REFLECTIONS ON USING SOME COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES
IN TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR

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Abstract:

Grammar is undoubtedly part of a language. Therefore, teaching and learning English grammar is indispensable to teaching and learning English. Poor English grammar will definitely make learners fail to communicate effectively in English. However, English grammar will only help if it is communicatively taught. That is to say, teachers should introduce English grammar in contexts and create practice activities that are close to situations in real life. In this article, the writer gives her own reflections on using some communicative activities including Information-gap activities, Jigsaw activities and Board games in teaching English grammar in the context of the People's Police Academy.

Keywords: English grammar, communicative activities, communication tasks, Information-gap activities, Jigsaw activities, Board games.

1. Introduction

Nowadays communication has become the heart and soul of the human life. The process of communication chiefly deals with speaking, listening, reading and writing. Therefore, it might be argued that there is no need for teaching and learning grammar when teaching and learning a language. Actually, all languages follow grammatical patterns and undoubtedly English is not an exception. Therefore, teaching and learning English grammar plays an important role in teaching and learning English. Eric Hawkins (1984) claimed: "The evidence seems to show beyond doubt that though it is by communicative use in real 'speech acts' that the new language 'sticks' in the learner's mind, insight into pattern is an equal partner with communicative use in what language teachers now see as the dual process of acquisition/learning" [1]. It is clear that we cannot communicate effectively in English if we do not master the essential principles of English grammar. If we imagine language as a big highway and the words are the cars and trucks, then the grammar is definitely the road signs that tell the cars and trucks where to go and how to drive. Without roadsigns, a big highway would quickly descend into total confusion. Without any grammar, we could manage to produce some sort of elementary communication, but we would be unable to form any more complex ideas into words. It follows, therefore, that developing a solid foundation in English grammar will make it easier for us to improve our communication skills in both spoken and written English.

2. Why should English grammar be communicatively taught?

As the ultimate goal of teaching English grammar is to help students communicate effectively in English, grammar points should be connected with communication contexts and teachers should focus on functions and how students use grammar to perform certain communication tasks in their real life. In reality, however, there still exist some problems concerning teaching English grammar. Firstly, it is teachers that formulate the grammar rules as to save time, but it will be better if students are given repeated input of a grammar item to help them draw out the rules themselves. Penny Ur (1995) stated: "If the learners can perceive and define the rule themselves quickly and easily, then there is a lot to be said for letting them do so: what they discover themselves they are more likely to remember" [2]. That is to say, getting the students to think about what the correct answer might be and figure it out for themselves will leave a longer lasting impression in their brain and result in better retention. Secondly, English grammar is often taught separately, not integrated with four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. In grammar lessons, it is common that teachers give the grammar rules and some drills for practicing the learned rules. As a matter of fact, students cannot see how all these rules connected to communicative situations in their everyday life. According to David Nunan (1991), form-focused exercises should progress to meaningful activities which should ultimately give way to tasks where the emphasis

is on successful communication[3]. Therefore, teachers should shift from teaching grammar for grammar's sake to teaching it for communication's sake.

3. Reflections on applying somecommunicative activities for teaching English grammar
3.1. Information-Gap Activities

An important aspect of communication in communicative language teaching is the notion of information gap. This refers to the fact that in real communication, people normally communicate in order to get information they do not possess. This is known as an information gap. More authentic communication is likely to occur in the classroom if students go beyond practice of language forms for their own sake and use their linguistic and communicative resources in order to obtain information. In so doing, they will draw available vocabulary, grammar, and communication strategies to complete a task. Information-gap activities also increase student motivation: students communicate for a purpose as they exchange and collect information needed to complete the task. Information gaps can involve group, pair, or whole-class interaction dynamics, which add variety to a lesson. Besides, information-gap activities incorporate authentic communication situations and materials: teachers can tailor information gap activities to meet students' real spoken English needs, such as asking for and following directions, asking for opinions, and solving problems with others. While teachers should provide level-appropriate scaffolding and language frameworks, communication during information gaps is often unscripted, reflecting the communication format students will encounter in everyday situations.

An information gap can be used in the practice or productive stage of a grammar lesson to re-enforce a pre-taught grammatical feature. It can also be used to review grammar, or used in a speaking class to engage learners in conversations with a communicative purpose. For example, in order to review "have got" the writer has used the "EFIT picture activity" for pre-intermediate students for several times and found it very useful and effective. In this activity, students worked in pairs, sitting back to back. In each pair, one student was given 5 sets of EFIT pictures,the other student was given 5 pictures of criminals. They asked and answered questions about the criminals' appearance using "have got" to find out the criminals. The pair with more correct answers in 2 minutes would win and get a present. From the writer's observation, all students were motivated by this activity. They

seemed to be in a rush to find out as many criminals as possible in 2 minutes. They asked and answered a lot of questions using the target grammatical point. However, students also made mistakes when making conversations themselves. Therefore, the writer always asked some pairs to talk in front of class and gave comments on their conversations.

Actually, there are numerous types of information gaps and the internet has a great variety of these types of resources that can be downloaded and used. One type that is a great way to practice giving directions is to give each partner a map of a city block. Each student has a different map with different places filled in and blanks that they need to ask their partner about in order to find a route to their destination. Another common type of information gap used to practice conversing about future plans is to give pairs or small groups different itineraries or planners. They must use one of the appropriate future tenses to ask about each other's plans and fill in the missing information. This type of activity can be made more challenging so that once the information has been exchanged; the group must negotiate a time to, for example, meet to do a class project. In short, it is always worth applying some information gap activities in an English grammar lesson.

3.2. Jigsaw activities

These are also based on the information-gap principle. Typically, the class is divided into groups and each group has part of the information needed to complete an activity. The class must fit the pieces together to complete the whole. In so doing, they must use their language resources to communicate meaningfully and so take part in meaningful communication practice.

When teaching parts of speech, the writer divided her class into four groups. There are eight parts of speech and each group was a group of experts on two of the parts of speech. Experts had to define, give 5 examples and rules about using the two parts of speech. After students had found out information about the two parts of speech, they formed new groups of experts on all eight parts of speech. They shared their information with experts from different groups and took notes on what they learned from other experts. Then they moved back to their original group and compared what they learned. The writer found the students eagerly walk around the classroom, sharing what they knew with others as well as noting down what others said. They were happy to gain useful knowledge from their friends. They were highly motivated in this activity. However, when the writer applied this activity in a

large-size class another time, it took a lot of efforts to control the class and give feedback to every group. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to take time and class size into consideration before use this activity.

3.3. Board games

In board games, students move around a board with many squares of questions related to the learned grammar points. There might be various rules for moving around but the winner must be the first person to come the square marked "FINISH". Board Game offers students an enjoyable and relaxing learning environment. It permits students to be in a fun surrounding while playing the game. While drawing themselves to the games, the students' attention is on the game, not on the grammar elements. Their aim is to win and not to focus on the correctness of the linguistic elements. This will eliminate the fear of being judged in public that will hamper their will to learn the language. A board game actually helps the students to enjoy and build their self-confidence. It also helps the students to learn and use new words and new structures unconsciously. It is also very important for the educators to make sure that the students have enough practice, be exposed to variety of grammatical structures and have opportunity to embrace the form and function. Moreover, the students have to be encouraged to take risks and evaluate their own learning while playing the games.

Teachers can design their own board games to include the tenses and structures their students have learned, or use any of the ones already available. When teaching tenses the writer always employs board games to make the lesson more communicative. For example, when teaching the simple past tense, the writer designed a board game including 15 questions of all types about what students did when they were at nursery school, primary school, secondary school and high school as well. Students took turns moving their counters along the board. When they landed on a square, they had to answer the question on the square in the past simple tense. If a student failed to answer the question or made a grammatical mistake, they had to move back to their previous square. The winner was the first student to reach the finish. It was quite simple and took the writer just 20 minutes to design. However, the result was surprising. All students in the class seemed to be engrossed in recalling their own memories of what they did at school. They were also interested in listening to their friends' memories. Some students even raised questions to get more information of their friends' answers. However, as the writer observed, it took a great deal of time to play this board game. For large-size classes, the writer recommends that teachers should ask students to form groups of 5 and each group will have a representative to play the game.

4. Conclusion

In short, grammar teaching plays a crucial role in language teaching. By thinking of grammar as a skill to be mastered, rather than a set of rules to be memorized, teachers will probably help students go a long way toward the goal of being able to accurately convey meaning in an appropriate manner. Hopefully, the writer's reflections on using some communicative activities in teaching English grammar in this article will assist teachers in their designing activities to encourage communicative competence.

References

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PHẢN ÁNH VỀ VIỆC SỬ DỤNG MỘT SỐ HOẠT ĐỘNG THỰC HÀNH CÓ TÍNH GIAO TIẾP CAO TRONG GIẢNG DẠY NGỮ PHÁP TIẾNG ANH

Tóm tắt:

Ngữ pháp là một trong những yếu tố cấu thành ngôn ngữ. Bởi vậy, quá trình dạy và học tiếng Anh không thể bỏ qua khâu dạy và học ngữ pháp tiếng Anh. Người học có vốn ngữ pháp nghèo nàn ắt sẽ thất bại trong giao tiếp. Tuy nhiên, việc dạy và học ngữ pháp chỉ thực sự phát huy tác dụng khi nó được tiến hành

theo đường hướng giao tiếp. Nói cách khác, giáo viên cần đặt ngữ pháp trong ngữ cảnh và thiết kế những hoạt động thực hành gần với những tình huống trong thực tế cuộc sống. Bài viết này chia sẻ kinh nghiệm của người viết về việc sử dụng một số hoạt động thực hành có tính giao tiếp cao, bao gồm Information-gap, Jigsaw và Board games trong các giờ giảng ngữ pháp tiếng Anh tại Học viện Cảnh sát Nhân dân.

Từ khóa: *Ngữ pháp tiếng Anh, các hoạt động giao tiếp, nhiệm vụ giao tiếp, các hoạt động Information-gap, các hoạt động Jigsaw, các trò chơi Board games.*