

PRACTICES OF TEACHING GRAMMAR

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ABSTRACT

The 21st century is known as the era of meaning-focused communicative approach to teaching of grammar. However, most language teachers are found to still follow transmission-based grammar-oriented approaches. It is known that the success or failure of teaching grammar effectively depends on teachers. Therefore, in spite of teaching of grammar being central to language teaching, it is problematic domain for language teachers. That is to say, what teachers do in regard to grammar instruction is an important issue that needs to be investigated. Therefore, through a classroom observation checklist, the present study investigated Nepalese primary-level English language teachers' practices of teaching grammar. The results revealed that teachers predominantly prefer the traditional focus-on-forms approach, which indicates that even if new way of teaching grammar have been emerged, the teachers are unable to shift their approach of teaching grammar.

Keywords: English language teaching; grammar teaching; teacher practices; primary level learners

Introduction

The teaching and learning of grammar in second language acquisition have been a topic of controversy. This becomes even more contentious when considering young learners. In recent research, three alternative methods have emerged as focal points for grammar teaching. – “focus-on-forms,” “focus-on meaning,” and “focus-on-form” (Long, 1991, pp.45-46). In focus-on-forms instruction, language is divided into isolated linguistic units and taught in a sequential manner through explicit explanations of grammar rules and immediate correction of errors (Long, 2000). Classes follow a typical sequence of “presentation of a grammatical structure, its practice in controlled exercises, and the provision of opportunities for production-PPP” (Ellis, Basturkmen&Loewen, 2002, p.420). The underlying reason behind using this approach is that the explicit knowledge about grammar rules will turn into implicit knowledge with enough practice (De Keyser, 1998). This approach, according to Thornbury (1999, p.29), is also called as “rule driven”

learning. This approach has been practiced in teaching of grammar from very ancient time by adopting “Grammar-translation” method.

Focus-on-meaning, on the other hand, which was introduced by Krashen and Terrell (1983) as Natural Approach to second language (L2) acquisition, completely refuses any direct instruction on grammar, explicit error correction, or even consciousness-raising, as L2 is claimed to be naturally acquired through adequate exposure to language or “comprehensible input” (Krashen, 1982, p.64; Krashen, 1985, p.2). According to this view, explicit knowledge about language and error correction is unnecessary and even harmful as it may interfere with the natural acquisition process in which learners would subconsciously analyse the forms and eventually deduce the rules from the language input themselves. Thus, this position claims that there is no interaction between explicit and implicit knowledge; therefore, conscious learning is different and cannot lead to language acquisition (Krashen, 1982; Larsen-Freeman, 2003). This view derives partly from the work of Noam Chomsky who argued that humans are “hard-wired” to learn language (cited in Thornbury, 1999).

However, both focus-on-forms and pure focus-on-meaning have been subject to serious criticism (Long, 1991; 2000). Focus-on-forms has been criticized for being teacher-centred, artificial, boring, and for not allowing meaningful communication and interaction, which are essential to language acquisition (Long, 2000). Focus-on meaning has also been called into question based on the empirical evidence that mere exposure to a flood of language input with no attention to grammar or error correction results in fossilization and poor L2 grammar in language production (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Skehan, 1996; Swain, 1985). Furthermore, it was suggested that some grammatical forms, especially those which are in contrast with the students’ first language, that are infrequent in input, and that are irregular cannot be acquired simply through exposure (Larsen-Freeman, 2003).

Because of these controversies, scholars attempted to merge form with meaning and introduced “focus-on-form” in the field. It refers to a need for meaning-focused activity into which an attention to form is embedded. According to Ellis (2001, pp.1-2), it refers to “any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic forms”. Having been informed by Schmidt’s (1990, 1993) Noticing and Consciousness-Raising Theory and Swain’s (1985) Output Hypothesis, this view proposes that some sort of noticing and consciousness-raising to target grammar structures in input, and feedback on errors during language use in meaningful communicative

activities would facilitate the acquisition of language (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2002; Long, 1991, 2000; Swain, 1998, 2005). Such noticing or consciousness-raising was stated to contribute to language acquisition in three ways: “learning will be faster, quantity produced will be greater, and contexts in which the rule can be applied will be extended” (Rutherford, 1987, p.26). Long (1991, pp. 45-46) says that focus-on-form “overtly draws students’ attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication”.

Various empirical studies have provided support for focus-on-form compared to other grammar teaching approaches. For example, Ellis (2002), based on meta-analysis of 11 different studies, demonstrated that focus-on-form contributed to faster language acquisition, higher levels of accurate oral or written language production, and longer retention of forms when compared to pure meaning-focused implicit learning.

This means to say that when “focus-on-form” is practiced in second language acquisition, learning is easy, fast and has long lasting effect. Therefore, recently, the benefits of focus-on-form over other approaches have been widely acknowledged (Spada&Lightbown, 2008), and the current discussions are diverted to finding the most effective means to implement this approach in classrooms (Doughty & Williams, 1998).

These series of development in the second language acquisition research, however, have not made their way into language policy and classroom pedagogy in most second language learning/teaching contexts in the world. For example, many large-scale national curriculum reforms around the world have targeted mainly one end – the meaning-focused communicative approach by encouraging implicit learning of grammar in many regions such as Europe (Nikolov& Curtain, 2000) and Asia-Pacific region (Nunan, 2003). However, because meaning-focused language teaching, which merely targets communicative competence, can lead to fossilization and weak grammatical competence, it was seen as inadequate for developing academic English skills, which are based on accurate and appropriate grammatical use (Peirce, 1989; Swain &Lapkin, 1995). As English has already become a global lingua-franca and the language of power in many contexts in the world, grammatical usage and accurate language use is especially necessary for EFL/ESL learners who need English for economic empowerment and upward mobility in many societies (Peirce, 1989; De Wet, 2002).

In the context of Nepal, English is taught and learnt as foreign language. In the past, English was taught explicitly focusing on forms of language; however policy of foreign language teaching has been shifted to communicative language teaching (CLT). In spite of adopting CLT in foreign language teaching policy, many teachers follow traditional way of explicit teaching. That is to say despite the government-initiated meaning-oriented reform movements, most language teachers have been faced with difficulties with communicative language teaching (CLT). Thus, they follow the familiar teacher-centered traditional grammar teaching methods in English language teaching due to various reasons, such as teachers' and students' low proficiency in English, time constraints, lack of materials, low student motivation, noise and classroom management problems, grammar-based examinations, clash of western and eastern cultural values, first language (L1) use during group work activities, limited resources and exposure to English, and lack of teacher training in CLT.

In this context, policy is to follow meaning focused communicative approach; however teachers practise "focus-on-forms" activities. Embedding forms and meaning is the current innovation in language teaching which the teachers are supposed to do in English language classroom. So, there is a big issue regarding which aspect of language (eg. forms, meaning or combination of both) to focus on teaching of grammar. Therefore, this study was attempted to investigate the practices of grammar teaching in Nepalese context especially of primary level teachers of government aided schools dealing with the research question "What are teachers' practices of teaching grammar?"

Methodology

Participants. This study involved a sample of 10 English teachers who taught at grade 4 and 5 in government aided schools located in the Bhaktapur District. Out of the total, 50% of the teachers were male while the remaining 50% were female. In terms of academic qualifications, 60% of the teachers had a B.Ed. degree, while the remaining 40% had completed I.Ed. or equivalent +2 with a major in English. All the teachers had a minimum of five years of teaching experience.

Procedures. The data were collected from 10 randomly selected government aided schools from Bhaktapur district mainly through a classroom observation checklist. For this purpose, three classes of each teacher were observed on grammar teaching. The descriptive frequency analysis of the prevalent teachers' practices was conducted.

Results

The practices of teaching grammar, in this study, have been analyzed in terms of activities adopted and approaches focused.

Activities related practices. Regarding the instructional activities employed by the teachers for teaching grammar, it was observed that despite the emergence of new meaning-focused communicative activities, teachers predominantly favored traditional forms-focused activities, specifically techniques of explicit grammar teaching. Out of the twelve different activities observed across a total of 30 classes, three activities, (e.g. explaining grammar structure, using teachers' own English and translating grammar structure into mother tongue) was 100%. Similarly, doing workbook or worksheet exercises on grammar and drills activities for structural activities had frequency of 66.67% and 60.00% respectively. The frequency of other activities were: giving quizzes and tests on grammar (16.67%), listening or viewing authentic language (16.67), doing project work activities (16.67%), performing conversations (33.33%), involving students in pair/group work (26.67%), assessing speaking (6.67%) and using songs or chants (23.33%). The following table presents the results very clearly.

Table 1: Teachers' practices in terms of activities adopted

| S.N. | Activities adopted by teachers | No. of occurrence | % |
|------|---|-------------------|--------|
| 1 | Doing workbook or worksheet exercises on grammar | 20 | 66.67 |
| 2 | Explaining grammatical rules | 30 | 100.00 |
| 3 | Giving quizzes and tests that focus on grammatical points | 05 | 16.67 |
| 4 | Drills activities for structural recognition | 18 | 60.00 |
| 5 | Listening or viewing to authentic language | 05 | 16.67 |
| 6 | Doing project work activities that require the use of English | 05 | 16.67 |
| 7 | Performing conversations or role plays | 10 | 33.33 |
| 8 | Using teachers' own English in class | 30 | 100.00 |
| 9 | Involving students in pair/group work | 08 | 26.67 |
| 10 | Assessing speaking | 02 | 06.67 |
| 11 | Translating grammar structures into mother tongue | 30 | 100.00 |
| 12 | Using songs or chants to practice grammar points | 07 | 23.33 |

Approaches related practices. It was also found that in 80% of observed classes (combining items 1 and 2 below), teachers followed a deductive approach by first explicitly and directly explaining the grammar rules, reflecting a focus-on-forms approach. Similarly, only in 13.33% of observed classes (item 3), they followed meaning focused communicative approach. And practice of focus-on-form (i.e. dealing with grammar forms in communication) was even rarer. That is to say, it was practised only in 6.67% classes of total observed classes. The following table presents details of results;

Table 2: Teachers' practices in terms of approaches focused

| S.N. | Approaches focused | No. | % |
|------|---|-----|-------|
| 1 | Explain the grammar structure; make students participate; and then practise by using the structure | 17 | 56.67 |
| 2 | Explain the grammar structure; and do drilling/exercises and repetition to practice the new structure | 07 | 23.33 |
| 3 | Do not explain any grammar rules, but do a lot of communicative activities for students to use and learn the phrases and grammar structures naturally | 04 | 13.33 |
| 4 | Do not explain any grammar rules; take attention of students to the target grammar structures while they are using the language in communicative activities | 02 | 6.67 |

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the grammar teaching practices employed in government-aided primary schools. The primary sources of information were 10 teachers and their observed classes, totaling 30 classes. Frequency analysis of the collected data revealed that teachers primarily relied on explicit grammar instruction, which involved explaining grammar rules or structures, assigning workbook and worksheet exercises, and translating English structures into the students' mother tongue. Occasionally, role play or conversations were used, but these were mainly focused on recognizing grammar structures rather than conveying complete meaning. Consequently, it can be inferred that Nepalese learners may not possess proficient skills in expressing complete meaning during conversations. Based on the findings, I recommend Nepalese English teachers to update their teaching practices, incorporating modern innovations such as the

focus-on-form approach, to foster a balanced development of grammar and meaning skills among learners in English language acquisition.

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