INTEGRATING GRAMMAR INTO TASK BASED LEARNING

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Abstract

Though grammatical competence is included as one important component of communicative competence, it is likely to be ignored in communicative teaching. It is implicitly taught in other skill such as speaking and reading. Grammar needs to be "packed" in different way that facilitates communicative situation. Therefore, grammar is not considered as the boring subject anymore. An alternative solution of this typical problem is integrating grammar explicitly using task based learning. Tasks based leaning can present grammar as the central topic in class. In these task, the process of learning is a process of obtaining information, dealing with information, analyzing problems and solving problems. The purpose of language learning is not just learning grammar knowledge, but the practical use of grammar knowledge. This paper attempts to explore the rational of teaching grammar through tasks, principles and classroom characteristics. It also provides lesson plan that is designed to bridge the gap between structural topic and meaningful activities.

Key words*: grammar, task based learning, communicative approach*

A. Introduction

Teachers have been using tasks for hundreds of years. Frequently, in the past, the task was a piece of translation often from a literary source. More recently, tasks have included projects for producing posters, brochures, pamphlets, oral presentations, radio plays, videos, websites and dramatic performances. The characteristic of all these tasks is that rather than concentrating on one particular structure, function or vocabulary group, these tasks exploit a wider range of language. In many cases, students may also be using a range of different communicative language skills.

The traditional way that teachers have used tasks is as a follow-up to a series of structure/function or vocabulary based lessons. Tasks have been 'extension' activities as part of a graded and structured course.

In task-based learning, the tasks are central to the learning activity. It is based on the belief that students may learn more effectively when their minds are focused on the task, rather than on the language they are using.

In task-based approaches, the focus of classroom activities is on the task, and ultimately on meaning. In Jane Willis' flexible model for task-based learning, learners begin by carrying out a communicative task, without specific focus on form. After they have done the task, they report and discuss how they accomplished this, perhaps listening to a fluent speaker doing the same task. Only at the end is there a specific focus on features of language form.

The advantage of the task-based approach, according to its advocates, is that during the task the learners are allowed to use whatever language they want, freeing them to focus entirely on the meaning of their message. This makes it closer to a real-life communicative situation.

One danger of task-based approaches is that focus on meaning could come at the expense of focus on form. Learners become quite fluent, but their utterances are not often accurate. In addition, they develop strategies to complete the tasks quite quickly, cutting corners in their language use and form. For this reason, language structure is important to be integrated into tasks based learning. Therefore, the learners can do the task focusing on structure in context. This paper presents how grammar can be taught using communicative task.

B. Task Based Learning

1. The Rationale of Task- Based Learning

The underlying philosophy of task-based learning will be analyzed in this section:

a. Theory of Language

Several assumptions about the nature of language can be said to underlie current approaches to task-based learning. The first assumption is that language is primarily a means of making meaning. Thus,task-based learning emphasizes the central role of meaning in language use. Skehan notes that in task-based learning, meaning is primary , the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome and that task-based learning is not concerned with language display" (Skehan 1998:98).

Besides, multiple models of language inform task-based learning: Advocates of task-based learning draw on structural, functional, and interactional models of language. This seems to be a matter of convenience. Therefore, task-based learning is not linked to a single model of language but rather draws on all three models of language theory.

The other assumption is that lexical units are central in language use and language learning: Vocabulary is here used to include the consideration of lexical phrases, sentence stems, prefabricated routines and collocations, and not only words as significant units of lexical analysis and language pedagogy. Many task-based proposals incorporate this perspective.

TBL advocates believes that conversation is the central focus of language and the keystone of language acquisition. Speaking and trying to communicate with others is considered the basis for second language acquisition in task-based learning; hence, the majority of tasks that are proposed within TBL involve consideration.

b. Theory of Learning

Task-based learning shares the general assumptions about the nature of language learning underlying Communicative Language Teaching. Some learning principles play a central role in task-based learning. Tasks provide both the input and the output processing necessary for language acquisition: Drawing on Second Language Acquisition research on negotiation and interaction, TBL proposes that the task is the pivot point for stimulation of input-output practice, negotiation of meaning, and transactionally focused conversation.

Task activity and achievement are motivational: Tasks are also said to improve learner motivation and therefore promote learning. This is because they require the learners to use authentic language, they have well-defined dimensions and closure, they typically include

physical activity, they involve partnership and collaboration, they may call on the learner's past experience, and they tolerate and encourage a variety of communication.

Learning difficulty can be negotiated and fine-tuned for particular pedagogical purposes: Specific tasks can be designed to facilitate the use and learning of particular aspects of language as they provide a vehicle for the presentation of appropriate target language samples. They can also be used "channel" learners toward particular aspects of language.

2. Components of Task-Based Learning Framework

Based on Willis (1998: 138) the basic procedures of the three phases in task-based learning are :

Pre-task
Introduction to topic and task: Teacher explores the topic with the class, highlights useful words and phrases, helps students understand task instructions and prepare.

Task Cycle
  Task: Students do the task, in pairs or small groups. Teacher monitors from a distance.

  Planning: Students prepare to report to the whole class(orally or in writing) how they did the task, what they decided or discovered.

  Report: Some groups present their reports to the class, or exchange written reports and compare results.

Language Focus
Analysis: Students examine and discuss specific features of the text or transcript of the recording.

Practice: Teacher conducts practice or new words, phrases and patterns occurring in the data, either during or after the analysis (Willis 1996: 38).

3. Six Types of Task

The classification will help to generate a variety of tasks on whatever topic is selected. Simple tasks may consist of one type only, such as listing; more complex tasks may incorporate two or more types, such as, listing then comparing lists. Problem solving may include listing, comparing and ranking. Six types of task, which will be outlined, are also classified as "closed" and "open" tasks. "Closed" tasks are ones that are highly structured and have very specific goals, for example, Work in pairs to find seven differences between these two pictures. The information is restricted. There is only one possible outcome. Most comparing tasks are like this. "Open" tasks are ones that are more loosely structured with a less specific goal, for example, comparing memories of childhood journeys, or exchanging anecdotes on a theme. Open tasks are considered more creative. Other types of tasks come midway between "closed" and "open" . Six types of task are:
Listing: brainstorming, fact-finding.

Ordering and sorting: sequencing, ranking, categorizing, classifying.

Comparing: matching, finding similarities, finding differences.

Problem solving: analyzing real or hypothetical situations, reasoning, and decision making.

Sharing personal experiences: narrating, describing, exploring and explaining attitudes, opinions, reactions.

Creative tasks: brainstorming, fact-finding, ordering and sorting, comparing, problem solving and many others (Willis, 1996).

4. General Principles and Characteristics of Task-Based Learning

- Task-based learning is based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching.
- Tasks that involve real communication are essential for language learning.
- Learners learn language by interacting communicatively and purposefully while engaged in the activities and tasks
- The focus is on process rather than product.
- Language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process.
- Activities and tasks of a task-based syllabus are sequenced according to difficulty.
- The difficulty of a task depends on a range of factors including the previous experience of the learner, the complexity of the task, the language required to undertake the task, and the degree of support available (Richards and Rodgers,2001:201).
- Errors are not necessarily the result of bad learning, but are part of the natural process of interlanguage forms gradually moving towards target forms (Ellis, 1994:105).

B. Teaching Grammar through Tasks

The Role of Grammar The role of grammar has always been an argumentative focus in linguistic field. According to the theory of communicative competence, focusing on meaning rather than form does not mean that grammar can be ignored. Instead, it should mean a balance between language system and competence in its use, with an emphasis on meaning. The important role of grammar cannot guarantee the important status of grammar teaching.

In traditional Grammar Teaching Methods, nearly every teacher follows a simple way like this: firstly, the teacher lists the grammar rules. Then, the students learn by heart all the rules and do some exercises. Lastly, the teacher gives more written exercises such as blank-filling or translation. This is quite similar with what we called 3p theory: presentation, practice and production. These three stages convey different purposes. Presentation is to present new language in context so that the meaning is clear, to present the new form in a natural spoken or written text so that students can see its use in discourse, to link the new form to what students already know, to check comprehension, to elicit the form from students where possible and exploit their existing knowledge.

Practice is to help students memorize the form, to help students produce the word order, to give intensive practice through repetition, to provide opportunities for feedback and error correction, to give practice in pronouncing new forms, to develop confidence. Production is to reduce control and encourage students to find out what they can do, to

encourage students to use the forms in expressing their own content, to help students see the usefulness of what they have learned, to check what has been learned and diagnose problems. It is obviously known to everyone that grammar is an indispensable part of English teaching. In order to get more information about grammar, the teachers try to list as many as possible the rules in each case, and the students have already got used to writing down all the rules on their notebook. Teachers try their best to give a clear explanation of each item and try to apply more information to the students.

Almost every student spends most of their time memorizing rules of grammar in or after class. Correspondingly, grammar class became the dullest class and most students got confused by so many rules. Many students complain that they are eager to learn grammar well since grammar is the fundamental knowledge in English but they couldn't help falling asleep on grammar class. Actually, grammar teaching should not just maintain its rule-listing routine. Instead, some new attempts should be involved. Teaching grammar through tasks can pursue the appropriate practical use of grammar. The problems as mentioned before can be solved through tasks such as songs, plays, story telling etc.

1. Basic Principles of Designing Tasks Focusing on Grammar

(1) The situation in which the task takes place should be likely to happen in real life. Daily routines like buying a present for your friends, inviting someone to a dinner, booking a room or seeing a doctor are all available for tasks.

(2) The task should involve communicative factors which can help students work together to solve a certain problem. Give the students more chance to accomplish a certain work by groups. Try to make it available when designing the task. Only in this way can the students understand the usefulness of group work.

(3) Students' individual ideas and ways of solving problems are encouraged. Always remember that the students are the host of the class. They can give their own ideas or comments without being afraid of being criticized. This will also encourage new ideas.

(4) Cultural issues should be involved in grammar teaching where possible. If the teacher wants to design a task of preparing a Halloween party, the first thing to confirm is the culture of Halloween in western countries. Culture is different from one country to another. Before designing the task, try to make sure the cultural diversity.

2. Characteristics of the Task-based Grammar Class

With accomplishing tasks and activities in real-life like situations becoming the focus of each class, grammar class will show the following characteristics:

(1) The process of learning is a process of obtaining information, dealing with information, analyzing problems and solving problems. When the students' attention is focused on the problems or activities, it is much easier to learn the grammar items well.

(2) The purpose of language learning is not just learning grammar knowledge, but the practical use of grammar knowledge. It is quite clear that grammar is the fundamental knowledge in English learning, since "practice makes perfect", the best way to learn it well is to practice, to use them in our daily life.

(3) Cooperative learning becomes accessible. In order to make the tasks more meaningful and interesting, the grammar class asks for the students' cooperation. The students can make great ideas by discussion and argument in a group with their partners.

(4) Student-centred class is highlighted. A teacher is no longer a dominator in class but a facilitator of learning. The new class model welcomes different ideas from every student. The class focuses more on the students' behavior and every has their own right to express themselves.

(5) Students' individuality (creative way of thinking and personal views in understanding and solving problems) is appreciated. In task-based class, there is not only one answer to every question and there is no set answer.

For better understanding, the following is the example of lesson plan for Grammar task based teaching. The task can be modified by the teacher based on the class atmosphere.

LESSON PLAN
Subject: English
Class   : XIII
Aim   : Students discuss how they were different 10 years ago.
Time   : 2x 40 minutes

Preparation
For this class you need a photograph of a famous people when he or she was 10 years younger (or thereabouts). This works best if you look considerably different in the photo than he does now.

You also need to prepare a short text about how her life was different then to what it is now. In this text include at least two examples of things she used to do and two examples of things she didn't use to do. You can either record this text onto a cassette to play for the students, or practise reading it out loud until you are able to "speak" it comfortably in front of the class.

Prepare a written version of this text that you can distribute to the class.

Pre-task warmer
Aim: To prepare students for the task, to engage their attention.

Tell the students that you are going to show them a photo of an actress from 10 years ago. Ask them what they think will be different, but don't correct them at this stage (i.e. respond to the meaning of what they say, not the form). Allow time for three or four suggestions. Then take out the photo of the actress and walk around the class, showing it to the students. Ask them what was different about her then. Put the picture up on the board and ask "What else was different about her life, do you think?" Allow more comments and suggestions from the class, but don't tell them if they are right or wrong in their guesses. Explain that they will find this out later.

Task
Aim: For students to discuss how their life was different ten years ago.
Ask students to work in groups of three. Tell them to talk about their life ten years ago. Put the following questions on the board:
What did you look like?

What was different about your life?
Did you have different likes and dislikes? Different hobbies?
Are you very different now?

Explain that the questions are to help them start talking. Give them a time limit of three to five minutes to discuss this. Circulate and listen to the students doing the task, but do not correct any language at this moment.

Planning
Aim: For students to prepare an oral report of their task.

Stop the task. Tell the students that they must work together to prepare a summary of their discussion to report to the whole class. They must write notes for this summary and be prepared to report this orally to the rest of the class. Set a time limit of five minutes for them to do this.

Report
Aim: For students to present their reports and find out who was most different ten years ago.

When the students are ready, ask a spokesperson from each group to report the group's summary. Tell the class that they must listen to each group's report and decide at the end of all the reports which students have changed the most in the past ten years. After all the reports, ask students who they think has changed the most. You could ask the students who have changed the most to bring in a photo of themselves at that time.

Post-task listening
Aim: For students to hear a fluent English speaker doing the same task.

Draw the student's attention back to the photo of the actress on the board and explain that you are going to ask them to listen to you doing the same task that they did. Read or play the recording that you made. Ask the students some quick comprehension questions about what they heard (e.g. What did I say about her hair? What did I say about her job?) If the students find it difficult to understand, repeat the text again.

Language focus
Aim: To raise students' awareness about the target language.

Choose two or three sentences from your text which include the grammar "used to" and write them on the board. For example:

a) I used to go lived with my grandmother.
b) I used to have long black hair.
c) I used to wear short skirt.
d) I didn't use to do my homework.

Check that students understand the meaning of the sentences. This is best done by concept check questions. For example a) above, the concept check questions would be:
Did I live with my grand mother? (Yes)
Was it a regular occurrence? (Yes)
Do I live with her now? (No).

Explain the rules of form for used to:
used to + infinitive and
didn't use to + infinitive

At this point you could distribute the script of your story and ask students to find other examples of how you used "used to". Point out that in English we use "used to" to talk about states and habits that continued for a period of time in the past.

Language practice
Aim: To give the students some restricted written practice in the target language.

If you feel that your class needs some restricted practice in the grammar, ask them to write down three things that they used to do and three things that they didn't use to do when they were children. Circulate and monitor. Ask students to check their sentences with each other and elicit some examples to put on the board.

Optional follow-up
Aim: To give the students a chance to repeat (and hopefully improve) the task.

Ask students to work with a partner that they haven't worked with yet during this class. Tell them to repeat the same task as they did at the beginning of the class, but that they should try to include the target structure used to into their speaking.

Once students have practised together, ask a couple to report back to the class what they talked about with their partner. Use this time to focus on accuracy, i.e. correct what they say if they make mistakes using the target language.

C. Conclusion
　　Although many prominent scholars have done lots of research about this topic, when we turned to practice, we may find that few teachers are putting this method into practice although they have heard of or even do some research on this matter. So there is still a long way to go to reach our goal in English teaching. Anyhow, teaching grammar through tasks should be promoted and time will prove that it deserves the promotion. What we need to do is to be confident to our teaching and learning in the future work. Only when we all be confident of ourselves, success is approaching.

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