Promoting Grammar Awareness through Task Activities

Muhammad Reza Alizain
Laboratorium Bahasa Fakultas Ekonomi dan Bisnis Islam
Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta
mrealizain@gmail.com

Abstract

Despite the continuous debate regarding whether it is necessary to teach grammar explicitly or implicitly in the language classroom, the debaters could agree that grammar awareness is significant for language learners. Many methods have been conducted by language teachers or researchers to promote language learners' grammar awareness, and one of them is through ideally designed task activities. Grammar awareness is a particular skill in language learning which can be acquired which is quite different from other language skills which deal with language productions or language comprehensions. Grammar awareness is a skill which could allow its possessor to identify the structure of a language rather than the meaning. Therefore, the activities to promote this skill should be logically different from activities to promote either production skills or comprehension skills. The purpose of this paper is to provide several alternatives, especially classroom activities, to promote grammar awareness which can be used effectively.

Keywords: grammar awareness, activities, language, explicitly, implicitly

INTRODUCTION

To begin with, it is a good idea to look at two polar opposites about grammar instruction in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) i.e. to teach or not to teach grammar. These kinds of instructions, to teach or not to teach grammar, have been an ongoing debate among teachers and researchers. Both researchers and teachers have explored the various advantages and disadvantages of explicit grammar instruction and implicit grammar instruction.

In fact, those who support such instructions have their own supporting argument for either allowing second language (L2) learners to naturally acquire grammar rules without any explicit grammar instruction, or those who support creating a special place for explicit grammar instruction in the classroom. Researchers and teachers who support the first claim, which says that learners should learn grammar naturally without explicit instruction, provide Krashen's theory which states that language could be learned naturally and unconsciously without the need of formal grammar instruction in their argument.

In contrast, teachers or researchers who believe that grammar instruction must be taught explicitly in the classroom claim that the only way a language can be properly acquired is by an important concept called

"noticing" or in other words, bringing into awareness the target language forms during input. This argument probably gives the big impact to Krashen and his supporters because it gives strong credibility to the argument that the unconscious process of L1 learning must not be compared to the conscious procedure of L2 learning. Krashen (1982) believes that grammar can only be acquired naturally without explicit instruction since learning do not precede acquisition in second language learning. The utilization and knowledge of grammatical rules may serve as a conscious monitor, enhancing grammatical accuracy.

Another reason why researchers have started paying attention to L2 grammar

grammar learning especially on non-generic English articles.

However, this paper will not discuss which instruction is better. This paper will only focus on promoting grammar awareness on learners because the writer believes that grammar should be considered as a necessary component of language instruction. And this paper will try to elaborate promoting grammar awareness with task activities.

One thing that must be understood in the matter of grammar awareness is not only learners who need it, but also teachers do. The importance of having grammatical awareness among English language teachers has been emphasized by many

instruction is due to Pienemann's "teachability hypothesis". This theory states that certain grammatical structures can only be acquired when learners are ready while others are more easily acquired when L2 learners learn them through teaching.

Nassaji and Fotos (2011) also stated that teaching grammar explicitly is effective as long as the teachers constantly gave the explicit knowledge of grammar to the students through certain activities where the students need to use the correct grammar in order to complete those activities. Moreover Akakura (2012) also found that explicit instruction had more durable effect on students regarding

experts for various reasons. Denham and Lobeck (2002), for instance, states that many English education textbooks point out that teachers must be aware of certain grammatical fundamentals in order to help students recognize patterns of errors.

However, this paper will only discuss the importance of grammar awareness from learners' side. In order to learn a language, one obviously needs lots of exposure to it. The samples of language that learners are exposed to should ideally present some challenge, something new to learn, without being so difficult that the learners are overwhelmed and able to understand little or nothing. This is sometimes expressed as the need for comprehensible input.

However, there is plenty of evidence that comprehensible input alone seldom leads to satisfactory progress in language learning. Learners need to notice features in the samples of the target language they are reading or listening to (Jones & Lock: 2011). Besides through various studies, researchers have come to believe that the only way a language can be properly acquired is by an important concept called "noticing" or in other words, bringing into awareness the target language forms during input. Here is the point where grammar awareness enters.

But, before we discuss it further, it is better to know what grammar awareness is first. Many experts have defined grammar awareness. All of them relate grammar awareness with the ability of recognizing certain pattern or structure in a language. For example, Cain (2007) defines grammar awareness as the ability to manipulate and reflect on the grammatical structure of language. It can be concluded that grammar awareness is a skill that distinct from the comprehension or production of a sentence because it concerns with the ability to consider the structure rather than the meaning of a sentence.

Promoting Grammar Awareness through Task activities

From the earlier discussion, it can be seen that grammar awareness has essential part in the success of second language (L2) learning. So that, it is important to promote learners' grammar awareness in order to increase the success of second language (L2) learning. In this section, this paper will focus on how to promote learners' grammar awareness through task activities. As what this paper has stated earlier, that the only way a language can be properly acquired is by an important concept called "noticing" or in other words, bringing into awareness the target language forms during input.

Tasks that assess grammar awareness must raise learners' noticing or awareness itself. Thornbury (1997) suggests tasks that provide opportunities for noticing are ones that, even if essentially meaning-focused, allow the learner to allocate some "attentional" resources to form, and moreover provide both the data and the incentive for the learner to make comparisons between interlanguage output and target language models.

METHOD

This paper is a perspective piece which means that the writer reviewed one side of the teaching grammar concept especially regarding to promoting grammar awareness through ideally designed task activities which were proposed by Thronbury (1997) and Jones and Lock (2011). Explicit and implicit grammar instructions are also briefly reviewed in the beginning of the paper to give understanding that one of

those two instructions could be as effective as the other; as long as the language learners have this particular skill called grammar awareness.

DISCUSSION

Ideal Tasks for Promoting Grammar Awareness

It is difficult to effectively describe all of the grammatical patterns a learner will need to use in ways learners can both understand and usefully apply. There are many situations in which teachers have trapped themselves into long and confusing explanations because they are committed to explaining to their students how a particular grammatical feature should be used, with the benefit of just one or two sentence level examples.

Secondly, as many teachers have experienced, learners can often successfully apply the rules they have learnt in carefully constructed exercises at sentence level, but do not go on to use the same features correctly in other contexts. This is surprising because, as observed above, the use of a grammatical feature in a particular clause or sentence can seldom be fully accounted for without reference to some context. Perhaps just as importantly, the rules are forced from outside and do not arise from the learners' own experiences of the language. Learners learn best when they discover things for themselves and when

they are able to combine new knowledge with their old knowledge.

Lastly, although the sub-title of this section is 'ideal tasks', there is no perfectly ideal tasks for promoting grammar awareness. However, many scholars and experts have suggested for this matter. For example, just like this paper has mentioned before, Thornbury (1997) suggests ideal tasks for promoting grammar awareness must fulfill certain conditions, i.e. allow the learner to allocate some "attentional" resources to form and provide both the data and the incentive for the learner to make comparisons between *interlanguage* output and target language models.

Another example, Jones and Lock (2011) suggest three activities in teaching and learning processes i.e. 'noticing' - 'exploring' - and 'practising' in promoting grammar awareness. In 'noticing' activities, learners need to notice features in the samples of the target language they are reading or listening to. They also need to notice differences between their own uses of the language and those in the samples. However, without some help, it is difficult to notice important features of the language while one is concentrating simply on understanding what is being said or written.

The next activities are exploring activities. These encourage learners to discover, through interaction with texts, their teachers and their fellow learners, how

the forms they have noticed are used or, more specifically, how they relate to meaning and context. The most important thing about helping students to learn how to explore the possible reasons why certain grammatical features are used in different contexts is that it helps them to become more independent learners.

The last activities are 'practising' activities. In these activities, repetitive practice can be designed to be meaningful and contextual. Practice activities that move the learners on from repetitive practice to practice in using the features to communicate in authentic-like contexts are also needed. Of course, noticing, exploring and practising are not necessarily discrete sequential activities. Learners often, for example, notice in the process of practising or practice using forms at the same time they are exploring how they are used. (Jones and Lock, 2011)

Samples of Tasks for Promoting Grammar Awareness

There are many examples of tasks which can promote learners' grammar awareness that accomplish certain conditions that are suggested by Thurnbury (1997) and Jones and Locks (2011). Below are some examples of tasks for promoting learners' grammar awareness:

Critical Thinking Exercises

Exercise 1 (taken from Discover English, Bolitho/Tomlinson, 1995, p.8):

Why do these nonsense sentences sound acceptable? What kinds of grammar structures are used in these sentences?

1. He crattled his splot and scrot out a neelying groal.

2. They strentered folicly until a magan veened to famble them.

(Objective: Students identify the grammatical markers which identify these sentences as English:

SVO sentence structure, subject pronouns, adjectival participles, past tense verb endings, articles, etc. This brings patterns of language to the fore.)

Exercise 2 (from Discover English, Bolitho/Tomlinson, p. 54):

Why do language learners make errors? Correct the errors in the following sentences and write down what you think might have caused each of the errors.

1. My father is a *cooker*.

2. I *am seeing* a lion in that cage.

3. He *like* football.

4. He *leaves* in a large house.

5. When I *will go* there tomorrow I will visit Mary.

6. I like Boston, because I *can see* snow there.

7. I am going to the lake *for swimming*.

(Objective: Students correct the mistakes, and then with the teacher, think

about why a learner might make such an error. This leads to a greater awareness of types of errors learners make, and of the patterns of grammar and grammar errors).

Self-Grammar Monitoring

Consciousness-raising continues with the following types of exercises designed to simulate real world speaking situations. Another critical aspect of grammar monitoring is learning to listen for mistakes: in videotaped speech, in transcript writing, and in live speech, both as a listener and as a speaker.

1. Students listen to a videotape of a NNES, and try to hear the mistakes that she makes while speaking. Ss. review what they found in groups, then they review a transcript of the videotape to see what they missed, and try to correct the mistakes they find.

2. Students look for grammar mistakes in written transcripts of presentations made by former graduate students, and try to correct the mistakes.

3. Students work in small groups to monitor themselves and each other for grammar errors while making short presentations. They look for patterns of errors, for confusing sentence structures,

mispronunciations that change the grammar of the sentence, etc. Teacher monitors, and then writes some of the more egregious or frequent mistakes on the board for the class to work on together. Students may only hear a few mistakes during this exercise; that's ok. The point is not to correct a huge number of errors, but to begin to listen to oneself again while speaking.

Grammar Monitoring one-on-one with a teacher

As part of all of teachers' classes, they typically make use of students' videotaped in-class presentations (e.g. mock teaching presentations) to do grammar monitoring; the student and the instructor review the presentation sentence by sentence, looking for specific errors. It is critical for the student to see the types of mistakes he/she is making, so that he/she can become more aware of mistakes when speaking in everyday situations. This is a good opportunity to look at a large variety of mistakes with the student, as the student will be receptive to being corrected, and may even catch many of the mistakes his/herself.

Tips for grammar monitoring one-on-one:

1. Use a videotaped presentation.

Students will probably not be able to hear their mistakes while in the course of speaking. It is also very disconcerting to try to speak if someone is correcting you every other sentence. A better strategy is to videotape the student making a presentation, then watch the videotape together. The student will be able to focus better, can take notes on problem areas, and will be able to better build awareness of patterns of grammar errors.

2. Have the student write a transcript of their presentation.

This is particularly useful for students who lack awareness of the frequency and severity of the grammar mistakes they make. Have the student transcribe a videotape of him or herself presenting without correcting it. The student can then read through the transcript with the teacher or tutor, and correct the mistakes in writing on the paper. This has helped many of our students become more conscious of the fact that they are making mistakes much more frequently than they realized.

3. Distinguish between low-level errors and errors that hinder meaning

Some are simple errors that do not hinder the meaning of the sentence, like missing –s endings on plural nouns, but some of the errors are serious, and can cause critical misunderstandings. The errors that cause misunderstandings should take priority over "cosmetic" errors that don't sound nice, but don't necessarily cause problems to the listener.

4. Pick battles.

Teachers probably should not focus on pointing out every single mistake every time one is made. A low-fluency student may not be able to correct mistakes in the course of speaking simply because he/she cannot take the focus away from fluency. Conversely, a high-fluency student may make many mistakes in every sentence. Teachers should use their judgment to decide which and how many errors they will focus on, taking into account the student's level of fluency or other linguistic challenges.

Comparing (taken from Functional Grammar in the ESL Classroom with adaptation)

In *comparing* the learners are presented with two texts which differ systematically in some way. The differences may be related to such things as:

1. mode e.g. a written text vs. spoken text on the same topic

2. tenor e.g. a polite request to a stranger vs. an order to a subordinate

3. time e.g. a description of a place now vs. 100 years ago

4. viewpoint e.g. a crime from the viewpoint of the criminal vs. the victim

5. topic e.g. a description of a specific thing vs. a class of things

Activities guide the learners to notice and to explore the reasons for grammatical differences between the two texts. The general procedure is as follows.

1. Have the students read or listen to two similar texts which differ systematically in at least one area of grammar.

2. Have the students notice the grammatical differences between the two texts.

3. Ask the students to explore the differences with reference to differences in the topics, contexts, or purposes of the texts.

4. Have students practise producing texts similar to the models they have compared.

Lesson plan

Noticing

1. Distribute the sample texts and have students read them.

2. Check their understanding of the main events in the texts.

3. Have students list all the 'main verbs' (i.e. all the **finite verb groups**) in the texts in two columns, the verbs from one text in one column and the verbs from the other in another.

4. Ask students what differences they notice between the forms of the verbs in the two columns.

Exploring

5. Have students discuss the following questions:

   a. In text one did somebody deliberately cause the explosions?

   b. In text two did somebody deliberately cause the explosion?

   c. What difference in meaning is there between 'something exploded' and 'something was exploded'?

6. Give feedback on the students' answers to the questions and then have them discuss the following additional questions.

   a. Which passive voice verbs in text one could be changed to active voice verbs keeping the same subjects?

   b. How would this change the meaning?

c. Which verbs in text two could be changed to passive voice keeping the same subjects?

d. How would this change the meaning?

7. Give feedback on the students' answers to the questions

8. If appropriate, explain that the verbs that can be both active and passive with the same subjects are known as **ergative verbs**

9. Ask the students to decide which of the following verbs which are also ergative verbs: *open*, *close*, *walk*, *fall*, *shatter*, *rise*, *raise*, *lift*, *develop*, *change*, *boil*, *stir*, *heat*. (They may need to consult dictionaries to do this.)

Practising

10. Write the verbs *drop*, *break*, *smash*, *rip*, *open*, *move*, *start*, *stop* on the blackboard. Ask one half of the class to form groups to prepare short accounts of accidental events and ask the other half to prepare short accounts of deliberate events. Both groups should use at least four of the verbs.

11. Have the groups compare and comment on one another's texts.

CONCLUSION

Grammar awareness has essential part in the success of second language (L2) learning. So that, it is important to promote learners' grammar awareness in order to increase the success of second language (L2) learning. Besides through various studies, researchers have come to believe that the only way a language can be properly acquired is by an important concept called "noticing" or in other words, bringing into awareness the target language forms during input.

Tasks that can promote grammar awareness have certain conditions. Thornbury (1997) suggests ideal tasks for promoting grammar awareness must fulfill certain conditions, i.e. allow the learners to allocate some "attentional" resources to form and provide both the data and the incentive for the learner to make comparisons between interlanguage output and target language models. Another expert, Jones and Lock (2011) suggest three activities in teaching and learning processes that can promote learners' grammar awareness i.e. 'noticing' - 'exploring' - and 'practising'. Hopefully there will be researches about implementing the ideally designed activities to promote grammar awareness on language learners

REFERENCES

Akakura, M., 2012. Evaluating the effectiveness of explicit instruction on implicit and explicit L2 knowledge. *Language Teaching Research.* 16(1): 9-37.

Bolitho, Rod, and Tomlinson, Brian (1995). *Discover English: A Language Awareness Workbook.* Oxford: Macmillan Publishers Limited

Cain, Kate. (2007). *Applied Psycholinguistics 28 (2007), 679–694.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Denham, K., & Lobeck, A. (2002). A practical grammar course: A (partially) annotated syllabus in syntax in the schools. *The Journal of the Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar, 18(2), 1-6.*

Jones, Rodney H. and Lock, Graham. (2011) *Functional Grammar in the ESL Classroom Noticing, Exploring and Practising*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Nassaji, H. & Fotos, S. (2011). *Teaching Grammar in Second Language Classrooms.* London: Routledge.

Nassaji, H. and Fotos, S. (2004). Current Developments in Research on the Teaching of Grammar. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 24*, 126-145.

Noonan, F. (2004). Teaching ESL Students to "Notice" Grammar. *The Internet TESL Journal, X* (7).

Pienemann, M. (1999). *Language, Processing and Second Language Development: Processability Theory.* Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Thornburry, S. (1997). *About language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.