. Learned knowledge only operates as monitoring agent and too much monitoring agent will only disturb the fluency which is very important in the process of communication. Since then, there have been controversies whether or not the knowledge accomplished through conscious learning can be internalized into acquired knowledge and, thus, is

necessary for building communicative competence.

Krashen's position is obvious that formal conscious instruction in grammar will not contribute to the development of acquired knowledge, required for productive purposes. However, some people, according to Richards (2002), argued that it does aid L2 acquisition, with the reason that formal grammar teaching has delayed rather than instant effect. They assume that productive ability can be accomplished through conscious learning followed by sufficient intensive practice.

The fact that no research has yet supported this assumption does not necessarily imply that the knowledge learned consciously can not be processed into acquired knowledge. He speculated that the problem might be on the amount and kind of practice used. Consequently, exploration on the kinds of practice for formal grammar teaching for productive purpose still opens for further researches. Otherwise, in a setting where English is as a foreign language, like in Indonesia, learning English will become mission impossible as the learners' chances to expose themselves to comprehensible input is not adequate to promote a natural acquisition process.

Deductive Approach to Grammar Teaching

Deductive approach to grammar teaching, which is often called rule-driven learning starts with presentation of rules and is followed with examples (Thornburry, 2001). This is the approach used in Grammar Translation Method where teaching begins with presentation of grammar rules and proceeds to practice of the rules involving the translation into and out of the students' first language. This method has long been abandoned since it has some marked weaknesses. First, it no longer serves the current purpose of language learning, namely oral

communication. It puts too heavy emphasis on written language and practically no oral language. Besides, it is also criticized as making the students too exhausted with meticulous and overwhelming grammatical terms and explanation (Omagio, 1986).

The long written translation exercise, the lengthy vocabulary lists, and the academic forms of language presented in the reading seem to be intended to give the students opportunities to internalize the structure rules just presented to receive and produce language. However, as Ellis in Richards (2002) reported, there has not been convincing empirical verification as well as theoretical validation that the acquisition of grammar structures involves the process of learning the rules and practicing them through gradual automatization of production. Therefore, deductive approach to grammar teaching receives less support than inductive approach. Even so, to a certain context deductive approach has an advantage of time-saving. Many grammatical rules can be more simply and quickly explained than elicited from examples (Thornburry, 2001).

Inductive Approach to Grammar Teaching

In contrast to deductive approach, inductive approach, which is labeled as discovery learning, starts with examples from which a rule is inferred (Thornburry, 2001). The procedure is similar to the process of children acquiring their mother tongue. First, learners are exposed to comprehensible language input and they will acquire the system of the rules subconsciously through peripheral attention to language forms. Automaticity will be accomplished naturally and effortlessly through the process of hypothesis testing cycles along the stages of interlanguage.

Brown (2001) says that in most context, inductive approach is more appropriate be-

cause of several reasons. First, it is more in keeping with natural language acquisition and conforms easily to the concept of inter-language development. Second, it allows learners to get a communicative “feel” for some aspects of language and builds more intrinsic motivation through discovery learning.

Even though inductive approach has several advantages, it is obvious that it will work well only in the setting where there is sufficient language input. In the context of English as a foreign language like in Indonesia, where English is not used outside the English class setting, providing sufficient comprehensible input constitutes a hard challenge. In addition, the classroom activities tend to focus mainly on meaning not on forms and will lead to task based activities where the learners’ focus is on the completion of task. This fluency orientation often costs the linguistic accuracy. Richards (2002) said:” What is often observed in language classroom during fluency work is communication marked by low level of linguistic accuracy”. The problem will certainly worsen when the task-based activities are done by learners of early level of interlanguage, where there is still high interference from their mother tongue.

Consciousness Raising

Consciousness raising (CR) seems to be the synthesis of deductive and inductive approach in that it incorporates both. Nunan (1991) says that CR rejects the split between conscious learning and subconscious acquisition and takes an organic rather than a linear view of learning. Learning process should be done through exposing the learners to language inputs and the learned grammatical items will, in turns, facilitate the process of acquiring the input exposed to the learners through the act of noticing. Though it is a kind of inductive deductive

process but basically it is inductive since it starts with exposing the learners to input.

Although CR contains deductive and inductive aspects, they differ in a certain respect. Different from inductive approach, CR involves a process of conscious learning, instead of only subconscious acquisition. On the other hand, CR is also different from deductive approach in that it does not use the conscious linguistic knowledge to build learners’ productive skill through repeated practice but to facilitate further acquisition process through the act of noticing the input. Rutherford in Richards (2002) says, ” CR is considered as potential facilitator for the acquisition of linguistic competence and has nothing directly to do with the use of that competence for the achievement of specific communicative objective, or with the achievement of fluency.” Furthermore, in CR grammar is not taught in isolation but embedded or situated in a broader discursal context.

The strength of this approach is that acquisition process can be facilitated by learning process, but the limitation is that CR still requires sufficient input for exposure so that in the context where providing sufficient exposure is a problem, as in the case of EFL in Indonesia, the application of CR is in some way problematic.

TOWARDS A SYNTHESIS OF THE APPROACHES

Since all the three approaches have their own strengths and limitations, the question on which approach to choose is hard to answer before considering some related aspects. Swan in Richards (2002) mentions that one of the good reasons to teach grammar is the reason of comprehensibility. He further clarifies that there are certain grammar items which are very essential to know in order that the learners can communicate types of meaning successfully. Without the knowledge of these grammar items, it is dif-

difficult to make comprehensible sentences. He also asserts the necessity to identify the items and says that the list will obviously include basic verb forms, interrogative and negative structures, modal auxiliaries, and the main tenses. He notes, however, that the list is debatable. These items are likely the ones which Thornburry (2001) says as more simply explained than elicited from examples.

From the above explanation, it is reasonable to infer that grammar item segment also determines which approach is appropriate. Some grammar items are more basic than the others and need incredibly high exposure to be subconsciously acquired. Unless inputs for exposure are highly sufficient these items are more efficiently and quickly learned deductively. Errors on these items will seriously impede the meaning. On the other hand, items which are less basic and have less disturbance on communication are more appropriately acquired subconsciously or acquired inductively. The grammar items some where in between might be more appropriately accomplished through consciousness raising.

To sum up, the synthesis then says that, in the context of EFL in general, the three approaches, inductive, deductive, and consciousness raising can have their own proper place in accordance with which part of grammar is used as the target of learning. The more basic the grammar items are the more explicit or deductive explanation is needed and vice versa.

On the basis of all this discussion, it is recommended that English teaching in Indonesia provide the learners with opportunities to accomplish grammatical competence through proportional combination of the three approaches. In the context which is similar to second language environment in which sufficient input is available, like in international or immersion schools or bilingual classes where English is treated as major means of communication or medium of

instruction, students can acquire grammar inductively through speaking and listening activities, and learn and acquire grammar rules in reading and writing activities through consciousness raising which, then, can be reinforced with deductive grammar teaching.

The opposite is the context where sufficient input is scarce like in most schools in Indonesia. The approach to the grammar teaching is reversed. Students

consciously learn basic grammar rules in separate structure class deductively, subconsciously acquire grammar rules in listening and speaking class inductively, and learn and acquire other grammar rules in Reading and Writing class through consciousness raising.

CONCLUSION

Following the controversy whether to teach or not to teach grammar, it has now better realized that the core issue is not on the importance of grammar knowledge but more on how to teach it. Concerning the latter issue, there are three approaches to how to teach grammar, i.e. deductive, inductive, and consciousness raising approach.

These three approaches have their own proper places, depending, to a great extent, on the sufficiency of input exposed to the learners and on how basic the grammar items are in the grammar system. The question is not which one to choose but how well the three approaches are combined.

Our homework then is to conduct further research to identify which approaches are appropriate for which grammar items. This is certainly bound to different contexts and situations. We, consequently, should have more confidence and courage to think in terms of Indonesian context and work hard to result in varieties of approaches, methods, and techniques appropriate to varieties of Indonesian classroom contexts.

For this purpose, exploration on the details and specificity of variables involved in the process of teaching and learning foreign languages in Indonesia should be identified and well taken into account in making a certain recommendation on what approaches, methods, or techniques to use. Even, perhaps, innovation on new approaches need to be made based on the specific context of Indonesia.

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