

A Communicative Approach to Teaching Grammar

Tomoko MAEKAWA*

With the belief that grammar should be taught through creative, communicative activities, the author taught a grammar class at a college, adopting communication activities together with group work and individual instruction. Some grammar rules learned were immediately used as a means of communication; the students expressed their experiences and thoughts in writing and then by speaking. Group work and individual instruction reinforced these activities; group work lessened students' shyness, and individual instruction encouraged slow learners. Four different evaluation methods tested the effectiveness of the approach positively. In particular, the students' own evaluation as reflected in a questionnaire and composition demonstrated their strong support for the approach used.

1. Introduction

Searching for an effective way to internalize grammar has always been a central concern among foreign language teachers. Krashen and Terrel¹⁾ advocate the Natural Approach and claim that grammar will be mastered naturally if the goal is communication. They declare a grammar-centered syllabus to be inefficient "even if the goals were just the acquisition of syntax" and point out that "a grammatical focus invariably distorts any attempt to communicate."²⁾ This "zero position toward grammar teaching" has been questioned recently.³⁾ Stern⁴⁾ encourages positive grammar teaching while cautioning against inappropriate or excessive grammar instruction. He emphasizes that grammar should be taught in a meaningful context of practical use. Discussing effective grammar syllabus, he suggests that the syllabus be designed according to the learner's profiles, i.e., age, educational background, proficiency level, etc.

Age could be an important factor when considering effective ways of teaching grammar. Celce-Murcia in Stern⁵⁾ claims that the degree of focus on grammatical form depends on the characteristics of the learner (learning style, age, proficiency level, and educational background), and that grammatical form is more important for adult learners than for children. Dulay et al.⁶⁾ recognize the cognitive superiority and grammar consciousness of adult learners, but they deny that learning grammar is an effective way to develop speaking skills. Even with regard to speaking, however, poor knowledge of grammar is one of the reasons why students cannot speak well.⁷⁾

Thus, a somewhat grammar-based syllabus seems useful for adult foreign language learners. Of

*Assistant Professor, the Department of Foreign Language Education

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course, this does not mean that grammar should be learned by memorization or drilling. Rather, grammar should be taught through creative, communicative activities. With this belief, the author taught a grammar class at a college for fifteen weeks. On the basis of that experience, she introduces here what she considers to be an effective approach to teaching grammar, outlining and evaluating her chosen method.

2. Approach

(1) Classroom Background

- (a) Subjects: Thirty-two first-year students majoring in English literature at a women's junior college
- (b) Course title: English grammar (Compulsory)
- (c) Period: Once a week for fifteen weeks (October 1996 - February 1997)
- (d) Class length: Ninety minutes
- (e) Textbook: Oxford Practice Grammar⁹⁾

The author taught only the latter half of the yearlong course as a substitute for a teacher who had taught the first half, using the same textbook he had used.

(2) Theories

"Grammar can be likened to a sewing machine and communication to making a dress.": Learning how to operate a sewing machine in itself is not the aim, but making a dress on the machine is. Likewise, learning grammar per se is not the end, while communicating with people and using the learned grammar is. The more often we use the machine in a real situation (sewing a dress), the more easily we learn how to use the machine. By the same token, the more often we use grammar in a real situation (communication), the more easily we learn how to use the grammar. Put simply, communication activities are indispensable for effective acquisition of grammar. Allwrite⁹⁾ illustrates the relationship between communication competence and linguistic competence.

Celce-Murcia in Stern¹⁰⁾ distinguishes more effective and less effective ways of teaching grammar and considers communicative activities to be more effective, as outlined in Table 1 below. However, in the normal grammar class, grammar rules are introduced by examples and explanations, followed by exercises and drills.¹¹⁾ This approach is unlikely to be successful; all of its elements seem to fall in Celce-Murcia's "less effective" category. That is, in the traditional grammar class, drills are not communicative but manipulative, practice has no concept, exercises are sentence-based, activities are not cognitively demanding, materials are not authentic, and context is dull. Unfortunately, the textbook the author had to use in the class was designed to be used as part of this common approach.

Table 1 "More effective and less effective ways to teach grammar"¹²⁾

MORE EFFECTIVE	LESS EFFECTIVE
communicative activities	manipulative drills
context-embedded practice	context-free practice
text-based exercises	sentence-based exercises
cognitively demanding activities	cognitively undemanding activities
authentic materials	contrived materials
interesting and motivating content	dull or neutral content

In order to correct these weaknesses, the author adopted communication activities together with group work and individual instruction while using the textbook.

(3) Procedure

The outline of a standard lesson will be described here.

The students made small groups of four to six. (T: the teacher/ Ss: the students/ C: communication activities/ L: lecture/ S: self study/ G: group work/ I: individual instruction)

PART I: Last week's grammar topics

1. T hands Ss last week's homework and composition, making some comments to each student.(I)
2. Ss discuss their errors in groups.(G)
3. T explains Ss's errors and answers questions from Ss— Usually there are no questions.(L)
4. Speaking activity: Ss tell stories based on their own composition checked by T, three times, with three partners from the group. (Maekawa¹³⁾ argues the advantages of the repetition of short speeches.) In the third speech, Ss are supposed to speak naturally without looking at the paper, while T walks around and occasionally gives advice.(C, G, I)

PART II: Today's grammar topics

5. T answers questions about today's grammar topics which Ss are expected to have pre-learned — Usually there are no questions.(L)
6. T explains some of these topics.(L)
7. Writing activity: Ss write a story, three sentences or more, using some of the grammatical rules learned in today's class and submit the composition and homework. (S, G, I)

OUTSIDE CLASS:

8. T checks the composition and homework.(I)
9. Ss pre-study the textbook and do four to five pages of exercises from the textbook as homework. (S)

(4) Results

The students were puzzled at first at the completely different teaching style from their former teacher. They were surprised at the idea of making groups; some murmured that the idea was childish. They were confused by creative writing and hesitated to speak out. However, as time went by, they became accustomed to these activities and came to enjoy them.

The power of group work and cooperative learning are supported by many studies such as Assinder¹⁴⁾ and Johnson and Johnson.¹⁵⁾ Group work provided a free, relaxed atmosphere, and peer-learning lessened any anxiety associated with the fear of making mistakes. Moreover, the teacher was able to instruct individually during the group work. In fact, individuals posed questions to the teacher while she was walking among groups, even though they seldom asked any questions in the presence of the whole class.

It was almost impossible to cover all of the grammar and textbook exercises in the classroom, especially since quite a lot of time was spent in communication activities. In order to compensate for this, the students were required to do self-study at home. They were expected to come to the class after reading four to five pages of explanation and doing the corresponding exercises.

The teacher, on the other hand, checked the exercises and compositions thoroughly and wrote some comments to each student in time for the next class. This extra effort, although time-consuming, helped her to understand the students' weaknesses. More importantly, she was able to communicate with them quite personally through this indirect contact.

3. Evaluation

The above approach was evaluated in four ways. (N/n: the number of the students)

(1) Multiple Choice Test

The students took a sixty-two-question multiple-choice grammar test as part of their final examination. The average score on that test was very high at 90.0 percent. This indicates strongly that they understood the course quite well. On the other hand, the average score in the first half of the course was 70.6. However, as the instructors, the test forms and the evaluation methods were different in the two situations, we should not simply compare those two scores in order to say that the students have progressed in grammar knowledge.

(2) Students' Evaluation in a Questionnaire (Appendix 1)

In the final test, they also answered some questions on whether the communication activities were effective for understanding grammar (Table 2), and if they liked the activities (Table 3).

Table 2

Effective	N=30 (94%)
No difference	N= 2 (6%)
Not effective	N= 0 (0%)

Table 3

Enjoyable.....	N=13 (41%)
Not especially.....	N=16 (50%)
Not enjoyable	N= 3 (9%)

(3) Students' Evaluation in Composition (Appendix 2)

In the composition section of the final test, the students expressed how they felt about the class.

The analysis is as follows.

- (a) Essays which express favor ... N=24 (75%)
(Words such as “fun,” “interesting,” “like,” “enjoy,” “kind,” “understand,” “good,” “had good time,” and “easy” are used.)
- (b) Essays which express motivation ... N=21 (66%)
 - Homework was tough, but I studied by myself a lot. (n=7)
 - Now I want to study grammar more. (n=7)
 - Now I want to improve my speaking ability. (n=7)
 - I studied more than ever. (n=3)
 - Now I like grammar. (n=3)
- (c) Homework was tough. ... N=5
- (d) Grammar is difficult. ... N=2
- (e) I hate grammar. ... N=1
- (f) I disliked the class because I hate grammar. ... N=1
- (g) Other good comments ... N=15
(e.g. “The story about your trip was interesting.”)
- (h) Other bad comments ... N=0

(4) Improvement of Writing

The composition in the final test showed the improvement of writing skills. It is not easy to point out which specific grammar rules were mastered throughout the course because the rules emphasized in each composition were different. However, the students' ability to express themselves and their communicative competence clearly improved during the course. Given that the course placed significant emphasis on grammar and communication, it is reasonable to suggest that the students' improvement is due partly to a better understanding of English grammar. The students were allowed to use dictionaries and textbooks and to confer with friends when they wrote the compositions shown in Extracts 1, 3, 5 and 7 below. On the other hand, none of these options were available to them in the final test. Therefore in Extracts 2, 4, 6 and 8, their actual ability, albeit under a little pressure, can be seen. Even under such conditions, they were able to express their ideas and feelings quite well in the final test.

EXTRACT 1: Student A's composition in the early stages (Lesson 2)

One of my hobby is going shopping. I went to the department store, and I bought jeans. And I had an ice there. (Oct. 15, 1996)

EXTRACT 2: Student A's last composition in the final test

Ms. Tomoko, who teach us English, is very good. Checking our answer is good thing, because we could find out some mistakes, and understood about it more. She always told us that we had to do homework by ourselves. And then, she said to us, “You may show other person's answer but, don't show just their answer.

It was right what she said. But we sometimes showed just their answer. So we may not improve English ability very much. English grammar is important. So we are going to study it more. (Feb. 4, 1997)

EXTRACT 3: Student B's composition in the early stages (Lesson 2)

I went to a restaurant. I found there's a hair in my soup. But I don't angry, because I am very gentle. Then I came back after having a beer. It was delicious (Oct. 15, 1996)

EXTRACT 4: Student B's last composition in the final test

I think you understand us. Because you make us do thing what we aren't good at. For example, writing, conversation and join the class. Some said to me "Is this class a children's class, isn't it?" But, to tell the truth, we knew that way is important for us, because we don't have enough to do conversations and we forget to do conversations in English. So we thanks that you recommended to us this basic, strange and funny class. I didn't like this class, but now I love this class. So I was glad to meet you and I wish your success. Thank you for 6 months. (Feb. 4, 1997)

EXTRACT 5: Student C's composition in the early stages (Lesson 2)

I drunk a cup of coffee. My mother drunk a bottle of milk. My family like both coffee and milk. (Oct. 15, 1996)

EXTRACT 6: Student C's last composition in the final test

Ms. Maekawa, who is our English teacher, teach us English easily. I could understand English grammar which you teach me. You told us to be able to understand if we remembered English form. This class seems to be better English ability than I've ever. So, I want to say "Thank you, teacher." But it difficult for me to speak and understand English. So, I don't like English exam. But I'd like to be good at speaking English. I study hard in order to speak English. (Feb. 4, 1997)

EXTRACT 7: Student D's composition in the early stages (Lesson 7)

On last Sunday, I went to Urakami cathedral with my friend. She said to me that it was beautiful and holy. I thought so, too. I suggested that we go to Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum next. (Nov. 19, 1996)

EXTRACT 8: Student D's last composition in the final test

I enjoyed studying in this class. This class is more interesting than other classes. I think comparing other teacher, you are little different type of teacher. When this class began, you said to us "Let's enjoy studying grammar." And you told us to gather our desks and to make groups. Then I thought we were neither elementary students nor junior high school students and it is childish way to learn. But your way of teaching is easy to understand and what you told about daily topics were interesting. What is more I could get more knowledge of grammar and other

things. As you have much experience. We could learn a lot of things. When we watched the video tape which you appeared on the TV, in that program, you said that you have some dreams. I thought you are big person because of continuing to have dreams. I do my best for my dreams. So please you do your best for dreaming come true. Thank you Miss Maekawa. (Feb. 4, 1997)

Thus, a comparison of the early and final compositions, for each of the four students extracted, shows an obvious improvement in their written communicative competence. Due to space restrictions, only a few compositions are printed above, but the author is confident that most of the students showed improvement in their writing because they express their opinions quite fully.

Analyzing all of their compositions very carefully, the author might be able to evaluate their grammatical competence more exactly. Indeed, on reading the extracts, one can sense the structural progress. However, here the author emphasizes their writing progress from the view of communicative competence.

4. Conclusion

The above evaluation clearly shows that the presented approach was effective in that class. Firstly, the scores on the grammar test in the final class averaged ninety percent, indicating that the students understood the course very well. Secondly, in the questionnaire ninety-four percent of the students answered that the communication activities in the course were effective for understanding grammar. Also forty-one percent of them enjoyed the activities, while only nine percent did not. Thirdly, in the final composition, seventy-five of them wrote favorably of the class, and sixty-six percent of them wrote that they were motivated to study harder. Lastly, the students' final compositions showed a clear improvement in their communicative writing skills; they came to be able to express their opinions fully. Thus, considering the high test scores and the students' positive attitude to the teaching approach, it would be appropriate to conclude that the method was successful and that the approach could be effectively tailored and applied in other circumstances as well. Therefore, it could be claimed that creative, communicative activities in a meaningful context are more effective in teaching grammar than mere memorization and monotonous drills. As alternative approaches for grammar instruction, the "grammar consciousness-raising activities" and "interpretation grammar activities" proposed by Ellis¹⁶⁾ will be examined.

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Appendix 1: The Questionnaire

後期の英文法の授業では、学習した文法事項を使って作文を書いたり、それを使って会話をしたりしました。それについてどう思いますか。

(文法の知識が早く身に付くと思う／変わらないと思う／暗記するだけのほうが良い)

(おもしろかった／普通／おもしろくなかった)

Appendix 2: The Composition Test

後期の英文法の授業についての感想、私が授業中に強調したこと等についての感想や意見を英文（5文以上）で書いて下さい。但し、次の文法事項を必ず用いること。

関係代名詞、直接・間接話法、recommend, suggest等の動詞を上手に使う。