An Evaluation of the Communicative Approach and Audio-Lingual Method in Teaching Grammar in a Private High School in Turkey

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Abstract

Finding out efficient ways for grammar teaching in second language learning has always been a great concern. Therefore, in this study, the benefits of teaching grammar through communicative approach and audio-lingual method are discussed in terms of their effects on the proficiency levels of target language learners.

This study was carried out through classroom observations by participating in two classrooms in a private high school in Turkey.

Sixteen students in both classes of all whom were ninth grade were observed. Although they were ninth grade students, their linguistic levels were different: ten elementary students and six intermediate level students. For the elementary level students, grammar teaching was implemented through audio-lingual method, while communicative teaching was applied for the intermediate level students. Data collection was accomplished through observation and interview reports. General findings of this research displayed that applying communicative approach and audio-lingual method in grammar teaching resulted in promising conclusions at different linguistic levels.

Key words: teaching grammar, communicative approach, audio-lingual method

1. INTRODUCTION

Grammar has been one of the fundamental aspects in second language learning and teaching environments. Grammar is usually assumed to be a guide through which words are

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put together to make correct sentences (Ur, 1996). Although most people agree with the idea that knowing grammar of a language means building grammatically correct sentences, grammar deals with combining not only units of a language but also their meaning for communicative purposes (Ur, 1996).

Due to the fact that many language learners know the grammar rules of a language well, but they cannot communicate effectively in that language (Hinkel and Fotos, 2002), the 1980s experienced a movement that grammar can be acquired naturally from meaningful input and opportunities in a classroom environment so as to interact efficiently in the classroom (Demircan, 2001; Richard and Rogers, 2002). If a focus on grammar is a desirable part of classroom language learning, the question that how grammar teaching should be integrated into language classes regarding the needs of target groups needs to be answered.

Second language learners may not always be conscious about their learning styles, but the learners, mostly adult learners, may have strong feelings and opinions about which type of instruction is the best way for them to learn; these beliefs and opinions are mostly based on learners' previous learning experience (Lightbown and Spada, 1999).

Moreover, second language researchers and methodologists generally think that attaining high levels of language competence and performance require instructed learning (Hinkel and Fotos, 2002). In this context, a growing concern about accuracy in learners' language has resulted in a reassertion of the role of grammar in syllabus design and the content of the lessons, and even explicit attention has been attached to grammatical forms and rules (Ellis 1994).

Furthermore, the methodology chosen to teach grammatical system of a language is expected to be fit usefully with learners' needs and expectations. Whatsoever the methodology, grammar teaching is generally instructed in foreign language teaching classes. Of these methods and approaches, teaching grammar through audio-lingual method and communicative approach is discussed in the present study.

1.1. The Audio-lingual Method and Grammar Teaching

The roots of the audio-lingual method can be traced back to structural linguistics where language is seen as a structured system of discrete units and teachers' job is to introduce the grammatical patterns of the foreign language in the learner (Richard and Rogers, 2002). Textbooks for this method are written by structural linguists, who divided language into subsystems (phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics) and tried to describe the structures within each system.

Therefore, in audio-lingual method, structures are presented initially and students drill those structures until they have mastered them orally. The drills are varied in nature and complexity such as repetition, substitution (inflection), replacement, completion, expansion, contradiction, transformation, combination (integration), formation (restoration), question-and-answer, and pronunciation drills (Richards and Rogers, 2002; Demircan, 2001).

In an audio-lingual classroom, teachers treat learners as passive learners, and learning is accomplished in a teacher-centred classroom where students are led through repetitious drills and exercises to form correct habits of pronunciation and sentence word order (Freeman and Freeman, 1992). Therefore, this method is assumed as an application that does not enhance students to create their own plans and leaves the responsibility to teacher until the final exploitation phase when students, having developed correct habits, can now practice using them with full attention on purposeful communication (Cook, 1991).

On the other hand, it favours the spoken form of language as well as graded structure points. The patterns of dialogues are taught to learners through the variety of drills applied in classroom so that they can become habitual. In other words, repetition of the pattern is the key to automaticity in this method (Keskil: 2000). In this sense, learners' attention is oriented towards form, rather than meaning, for its own sake as a separate body of knowledge which may lead to failure in learning how to use it.

1.2. Communicative Approach and Grammar Teaching

The traditional methods have been disregarded on the grounds that teaching grammar does not correlate with acquiring grammar (Ellis, 2002). On the other hand, the communicative approach, which has been common in language teaching environments since the mid-1970s, has created the question whether it is necessary to teach grammar or not, because, according to this approach, the aim of language course is to facilitate language acquisition by giving learners positive feelings towards the instructional process and lowering the affective filter in the classroom (Richards and Rogers, 2002).

Moreover, there exists meaning focused input containing target forms and vocabulary rather than formal grammar instruction in the classroom; thus, learners acquire the forms and vocabulary naturally, during the process of comprehending the input, which is a similar way a child learns the first language (Hinkel and Fotos, 2002).

Although communicative approach has been readily accepted by many experts and language teachers, it has never been totally applied and there are some opposing ideas to the approach. One of the opposing ideas is that the approach poses that explicit grammar teaching is not needed for communication; however, second language researchers and methodologists comment that grammatical competence is essential for communication (Freeman and Freeman, 1992; Richards and Rodgers, 2002).

In addition, grammar instruction should not be dismissed altogether, for there is at present, no convincing evidence that to do so would ultimately be beneficial to second or foreign language learners, especially those who need to achieve a high level of proficiency and accuracy (Celce-Murcia, 1991). Furthermore, functions of language specified to be practiced in class may not prepare students to work with academic content they need in schools (Freeman and Freeman, 1992).

There exist other opposing ideas about communicative syllabuses, which are acknowledged to be equally inadequate because of their neglect of grammar instruction, tending to produce fossilization and classroom pidgins and lower levels of accuracy than

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would be the case under formal instruction (Skehan and Foster, 2001). In this case, integrating grammar instruction with communicative language learning may be supportive. Thus, learners can recognize the properties of target structure in context and develop accuracy in use (Hinkel and Fotos, 2002).

In other words, students may learn grammatically correct structures but the crucial point is whether they are appropriate for different situations. Hence, just memorizing the structures cannot be satisfactory for using the target language, but what is important is to be able to use the language in natural situations by performing the linguistic forms, meanings, and functions.

Although both communicative approach and audio-lingual method do not focus on grammar teaching as a primary goal, in this study the implementation of grammar teaching through them in real classroom environments was observed and evaluated.

2. METHOD

The purpose of the study is to examine and discuss how grammar teaching is implemented in language classes in a private high school in Edirne, Turkey. For observation, two ninth grade classes were chosen. Despite their same grade levels, linguistic levels of the students were grouped as elementary and intermediate. Such an application in the language classes has been implanted in the mentioned private high school regarding the students' language performances. The aim is to educate the students according to their linguistic levels efficiently.

2.1. Participants

The research group in this study consisted of 16 ninth grade students who were grouped in two classes. The first group consisted of 10 students at elementary level, and the latter one consisted of 6 students at intermediate level.

2.2. Data Collection

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Data was collected through classroom observations and interview reports of the students and the teacher. Classroom observations were conducted as non-participant observations. The students were observed in the classroom atmosphere once a week for five weeks. Observation and interview reports were used for data analysis.

2.3. Data Analysis

The first research group was FL $9A_1$. This group consisted of six intermediate level students. The lessons were tutored by means of a course book titled "Solutions Intermediate" which was chosen by their teacher. The course book covers all language skills, so the lessons which were observed included other teaching skills in addition to grammar teaching. In order to relate the classroom observations to the study, a sample lesson from each class which was grammar oriented is presented below:

In the lesson, the distinction between the past continuous and the simple past tenses was addressed. The teacher created a situation by stating those tenses, and after that, the tenses were given in a context. The students were encouraged to figure out the rules inductively by underlining the structures that were new for them. Then, they were given instructions to tell what they understood. During the lesson, usual mistakes were observed especially while constructing 'when-while' sentences. It was monitored that they only confused about using the past simple or the past continuous while deciding upon which one to use, but, in general sense, they learnt the subject well and used the structures they had learnt properly while speaking and writing. As they did not have any problem with the vocabulary given in the context, they felt themselves more confident.

The other group consisted of 10 students from the class FL $9A_2$, and their level was elementary. The teacher conducted the lesson by means of their course book "Solutions Elementary". Extra materials such as worksheets were also provided for the students. The teacher initially applied the communicative approach for teaching grammar.

Firstly, a text covering the structure of the present simple tense was given. They gave no reaction to the text. Later, the teacher gave them just the sentences in the present simple tense without referring to the context but the result was not different. Then the teacher gave

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them the rules of the structure and explained them in detail by constructing simple sentences. They mastered the rules and sentences orally. They tried to form their own sentences by listening to the model sentences given by the teacher and by inserting the cues into the right place in the sentences. After the repetition drills, they began to use the simple present tense. As a task, they were encouraged to tell their habits and regular activities by using the tense. Some common mistakes were observed, especially while using 's' suffix after singular verbs or using question forms with 'does-do'.

In addition to the observations, both the teacher and the students were interviewed. The main topics of the questions were on grammar teaching through communicative approach and audio-lingual method at different linguistic levels.

3. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The teacher of the course indicated that the lessons were difficult and boring for the students at elementary level when grammar was taught in a context. The teacher had difficulty when she tried to create a natural classroom setting; she also stated that the students felt confused while discovering the rules on their own. Moreover, she declared that this process was time consuming.

On the other hand, the teacher supported the idea that teaching grammar in a communicative approach was very beneficial and efficient in her lessons. She indicated that, in general sense, the students having a higher proficiency level in English preferred learning grammar rules within a context and in functional situations since the lessons became more enjoyable. Hence, the students got motivated towards English lessons.

After the lessons were observed by the researchers, the students were interviewed about how they learnt grammar effectively. The comments of the students in FL9A$_1$ were as follows:

Berke Cenktuğ Korucu: "I had no problem to understand the rules in context. It is more meaningful to me."

Onur Arabacı: "It is easier to understand the grammar rules from a text."

Buğra Ekuklu: "I love reading so when I see a text; I try to understand it much more carefully, so grammar rules are easier to understand from a text for me."

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Sevgi Günüşen: "It isn't very different to me, but within a context, it is more enjoyable for me. Just rules, very boring."

Aybike Şimşek: "I like grammar but when I just see the rules, I confuse them a lot, but when I see in a text, I see it in sentences, so I understand well and I don't forget."

Alara Eren: "I agree with Aybike. It is easier and more enjoyable for me when I see the context."

As seen in the comments, in this research group, the students preferred learning grammar in a context rather than just learning the rules through certain repetitions or structures.

The comments of the students in FL9A$_2$ were as follows:

Bahadir Aydemir: "I don't understand the text. I should see the rules, otherwise I don't understand anything."

Fatih Erduğan: "I can understand the text but I forget if I don't see the rules on the board."

Dilsu Çolpan: "I agree with Fatih. I cannot understand the text but when I see the rules, I am sure that I have understood."

Büşra Zofun: "I understand when I see the text but if I don't see the rules, I can't use it or do well in exams.

Berk Karaoğlu: "I should see the rules, without rules, how can I speak or write?"

Berk Atmaca:" I don't understand the text- Nothing! I can only understand the rules."

İbrahim Erden: "I can only understand a text by learning the rules.

Kerem İşbaşaran: "I should see the rules on the board, and write it down. It is easier to study at home and do exercises."

Hande Sağ: "I don't understand when the teacher writes a text or gives the structures in a situation, but when she teaches the rules first, I understand better and I can build sentences"

Çağla Muyan: "I should see the grammar rules, because without it, I understand nothing. How can I make a sentence if I don't see the rules on the board?"

These comments display that the students at elementary level learnt grammar better when certain grammatical rules were thought by repetition drills.

4. DISCUSSIONAND SUGGESTIONS

This study aimed to clarify the efficiency of teaching grammar through communicative approach and audio-lingual method. In order to focus on the purpose, the researchers observed two different classrooms consisted of two different linguistic levels. At the end of the study, it was seen that teaching grammar through communicative approach and audio-lingual method can be efficient on the proficiency levels of the students at different levels. While communicative approach was efficient on the intermediate level students, audio-lingual method had positive impacts on the elementary level students. The latter group had difficulty in understanding the context and functions of language within a context. Such an outcome may be due to the fact that they are not accustomed to using the foreign language efficiently in contextual situations.

On the other hand, it became that the use of communicative approach was an efficient and a productive way for the students who had a background in the target language, since they became more motivated through the communicative items when learning a foreign language. The grammatical structures were considered as boring for them, so they might prefer learning grammar by means of communicative tools.

In the study, it was seen that the teacher also claimed that learning grammar inductively could create obstacles for the students at elementary level while understanding the foreign language, because it might form a barrier for the students when learning the language. However, teaching grammar in communicative approach was useful for the students who were above elementary level, and it created more enjoyable and efficient learning and teaching environments.

To conclude, each method or approach can have different effects on different student groups at different proficiency levels, so the lessons should be conducted by means of appropriate methods or approaches which are determined according to the learning groups. In this sense, foreign language teachers need analyse the needs of their students. Students' proficiency levels should be clearly determined, and the ways they learn the subjects better should be taken into consideration

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