

Teaching English grammar communicatively to improve the communicative skills of college students at An Giang Vocational College

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Abstract: *This study explores the efficacy of teaching English grammar communicatively to enhance the communicative abilities of college students at An Giang Vocational College. Through an experimental approach, it investigates the impact of communicative grammar instruction on students' language proficiency. The research aims to contribute to pedagogical practices by emphasizing a communicative approach to grammar teaching, fostering practical language skills crucial for students' future careers.*

Keywords: *Teaching grammar communicatively, communicative skills, practice activities, controlled practice, free practice.*

1. Introduction

The purpose of teaching and learning languages in general and English in specific is that the learners can master the four skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. However, for students at An Giang Vocational College, this is a far-fetched goal due to inappropriate teaching and learning methods. For many reasons, including exam requirements, teaching English, specifically English grammar, currently does not focus on developing communicative skills for students. They are mostly taught to memorize rules and do mechanical exercises. As a result, the students' English communicative skills do not meet the requirements of the output standards of An Giang Vocational College as well as society's expectations.

This article aims to analyze the possible impact of teaching English grammar communicatively on students' communicative skills. Therefore, the study finds the answer to the research question "Can teaching English grammar communicatively improve students' communicative skills?".

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Teaching methods

**Grammar-Translation Method*

The Grammar-Translation Method, prevalent for centuries, teaches grammar by translating between languages. It heavily relies on the mother tongue, with teachers explaining rules deductively and learners practicing through translation exercises, focusing on written expression. However, this approach falls short in promoting English communication skills. While learners may excel in written grammar,

they struggle to communicate orally. Therefore, adopting more communicative methods is crucial for developing students' English proficiency in both written and spoken forms.

**Audio-Lingual Method*

The Audio-Lingual Method, emphasizing habit formation, aids speaking practice through repetitive exercises. Learners memorize sentences through repetition, guided by prompts from teachers. Despite its behavioral basis, the critique of Noam Chomsky (1959) highlighted the method's limitation: lack of explanations hindering original expression. By the 1970s, its use waned, but language drilling persists as learners and teachers value repetition for effective learning.

**Communicative Approach*

Communicative language teaching emerged as a reaction to the Audio-lingual method, stressing natural language acquisition through usage, communication desire, and purpose (Richard, 2006). Learners engage in diverse speaking and writing tasks, prioritizing language content over grammar rules. Success is measured by effective communication rather than grammatical precision, with accuracy becoming important once communication skills are established. This approach encourages real-world language application and active participation in learning.

2.2. Grammar presentation techniques

In this stage, teachers plan how to introduce new grammar, considering factors like student group and content. They choose focus areas: FORM,

MEANING, or USE, and consider learner traits for inductive or deductive approaches. Key presentation techniques include:

Direct explanation: Teachers explain grammar rules with examples, using the mother tongue for comparison. English explanation becomes more beneficial as learners advance.

Discovering grammar: Teachers provide contexts for learners to discover grammar rules themselves from the material.

Using pictures or drawings: Teachers illustrate grammar points with visual aids.

Drawing timelines: Instructors use timelines to teach time-related grammar points, like tenses or sequencing actions/events.

2.3. Grammar practice activities

*Grammar practice activities

Controlled practice activities

Controlled practice activities facilitate repeated practice for grammatical accuracy, involving tasks like repeating the teacher's instructions or sentence structures orally. Learners receive incremental support from the instructor, boosting confidence and fluency while encouraging the use of complex language. These exercises need to follow grammar rule introductions, focusing on basic rule application without relying on prior knowledge or creativity.

Guided practice activities

Guided practice activities reinforce new grammar concepts by encouraging learners to apply them while expressing personal opinions. Successful completion boosts learners' confidence in their language skills and prepares them for real-life communication. These activities follow controlled practice, where learners initially apply grammar rules in simpler exercises. Guided practice allows for more creative expression but still benefits from teacher guidance when needed.

Free practice activities

These activities give learners complete freedom to express personal opinions, with the teacher unable to predict their responses. Learners can personalize language activities, combining them with grammar knowledge. They receive minimal support, encouraging creativity, despite inevitable mistakes. Typically, these activities occur after learners grasp new grammar rules, offering them more choices in expressing opinions by applying and combining old and new grammar points.

**Benefits of communicative language teaching*

Larsen-Freeman (2000) asserts that communicative language teaching, a learner-centered approach, is widely recognized for enhancing effective communication skills. Tailoring techniques to learner characteristics fosters proactive engagement in discovering language rules and usage. Group activities encourage listening comprehension, expanding vocabulary, and grasping grammatical structures. Brown (1994) underscores fluency in speech over grammar mastery, advocating for error-tolerant environments where learners can freely practice speaking without fear of correction. This approach values trial-and-error learning as integral to developing communication skills.

2.4. Content

**Methodology*

The research was conducted on 2 classes with similar numbers, levels and majors in the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering. The study lasted for one semester by applying a communicative grammar teaching method in one class, while the other remained a control group.

The new teaching techniques were applied according to these instructions:

- Present grammar associated with familiar content: examples or situations should be related to students' life or interests, making them more interested in the lesson.

- Use materials to present in a diverse way: materials should be collected from different source and in different forms like letters, cartoons, stories and so on to give students more opportunities to access different materials.

- Present grammar in an inductive way to increase learners' participation in the lesson.

- Spend enough time on practice: the time used for practice needs to be at least three quarters of the lesson.

- Design appropriate practice activities to the purpose of the practice stage such as memorizing the rules or form, distinguishing different structures or applying the rules in the real contexts.

- Organizes training activities in a reasonable way from controlled practice activities to less controlled and free practice activities.

**Research results*

After a semester of applying the new teaching techniques, the data were collected about their attitude and interests towards the subject and their communicative proficiency.

Students show their improvement in communicative competence.

Students took an exam to test their communicative skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The data show that the learners have dramatical improvement in communicative competence as in this table

Class \ Marks	2	4.5	5	6	6.5	7	7.5	8	8.5	9	10
Experimental class	0	1	3	0	0	3	7	1	4	3	1
Control class	1	2	2	4	3	3	0	3	1	3	1

The number of students in the experimental class get higher marks than those in the control class. To check whether the above data are statistically significant or not, we perform an overall mean test via T-test, the results are as follows:

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	Variable 1	Variable 2
Mean	6.739130435	7.456521739
Variance	3.406126482	2.225296443
Observations		23
Pearson Correlation	0.953286046	
Hypothesized Mean Difference		0
Df		22
t Stat	-5.563585927	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.000006809	
t Critical one-tail	1.717144374	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.000013618	
t Critical two-tail	2.073873068	

The above results show that the mean of the experimental class is 7.456521739 while the mean of the control class is 6.739130435. The test also showed that this intervention created a statistically significant change with sig. = .000.

Students' attitude and interests towards English are better

Class \ Interests	Really like it	Quite like it	Like it a little	Not like it
Experimental class	6.7%	53.3%	40%	0%
Control class	0%	30.8%	61.5%	7.7%

The survey was conducted to ask about their attitude and interests towards the subject. The data above show that students in the experimental class have more interests in learning English after studying with the communicative teaching method.

Class \ Interests	Like it much more	Like it a little more	Not like it more
Experimental class	33.3%	60%	6.7%
Control class	15.4%	61.6%	23%

When being asked to compare with their interests

in learning English with those before this semester, the data of students in experimental class show more positive changes. The percentage of students in the experimental class having more interests in the subject is higher than in the control class.

**Recommendations*

Teaching English grammar communicatively is best choice for improving students' communicative skills because this method helps students to understand the grammar rules and use them properly in communicative ways at the same time. To gain these benefits, teachers need to focus on all the stages from presenting grammar, designing and arranging practice activities as well as other factors affecting the class atmosphere and students' self-esteem. To enhance communicative skills among college students at An Giang Vocational College and adopt a communicative approach to teaching English grammar, we need to encourage interactive activities such as group discussions, role-plays, and real-life scenarios to contextualize grammar rules, incorporate multimedia resources and authentic materials to engage students actively, provide ample opportunities for students to practice speaking and writing in meaningful contexts, fostering fluency and accuracy simultaneously.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, adopting a communicative approach to teaching English grammar can significantly enhance the communicative skills of college students at An Giang Vocational College. By emphasizing real-life language use and meaningful communication, students can better grasp grammar concepts and apply them effectively in various contexts. This pedagogical method fosters active engagement, encourages collaboration, and ultimately empowers students to become confident and proficient communicators in English, preparing them for success in their academic and professional endeavors.

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