

Grammar in EFL Pedagogy: To be or not to be: Explicit or implicit grammar instruction in EFL

Birsen Tütüniş*

Abstract

This think-piece discusses the major approaches to the instruction of grammar in EFL contexts, referring to key theories and studies in the concerning field of inquiry. The discussion also stretches the boundaries of the issue by addressing to the recent research in second language acquisition and initial English teacher education; thus, helps pool our thinking to seek various connections between the theory and practice of teaching grammar, which is quite illuminating to adopt a sound approach in grammar instruction for English teachers.

Key Words: EFL, Grammar instruction, Teacher education

1. Introduction

Teaching grammar plays a central role in every EFL/ ESL class. The important question that needs to be answered is how to teach grammar. In many parts of the world; pre-service and in-service training of English Language teachers and the course books on the market have encouraged teachers to change their grammar teaching from traditional grammar rule teaching to a more communicative and interactive ways which focus on how to make use of grammar rather than a pure knowledge of grammar. But in practice, teachers keep their beliefs on the benefits of explicit grammar teaching as opposed to implicitness. The reasons for such attitude need to be studied in depth.

The contradictory claims like; 1) acquisition of L1 is implicit, is extracted from experience of usage, is not acquired from explicit rules; and 2) acquisition of L2 is not the same as L1 acquisition; language forms that are attended are learnt better, noticing and knowing the rules helps acquisition (Krashen, 1982, Long 1988, Schmidt 1990, McLaughlin, 1987) may be the reasons that cause confusion in language teachers' minds. The period 1980-2000 was a time of research to measure the effectiveness of implicit or explicit L2 grammar instruction. The ongoing debate on grammar or non grammar or accuracy versus fluency in EFL classes led scholars reexamine grammar and how it is conceptualized by teachers.

2. Teacher knowledge and experience

Borg (1998: 172-173) conducted a study on the role of meta-talk-talking about grammar in classes- and came to a conclusion that, the reasons for meta-talk in FL classes depend on a number of variables like; the teachers' experience, knowledge, personality, beliefs about language and foreign language learning, students, roles, theory, methodological orientation, choice of material and context. Teacher's knowledge and experience play an important role on classroom applications. Most teachers feel at ease with grammar instruction and adopt FOF type of instruction as they are confident about their grammatical knowledge compared to the other knowledge (cultural, colloquial etc.) of the language they teach. Language is a living thing and dynamic not static. It is bound to change. This is called 'Grammaticalization' Swan (2005). It is difficult for language teachers to catch up with the changes in the foreign language.

Arbitrariness and situational meaning of lexis make language teacher's job even more complicated in terms of explicit grammar instruction and the students, even though they get puzzled, accept what their teachers teach. Bill Bryson in *The Mother Tongue* (1990: 137) exemplifies the point of view humorously "Some of us managed to learn what we were taught. We accepted and memorized the statements of teachers who told us that "English has eight parts of speech," or "English has nine [or was it eight?] tenses such as the preterit, the imperfect, the conditional, the progressive, the future, and so forth." We accepted that a "noun is a person, place, or thing" and that words such as *dog, joy, mathematics, discussion, and determination* are all *things* since they are not persons or places. Some of us even enjoyed sentence diagramming. Then there were some of us who despairingly went along with what we had to do, but never quite caught on.

* İstanbul Aydın University, birsentutunis@aydin.edu.tr

We split infinitives, confused transitive verbs with intransitive verbs, never quite got the meaning of terms like “perfect” and “imperfect” as they applied to tenses (rather than people), and worried why in a sentence such as “It is raining,” the subject was “It” when deep in our hearts we knew that “raining” was what the sentence was about.”

Ellis (1999:234) accepts this fact but proposes to adopt alternatives to Focus on Form teaching strategies that draw less heavily on a command of technical terminology and the ability to verbalize grammatical rules where there are gaps in teachers’ explicit knowledge. Bailey et al. (1996) agree this fact and state their belief as ‘we teach as we have been taught rather than as we have been trained to teach’ and they suggest that if we wish to break that cycle we need to bring our past experience to the level of conscious awareness. This brings in the issue of teachers’ mental lives.

The study of teachers’ mental lives is now acknowledged as a central concern in the study of language teaching, and recent years have seen the development of a significant body of work examining teacher cognition—what language teachers think, know and believe – and its relationship to instructional decisions (Borg, 2005).

3. Teacher education and change in classroom applications

To change the traditional classroom applications teachers’ initial education needs to be reassessed. Teacher candidates at universities, colleges and other teacher training institutions need to be trained not only on the pedagogical issues related to the profession, but also on how to develop a critical mind to further their professional practices. Almazra (1996: 75) believes that ‘pre-service teacher education courses should help student teachers to be in more control of their professional development and provide them with the opportunity to approach the profession from a much broader perspective than as merely a method. Student teachers should be taught the skills and confidence to analyze and articulate their thinking.’

Teachers’ initial education supplies the prescriptive knowledge for foreign language pedagogy as well as the practical classroom implications. But teacher students are not asked to be inquisitive. If they are encouraged to analyze the theoretical knowledge and see how this knowledge can help to improve their practices, their teaching practices will be more realistic and they will eventually be more in control of their professional development. After studying ‘acquisition of implicit and explicit knowledge of a language and how to teach grammar’ for example, student teachers can be advised to conduct research on grammar teaching and then to carry out discussion sessions on the results of their researches. This will take them out to real classes where English is taught as a foreign language. Theories and classroom applications will be then compared and contrasted and awareness would be raised. Creating conscious awareness depends on student teachers’ experimental and more realistic education which would enable them to see both sides of the coin.

Change in classroom applications can not occur overnight. Borg (2006) claims that teacher cognition is formed by thoughts, knowledge and beliefs and has an impact on instructional decisions. Professional knowledge is primarily gained at teacher training institutions and this knowledge affects the thoughts. The practice, on the other hand, displays the beliefs.

In their initial education, to form a decent knowledge, teacher candidates need to do research on the relationship of theory and practice to form the knowledge that would affect their thoughts. Their declarative knowledge about English as a foreign language needs to be developed as well, but for academic purposes only. The instructors at universities are the mirrors of student teachers’ professional knowledge. If declarative knowledge about the language is emphasized other than academic purposes, the candidates will form thoughts and beliefs about the over importance of grammar teaching. Instructors are expected to be the professional life coaches assisting teacher candidates to develop analytic minds and professional identities. As Nero (2005:194) points out, the notion of *first* and/or *second* language may not always be clear-cut, and disproportionately focus on *language form* (correctness), which has in many ways limited language teaching and learning in classroom settings, and devalued what most students already know about and do with language. Nero (2005:203) proposes ‘a broader framework called Language Identity, Awareness and Development (LIAD) which goes beyond language as form, to foreign language teacher’s awareness of students’ knowledge and identities’. Teacher knowledge and identities also need to be added to this framework to improve foreign language teaching and learning.

Thus, new paradigms are needed for second/ foreign language acquisition theories along with teacher-student identities and teacher preparation for language teaching. Otherwise it will be difficult to bring change into foreign language classes.

4. Explicit and implicit grammar instruction

Explicit grammar instruction supplies the declarative knowledge of grammar whereas implicit grammar instruction supplies procedural knowledge of grammar. Explicit grammar instruction creates awareness and leads to conscious learning and noticing (Schmidt's noticing hypothesis, 1990), implicit grammar instruction on the other hand converts input into intake similar to L1 acquisition. Both explicit and implicit grammar instruction ends up with automatization. Therefore the pendulum needs to swing sensibly and the type of instruction must be chosen according to the types of stakeholders in hand. Grammar treated as only a set of rules might be good for students who try to hold on to something in their L2 learning struggle and some others might be willing to understand the logic of the system in their learning process. Freeman (2003) believes that 'thinking of grammar as a skill or dynamic process rather than as a static area of knowledge is good both for explicit and implicit grammar acquisition. However, the question whether grammar acquisition leads to L2 acquisition is still under investigation. Therefore, as Rothstein states, language teachers need to think "How do we make grammar fun to learn, really, really fun, and memorable and meaningful?"

In conclusion, our suggestions for language teachers can be summed up as; being sensible and using both implicit and explicit techniques in their L2 instruction, but at the same time being a good researcher by doing action research and evaluating the new ideas put forward by the scholars.

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