# Grammar Teaching in the Communicative Classroom

## Based on Focus on Form Theory

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*Abstract*—Grammar teaching is debated a lot related to its being taught or not in the field of second language teaching. 'Focus on form', suggesting that attention to form should be encouraged in communicative language classrooms, has aroused an increasing interest in the field of second language teaching methods. However, no systematic explicit grammar instruction is included in form-focused instruction. On the basis of the features of the EFL setting in China, two patterns of grammar teaching, which are divided into inductive and deductive approaches, are advocated as the adapting of 'focus on form' from ESL (English as a second language) setting to an EFL setting. Meanwhile, systematic explicit grammar instruction by the teacher is combined with task-based language teaching.

*Keywords—form-focused instruction; grammar teaching; communicative classroom*

## I. Introduction

The issues of "whether grammar should be taught or not" and "how to teach grammar" have long been the focus of debate by many linguists and educators worldwide. Many of them have done research and written papers on the topic. Practice proves that it is a desirable method to teach grammar by applying form-focused instruction. We can integrate form-focused instruction into grammar teaching and teach grammar inductively and deductively. Form-focused instruction has always been a controversial issue for the researchers and language teachers in the field of second language acquisition. The early research took "method" as the object with the comparison of different opinions of languages and language teaching. The basis of the research is that form-focused instruction in language teaching has a sound foundation, while the focus of argumentation is that whether form-focused instruction is explicit or implicit. However, these researches prove fruitless finally. There is no way to prove which method mentioned above is better. Meanwhile, on the basis of the achievements and methods of the first language acquisition, the researchers of second language start to research how to acquire the second language in the natural environment. The results show that learners usually obey the natural order in the acquisition and the same in certain grammatical structures. Therefore, the function of form-focused instruction began to be questioned. Krashen (1981) and the later Schwartz (1993) proposed that grammar can only be acquired unconsciously

from understandable in-put by the learners. Grammar teaching or error-correction has no influence on the target language system at all. Under the influence of this point of view, form-focused instruction had once been discarded in the language classroom. At the same time, many comparisons and experiments shows two contradictory findings. First, learners with form-focused instruction prove to be faster and higher in the speed of learning and language level, which shows that form-focused instruction is helpful in language acquisition (Long, 1983). Second, the order of acquisition of the two kinds of learners is completely the same. Form-focused instruction seemingly cannot change the order of acquisition (Ellis, 1984). However, these experimental results are not emphasized enough. In the most recent 10 years, directive theory of language teaching has changed greatly. People begin to find it is not enough to only put the learner in the target language environment. The research of process of natural acquisition proves that if the second language study is only experiential and/or communication-centered, though supplying learners with enough understandable in-put and chances of communication, they cannot acquire many grammatical structures and the accuracy of language cannot reach the desired level. Therefore, researchers begin to reconsider the status and function of form-focused instruction in language learning. On the basis of the early research, they put forwards that form-focused instruction undoubtedly is helpful in the language acquisition. If only with natural acquisition, the function of it would be completely shown. Its function is to promote the process of acquisition while not changing the process of acquisition (Ellis, 2001). Therefore the recent research is how to integrate form-focused instruction with communicative teaching. In one aspect, we can preserve a real, natural, learner-centered classroom environment; in another aspect, this can promote the effective development of target language to assure the efficiency of acquisition.

## II. Problems in Grammar Teaching

Though great progress has been made, there are still some problems in teaching English grammar in China: the methods are dull, outdated and simplistic; the effects of teaching English grammar are very unsatisfactory; most students lack systematic grammar knowledge; although they are not poor in

grammar examinations, they always make various oral and written mistakes in application.

Grammar teaching is an extremely important part of foreign language teaching but there exist two universal problems. One is that it is ineffective: during class, teachers explain grammar rules one by one, and students seem to understand and they have done many related exercised, but when they speak and write, they still make many grammar mistakes. This is called Inert Knowledge by Whitehead (1929). The other is that the students feel that grammar teaching is very dull and boring. Therefore they have no interest in learning. Diane Larsen-Freeman suggests that teachers and students must change their beliefs in grammar. Teachers can not regard grammar as fixed and rigid rules, but we should consider it as a skill, and we must teach students grammar like the four skills. We should cultivate students' ability to use grammar structures accurately, meaningfully and appropriately.

If grammar instruction is appropriate for a class, the teacher's next step is to integrate grammar principles into a communicative framework, since the fundamental purpose of language is communication. Unfortunately, grammar is often taught in isolated, unconnected sentences that give a fragmented, unrealistic picture of English and make it difficult for students to apply what they have learned in actual situations.

Many teachers only focus on forms and infusing knowledge of grammar by repetitious instruction, but neglect training the students' ability to communicate and use the English language. They often spend most of their time explaining dull, complex grammar rules. The practice of attaching great importance to form but underestimating language communication has long been involving in our ELT. Whether communication serves language or language serves communication has been the point of issue.

## III. THEORY OF FOCUS-ON-FORM

The term form is often taken to refer exclusively to grammar; in fact it need not and should not. 'Focus on form' can be directed at phonology, vocabulary, grammar, or discourse. Thus the term "form" is intended to include phonological, lexical, and grammatical aspects of language. It should also be noted that the term "form" does not exclude considerations of meaning. Form of language carries meaning, and meaning is expressed by form. If there is no form existing, there is no meaning at all. While meaning is emphasized in current English classrooms, form should not be ignored. We should not emphasize grammar too much in English classroom teaching following the nature of language and the laws of language teaching. However, it does not mean grammar can be ignored in classroom.

One of the current concerns of applied linguists is centered on the most effective form of grammar instruction in the communicative classroom. The debate revolves around the degree to which teachers need to direct learners' attention to understanding grammar while retaining a focus on the need to communicate. 'Focus on form' refers to how focal attention resources are allocated. It often consists of an occasional shift

of attention to linguistic code features - by the teacher and/or by one or more students - triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production. 'Focus on form' overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication This definition above identifies two essential characteristics of FonF: (1) Attention to form occurs in lessons where the overriding focus is meaning or communication, and (2) attention to form arises incidentally in response to communicative need.

## IV. THE APPLICATION OF FORM-FOCUSED INSTRUCTION IN EFL CLASSROOM

The Mohamed study indicated that "both deductive and inductive tasks are effective learning tools that could be used in the language classroom to make learners aware of form, where explicit instruction is necessary". So two patterns of grammar teaching which are divided into deductive and inductive approaches for the EFL context in China are proposed. Generally speaking, in deductive teaching, a grammatical structure is presented initially and then practiced in one way or another. In inductive teaching, learners are first exposed to examples of the grammatical structure and are asked to arrive at a metalinguistic generalization on their own; there may or may not be a final explicit statement of the rule. But in the inductive approach the author provides, a final explicit statement of the rule should be included.

### A. The Deductive Approach

The deductive approach can be divided into four steps, which are the following: a) explicit formal instruction of grammar; b) consciousness-raising input; c) deductive structure-based tasks; d) corrective feedback of errors.

In the deductive approach of teaching grammar, the first step is to give explicit formal instruction on grammar points by the teacher. This step is aimed at assisting learners to notice grammar forms, thus to raise their consciousness on the target grammar.

Then learners are provided with input flood which includes the target grammar point. The reading exercise provides further examples of use of the structures in meaningful contexts. Here the primary focus of the learners is the meaning of the passage. In order to make the learners pay attention to the target grammar point while focusing on meaning, the target grammar point should occur in the passage repeatedly. Besides the repeated occurrence of the target grammar point, teachers can use other, more direct ways to raise the learners' consciousness, such as bolding, italics, and underlining. The target form can also be typographically enhanced through enlargement and different combinations of the previous techniques. The type of enhancement should be varied from activity to activity to maximize the novelty of the technique and to increase the likelihood that students would attend to forms. The aim of this step is also to raise the learners' consciousness of the target form, and make the learners understand the usage of the target form while giving their primary attention to meaning.

The third step is a production stage. What the teachers do is design tasks in which the target grammar point is the necessary part to complete the tasks. This requires that learners must use the feature in order to complete the task successfully; if they fail to use it, they will not be able to achieve a satisfactory outcome. In this respect, the target feature becomes the "essence" of the task. At this stage, the tasks the teacher designs had better ensure the "task-essentialness" of the target form in order to test whether the learners have grasped the target form or not.

The last step is error correction. Teachers can use the techniques included in FonF instructions such as recast and explicit feedback to correct the errors made by the learners. Thus the students can raise their attention to form again and make progress in internalizing the target form.

For example, if comparative forms of adjectives and adverbs are the grammar points, students will learn in the deductive approach, the first step is the teacher-fronted instruction on the rules of the comparative forms of adjectives and adverbs. Then the students will read passages which contained the target forms. The target forms are enhanced by typographical input flood. Next, purely communicative tasks are designed so that learners must use the target structure to complete the tasks. The learners will be requested to exchange information about features of two cities and then compare the features. In order to complete the task, the learners have to understand and produce various comparative forms. Then correction should be given on the basis of the errors that the learners made.

## B. The Inductive Approach

To carry out the inductive approach, five steps are included. These steps include: a) consciousness-raising input; b) inductive structure-based tasks; c) explicit formal instruction of grammar; d) productive tasks; and e) corrective feedback on errors.

In the inductive approach, the first step is consciousness-raising input. This step is quite the same as step two in the deductive approach. When the learners give their attention to the meaning of the passage, the target forms occur in the given passage repeatedly and are typographically enhanced through enlargement and different combinations of the following techniques such as bolding, italics, and underlining. Thus the learners' awareness of how the target structure is used in context is increased. Here, the type of enhancement should also be varied from activity to activity to maximize the novelty of the technique and to increase the likelihood that students would attend to forms.

After the learners' consciousness has been raised, the next step is to ask the students to arrive at a metalinguistic generalization of the target form on their own and explain the observed use of the structure.

Then the teachers should give explicit formal instruction of the grammar to check whether the students get right generalization or not, so continued awareness is facilitated. The formal instruction here can help the learners activate their

previous knowledge of the form and integrate the new material with what they have already known.

The next step is productive tasks. In this step, productive tasks which include the production of the target form are assigned to the learners to test the internalization of the target form. Teachers should also follow the principles of task design mentioned in the deductive approach. This step is used to check whether the learners can use the target form freely and correctly while communicating with others.

The last step is corrective feedback. This step is the same as the last step of the deductive approach.

If comparative forms of adjectives and adverbs are taught in an inductive way, the steps will be different. The first step is typographical input flood. When the students read passages for meaning, their awareness of the target structure is increased as well. Then the students are asked to describe the observed use of the structure and get a metalinguistic generalization of the comparative forms on their own. Teachers give explicit instruction on the rules of comparative forms to help the learners check their findings. In the next step, purely communicative tasks are designed so that learners must use the target structure to complete the tasks. The content of the task is to require the learners to exchange information about features of two cities and compare the features. For the purpose of completing the task, the learners have to understand and produce various comparative forms. The last step is to give learners feedback on the errors and continuously increase their consciousness and thus help them internalize the correct form.

## V. CONCLUSION

The advocacy of two patterns of grammar teaching which allow systematic explicit grammar instruction in the communicative classroom based on the EFL context in China is to promote the grammar teaching and foreign language teaching in China. Through the use of the modified FonF activities, the Chinese students can get examples of grammar used in meaningful context as well as the communicative situation. Thus we can find a proper position for grammar teaching in the communicative classroom to promote Chinese learners' grammatical competence as well as their communicative ability.

In fact, there is no final conclusion on grammar teaching in the field of applied linguistics. Our intention is to find a pedagogically sound and empirically grounded position for grammar in the communicative classroom and to show the necessity of systematic explicit grammar instruction as a pedagogical choice of grammar teaching in the communicative classroom in China. With the development of applied linguistics and foreign language teaching, teachers will surely find an appropriate way of teaching grammar in his or her communicative classroom on the basis of the pedagogical principles, classroom context and learners in his or her classroom.

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