

EXAMINING THE ROLES OF GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

Despite its possibility to help students understand how language is properly arranged, grammar instruction has been widely debated in the field of language teaching in terms of the necessity to engage students in such instruction. The opponent of this practice claim that it is ideal for students to acquire grammar through language exposure, and grammar instruction does not guarantee better production as it is evident in the previous grammar based language teaching method. However, others still maintain the importance of grammar instruction due to language complexity, which cannot be understood through exposure only, and its possibility to accelerate language comprehension. This present article makes an attempt to examine this view in this current language teaching practice. With the aim to see if grammar instruction is still needed and effective in the real practice, five English teachers were interviewed to obtain their view on grammar instruction in language teaching. From the interview, it is found that (1) teachers still believe grammar instruction is still important, (2) grammar is taught deductively with frequent error correction and use of L1, (3) grammar instruction is still effective to improve students' language comprehension, and (4) grammar instruction needs to expose students to wide variety of structures with their language function. Therefore, it can be concluded that grammar instruction is still viewed important in today language practice but some improvement needs to be made

Keywords: Grammar, Grammar Instruction, Language Teaching

INTRODUCTION

Being one of the language components, grammar plays a vital role in language development regardless of the manner through which it is mastered, either by acquisition or by learning. The importance of this language component lies in its function to provide language users with a set of knowledge on how to arrange the available lexical element into a meaningful utterance. Therefore, without grammar, it is unlikely possible for language users to engage in meaningful interaction because the language production may be chaotic and unintelligible.

Due to the aforementioned roles of grammar, grammar is highly influential in leading language learners to comprehend and produce the language learned. Through the

knowledge of grammar, students can understand that they cannot randomly form the words as there are some rules to be followed. As suggested by Thornbury (1999), the study of grammar involve investigating the way how forms are arranged and patterned. Through such involvement, students will know that the correct lexical composition is 'he sent me a letter last week' instead of random arrangements such as 'week last a letter sent he me'. In order words, it will inform students that to express themselves effectively, they need to arrange the words in such a way otherwise they will not be understood due to their chaotic language production.

In the practice of language teaching, grammar has been widely prized and criticized. Some stresses its importance on

students' language development; others have contrary point of view. The importance of grammar instruction in language teaching is stressed by Weaver (1996). He asserts that the study of grammar is important due to the fact that language is supreme human achievement that deserves to be studied as such. This notion implies that language should be learned through the underlying principles of language themselves. Therefore, as the heart of language, grammar which makes language possible is essential part in studying language. Moreover, the study of grammar, according to Weaver, will help learners master the acceptable language convention. Through learning grammar, they will be exposed to the type of language used in standardized context. Therefore, students with good grammatical knowledge will be more readily to engage in language interaction with any forms and contexts. Finally, he also proposes that the study of grammar will help students score better on language test. The test of grammar is highly common in any language test, and the score of grammar will be included in their overall score. Accordingly, students who has more experience in grammar instruction have higher possibility to score higher than those who do not.

The importance of grammar instruction is realized in proposed language teaching theoretical framework and method. In fact, in the beginning of language teaching practice, grammar receives a considerable amount of attention as underpinning theories of language teaching approach. Hinkel & Fotos (2002) claim that the practice of analyzing and memorizing grammar in written form was widely applied in second language instruction for more than twenty centuries. In other words, language learners spend a substantial amount of time training with grammatical rules.

Due to the heavy influence of grammar, the early language teaching methods mostly concerned on leading students to understand grammar. The earliest grammar translation method which was widely used in

19th century focus solely on instructing students to investigate and memorize grammatical rules and structure. Similarly, Audi Lingual Method was also underpinned by grammar framework. Students were taught structural and phonological aspects of target language, arranged from the simple into the complex ones (Nassaji & Fotos:2011). Other grammar-based language teaching methods are Reading approach, Oral and Situational Method, Silent Way, and Total Physical Response.

Contrary to the previous trend in language teaching, the necessity of grammar instruction faces many criticisms in the current development of language teaching. Many applied linguists and practitioners begin to question the importance of grammar in language teaching. The growing trend of opposing grammar instruction stems from the fact that students who have been exposing to deal with grammatical rule for significant amount of time fail to use language when they are expected to. It implies that prolonged exposure to target language grammar does not guarantee better language production. Smith in Nassaji and Fotos (2011) mentions that it is possible for students to acquire linguistic rules through exposure to the target language. It can be inferred that they will indirectly learn and comprehend target language grammar through their experience with the learned language.

Although students' failure in language production regardless of their grammar training is evident, some theoreticians suggest that grammar instruction should not entirely be abandoned in language teaching field. In other words, many still view that students still need to be taught about grammar. Nassaji and Fotos (2011) argue that language teaching needs to incorporate grammar instruction since a certain number of grammatical point cannot be absorbed and obtained solely through exposure. Language consists of many syntactic patterns that students cannot grasp through their language experience; direct instruction is still needed. Moreover, Larsen-Freeman

(1997) suggest that although grammar can be acquired in natural context, it does not necessarily mean teaching it is unimportant. As a matter of fact, grammar instruction can speed up such acquisition.

Inspired from this problematic issues, the writer is interested in seeing how the position of grammar is currently viewed in language teaching practice related to its importance.

METHOD

This research attempts to investigate how grammar is currently viewed in language teaching practice. To do this, the writer conducted document analysis research. Documents used as the source of data are five research journals on the related topic of grammar instruction and language teaching practice. The research on this journal was conducted in various context of ESL and EFL teaching ranging from 2006 to 2017. Due to such various context, the data obtained will likely describe the practice of grammar instruction in large context not only in the certain part of the world. In addition, seen from its recent publication, the data obtained illustrate the current practice of grammar instruction in language teaching. The data were collected from the findings section of the five published journal on grammar instruction and language teaching. To analyze the data in order to obtain the current empirical information on how grammar instruction is viewed, those findings were synthesized and their common theme were identified to see whether grammar instruction is still relevant today.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis done over the five documents, the researcher identified five common themes related how grammar instruction is viewed in the current practice of language teaching. They are teachers' perspective on the importance of grammar, their reasons behind this perspective, the practice of teaching grammar, the result of

grammar instruction on students' achievement, and the ideal grammar instruction in today language teaching field.

The first issued explored is teachers' perspective on the importance of grammar instruction. It deals with how teachers' view grammar instruction in language classroom in terms of whether students should be involved in grammar instruction or not. As the authority in language classroom, teachers' perspective on the importance part of grammar is very important since it dictates if grammar should be taught or not in their language classroom. The results of the analysis over the five studied journals reveal that teachers' perspective on grammar instruction is varied with the higher tendency to show their favor toward grammar instruction. Among four teachers participated in Nazari and Allahyar (2012), three of them shared the similar ideas that grammar instruction is important in language teaching. However, one of them shows the opposing view toward grammar instruction stating that language teaching should involve students in conversational activities and language use not grammar.

Similarly, the tendency to stress the importance of grammar instruction is also exhibited by other language teachers participated in the research of other journals. It is found in Underwood (2017) that all four teachers studied in this research show the favorable view on the importance of grammar instruction. All of them agree that grammar is still needed to be taught. In fact, two of the teachers spend a significant amount of time on drilling their students about grammar. The inclination on the importance of grammar instruction is also shared by the language teachers in Benjamin (2006). In brief, teachers in the current language teaching practice generally believe that grammar instruction is still relevant to be employed in language classroom.

In addition to this perspective, teachers' personal views underlying it are also identified. It is done to get the ideas why teachers think grammar is important in

language classroom. Since only one teacher show the ideas against grammar instruction, her view will be analyzed first. One of the teachers in Nazari and Allahyar (2012) mention that grammar instruction is unnecessary in language classroom. She believe that grammar is a block to communication that would distract students from fluency as the main goal. She furtherly elaborates that grammar do not guarantee better communication because there is a gap between what is applied in real talk and what is dictated in language rule.

As for the underlying ideas on the importance of grammar instruction, three patterns emerge. Some teachers in Benjamin (2006), Nazari and Allahyar (2012), and Underwood (2017) stresses the importance of language accuracy. They assert that students' language production whether spoken or written should be systematic and free from error which might make their production sound ignorant especially in the context of advanced language learners. In addition to language accuracy, another reason on the importance of grammar instruction is related to test purpose. One teacher in Nazari and Allahyar (2012) mentions that grammar is a set of principles provides one of the means by which teachers can evaluate students. It implies that one of the ways teachers do to assess their students language achievement. It is also revealed in Nazari and Allahyar (2012) that grammar is taught partly to help students pass the university entrance test. Finally, the important of teaching grammar lies language learning itself. Some language teachers vin Benjamin (2006) mention that some language learners may have enthusiasm in learning and exploring language. Therefore, language instruction should meet this need by involving students to explore grammar as the heart of the language.

Apart from obtaining teachers' perspective and its underlying opinion, it is also important to see how grammar instruction is conducted in today language teaching

practice. Interestingly, the data on the practice of grammar instruction were obtained from the research conducted in Asian and Western context. Interestingly, in Asian context, the practice of grammar instruction is characterized by deductive approach, frequent error correction, use L1 and small extent of attention to language and pragmatic function of the grammatical point taught Nazari and Allahyar (2012) and Underwood (2017). Contrary to the teachers' statement in the interview on their preference on leading students to find the rules on their own, the result of observation reveal that teacher explain about the grammar terminology explicitly and give explanation about its form, use, and function. Another common trend is teachers' tendency to correct students' grammatical error due to their emphasis on accuracy. Despite its potential to make students speak more accurately, frequent error correction may discourage students in learning as teachers' keep interfering with their language production. Use of L1 is mostly for the purpose of clarifying or reinforcing students' understanding on the grammatical features explained. Some translation practice and L1 grammar equivalent are also found by Nazari and Allahyar (2012) and Underwood (2017). Adjusting to the current view of the neccessity to teach students language function rather than simply acceptable sentence arrangement, those teachers begin to give their attention to expose students how grammar is used for communicative purpose although in most of the case language form is still more dominant.

The research from Benjamin (2006) in western context reveal more flexible of the practice of teaching grammar with minimum tendency on error correction drilling students. The teachers assert that grammar instruction should aim at students flexibility on using the language. Rather than correcting students' error, teachers instruct students to do error analysis on their own and discover grammatical rules by themselves. When they

are successful in self discovery of grammatical rules, their accuracy will improve. Such practice is possible because it is probably due to the fact the language context where students have richer exposure to the target language in natural context than those in their Asian counterpart.

The next findings obtained from document data analysis is related to the result of grammar instruction on students language achievement. It is done for the purpose of seeing grammar instruction is effective in improving students' language comprehension instead of only language exposure. It is found in the study of Subramaniam and Khan (2013) that grammar instruction is effective in developing students' use of target language. In this case, grammar instruction conducted in contrastive grammar teaching framework do not only improve students' understanding on the linguistic form but also improve their understanding on their function of the grammar items. Similarly, study from Underwood (2017) suggests that grammar instruction is proven effective in students' language comprehension as it can be seen from their test result.

Finally, the last consideration on grammar instruction seen is related to the its ideal practice in this current language teaching today. To this aim, an analysis from Larsen-Freeman (2015), one of the leading applied linguists on the field of language teaching, is given. She illustrate how current research has contributed to the grammar instruction. Research and practice on non interface position should be minimized and be improved for form-focused instruction as their contribution to language teaching ranges from not significant to moderately significant. The former term refers to the notion and practice that students will acquire grammar through exposure, so grammar instruction is not necessary and should be abandoned. The latter term of form focused instruction refers to the notion and practice in grammar instruction that their attention should be drawn to grammatical forms as they arise when they are

communicating. She suggests that grammar instruction should be reconceived in order to be more effective. Understanding on grammar should not only limited to the traditional definition of right or wrong language production but rather of their pragmatic function. Students need to be exposed to a large number of possible choices of structure use so that they understand the consequences of their choice. She further maintains that grammar is dynamic, so new structural invention is added to the old ones to express the same meanings. Therefore, students' need to know about this.

CONCLUSION

From the research findings on the document analysis, it can be concluded that:

1. Teachers still believe that grammar is still important to be taught in today language classroom for the purpose of language accuracy, satisfying students' linguistic curiosity, and language test score.
2. In the context foreign language teaching where the natural input is scarce, grammar is mostly taught through deductive approach with provision of grammar correction and use of L1 to give more understanding about the grammatical features taught.
3. In the context of second language teaching where natural input is available, grammar instruction is conducted to facilitate students' to discover the rules and do self correction.
4. Grammar instruction is proven to be still effective to improve students' comprehension on language form, use, and function and to increase their achieving score in language test.
5. Due to the dynamic nature of grammar, students need to be exposed to wide range of grammatical structure possibility to express similar ideas rather than just expecting them to acquire it through language exposure and just involving them solely on language form.

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