Task-Based Approach to Grammar Teaching

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Abstract

This essay is devoted to a review of Fotos and Ellis' (1991) article about using task-based approach in teaching grammar. The choice of the article is based on the fact that it provides a good start for a discussion of the implementation of task-based approach to grammar teaching. First, a summary of the main points in the article is presented. The second part provides a discussion focusing on how the issue of teaching grammar communicatively has been tackled by other researchers. The last part is an attempt to draw some implications of task-based approach in teaching grammar for the Moroccan context.

Key words: Fotos and Ellis; task-based approach; grammar teaching

INTRODUCTION

The article by Fotos and Ellis (1991) reports the results of an exploratory study on the use of a communicative grammar-based task with EFL college students. The authors begin by stating the problem; there is in the field of language learning a controversy about whether grammar should be taught or not. Hence, there are two main viewpoints concerning this issue. Some researchers (e.g. Krashen, 1985) advocate that grammar teaching is not important since it has a limited effect on the development of linguistic competence. Other researchers (e.g. White, 1987); on the other hand, advocate that teaching grammar is necessary because formal instruction is essential for acquisition. In spite of this disagreement, there is a general agreement that foreign language learners need opportunities to communicate, which enables them to obtain comprehensible input and to be in conditions needed for developing strategic competence. Hence, the purpose of the article is to provide evidence for the claim that it is possible to integrate the teaching of grammar with providing opportunities to communicate.

After this introduction, the authors provide a section for the role of formal instruction in second language acquisition. In this perspective, Bailystock (1981) advocates that learners formulate two types of knowledge; explicit and implicit. The former is analyzed as well as abstract, and learners have it as conscious representation. The latter, on the other hand, is intuitive and procedural, but not consciously available to learners. The authors' position is based on conclusions drawn from studies investigating the effect of formal instruction on the acquisition of grammatical knowledge. These conclusions can be summarized in to the following:

a) Formal instruction promotes second language acquisition.
b) There are psycholinguistic constraints governing whether teaching learners specific grammatical rules results in implicit knowledge.
c) Practice is not sufficient to overcome these constraints.
d) Formal instruction directed to relatively simple grammatical rules may be successful in developing implicit knowledge.
e) Formal instruction is effective in developing explicit knowledge of grammatical features.

f) Formal instruction promotes acquisition when it is linked to opportunities of natural interaction.

Based on the conclusions from other research (e.g. Ellis, 1990), the role of explicit knowledge in L2 acquisition can be summarized in two ways:

a) When learners know about a grammatical feature, they are likely to notice it in input and acquire it as implicit knowledge.

b) Explicit knowledge has a monitoring role in communication and consequently accelerates the process of acquiring implicit knowledge.

The authors draw a number of implications for formal instruction based on the aforementioned conclusions. First, the role of formal instruction should be directed to explicit knowledge. Second, formal instruction should be directed at insuring that learners know about a target structure and can monitor it, but not for using it in free communication. This seems to mean that grammar teaching should have as a purpose consciousness raising and not practice. Hence, the approach advocated by the authors emphasizes the role of cognitive understanding, which may be achieved through problem solving tasks. The third implication is that formal instruction has to be accompanied by authentic communication.

After discussing formal instruction, the authors provide a section to communicative language teaching and second language acquisition. Since the main purpose of communicative language teaching is to provide learners with opportunities for interaction, the question to be asked is how does this help acquisition? It is the comprehensible input resulting from negotiating and conveying meaning which facilitates acquisition. In this perspective, Long (1985) emphasizes the importance of interactional adjustment (comprehension checks and clarification requests) in two-way communication. Swain's (1985) hypothesis of pushed output complements Long's interactional claim, in that it focuses on learners' need to produce precise, coherent and situationally appropriate output.

The type of interaction needed for acquisition can be promoted by a task-based approach to language pedagogy. Studies done on pair/group work, which is a characteristic of a task-based approach, demonstrate that learners interact more, negotiate meaning and use longer sentences in this mode of work than in teacher-fronted lessons. In order to link both formal instruction and communicative language teaching, a grammar task can be used to promote communication about grammar. The aim of grammar tasks is to raise learners' consciousness about grammatical properties of L2. These tasks incorporate the information gap technique and they are close in that there is only one solution to each problem.

The study reported in this article is based on a task which used four task cards and a task sheet. The task requires learners to exchange information on their task cards in order to complete the chart on the task sheet, to discuss the information, agree on the result and report to the others by the rules they have agreed on.

a) The study aims at investigating two research questions:

Is the study of specific grammatical features through a grammar task as effective as the study of the same feature through the traditional teacher fronted grammar lessons?

b) Is the grammar consciousness raising task used as interactive as the information gap task?

The subjects included in this study were of two groups of Japanese EFL college students; one majoring in English whereas the other was not. They were divided into three groups. The first group performed the grammar task; the second was taught through teacher fronted lessons and the third group (control group) worked on a reading assignment during the treatment. The sessions of the first two groups were audio-taped. All subjects took a pre- and a post test. Concerning the grammar task group, they were divided into groups and pairs to investigate which mode of work would produce more interaction.

The results obtained demonstrate that the grammar task functioned as the lesson in the short term and was slightly less effective in maintaining proficiency than the grammar lesson after two weeks. This finding was only for the learners majoring in English. As for the non-English major subjects, the grammar lesson group showed maintenance of proficiency gains after two weeks whereas the task treatment group did not. This difference can be explained by the fact that the second groups were not familiar with pair/group work and they did not understand the instruction clearly as indicated by the content and questions of their recording. Concerning negotiation of meaning, the groups of the non-English major produced more negotiations than the pairs, whereas the pairs of the English major produced many more negotiations. This is due to the fact that they possess explicit linguistic knowledge of the grammar rules.

The findings of the study can be summarized as follows:

a) College EFL learners were able to increase their knowledge of a difficult grammar rule by completing a grammar task.

b) The interaction resulting from the grammar task performance was characterized by similar quality of conversational negotiations to those occurring in two-way information gap tasks. Examples of these are:

i. Repetition of the sentence or part of it.

ii. Explanation of an unfamiliar word in a sentence.

iii. Confirmation of their guesses that the sentence was either correct or incorrect.

c) Subjects had the opportunity to learn about grammar while participating in a communication based on information exchange.

The authors conclude the article by mentioning that although grammar tasks produce negotiations which are

rather mechanical, these tasks appear to be an effective type of classroom activity. They provide serious content not a trivial one as it is often the case with information gap activities. In addition, these tasks encourage discovery learning. However, this type of task may not suit all learners; some may refuse to talk about grammar and others may use the mother tongue during interactions. Concerning students' level, grammar tasks are suitable only to advance learners studying grammar as a subject matter. Nevertheless, research is still needed in order to have a clear idea about the effectiveness of the grammar-based approach.

1. DISCUSSION

There are two main points discussed in this article; the first one is the importance of consciousness-raising in the acquisition of linguistic features and the second is the effectiveness of grammar tasks in promoting acquisition. Concerning consciousness-raising, Schmidt (1991, p.129) advocates that "conscious understanding of the target language system is necessary if learners are to produce correct forms and use them appropriately. Errors are the result of not knowing the rules of the target language, forgetting them or not paying attention to them". Accordingly, consciousness refers to awareness, intention and knowledge. He argues that subliminal learning is impossible and that input is translated into intake when learners notice some features consciously.

In the same perspective, Fotos (1993, p.386) defines consciousness raising as "increased learners' awareness of particular linguistic features". This awareness is achieved through formal instruction, which leads to an explicit representation of what learners are taught. One way of achieving this consciousness raising is through the use of grammar tasks with a grammar problem to be solved interactively. In this way, there is an integration of grammar instruction with the provision of opportunities to communicate and use the target language.

What is at issue, then, is whether the use of grammar tasks is as effective as teacher-fronted grammar lessons, and whether they produce interactions in the same way information-gap tasks do. Concerning the first question, Fotos (1993) conducted a study in order to investigate the effectiveness of grammar tasks in comparison with teacher-fronted lessons on the amount of learners' noticing of specific features. The findings of this study demonstrate that both types of tasks are effective in promoting significant levels of noticing the target structure in subsequent input. Concerning the comparison, the grammar consciousness-raising task is nearly as effective as formal instruction in the promotion of noticing.

Concerning the effectiveness of grammar tasks in promoting interaction, Fotos and Ellis, in the article being reviewed, have provided evidence that communicating about grammar can elicit interaction based on meaning negotiation in the same way information gap tasks do. Ellis (1995, p.87) argues for the use of what he calls "interpreting tasks for grammar teaching" in order to achieve a higher level of grammatical competence. He states that there is a need to supplement "activities designed to focus learners' attention on message conveyance with activities that also require a focus on form". He further argues that the traditional approach to grammar teaching, which provides learners with opportunities to produce sentences containing the target structure, is inefficient in that this way of teaching grammar does not alter the sequence of acquisition which is clear in second language acquisition research. Another limitation of this approach is that pushing learners to produce grammatical structures they find difficult and then correcting their mistakes may increase their anxiety and result in a psycho-affective block to learning anything. Interpretation tasks, on the other hand, aim at grammar comprehension, enhance noticing and enable learners to carry out the kind of cognitive comparison that has been hypothesized to be important for interlanguage development.

2. IMPLICATIONS FOR TEFL IN MOROCCO

I think that the issue of grammar teaching is controversial especially in the search of the "best" way of to promote the learning of linguistic features. The article by Fotos and Ellis and the related research have been very insightful. First, I think the idea of making students communicate about grammar is an appealing one. This should not be understood as suggesting that it can be a substitute for other communicative activities, but grammar tasks can be used from time to time. The idea of noticing, which refers to drawing students' attention explicitly to the target feature and which is related to consciousness raising, is also very important in promoting learning because it leads paying attention to specific features in subsequent input.

Grammar tasks present a number of advantages. They can be related to the notion of "depth of processing" advocated by Craik and Lockhart (1972), who argue that acquisition results from task demands. This means that awareness leads to deep processing and the latter leads to acquisition. Grammar tasks encourage inductive learning because students are asked to deduce the rules governing the use of a linguistic structure at the end of the task. Another advantage of task-based approach to grammar is the fact that problem-solving becomes for the learners a strategy to be used with other features of the target language. When performing the grammar tasks, students' attention is attracted to other features of grammar (word order, function of other words...). The problem of mixed abilities can be solved in grammar tasks in that low-ability students see that they are discussing the content in the same way as more proficient students, and they can feel

their progress. If the task is conducted appropriately, more proficient students in the pair or the group can endorse the role of the teacher.

In the Moroccan context, especially in high school, this approach can be applied gradually, especially with second-year baccalaureate students. The teacher can start using the gramma-based approach with some easy rules like the contrast between simple present and present progressive. This can be used as a way to familiarize the students with this type of activity. Then, more complex rules can be introduced gradually.

Given that the students at this level lack the metalinguistic knowledge and language to discuss grammatical rules, the teacher can monitor the task moving from one group to another and provides the needed terminology as appropriate. Gradually, students can master this terminology and feel more relaxed to use it during the task. In this type of activities, there the risk that the students could use their mother tongue instead of English to discuss the grammatical rules under study. The teacher can reduce this risk by moving around and making sure that the students are using English. The grammar activities can be made amusing if the teacher makes them as a kind of competition between the groups by rewarding the first group to provide the rules.

Since most students in Moroccan high schools stop having formal instruction about English after the Baccalaureate, the grammar-based approach is a good way of providing students who want to know more about English with a strategy to deal with linguistic features. This approach is also a good way of training students who will major in English at the university by giving them the opportunity to discuss grammatical features and to deduce the rules, a process which will be used at the university.

In spite of its feasibility, there are some constraints to the use of this approach in Moroccan high schools. The first constraint is that of time because presenting a grammatical feature in a teacher-fronted way is less time consuming than group-work activities. Another constraint is that of large classes which cannot be divided into small groups. The last limitation of the grammar based approach is the reluctance of students to take part in these activities either because of their unfamiliarity with these tasks or because of the fact that grammar is not appealing as a subject of discussion. Nevertheless, I think that grammar-based approach is worth trying in our classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This essay consisted of a review of "communicating about grammar: a task-based approach" by Fotos and Ellis (1991). A summary of the article was provided focusing on its main points especially the issue of grammar teaching, the difference between implicit and explicit knowledge and the use of communicative language teaching in grammar. The review also focused on the study reported in the article investigating the effect of using task-based approach in teaching grammar. This was followed by a discussion of the use of communicative activities to teach grammar. The essay ends with an attempt to draw some implications of teaching grammar communicatively for TEFL in Morocco.

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