Teaching English Grammar to our EFL Student-Teachers Through the Organic Approach

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Abstract:

At the University of Mosul, Student –Teachers (STs), especially at the College of Basic Education, still find themselves working with heavily structure-based Grammar courses. Although these courses are not generally speaking practical, they can hardly be replaced since they are prescribed. The researcher has recognized the pressing need for a more communicative approach since the College leavers, however sound their knowledge of structure sis, are increasingly unable to use English correctly in their practice period classes.

في تدريس النحو الإنكليزي للطلاب ـ المدرسين الذين يتعلمون الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية من خلال الطريقة العضوية

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ملخص البحث :

لا يزال الطلاب–المدرسين في جامعة الموصل ، وفي كلية التربية الأساسية على وجه الخصوص ، يتعاملون مع مناهج نحوية مثقلة بالتراكيب القواعدية . وعلى الرغم من كون هذه المناهج غير مرضية عملياً ، إلا انه لا يمكن استبدالها طالما أنها مقررة . لقد أدرك الباحث من ناحيته الحاجة الملحة لطريقة دراسية اكثر تواصليةً طالما ان خريجي الكلية غير قادرين وبصورة متزايدة على استعمال الإنكليزية بصور صحيحة في صفوفهم الدراسية خلال فترة التطبيق، مهما كانت معلوماتهم في التراكيب القواعدية وفيرة.

1. Introduction:

A large number of grammar books have been published in recent years. Although many of them are claimed to be suitable for classroom use, they turned out to be not because they are mainly theoretical. When reviewing several of these publications by Alan Fortune (1992:160) in ELT Journal 42/3, it struck him as well as the researcher that two features are common to nearly all of them. Firstly, a deductive approach to learning is employed. Secondly, the range of exercise types is narrow. Most of them include isolated, uncontextualized sentences and involve the learners in either gap-filling, or putting a verb in brackets in the correct tense, or sometimes both. This lack of variety makes grammar practice rather dull for learners. Thus, the researcher set out to investigate how the student-teachers (henceforth STs) themselves evaluate both the deductive approach and inductive approaches besides suggesting the Organic Approach (O.A).

2. Two Main Approaches to the Teaching of Grammar:

Generally speaking, using a language is, a psychological activity where the responses of a speaker depend not only upon his knowledge of structure but also upon his knowledge of the events of the situation towards which he feels.

Accordingly, the grammatical rules of a language do not inform us of what to say. Rather, the grammatical rules of a language inform us of how to respond correctly in the realm of the structural system of a language. Therefore, STs especially the graduate ones "must be expected to give semantically and situationally correct responses as well as grammatically correct ones".(Pollock,1982:ix).

Recently, a new subject has been prescribed for 4th year EFL STs at the Department of English, College of Basic Education, University of Mosul. This subject which is entitled "Advanced Comprehension" includes three minor subject. One of these is Grammar. To approach the teaching of English Grammar deductively (as usual) is thought to make the task rather dull for our STs since it lacks variety. Also, the nature of the other two minor subjects on which "Advanced Comprehension" is based impels a different approach to the teaching of English Grammar. These two minor subjects are: Literature and Translation which necessitate a discoursal treatment when teaching them. Accordingly, the researcher decided to approach the teaching of English Grammar inductively rather than deductively.

Towards the end of the first Academic year 2002-2003 in which "Advanced Comprehension" is newly adopted, the present researcher sets out to investigate how his STs themselves evaluate deductive Approach to the teaching of Grammar, and the Inductive one for the second time. Before describing the investigation or Field Study, the researcher will shed some light distinguishing between the two main approaches to the teaching of English Grammar.

2.1 The Deductive Approach:

Learning of English Grammar may be approached deductively in which case "students are given a grammatical rule with examples before they practice the use of a particular structure"(Rivers,1978:110). Thus , if our EFL STs for example need an expression of past time for something they wish to say or write, they ask for the forms they need. The teacher of EFL Grammar on his part can tell them briefly how to create past time forms (e.g., simple past and past progressive) from known verbs and

explains the difference between expressions for a single past event and a past action in progress which is related to another past event for example. The teacher of EFL Grammar then may encourage the students to use other examples of these past time forms in what they are trying to say or write. This approach to the study of EFL Grammar is favoured by the vast majority of workbook publishers. So, learners study EFL Grammar rules before applying them in doing exercises. In other words, "They work from the general to the particular" (Fortune,1992:160).

In a deductive approach to EFL Grammar teaching the rules or patterns are presented to the ST and then he is given enough chance to practise the new grammatical rule. This approach is very influential for presenting the irregular patterns or exceptions to general patterns for they can not be discovered usually by means of analogy. In addition, a good teacher who follows the deductive approach to EFL Grammar teaching can save class time. Also, there are some students who prefer the presentation of the rule first and then given the chance to demonstrate their understanding by applying it to new sentences. "The drawback of the deductive presentation is that it may become dry and technical "(Allen and Valette,1977:85).

The ST may feel that he is being lectured and stop paying attention any more .Moreover, If the examples given are very difficult, the ST will be frustrated when applying the rule. Thus, learning EFL becomes no more than an intellectual exercise rather than being a means of communication.

Finally, Allen and Valette suggest some procedures and techniques for the deductive presentation of English Grammar (Ibid:86-89).

2.1.1 Procedures:

The procedures followed in presenting English Grammar deductively are:

(1) Statement of at the rule or pattern

(2) Sample sentences that EFL STs repeat.

(3) Ample opportunity for STs to practise the new pattern.

2.1.2 Techniques:

The EFL teacher of Grammar may use a variety of techniques to emphasize the essential aspects of the rule or pattern he is presenting, such as:

(a) Flash Cards

(b) Transparency and Overhead Projector

(c) Props and Chalkboard

2.2 The Inductive Approach:

Learning of English Grammar may be approached inductively in which case "students see a number of examples of the rule in operation in discourse, practise its use, and then evolve a rule from these examples with the help of the teacher, or they see a number of examples, evolve a rule from these examples with the help of the teacher and then practise using the structure".(Rivers,1978:110). Although recent classroom materials have placed greater emphasis on inductive learning we can notice that , very few inductive grammar workbooks have been published in order to be used in classroom for the discovery of rules by EFL STs themselves. Such workbooks are very useful for our STs since they will be obliged to exercise their utmost intellectual abilities in grasping such kind of materials.Moreover, "I have long suspected that inductive

activities engage the brain rather more than many familiar, mechanical, deductive exercises, and that the extra challenge motivates many learners". (Fortune,1992:161).

According to the inductive approach, the EFL teacher of Grammar gives his STs first, examples of the grammatical structure or rule to be learned. After practising the examples, the STs are led by their EFL teacher of Grammar in forming a generalization about the grammatical rule or principle with which they have been working. This approach has many advantages. One of these is the discovery of regular grammatical patterns in particular. "Encouraging students to discover grammar for themselves is one valuable way of helping them to get to grips with the language, and that the use of discovery techniques can be highly motivating and extremely beneficial for the students' understanding of English grammar". (Harmer,1987:39).Another advantage is STs' participation in the formulation of the grammatical principle. As for the disadvantages they are two. Firstly, it often takes more time than the deductive approach. Secondly, some STs prefer knowing the generalization before giving the examples.

Finally, Allen and Valette suggest some procedures and techniques for the inductive presentation of English Grammar.(Ibid:90-99).

2.2.1 Procedures:

The procedures followed in presenting English Grammar inductively are :

(1) Introducing the examples

(2) Oral or Written practice

(3) Generalization or rule that is drawn from presentation of examples. In this case, the STs formulate the rule or the EFL teacher of Grammar himself. The following are some procedures in practice:

(a) Selecting the model sentences.

(b) Proceeding from known to Unknown Grammar.

(c) Placing the sentences in a meaningful context.

(d) Preparing the Questions Leading to the Generalization.

2.2.2 Techniques:

The EFL teacher of Grammar may use a variety of techniques for presenting model sentences from which generalization about rules are made:

(a) Chalkboard

(b) Wall chart

(c) Cloth Board

(d) Overhead Transparencies

(e) A prepared Ditto sheet

(f) Props

(g) World Maps

3. Which Approach to Choose?

Before deciding which approach to choose, two solutions are thought of: the first is Remedial, while the second is Investigation or Field Study. As for the remedial solution, it is faced with the fact that "You cannot learn a language without learning its grammar". (Widdowson,1992:333). But our EFL STs have been learning English grammar for years and still their learning of EFL is not up to the Dept. of English expectations. Most, if not all, of the Dept. teachers suffer from

their EFL STs terrible errors after visiting them in their practice period classes. What does this mean? Does it mean that their EFL grammar teachers are to blame? Or does it mean that the approach through which they have been learning EFL grammar is to blame? "The word "grammar" brings to the minds of many high school students a formal and often uninteresting analysis of language. Some students think only of conjugations, paradigms, declensions, and diagramming, all of which appear to be an end in themselves". (Allen and Valette,1977:81).

In fact, both the EFL grammar teacher and the approach are to blame, but not equally since the teacher remains the master of the situation. Although he is restricted with the textbook and the syllabus, he can still do his best to make his teaching- learning situation a success. He can at least teach his EFL STs in a way which is more interesting and beneficial than the way according to which he himself had been taught. "Research has shown that teachers remember their own school grammar instruction without enthusiasm or pleasure, yet they tend to repeat that pattern with their own students". (Kane,1997:21). The EFL grammar teachers can even do more for their EFL STs. "instead of viewing grammar as a static system of arbitrary rules, it should be seen as a rational, dynamic system that is comprised of structures characterized by the three dimensions of form, meaning, and use".(Larsen-Freeman, 1997:5).

What is mentioned above shows that the remedial solution is not that fruitful. "There is no point in presenting a remedial English class at the University level with a speeded-up version of the secondary school syllabus, for the class will rapidly become bored and resentful even if they show evidence of not having fully mastered the material".(Brumfit and Johnson, 1979:132).

Now, we are left with the second solution, i.e. Investigation. This solution gives the EFL grammar teacher a free hand in choosing the approach which makes the learning of English grammar by our STs a success. "Teachers should be encouraged to try out a variety of approaches and discover which work best for them and for their students". (Allen and Valette,1977:81).

4. The Field Study:

In sections 2 and 3, reference has been made that an investigation or Field Study will be made in the light of which the choice between the above two main approaches will be decided. The investigation involves 30 EFL STs at the Department of English, College of Basic Education, University of Mosul. They are aged between 22 and 25 years old, and 20 of them are female.

4.1 Aim of the Field Study

The main aim of the investigation or Field Study is to discover the preferences of our EFL STs for either the deductive or inductive approaches.

4.2 Elicitation of the Information:

The EFL STs are asked to answer a one-item questionnaire (adapted from Fortune,1992:170). This questionnaire is designed to elicit basic information about the STs attitudes and approaches to the learning of English grammar. These STs are asked to fill in the questionnaire twice. The first is at the beginning of the academic year, while the second is towards its end. This is so, because the researcher wants to discover whether there will be any change in his STs views towards the end of the

academic year or not. It is to be noted that exercises on the two main approaches are provided with the questionnaire as examples, but they are not mentioned for space limitation. Also, STs are asked to do these exercises before filling in the questionnaire. In additioon, it is anticipated that utilizing the questionnaire twice would yield more precise information than either technique alone.

4.3 Text of the Questionnaire:

Following is a full text of the one-item questionnaire:

- **Write (a) or (b) in the space alongside:** To learn English grammar, I prefer

(a) to read a grammar rule first and then to do an exercise; or

(b) to look at some examples (e.g. pairs of sentences, a text) in order to try to discover a grammar rule.(Ibid).

4.4 Results of the Field Study:

Findings of the Investigation or Field Study are divided into two main groups:

1. At the Beginning of the Academic Year

The main findings are

* 22 out of 30 EFL STs (i.e. 73.3 percent)

Prefer to be presented with a rule first, and then to do related grammar exercises (The Deductive Approach).

* 8 out of 30 EFL STs (i.e. 26.6 per cent)

Prefer to study some example language in order to discover a grammar rule themselves (The Inductive Approach).

2. At the End of the Academic Year

The main findings are:

*12 out of 30 EFL STs (i.e. 40 per cent)

Prefer to be presented with a rule first, and then to do related grammar exercises (The Deductive Approach).

* 18 out of 30 EFL STs (i.e. 60 per cent)

Prefer to study some examples in order to discover a grammar rule themselves (The Inductive Approach).

4.5 Discussion of the Results:

The experience of being taught English grammar through the Inductive Approach persuades the majority of our EFL STs to provide worthwhile and interesting practice. Although not few of the EFL STs (40 per cent) still express a preference for the deductive approach, the proportion preferring the Inductive Approach raises from (26.6 per cent) to (60 per cent). Also, learning EFL grammar through the Inductive Approach, makes the ST work harder and use his common sense, since he will be able to remember the rule more easily, when he finds it himself. "All learning theory suggests that those things we discover for ourselves are more firmly fixed in our minds than those which we are "told", In place of blind "learning", the emphasis is moved to the process of exploration which leads to genuine understanding". (Lewis,1986,165).

Despite adopting the Inductive Approach, many of our EFL STs reveal that they like grammar lectures to be reinforced by looking at a rule afterwards, and then to be followed by further practice. This is so, because seeing a rule is considered an important prerequisite even for many of those EFL STs who prefer the Inductive Approach. Also, "there

was some indication that the higher their language level, the more likely the learners were to prefer the Inductive Approach exercises". (Fortune,1992:167).

5. Conclusions :

The results of the above investigation or Field Study show that:

1. EFL STs interest in the grammatical material learnt through the Inductive Approach has increased significantly after encountering it.

2. EFL STs' interest has increased, because they have found the "new" Inductive Approach motivating.

3. The Inductive Approach has facilitated our EFL STs mental processes.

4. Our EFL STs experience has increased, which means that the Inductive Approach engenders better learning.

5. The experience acquired from the inductive exercises causes many of our EFL STs to prefer it to the more familiar deductive approach.

The above conclusion reveals that a new approach is urgently needed to satisfy not only the pedagogic needs of grammar, but also the whole new course entitled "Advanced Comprehension". Besides teaching grammar in context (i.e. the Inductive Approach), such an approach must take into account the discoursed nature of the other two minor subject-matters from which "Advancal Comprehension" is contained. The approach to satisfy the above requirements besides enabling our STs to command their ultimate goal (Learning "EFL") is the Organic Approach (O.A.).

6. Suggestions :

Before suggesting the Organic Approach (O.A), some pedagogical prerequisites are taken into account.To begin with, "The old-fashioned way of teaching grammar has been dropped".(Fitch,1995:34). Similarly, (Wilczinska,1987:38) indicates that "learners should not be over burdened with rules and theory". This point constitutes the major problem which the learners of English grammar in Iraq, including EFL STs at the University level, have been suffering from because their teachers of English grammar have always emphasized the learning of grammatical rules. It is unquestionable that the meaningful use of the FL is a more effective way of acquiring control of the language and that "grammar instruction must be given imaginatively, sensitively and proportionately" (Coll,1986:60). Moreover, "grammatical description which relates structure to language use could be of (Future) assistance to the EFL teacher"(Stokes,1975:7).

For full text of the Organic Approach, the reader is referred to Nunan (1998).AL-Juwari,(2002:109-118) reviews the theoretical and practical aspects of the O.A. as follows:

6.1. The Theoretical Aspect of the Organic Approach:

Nunan (1998: 102) indicates that the adoption of an 'organic' perspective can greatly enrich our understanding of language acquisition and use. Without such perspective, our understanding of other dimensions of language such as the notion of grammaticality will be piecemeal and incomplete, as will any attempt at understanding and interpreting utterances in isolation from the contexts in which they occur. Likewise, "teaching particular utterances in contexts which provide meaning and

usability to learners is both sufficient (witness the native learner) and necessary (witness the classroom learner" (Lester, 1973: 209).

Nunan further indicates that the Organic metaphor sees FLL more like growing a garden than building a wall. Learners do not learn one thing perfectly, one item at a time. They rather learn numerous things simultaneously (and imperfectly), as the linguistic flowers do not all appear at the same time, nor do they all grow at the same rate. Some even appear to wilt, for a time, before renewing their growth.

Concerning the role of textbooks in grammar teaching, Nunan thinks that grammar is, in this respect, presented out of context since learners are given isolated sentences which they are expected to internalize through exercises involving repetition, manipulation, and grammatical transformation. These exercises are designed to provide learners with formal, declarative mastery, but unless they provide opportunities for learners to explore grammatical structures in context, they make the task of developing procedural skill, being able to use language for communication, more difficult than it needs to be, because learners are denied the opportunity of seeing the systematic relationships that exist between form, meaning, and use (Ibid). To put it differently, if learners are not given opportunities to explore grammar in context, it will be difficult for them to see how and why alternative forms exist to express different communicative meanings. For example, getting learners to read a set of sentences in the active voice, and then transform them into passives following a model, is a standard way of introducing the passive voice. However, it needs to be supplemented by tasks which give learners opportunities to explore when it is communicatively appropriate to use the passive rather than the active voice. However, learners are not shown that passive forms have evolved to achieve certain communicative ends to

enable the speaker or the writer to place the communicative focus on the action rather than on the performer of the action.

Halliday (1985) points out that, as teachers, we need to help learners see that effective communication involves achieving harmony between functional interpretation and formal appropriacy by giving them tasks that dramatize the relationship between grammatical items and the discoursal contexts in which they occur. On his part, Nunan (1998: 102) indicates that in general communication beyond the classroom, grammar and context are often so closely related that appropriate grammatical choices can only be made with reference to the context and purpose of communication. This forms a main reason why it is often difficult to answer learners' questions about grammatical appropriacy. In many instances, the answer is that it depends on the attitude or orientation that the speaker wants to take towards the events he or she wishes to report.

Nunan further emphasizes the need to supplement form-focused exercises with an approach that dramatizes for learners the fact that different forms enable them to express different meanings; that grammar allows them to make meanings of increasingly sophisticated kinds, to escape from the tyranny of the here and now, not only to report events and states of affairs, but to editorialize, and to communicate their own attitudes towards the events and affairs (Ibid: 103). Unfortunately, many courses fail to make clear the relationship between form and function. Learners are taught about the forms, but not how to use them to communicate meaning. Added to that, if the communicative value of the alternative grammatical forms is not made clear to learners, they will come away from the classroom with the impression that the alternative forms exist merely to make things difficult for them.

Finally, Nunan suggests the adoption of the OA so as to enable students learn how to form structures correctly, and also how to use them

to communicate meaning. He believes that such a methodology will show learners how to use grammar to get things done, socialize, obtain goods and services, and express their personality through language, i.e. achieve their communicative ends through the appropriate deployment of grammatical resources (Ibid: 103).

6.2 The practical Aspect of the Organic Approach:

The more grammar is practiced, the more it is understood. This is vividly reflected in the understanding of EFL since grammar is considered the core of language, and since "grammar practice consolidates students' understanding of grammar and provides the teacher with diagnostic information about their needs"(Borg, 1999: 159).

Concerning the present study, our EFL STs have had a good deal of instruction in grammar and are likely to possess considerable dormant competence in English which can be activated and also extended by relating STs' previously-acquired linguistic knowledge to the meaningful realizations of the language system. STs' knowledge of how the language works can also be consolidated, as (Candlin 1979: 132) views, as they experience language used in meaningful context. For instance, on introducing a new grammatical principle, the teacher should know how to present the material to the student. He should be aware of the fact that "the only way grammatical information can be utilized pedagogically is through overt factual presentation in teachable units" (Rutherford, 1980:70) since such presentation guarantees learning and "draws learners' attention to the grammatical aspects presented in a pedagogical context" (Boers and Demeccheleer, 1998: 197).

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