

Is the Grammar-Instruction Approach an Old-Fashioned Method in Comparison to the Communicative Approach in Non-Native Contexts? A Case Study of Students and Teachers' Perceptions

Nancy F. Nehme

The Lebanese University

Abstract

With the height of the new and updated approaches in English Language Teaching (ELT), the communicative approach rises among them as the ultimate solution against the so-called old-fashioned methods. Therefore, in a globalized world, institutions in the non-native realms started to adopt the new trends to cope with the international change that occurred in the English teaching field. Grammar Translation was and is still used at an educational level because it is considered to be more effective in teaching a foreign level with restricted opportunities of use. Thus in English Foreign Language (EFL) circumstances, can a communicative approach fulfill its effectiveness in terms of proficiency without grammar instruction? Are EFL students fully adept to acquire a foreign language without a focus on its rules? Do teachers promote the communicative approach to be solely used in their classrooms?

This paper examines this concern by taking into account those questions from students and teachers' perceptions in an English language course in a private university in North Lebanon. This paper will discuss both students and teachers' attitudes towards both the communicative and grammar approaches in terms of learning and teaching the English language in an EFL context.

Keywords: grammar-instruction, second language acquisition, the communicative theory, learning styles, learner-centered approach, English language teaching

Background to the study

The reality of the growth of the English language as a global Lingua Franca enforces the prospect of its becoming a main requisite for all countries to cope with globalization and economic expansion (Butler, 2007; Jenkins, 2009; Mauranen & Ranta, 2009; Sung, 2011). English became the vital means not only to create economic opportunities but also academic and educational chances for both native English speakers and non-native English speakers as well (British council, 2013; Shamim, 2011). As a result, the increase in the use of the English language accelerated the need of a universalistic dimension to the teaching-learning process to achieve proficiency in English language education especially for non-native speakers, whether students or teachers. Being the lingua franca of higher education (Coleman, 2006; Gill & Kirkpatrick, 2013); English has been adopted by different universities and scholastic institutions in non-native English countries (Annous & Nicolas, 2014).

The English language was and still is revered by countries that use it as a second language (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL), following a transnational education model adopted by many universities around the world (Annous & Nicolas, 2014). This emphasizes the fact that the inner countries, referred to as the core countries or the Centre (Britain, the United States of America, Australia, New Zealand and Canada) play a significant role in relation to the periphery (non-native countries that either use English as an ESL/EFL language) as they are the providers of educational materials such as books, textbooks, researches, new approaches or methodologies, publishers, funding agencies, the teachers and the definition of what is worthy of being taught. The resources of the Center are regularly renewed with the periphery stressing the dependent situation (Phillipson, 1992). This reality opens the window to a concern specifically in EFL

contexts, where institutions face many obstacles when implementing new approaches into their classrooms that might be inadequate to the Lebanese context of the study whether at an educational level or on a cultural level. This might be implied that what is suitable for one situation might be inappropriate to another.

To focus the discussion more, the communicative approach is one of those concerns that still causes confusion among practitioners in the English language teaching field especially in the non-native settings. Being the trend of the day, the communicative approach based on the idea that learning a language successfully comes through real communication of meaning started to contest other approaches that were considered old-fashioned among those is the grammar instruction method that was and is still mainly used in the EFL classrooms.

Literature Review

Among many definitions, teaching is a process that involves a variety of approaches, methodologies, skills, beliefs and ideas that a teacher implements in a classroom to yield desirable learning outcomes. A critical shift from traditional teacher-centered approaches that emphasize grammar instruction to the communicative approach identified in student-centered approaches has been embraced to promote the focus of instruction on learning rather than teaching. Therefore, the philosophy of teaching has changed from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered one that stresses students' needs and abilities.

As an English teacher, I have come to that education is not concerned with teachers' needs but should be primarily associated with students' requirements, interests and abilities. Studies support the notion that when an individual is participating in the learning task, learning is accomplished more rapidly and retained longer if it is presented in a way that the individual

prefers (Davis, Nur & Ruru, 1994). Therefore, the ways in which “an individual characteristically acquires, retains and retrieves information are collectively termed the individual’s learning style” (Felder & Henriques, 1995, p.21). Studies show that students’ academic success is facilitated when learning experiences are tailored to students with different learning preferences (Hainer, Fagan, Bratt, Baker & Arnold, 1990; Damavandi, Mahyuddin, Elias, Daud &Shabani, 2011; Tulbure, 2011).

As Prashnig (2006) states educational institutions “should not be about every student knowing the same stuff, they should also not be about preparing students for one-shot examinations where they regurgitate the stuff, and then begin to forget it as soon as they leave the exam room” (p.3). On the contrary, they should be places where students enjoy learning, by offering material that is relevant to their needs. As a result, students should learn by having them experience a new kind of involvement different from traditional approaches where the teacher is the “owner” of knowledge. Thus, learning will be most meaningful when topics are relevant to students’ lives, needs, and interests and when the students themselves are actively engaged in creating, connecting, and understanding knowledge. Accordingly, learning in an environment that involves real communication through a variety of activities help them to recall and retain this experience. Also, adding creativity, interaction and the real life component into the classroom environment allow students to enjoy their learning moments by offering them an unforgettable experience as students will have a higher motivation to learn when they relate their own learning to their real life.

In Lebanon, prospectuses for English classes require that grammar teaching should be set as part of the program. Thus, as a main component in language learning, grammar is taught to

students in universities and colleges for years. It is known that “grammar is a set of rules that define how words (or parts of words) are combined or changed to form acceptable units of meaning within a language” (Penny, 2000 as cited in Chang 2011). Guaranteeing the accuracy of the sentences mainly depends on the learner’s mastery of grammar. Grammar, which is a crucial part of a language, is so important that the teachers and students have always attached great importance to grammar teaching and learning (Chang, 2011). The existing grammar teaching situation in Lebanon is still characterized by the adoption of the traditional teaching approaches known as the grammar instruction method. My experience as a Lebanese learner and a Lebanese instructor allows me to assert that a great number of educational institutions in Lebanon still follow traditional-centered approaches. For instance, at the schools and universities where I teach, a tight teaching schedule and curriculum requirements do not leave room for students to fully experience the communicative approach. Teachers in Lebanese classes play the role of language structure providers; students after the explanation practice the rules in the form of spoken or written exercises, and then used by learners in controlled speaking or writing activities. This approach allows for the mastery of grammatical rules, yet in such circumstances students are unable to use these rules flexibly and appropriately in communication. This implies that the traditional teaching method has its disadvantages as it prevents students to develop their communicative skills. Consequently, students are passive not active learners lacking communicative opportunities. Moreover, memorization and rote learning are the basic techniques that do not arouse students’ interest, cannot build self-confidence or improve their communicative strategies in English learning (Chang, 2011).

An alternative to the traditional grammar teaching method is the Communicative Approach. The Communicative Approach makes language teaching as in real-world situation.

Grammar learning is emphasized by communication through the approaches of 'learning by doing', through students' participation or co-operative completion of teaching tasks between or among students and teachers, then grammar can be acquired naturally by learners.

From a second language acquisition perspective, a cognitive approach was regarded in the 70s and early 80s as the dominant model for second language instruction. This theoretic model that underlies that a language consists of a set of rules with an associated lexicon (Terrell, 1991). This means that foreign language students must learn rules of grammar. This is exemplified in the suggested sequence of studying a rule (usually with instructor clarification), practice a rule (in grammar exercises), and then apply the rule in meaningful communications in the target language.

Krashen (1982) proposed a model of second language acquisition in which the processing of input, rather than grammar instruction, plays the fundamental role. His hypothesis is that acquisition occurs when learners process input in a low anxiety context. Learners presumably make use of a mental language acquisition device that allows them to store and produce utterances in the target language. Krashen does not attempt to specify how the acquisition process unfolds, but rather describes the conditions necessary for it to take place. He posits that the learner must be relaxed (have a low "affective filter") and be focused on meaning rather than form.

Method

The study was conducted in a private Lebanese university in two sections of a freshman English course ENGL 101 during the spring semester of the academic year 2011-2012. My participants included instructors who taught the ENGL 101 course as well as ENGL 101 students. I interviewed five instructors including two males and three females who differed in

years of experience. Three of them had been teaching the course for two years, another teacher had a one year of experience and one of the instructors had nine year of experience in teaching the 101 course. In addition, the coordinator of the course was interviewed. As for students, the sample comprised 30 students. They were of the same age and came from a similar social background. Students majored in different domains such as civil engineering, mechanical engineering, chemical engineering, interior design, business and biology. The course allows students the opportunity to experience a variety of tasks that cater for students' academic and career needs. The course differs from the other courses by the way it brings life to the classroom by allowing students to experience situations that they might encounter in real-life but without real-life stress (Salies, 2002). This communicative approach empowers students to learn on their own (Salies, 2002). It also nurtures creativity by forcing learners to use a variety of skills (Salies, 2002) that requires them to use their senses (auditory, tactile, visual, kinesthetic) and as well as their thinking skills to adapt to the situation they are performing so that to succeed in the simulated environment. Therefore, giving students this opportunity to become better language users of the language through a relaxed and realistic learning atmosphere comprising a variety of activities helps learners to experience their interests in one way or another.

Materials and Procedure

This is a descriptive research in the form of a case study. It uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to gather data to describe “a problem, context or a situation” (Morrell, 2012). A qualitative approach was chosen because it helps to gain insights into people's attitudes by investigating their thoughts, behaviors, attitudes and experiences of students and teachers with a purpose to obtain in-depth views.

Therefore, to develop an in depth view of the case, I drew on several data gathering sources that I found valuable for exploring students and teachers' perceptions regarding the communicative approach and its effectiveness and whether students are able to acquire a language and its rules without grammar instruction. Depending on the type of information that I sought to know about, I selected a variety of instruments to widen my scope of exploration. Four instruments, observations, semi-structured interviews with instructors, student questionnaires and document analysis, allowed enriching the account of the issue under study. All the data as questionnaires, teachers' interviews, observations, and document analysis were gathered and analyzed.

Results and Discussion

Findings revealed that students in the two sections differed in beliefs and opinions. Eighteen out of thirty liked the new learner-centered classroom while twelve preferred the traditional teacher-centered approach. Those who liked the new methodology asserted that the English 101 course creates wide communicative opportunities that allowed them to promote their productive skills into a higher level as the course included activities that focus more on the speaking and writing skills. As for the other group, they thought that the course is different in style and creates communicative situations but they proclaimed that to them communication is not of that great importance because at the end they are going to be assessed in terms of writing and not in terms of communication. Students said that in the exam writing test, tutors will assess them in terms of "language errors and grammar mistakes". Therefore to them, a learner-centered classroom based on the communicative approach is not fully effective as it focuses on communication and not grammar.

Students who are with the traditional grammar-instruction method expressed their concerns regarding the course by mentioning that it should include a grammar part explanation. In fact, the course included a grammar part with grammar rules in their booklets but the grammatical rules were not explained by the tutors; students had to go to specific websites that tutors specify and students had to explain the rules to themselves. If any difficulties, students had to come the second day and ask for any clarifications. This implied that students like the spoon-feeding technique that is based on rote learning and explanation. Students thought of learning a language as a set of rules to be learned and practiced. Despite all the activities offered and the communicative environment all what students concerned was grammar and its explanation. One of the remarkable comments was “is it all about presentations and games? I don’t feel myself learning. It is like we are having a spare time!” The twelve students also showed the same thought. As for the other eighteen, they regarded the course self-learning since they are required to do the work and thought that depending on oneself is very helpful as it allows them to learn new skills. To them the new approach fulfilled it proficiency without the need of grammar instruction.

From teachers’ perceptions, the five tutors admitted that the course is original and promotes productive skills. The very nature of the course with its diverse activities and its learner- centered approach permit students to test their skills and to build their confidence in terms of communication and writing skills. Also, the five tutors noticed that students’ opinions concerning the course differ. They acknowledged that many students liked the course while others showed a dislike. They also stated that they have seen students’ level in the communicative and written skills has promoted. They were astonished for the higher production students have provided in their presentations, writing tasks and vocabulary lexicon. Moreover,

when asked about the effectiveness of the communicative approach to be solely used in a class, teachers showed positive approval after their experience with their students. To them this kind of approach help students to depend on themselves to learn a language. However, teachers also expressed that many students did not like this kind of approach because they thought that teachers are not doing anything in class unless giving directions and instructions when needed. Teachers believed that some students felt it is not effective because they are familiarized to the teacher-centered approach from their early childhood. Therefore, incorporating the newly approach caused to them confusion or a kind of insecure since it is not traditional to them and this is the reason for giving negative comments. The coordinator of the course believed that the course was designed to create real-life situations so that students will try to cope with those circumstances in a relaxed environment full of motivation. She also acknowledged that it is a new way to let them experience new skills as their previous experiences as school pupils restricted them to encounter a diversity of activities that stress productive skills.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as an English instructor and after my observations in the classes, I believe that a student-centered classroom based on the communicative approach that promotes productive skills is an effective methodology that allows students to develop their potentials and abilities by aiding them to be independent learners. However, amendments should be conducted in terms of curricula and English hours. Also, the grammar component should be emphasized by explanation because the majority of Lebanese students feel insecure if they don't follow the traditional method when it comes to grammatical rules. Amendments should be conducted from the perspective of students' needs and interests and what is suitable for them. Sometimes teachers want to apply new approaches in the EFL context but when applying it many obstacles

come into being restricting its effectiveness. Therefore, being the trend of the day doesn't guarantee that it is going to be effective. Many variables may come together and hinder its application in Lebanese classrooms.

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