

INNOVATION OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR TEACHING METHOD THROUGH COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

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Abstract: *In the current era of an integrated economy, English has become a tool for international communication. Therefore, innovating English teaching and learning methods to improve learners' communication ability is becoming increasingly important in educational institutions. The introduction of the communicative approach in English teaching method has brought a lot of effects, especially for teaching and learning English grammar. Thanks to this method, learners can promote their English communication ability. The article is based on the author's teaching practical base and English grammar learning ability of students who are studying basic English courses at Hanoi Open University in general to analyze the current situation, thereby proposing some solutions to improve teaching methods of English Grammar for non-major students at Hanoi Open University.*

Keywords: *English grammar, communication tools, communicative approach, grammar teaching, teaching method.*

I. Introduction

Currently, knowing how to use English is one of the indispensable conditions for students to find the desired job after graduation. However, one of the most disturbing facts is that the majority of university graduates in Vietnam still cannot use English fluently. Facing this situation, universities have been trying to promote and innovate English teaching and learning, especially training programs and teaching methods, in order to improve the ability of students to use English so that they can meet the strict requirements of employers and can easily find a job as desired.

In today's integration trend, we cannot deny the great role of foreign languages in general and English in particular. It can be said that English is an international language because it is an effective communication device that unites countries around the world. English teaching methods at educational institutions have had a lot of positive innovations in recent years, including foreign language teaching applying the Communicative Language Teaching method, teachers use this method to teach language for communicative purposes. The learner's communicative capacity must be

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the communicative target. The purpose of learning English is to communicate - this is very suitable for the integration trend of Vietnam, in line with the Foreign Language Teaching and Learning Project for the period 2008-2020 approved by the Prime Minister on September 30, 2008: "By 2020, the majority of Vietnamese youth graduated from high schools, colleges and universities with sufficient foreign language capacity to use independently, confidently in communicating, studying and working in an inclusive, multilingual and multicultural environment, turning foreign languages into strengths of Vietnamese people, serving the cause of industrialization and modernization of the country".

As mentioned above, although there has been a lot of innovation in English teaching methods, mainly implemented for the teaching activities at four skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing; meanwhile, grammar teaching has not yet received the attention it deserves. Therefore, many institutions have approached communication methods to teach grammar to help learners develop better communication capacity.

When learners master English grammar knowledge, they will be more confident in communicating, helping to improve learning efficiency and obtain good results in exams. In addition, mastering grammatical knowledge will also contribute to helping students better improve their skills. Therefore, grammar teaching is essential and must always be focused in English classes in our country.

II. Grammar and its roles in the English teaching activities

2.1. English grammar

According to "Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics", Richards & Schmidt (1985) argue that "Grammar is the description of the structure of a language and the way in which language units such as words and phrases come together to form sentences. The grammar of a sentence usually includes the meaning and function of the sentence placed in the overall system of the language." Ur, P. (1988) also shares his view on grammar: "Grammar is simply defined as the way language expresses itself and how words (phrases) are combined to form longer units of meaning". Brown (2001) asserts that grammar, which is defined as "the system of rules that regulate the arrangement and relationship of words in a sentence," is an integral part of a language. There are many linguists who spend a lot of effort to come up with the concept of grammar and the role of grammar, helping us understand that grammar is the structure of language. The role of grammar for a language is very important. Grammar helps structure the lesson logically in chronological order or by causal relationship, in particular, it indicates the relationship of meanings in the article. In other words, grammar is not simply the classification and description of words, phrases, clauses, sentences, but moreover, it also expresses the function of relationships between words, phrases, clauses, sentences associated with the social purpose of the lesson.

2.2. Teaching English grammar in the direction of communication

Because of the many differences between teaching methods, each researcher of linguistics and language teaching methods has a very different view on the importance of grammar in the language teaching process.

In 1622, J. Webbe[†], a grammar teacher and expert, once wrote: “No one can learn language quickly while being limited by the rules of grammar”[‡] (quoted in Thornbury, 1999). He suggested that grammar could be acquired simply by communicating and practicing through listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Webbe was one of the first educators to question the value of teaching grammar, but he was certainly not the last.

Sharing the same view as Webbe, from the early 70s, S. Krashen developed a *theory of second language learning* in which he rejected all the value of grammar teaching. Krashen’s theory holds that there are two processes by which adult learners acquire language knowledge: the first is *acquisition* and the second is *learning*. This doctrine implies that all aspects of grammar teaching are meaningless or

as he observes: “The effects of grammar teaching ... seems irrelevant and very fragile” (quoted in Thornbury, 1999).[§]

On the contrary, over the past few decades, a lot of empirical evidence suggests that teaching grammar in the classroom actually helps learners acquire a second language more effectively. This evidence comes from carefully controlled studies that have been conducted in the classroom (Cowan, 2008). Therefore, no one can say that the teaching of grammar is irrelevant, or that grammar is no longer necessary in English teaching. As Brown (2001) stated: “No one can doubt the importance of grammar as a rule of language organization for communicating.”[¶]

Today, many researchers have concluded that Krashen’s theory of how adults acquire a second language receives little support. However, many teachers still believe that teaching grammar is not beneficial. Some teachers who teach English in kindergarten through 6th grade claim that their students seem to learn without knowing grammar because children can acquire another language with little or no instruction. Children only need to be exposed to that language in

† Joseph Webbe (1610 - 1630) là một chuyên gia về ngữ pháp, bác sĩ và nhà chiêm tinh của nước Anh. Ông được nhớ đến với quan điểm giảng dạy ngôn ngữ dựa trên “việc giảng dạy tối thiểu về ngữ pháp” (*minimal instruction in grammar*), đi ngược lại các quan điểm thời bấy giờ. (trích từ Wikipedia)

‡ “No man can run speedily to the mark of language that is shackled... with grammar precepts.” (Webbe, trích trong Thornbury, 1999)

§ “The effects of grammar teaching... appear to be peripheral and fragile” (Krashen, extract in Thornbury, 1999)

¶ “No one doubts the prominence of grammar as an organizational framework within which communication operates” (Brown, 2001).

meaningful contexts. In contrast, adults no longer have this ability and need to be instructed to recognize and absorb the grammatical rules of a second language (Cowan, 2008).

In traditional language teaching directions, teaching grammar in the traditional method known as the Grammar-Translation Method, which often relies on what grammarians studied and described, taking the teacher as the center of the teaching process. Much of the class time is spent explaining English grammar rules in detail, and learners listen or take notes. With this method, the teacher usually presents the grammatical structure, then practices in the form of speaking or writing exercises, and then is used by learners in less controlled speaking or writing activities. Therefore, teachers will focus on semantics and form, with little context, resulting in learners not being able to use these rules flexibly and appropriately in real communication situations, making it difficult for learners to develop their communication capacity. In the direction of language teaching communication, the role of grammar is no less important but it is only a means to achieve the purpose of communication. Therefore, one of the basic principles of grammar teaching is to serve communication. One method that can replace the traditional grammar teaching method is the *Communicative Approach*. With the method of teaching grammar in the direction of communication, grammar teaching must be based on real situations. The process of teaching and learning

grammar is carried out by practice, in which learners are required to participate in group activities in order to complete learning tasks. Therefore, there is always communication between learners - teachers and learners - learners, from which learners can absorb and memorize grammar rules naturally and for a long time.

III. The state of English grammar teaching in universities in Vietnam

In the training program for English majors and non-major students, grammar is always one of the compulsory modules. Grammar, which is defined as “the system of rules that regulate the arrangement and relationship of words in a sentence” (Brown, 2001)**, is an integral part of a language. That is why lecturers and students always focus on teaching and learning grammar. Therefore, how to teach and learn grammar effectively has always been an important task for both language lecturers and researchers.

Although English teaching and learning in Vietnam has undergone remarkable changes over the past few decades, current grammar textbooks at universities and colleges still mainly use traditional teaching methods, known as *Grammar Translation Methods*. With this method, instructors often present grammatical structures, then practice in the form of speaking or writing exercises, and then be used by learners in less controlled speaking or writing activities. Although traditional grammar teaching methods

** “the system of rules governing the conventional arrangement and relationship of words in a sentence” (Brown, 2001)

help students master grammar rules, students cannot use these rules flexibly and appropriately in real communication situations.

In other words, traditional teaching methods still have some disadvantages that hinder learners from developing their ability to communicate. *Firstly*, the traditional method of teaching grammar is teacher-centered. As a result, much of the class time is spent with the instructor explaining the rules of English grammar in detail, while all students just listen or take notes. The typical exercise of this method is to translate or place sentences from English to Vietnamese or vice versa, to fill in the blanks with an appropriate word and correct errors in the sentence. Therefore, lecturers and students hardly pay attention to the development of communication abilities during English grammar lessons. The students absorb English passively and have very few opportunities to use English to communicate. *Secondly*, for the Translation - Grammar Method, the basic learning technique is memorization, which does not excite students, helps students build confidence or improves communication skills, and even makes students form a fear when learning grammar.

IV. Teaching English grammar with a communication-oriented teaching method

4.1. General rationale for teaching grammar in the direction of communication

It can be affirmed that grammar is a part of teaching communication, it is not possible to teach grammar focusing

only on semantics and forms, but must be based on situations and contexts so that learners can acquire knowledge naturally and apply the learned knowledge effectively. From there, the learner's communication capacity is well promoted. There is no denying the importance of teaching grammar in a communication direction to help learners develop their communication capacity. According to J. Webbe, a teacher and grammar expert, grammar can be acquired simply by communicating and practicing through listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Brown (2001) has emphasized: "No one can doubt the importance of grammar as a rule of language organization for communicating" and that "Grammatical structures when combined with specific communication situations help learners to notice the connection between the form and function of grammatical structures". So learners can learn how to choose the right sentence pattern to express their ideas and feelings when communicating. They also learn how to apply grammar rules to different communication situations.

Celce-Murcia (2001) summarized as follows: The purpose of teaching foreign languages in general and grammar in particular is to create communicative capacity for learners; The lesson content includes not only linguistic structures but also social functions; Learners often work in groups or pairs to exchange information with each other; Documents used and activities are authentic, showing real-life situations; Teachers have a role to play in promoting communication in the language being learned. In short, teaching English grammar in a communicative way

is not just about memorizing vocabulary, noun phrases/ nouns, verb phrases/ verbs, prepositions, articles and other grammatical structures. It also promotes the application of effective and useful teaching methods to guide, help and encourage learners to see and use grammar as a tool for communicating ideas clearly and accurately.

In the past, a lot of English instructors only taught grammar based on existing structures without any flexible transitions to suit real-life communication contexts. However, since the 1990s, the communicative teaching method has been widely applied in foreign language classes because according to Richards (2006), this method takes communication capacity as the purpose of teaching, and to that end, the curriculum as well as the teaching method must be built on activities. communicate.

Sharing the same view, Brown (2001) adds: “Grammatical structures when combined with specific communication situations help learners see the connection between the form and function of grammatical structures.” Students can learn how to choose the right sentence patterns to express their ideas and feelings when communicating. Students also learn how to apply grammar rules to various communication situations (Brown, 2001). He also pointed out five things teachers need to pay attention to in grammar teaching.^{††}

- *Firstly*, grammatical structures must be expressed in meaningful

communication contexts. When learners notice that the context of communication is directly related to real-life situations, they will be more interested in learning how to properly convey information grammatically.

- *Secondly*, grammatical structures must be suitable for the learner’s communicative purpose, which requires teachers to regularly learn and analyze the needs of learners to determine that what we teach is consistent with what learners expect and need in practical communication.

- *Thirdly*, grammatical structures must contribute to helping students improve their ability to communicate in English correctly and fluently. When using language in communication, students need to ensure accuracy as well as fluency.

- *Fourthly*, faculty should not overwhelm learners with specialized linguistics terms. The use of simple and appropriate terms will make it easier for students to understand and absorb faster. Moreover, the teaching of grammar should also not focus so much on the rules but on how to use these structures correctly and appropriately with the goal of communication.

- *Finally*, grammatical structures should be presented as vividly and naturally as possible in order to

^{††} “Grammatical patterns are matched to particular communicative meanings so that learners can see the connection between form and function.” (Brown, 2001)

motivate students in the process of absorbing a subject as dry and difficult as grammar.

In addition, Cowan (2008) introduces a number of ways to apply communication-oriented teaching methods to grammar classes such as: *using games, solving puzzles, role-playing, storytelling, discussing, presenting views, reviewing and making judgments about images* and presentations. An important factor in the communicative classroom is the change in the role of faculty and students compared to the traditional language class. For communicative teaching, teachers no longer have control over classroom activities. Instead, students actively work in groups or in pairs and must interact and communicate with each other to complete tasks, while the instructor stands by observing and only offers guidance or solutions to problems that arise during the discussion.

4.2. The role of English grammar teachers in the direction of communication

If, according to the traditional method of teaching grammar, the teacher plays the leading role, then according to the communicative method, the teacher no longer has control over the activities in the classroom. Instead, learners actively work in groups or pairwork and must interact and communicate with each other to complete tasks, while the instructor stands aside and offers guidance or solutions to problems that arise during the discussion. In the process of teaching in the direction of communication, the teacher plays the role of instructor and implementation

organization; learners play a leading role in the teaching process; that is, it is necessary to promote the positivity of learners in practical practice.

However, in order to be effective in communicative grammar lessons, Brown (2001) emphasizes these points:

First, grammatical structures must be expressed in meaningful communication contexts. When learners notice that the context of communication is directly related to real-life situations, they will be more interested in learning how to properly convey information grammatically.

Second, grammatical structures must be suitable for the learner's communicative purpose. This requires teachers to regularly learn and analyze learners' needs to determine that what we teach is consistent with what learners expect and need in actual communication.

Third, grammatical structures must contribute to helping students improve their ability to communicate in English correctly and fluently. When using language in communication, students need to ensure language accuracy as well as fluency in usage.

Fourth, teachers should not worry learners by using too many linguistic terms. The use of simple and appropriate terms will make it easier for students to understand and absorb faster. Moreover, the teaching of grammar should also not focus so much on the rules but on how to use these structures correctly and appropriately with the goal of communication.

Finally, grammatical structures should be presented as vividly and naturally as possible in order to motivate students in the process of absorbing a subject as dry and difficult as grammar.

4.3. The process of English grammar lessons in the direction of communication

Teaching grammar is an indispensable content and one of the essential basics in a language lesson, in order to provide learners with new grammatical structures that they can use throughout the course of that lesson. According to modern French teaching, teaching grammar consists of 3 basic steps.

Step 1: Introduce the structure (Presentation). In order to help learners master a new grammatical structure in terms of structural characteristics, meaning and use of grammatical structure in communicative situations, teachers need to introduce grammatical structures in a certain sequence. Following the direction of the principle of communication practice starts from listening and then literacy. Below the author proposes some ways to introduce new grammatical structures: 1/ *Using situations*: Situations that can be real, imaginary or creative, taken inside or outside the classroom in which that structure can be used naturally. Through situations where learners can recognize when to use that pattern, promote the creativity and reasoning ability of learners; 2/ *Using visual aids*: Such as objects, drawings or pictures that can be combined with facial expressions and gestures to help impress the image so that

learners can directly relate to the meaning of sentences; 3/ *Using comparative methods to compare* grammatical structures: help learners consolidate old sentence patterns, avoid confusion with new structures; 4/ *Using alternative methods* so that learners can assemble and replace each sentence component to create many different sentences. Teachers should incorporate flexible teaching methods. The combination of a variety of teaching methods will help learners feel not bored, learners are easier to apply and remember.

Step 2: Practice. Learners practice with the control of the teacher, learners will apply the knowledge they have just learned to do specific exercises. These exercises are designed in the direction of communication practice and learners start from simple exercises that help master the basic concept. Then come more advanced exercises for learners to practice thinking, expand knowledge. Through practical exercises in the classroom, teachers can know to what extent learners understand grammatical structure to determine the next activities.

Step 3: Apply (Production) in this step, the teacher plays the role of instructor, the implementation organization, the learner plays a leading role, i.e. must promote the positivity in practice. the teacher can ask learners to practice in pairs, in groups based on the situations suggested by the teacher, or each group sets its own situation based on the grammatical topic learned. Teachers can perform a number of applied communication activities during grammar lessons such as: Using games, solving puzzles, role-playing, storytelling, discussing, presenting views, reviewing

and making judgments about images and presentations (Cowan, 2008). Thus, the communication method has advantages over other previous methods because it covers all aspects of the foreign language teaching process: linguistic, cultural, social, non-linguistic factors, ... to practice complete communication skills. In particular, the method of teaching English in the direction of communication also considers the formation and development of four language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing as the ultimate goal of the teaching process. Linguistic dimensions such as phonetics, vocabulary and grammar are the foundation, conditions for the formation and development of communication skills.

V. Conclusion

Teaching communicative grammar requires students participate in working more than simply memorizing vocabulary, noun phrases, verb phrases, prepositions, articles, and other grammatical structures. It promotes the application of effective and useful teaching methods to guide, help, and encourage students to see and use grammar as a tool for communicating ideas clearly and accurately.

Therefore, foreign language teachers need to change and combine different teaching methods on their own to make grammar more practical and gentle by organizing activities related to communication in the classroom. Teachers must understand that each student learns in a different way and has different strengths and weaknesses. From there, faculty need to tailor classroom activities based on the different needs

and competencies of students instead of forcing students to follow a single model. The variety of teaching methods and classroom activities will help students develop more receptivity and confidence in their language learning process.

The application of communication methods in teaching English grammar or teaching English grammar in the direction of communication is considered a good sign in innovating English teaching methods in general and teaching English grammar in particular. Therefore, this method really helps learners have the ability to use English to communicate. Society is developing more and more, the need for information exchange between countries is increasing. Communication in English is more necessary than ever. Vietnamese education is always on the path of innovating English teaching and learning methods to meet the development needs of society. The introduction of the method of teaching communicative language has really been warmly received in schools and educational units because of its advantages.

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