

**DIFFICULTIES AND SOLUTIONS TO TEACHING ENGLISH
GRAMMAR FOR NON-MAJOR ENGLISH STUDENTS
AT QUANG BINH UNIVERSITY**

**NHỮNG KHÓ KHĂN VÀ GIẢI PHÁP TRONG DẠY NGỮ PHÁP CHO SINH VIÊN
KHÔNG CHUYÊN NGỮ TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC QUẢNG BÌNH**

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ABSTRACT: *This paper aims to identify difficulties in teaching grammar for non-major English students at the practice stage at QuangBinh University. It points out the reality of teaching and learning grammar at this stage and shares with the teachers who have interest in how to reduce difficulties and improve efficiency in the grammar teaching and learning at the controlled practice.*

Keywords: *Difficulties teaching and learning grammar, non-major English students.*

TÓM TẮT: *Bài nghiên cứu này nhằm chỉ ra một số khó khăn trong quá trình dạy và học ngữ pháp cho sinh viên không chuyên ngữ ở đại học Quảng Bình. Bài nghiên cứu vạch ra thực trạng dạy và học ở giai đoạn thực hành và cùng chia sẻ với những giáo viên tiếng Anh quan tâm đến việc giảm thiểu khó khăn và tăng cường tính hiệu quả. Từ đó, bài viết đưa ra một số giải pháp để khắc phục khó khăn và ứng dụng các giải pháp để dạy ngữ pháp một cách hiệu quả.*

Từ khóa: *Khó khăn, giải pháp, dạy ngữ pháp tiếng Anh, sinh viên không chuyên ngữ.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been applied in every ESL/EFL teacher's classroom, but it does not mean that grammar is not taught. There is no doubt that knowledge of grammar is extremely necessary for the mastery of a language and also helps the learner to be competent at communicating. According to Canale (1983), there are four communicative competence: grammatical competence, socio-linguistic competence, discourse and strategic competence. To show a crucial importance of grammatical competence.

In fact, most of the teachers have positive attitudes towards the communicative approach, but in the process of teaching, they also have difficulties in teaching grammar communicatively. As a teacher of English, the writer recognizes some difficulties in teaching and learning grammar in a communicative way. The problem is that students' English knowledge is still low and the time for them to study English is not long enough to grasp the grammar instruction. In this case, learning and teaching methods and motivation for students are highly in need to be

considered.

2. THE CONCEPTS INVOLVED IN LEARNING AND TEACHING GRAMMAR FOR BUILDING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

The role of grammar in English teaching

It is clear that "communication cannot take place in the absence of structure and grammar" (Savignon, 368). Similarly, language cannot exist in the absence of grammar.

Basic principles of grammar teaching

Dealing with the role of grammar, Thornbury (1999:25-27) draws up some basic rules of thumb (principles) for grammar teaching - rule of thumb is considered as the criteria for evaluating the practical approaches. Grammar presentation and practice activities are evaluated according to how efficient they are (the E-factor) and how appropriate they are (the A-factor).

The E-Factor: Efficiency = economy, ease, and efficacy

Three factors of efficiency: Economy, ease, and efficacy.

Economy is a key factor in the training of technical skills: when learning how to drive a car or operate a computer, the more the instructor piles on instructions, the more confused the trainee is likely to become. It is similar in language teaching. Be economical, too, in use of planning and resources.

Ease means that teachers should choose suitable activities with their students' level and goals. The ease factor helps both teachers and students reach their purposes in the shortest way. The easier an activity is to set up, the better it is.

Efficacy of a grammar activity can be partly shown by the degree of attention it arouses. However, attention must be with understanding because attention without understanding may be a waste of time, so efficacy will be partly based on the amount and quality of contextual information, explanation and checking.

Efficiency, then, can be defined as the optimal setting of three factors: economy, ease and efficacy. These factors have a close link to each other.

The A-factor: Appropriacy

The appropriacy of an activity takes into account:

- the age of the learners
- their level
- the size of the group
- learners' needs and interests
- learners' attitudes and expectations
- the available materials and resources

- cultural factors
- the educational context

Characteristics of practice activities

According to Thornbury (1999:92), a practice activity for accuracy has the following characteristics:

• **Attention to form:** The practice activity should motivate learners to want to be accurate. They should focus on how they are saying rather than what they are saying.

• **Familiarity:** Learners need to be familiar with the language that they are trying to get right.

• **Thinking time:** monitoring for accuracy is easier and therefore more successful if there is sufficient time available to think and reflect.

• **Feedback:** Learners need unambiguous messages as to how accurate

they are - this traditionally takes the form of correction.

Criteria for assessing accuracy in practice activities

In "The ELTTP Methodology course - skills & Testing", there are three criteria to assess accuracy:

- **Grammar:** At this stage, students can apply grammar points/structures they have just taught. Students use correct order, words, tenses, agreement, etc. to make sentences. They may practice different sorts of exercises for accuracy.

- **Vocabulary:**

Students have a range of vocabulary that corresponds to the syllabus year list and use words teachers have taught.

- **Pronunciation:** Students follow correct pronunciation. When they speak most people will understand.

The roles of the teacher and the student in grammar teaching and learning

The roles of the teacher

The teacher has a variety of roles to play not the same two or three roles found in the traditional classroom. Until now, many researchers have studied the teacher's roles in CLT such as Littlewood, W (1981), Nunan, D (1984), Harmer, J (1991), Brown, D (1994), Prodromou, (1994).

They focus on that the teacher is no longer in control in the class, but he finds himself with many parts to play. According to Prodromou (1994:24), the teacher can act roles as friend, manager, monitor, facilitator of learning, counsellor, reliable informant on the language, social worker, model for the students, etc. The fact that there may be many more roles of the teacher than those listed above, and what roles the teacher has depends on his /her students in certain situations.

The roles of the student

In term of CLT, approaches learner-centered instruction, the student's roles are required to become more dominant in language learning. The student's roles are expressed clearly at each stage of a grammar lesson. At the practice stage, the stage for accuracy, as a careful participant, he is given more chance to use the new language in a controlled environment.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research methods: With the data of 45 non-major English students' questionnaires, interviews and some teachers' observations. The paper uses collection, analyses and contrast methods to find out the results.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Students' feelings toward learning grammar

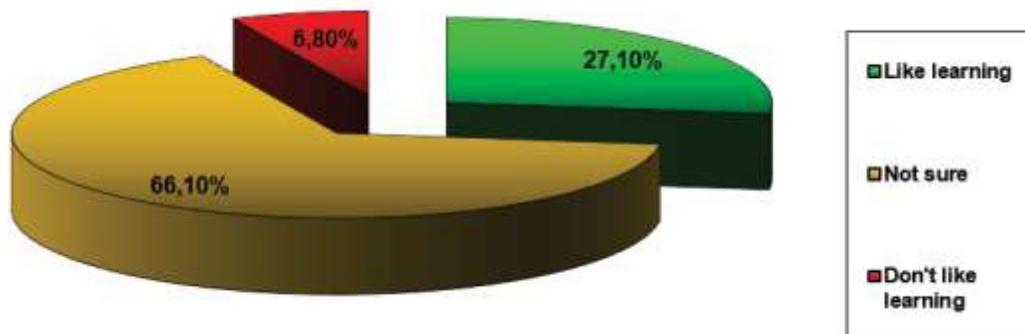


Figure 1. Students' feelings toward learning grammar

It is believed that young people are often enthusiastic to learn English well. Many learners think English is interesting but difficult. Others consider learning grammar is one of the difficult aspects of language learning. Although learning grammar is not easy for many students, figure 1 shows that only 27.10% of the students like learning grammar lessons. In fact, some students who were interviewed revealed that although they cannot speak English well, they still like grammar lessons.

Besides, figure 1 points out that 66.10% of the students are not sure that they like or do not like learning grammar. In particular, 6.80% of them admitted that they don't like learning grammar. In fact, it may be difficult for these students to participate actively in grammar practice. From the students' interests, the teacher needs to develop appropriate ideas and involve as many students possible in grammar lessons.

4.2. Teachers' activities at the Practice stage

<i>The practice stage</i>	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Designing a set of exchanges for pair work practice	4 (44.44%)	5 (55.56%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Correcting students' mistakes immediately	2 (22.22%)	4 (44.44%)	3 (33.33%)	0 (0%)
Talking Time	1 (11.11%)	5 (55.56%)	3 (33.33%)	0 (0%)

Table 1. Some Teachers' activities at the Practice stage

Table 1 shows that 44.44% of the teachers of English at Quang Binh have experience in designing a set of exchanges for pair work practice. It is necessary for students to use a set of exchanges for pair work practice in which students can ask and answer questions using the target item they have learnt. It helps students have more to practice for accuracy. This activity makes free practice easier for the students later, but more than a half of them, 55.56% sometimes do it. This is not a very satisfactory figure.

However, when having investigated the frequency of the teachers' correction, a few teachers (22.22%) often correct students' mistakes and 44.44% of them sometimes do this work. As we know

making mistakes is unavoidable and mistakes are a natural part of in the learning process. In spite of the value of this, 33.33% of the teachers rarely correct students' mistakes. It shows that they hardly give an opportunity to students to correct mistakes with each other and the teacher has no chance to reduce the element of teacher domination at this stage. It is probably that some of them do not realise the importance of correction, they are not sure which stages of teaching grammar students' mistakes must be corrected or they want to do this but they have difficulty in correcting students' mistakes.

The appropriate amount of TTT for each stage of a lesson is one of the requirements of a good language teacher.

Language teacher must find strategies for maximising the amount of student talking time (STT). Table 1 shows that 11.11% of the teachers often have longer amount of TTT than STT at the practice stage, and up to 55.56% of them sometimes have longer amount of time than students' talking time. It is good that 33.33% of the teachers affirm that teacher talk is rarely longer than student talk. In reality, based on some class observations, some teachers' lessons have become unsuccessful because of much teacher talking time.

4.3. Materials for students

With the support of class observations and interviews we can see that 78.89% of the teachers often base on sources of material in the textbooks for grammar practice. This is a cause for concern as it appears that there are too many teachers who are highly dependent on the textbooks. If the teacher always follows the textbook, he will make students think that it is enough for them to learn everything in the textbooks. This figure shows that the teachers should not follow the textbooks heavily. As Lewis and Hill (1992:9) also agree: "Inevitably, teachers tend to follow the book, deciding in advance how long they can spend on each unit so that they will finish the book in a certain time. But the object of the course is to teach the students, not finish the book".

Besides, 51.63 % of the students answered that they usually work in pairs and groups for grammar practice. Many of them are active learners with the encouragement from the teacher or friends, but some acknowledge that they are not active in grammar tasks and they pay little attention to the teacher. It's not interesting

that 19.35% of them are not afraid to admit to their weakness. They don't pay attention to how well they participate in activities in pairwork and groupwork activities and they sometimes work individually without supporting.

5. SOLUTIONS

The Practice stage is aimed at achieving accuracy in communication. The students are asked to practise the new language materials they have just learnt. The teacher uses different sorts of exercises to make the students practise: drills followed by pair work are the most common way of organising practice. At this stage, practice is controlled and learners are not worrying too much about meaning but they are able to devote attention to form and meaning. Hence, there are some following suggestions to give more opportunities for students to practise the new language as well as to reduce the teachers' and students' difficulties at the practice stage.

5.1. Increasing the amount of student interaction in pairwork and groupwork

In Communicative Language Teaching, the class must be well-organised which means the teacher must have made sure about which task, as well as who will work with whom and what kind of work arrangement will be used.

Good work arrangements create a more relaxed classroom atmosphere and give students greater motivation to practise the target language. It provides students with an opportunity to work with different members in different situations. In this case, the teacher tries his best to remember some strong students and weak ones so that he doesn't put all the strong students together or not all the weak ones in the same

group. The more teacher mixes them up, the easier it will be.

Another way is that the teacher lets students start with self-selected groupings. By this way, students are working with people they like.

For large and multilevel classes, the teacher should divide it into small groups as Thornbury (1999:111) suggests: "Obviously, the smaller the group, the better the chance of all students participating, but a lot also depends on the group dynamic that has been created".

5.2. Improving the roles of the teacher

The teacher plays an important role at the practice stage, because he/she should act roles as monitor, model for the students, facilitator of learning, counsellor, reliable informant on the language. The fact that there may be many more roles of the teacher than those listed above, and what roles the teacher has depends on his /her students in certain situations. Likewise, the student's roles today are entirely different from their roles were in traditional methods of learning. As Champeau de Lopez (1994:16) describes: "Now, the student is not simply a passive receptacle into which the teacher pours knowledge", but "it is the learner who must assimilate the language and allow it to become part of him". Teachers should have not only abroad background knowledge but also abilities to combine the teacher's essential roles in order to help students in the practising process.

It is obvious that during the practice stage the teacher is almost in control because he uses TTT to give drills, work with students, correct students' mistakes for

accuracy. The teacher has to correct students' mistakes when necessary and helps them understand: "the main principle of correction is that self-correction is best" (Lewis and Hill, 1992:91). It does not mean the teacher must spend far too much time talking because the student is a person who needs to practise language, not the teacher. The teacher should focus on the balance between teacher talk and student talk and using English effectively during this stage. What will happen if the teachers become freer while students practice the new language in pairs or groups?

5.3. Using teaching aids to teach grammar

Make sure how to use power-point and projectors before using them and practise working with power-point as much as possible.

To overcome photocopying constraints, the teacher points out that it is necessary for students to use handouts like learning materials as a basis of a communicative activity. They make students' learning easier.

More importantly, the teacher should collect teaching materials from The Internet, magazines, newspapers and real life for meaningful and realistic drills give their students a chance to practise language in a positive way.

6. CONCLUSION

As we discussed above, knowledge of grammar is extremely important for the mastery of a language and also leads the learner to be competent at communicating. When teaching grammar, both teachers and students meet several obstacles. A teacher, however, is usually the first to

actively reduce such academic difficulties that his or her students meet by strengthening class, management skills, involving in different teaching activities, and especially choosing appropriate, appealing materials for each learner's specific level. Learners should be continuously assisted with enhancing their

English skills in a long period of time instead of a short term of one or two days by raising the awareness of studying grammar, benefits of group /pair study and self-study, those methods are hopefully to bring students learning improvements and better results.

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