

Applying Communicative Methods to Teaching Grammar: An Experiment

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Can CLT help Vietnamese students learn grammar better than traditional methods?

Background

There are many English textbooks currently available on the market, and teachers and learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Vietnam have a wide range of choices. Though the design of most of these books is based on the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, many teachers generally still prefer the traditional method in which grammar rules are taught deductively (the grammar-translation method). This is due to many reasons, of which the most noticeable are the traditional role of language teachers, as well as teachers' attitudes and experiences.

Traditionally, applying the grammar-translation method, classes are taught in the mother tongue with little active use of the foreign language. Grammar rules are explained in the mother tongue and students are expected to learn them by heart and then reproduce them. The teacher is a controller while learners are only passively involved. The students do as the teacher says so that they can learn what she knows. This prevents them from producing their own language—the language is not used meaningfully, naturally, or contextually.

Teachers feel more comfortable when using the grammar-translation method because it is familiar to them, and thus they feel more confident. If they want to make a change toward CLT, they may have to cope with difficulties related to both themselves and their students. Problems appear when an inexperienced teacher does activities with unclear instructions or goals. Learners may make too much noise when practicing or when the teacher is busy with other pairs or groups. They may prefer speaking their mother tongue to the target language. Activities may take more or less time than planned. The teacher may be confronted with difficult queries to which she does not immediately know the answers. Having no English-speaking context outside class, students may be unmotivated. A large class, as is often the case in Vietnam, is not an ideal environment

for a communicative lesson. Controlling the class and assuring all learners' participation and involvement is not easy work for the teacher!

Because of all these problems, communicative lessons may be considered unsuccessful, with both teachers and students left unsatisfied. Furthermore, although the communicative method has been accepted in teaching language skills subjects, it is still not widely used to teach grammar.

Research

Participants

The subjects of our study were 50 participants chosen from among 74 students in two non-major English classes (D2001 VT1 and D2001 VT2) in the Telecommunications Department of the Post & Telecommunications Institute of Technology (PTIT). Their level of English was elementary. The instructor of both classes was a female teacher of English who qualified to teach with a B.A. in English. She had been teaching English at PTIT for nine years.

Procedure

For our research, we followed these steps:

- Initially, a grammar pre-test was given to both classes. It was done by both classes on the same day, with researchers' visitation.
- Next, the two classes were taught with two different methods: one with a communicative approach (the experimental class) and the other with the traditional grammar-translation method (the control class).
- During the research period, seven lessons were observed in both classes.
- Finally, a grammar post-test was given to both classes, again on the same day, with researchers' visitation.

Data Collected

Pre-Test

The pre-test's primary goal was to compare the two classes in amount of vocabulary, level of knowledge, and ability to write communicative sentences with appropriate grammar. A secondary purpose was to find 25 suitable research participants in each class.

Section A of the test (drawn from Azar, pp. 14-15) aimed to assess students' ability to give the correct forms of given verbs. The 20 blanks contrasted the simple present (eight blanks) and present progressive tenses (12 blanks). Eight of the 12 verbs expressed what the subjects were doing at the moment, and the rest showed future intention and prediction.

Section B (drawn from Doorley and Gray, p. 47) aimed to check learners' writing skills by having them create complete sentences to form a letter, based on a series of prompts. In order to make the letter meaningful, the test-takers would have to understand it as a whole. The letter consisted of eight sentences using different verb tenses—three past, three present, and two future. (The pre-test is found on page 21.)

According to the pre-test's results, the students in each class were divided into four groups: weak students (1-4 marks); medium students (5-6 marks); good students (7-8 marks); and the best students (9-10 marks). The two classes had the same number of good students, nearly half of each. The number of best students in the experimental class was a bit lower than in the control class. The percentage of medium and weak students in the experimental class was a bit higher than in the control class. (See Figure 1.)

On the whole, no great difference existed between the two classes' pre-test scores for the selected research participants. That is, the experimental and control students performed the test rather equally.

Post-Test

After six weeks of lessons, both classes were given a post-test. The post-test aimed to check the knowledge the two classes had acquired and their ability to express communicative sentences using appropriate grammar. The structure of the post-test was a bit different from that of the pre-test. Sections A and B (drawn from Azar, pp. 46-49) assessed students' ability in giving the correct forms of given verbs which appeared in contextual sentences. In section A, ten blanks required verbs in near future tenses: "be going to" to express prior plans (five blanks) and "will" to show willingness (five blanks).

The sentences in section B comprised ten blanks of verbs in the "will / be going to" forms (five blanks) and simple present forms (five blanks), which the learners had just studied and practiced. Overall, these two sections contained 20 blanks (as had section A of the pre-test).

Section C (drawn from Doorley and Gray, p. 12) asked students to make up sentences from given prompts. These sentences built up into a letter and contained several grammatical structures. The test-takers would have to understand it as a whole in order to make the letter meaningful. It consisted of eight sentences with different tenses—five using past, two using present, and one using future tenses. (The post-test is found on pages 22-23.)

Figure 2 presents the average scores of the two classes on the post-test. From this, it can be seen that the number of weak students in the experimental class was much smaller than in the control class. In addition, the number of students with excellent marks in the control class was just one-quarter of that in the experimental class.

Checklist 1

During the six weeks of teaching the assigned grammar units, the two classes were observed seven times by the researchers, using two checklists.

Checklist 1 (adapted from Richards and Lockhart, p. 19) contained five questions to check the teaching methods used and to investigate which methods did better in increasing learners' motivation. (This checklist is found on page 23.)

Data was recorded from the observations, but the detailed results are not shown here (complete tables are available upon request). Instead, we report our analysis and conclusions resulting from the observations:

- Although the teacher applied two different methods to the two classes, some of the things she did during the lessons were the same, such as having students create sentences or paragraphs using specific grammar rules or sentence patterns, and using visual aids.
- Communicative activities such as pair work and group work appeared in many observations and proved to be of great help in the teaching of grammar.
- What the teacher did when applying the two methods most differently clearly affected learners' motivation. The communicative method better motivated the learners in the experimental class.

Checklist 2

Checklist 2 (drawn from Harmer, pp. 4-7) was designed to investigate other aspects of the classroom which were believed to affect learners' motivation. They

Figure 1. Pre-Test scores.

	D2001 VT1 (Experimental class)		D2001 VT2 (Control class)	
Group 1: Weak students	2	8%	2	8%
Group 2: Medium students	5	20%	4	16%
Group 3: Good students	12	48%	12	48%
Group 4: Best students	6	24%	7	28%
TOTAL	25	100%	25	100%

are, according to Harmer, the teacher, teacher/students interaction, and lesson's success. (This checklist is found on page 24.)

Again, data was recorded from the observations, but the specific results are not shown here (complete tables are available upon request). Upon analyzing the data, we reached the following conclusions:

- With the same teacher in both classes, the marks given to the teacher were the same except as to the ability to make the lessons interesting, which was probably the result of the teacher applying two different methods.
- The average marks for teacher/students interaction in the experimental class were much higher in comparison with those in the control class. These learners had noticeably more motivation.
- As for the lesson's success, with different grammar points in some lessons, both classes reached their goals successfully. Most of the activities were not too challenging, so the tasks were completed.
- Conducting the lessons communicatively brought great advantages. Yet a communicative lesson also brought some troubles, such as students' speaking L1 instead of L2 and making too much noise when practicing. The teacher had less ability to control the class. Other problems included uncooperative students (who did not want to work with others) and the large size of the class (35 students). These problems made the teacher's work in assuring all learners' participation and involvement very difficult.

Summary of Main Findings

Achievement. The learners did better in the experimental class, with communicative grammar lessons, than in the control class, with traditional lessons. Communicative activities such as language games, role-

plays, pair work, and group work helped to improve learners' grammar appropriateness and accuracy skills better than grammar-translation activities.

Motivation. In addition, CLT lessons brought more motivation to learners. The interesting communicative lessons increased learners' motivation, whereas grammar-translation lessons seldom sparked interest. Learning grammar in communicative ways helped the students enjoy learning English more.

Discussion and Recommendations

From these major findings, we have arrived at several recommendations which we hope will be helpful to the teaching of English grammar at technical colleges and universities in Vietnam.

Keep the Advantages of the Traditional Approach

Changing Vietnamese teachers' and learners' attitudes towards communicative English grammar teaching will not be easy, for they are accustomed to traditional grammar lessons. And we should note the fact that applying traditional methods in Vietnamese contexts generally and at PTIT in particular brings several advantages. Since teachers are more familiar with these methods, they have experience, confidence, and motivation when conducting the lessons. The learners may feel safer in practicing the teacher's very careful explanations of grammar rules. As a result, they can acquire grammar rules and make correct sentences, and their grammar knowledge helps them understand readings which they have later in their ESP courses.

From the fact that some students in the control class had good marks, one can see that the traditional method

Figure 2. Post-Test scores.

	D2001 VT1 (Experimental class)		D2001 VT2 (Control class)	
Group 1: Weak students	1	4%	3	12%
Group 2: Medium students	5	20%	7	28%
Group 3: Good students	7	28%	12	48%
Group 4: Best students	12	48%	3	12%
TOTAL	25	100%	25	100%

is of some help in improving grammar production. Having seen both advantages and disadvantages of applying the grammar-translation method, we should have a proper attitude towards it, exploiting what could be useful in our own contexts.

Pursue the Benefits of the Communicative Approach

From our experiment, we see that a communicative approach has the ability to help learners study and practice not only communicative skills but also grammar patterns. Our hope is that applying a communicative approach to teaching grammar would move from being a question-mark to a normal reality at PITT particularly and at other technical colleges and universities generally.

Teachers and learners should be familiar with a student-centered classroom. During the lesson, learners should be encouraged and instructed to explore the content and discover new language rules. They should be given chances to play games—to practice communicating through activities. The teacher should be ready to answer questions and help students in ways that involve them with the lesson. Students should be expected to take their share of responsibility for their learning and to negotiate and cooperate with each other. An active classroom learning atmosphere will be created, and the lesson will be more interesting and effective.

Yet because communicative grammar lessons in Vietnamese contexts bring about certain problems, English teachers should study more about this approach. By having better background knowledge, they will learn more from their experiences with it. To this end, teachers might attend courses or workshops, read books and articles, and observe communicative lessons.

Exploit Facilities and Upgrade the Evaluation System

In applying CLT to enhance learners' grammar competence and performance, it would be useful to exploit better the available language laboratories. Doing so would bring learners more chances to practice.

Another point to be considered is the current test and examination system, which was designed mainly based on the traditional method. Significant changes must be made to make the system meet the needs and purposes of modern English study, and to match up with current coursebooks.

Pay Attention to the Quality of Activities

Great attention should be paid to the quality of classroom activities, and teachers should make these activities more interesting and useful. There are numerous factors affecting quality, including:

Suitable objectives and active language use. Teachers should find suitable ways to balance two kinds of objectives: not too linguistics-oriented, which may make tasks boring and meaningless, but also not ignoring linguistics, otherwise the tasks may not prove very useful.

Teachers can make activities meet these requirements by:

- Designing activities based mainly on actual language use. Do not waste too much time on mime, artistic creation, or silent brain-racking.
- Remembering that production of the structures being practiced should be done repeatedly during activities.
- Putting certain constraints on the process of achieving the task objectives in order to make sure that maximum language use in fact takes place.

Student interest. This is a very important characteristic which can motivate learners more during activities. From Ur's point of view, some important features when designing activities are: topic, visual focus, open-endedness, information gaps, personalization, and pleasure tension (pp. 19-25).

Ways of introducing the activities. Before a new activity, teachers should give a brief introduction. This might be compared to "selling" it to them—attracting them to the activity in order to increase their involvement and pleasure.

Another aspect of this is making sure the instructions are clear. There are numerous ways to ensure this: giving slow and short directions, having one or some of the learners demonstrate the task, giving an example yourself, and asking students if they have any questions about the task. The instructions should include the expected duration, what final product or action is required, and what students can do if they finish early.

Timing and pace. These factors can turn into big problems, for if activities are planned at an inappropriate time, or run too long or too fast, they will be ineffective. Ur notes the time for practice should come in the middle, not the end, of the lesson (pp. 35-36). If exercises take longer than necessary, learners may feel tired or bored. Yet if an activity is too hurried, learners may not have enough time to absorb or practice the material. These problems can be solved by careful lesson planning and preparation of materials.

Integrate Grammar Skills Into Activities

During the sample lessons, we observed that some communicative activities can be made more interesting and useful by adapting them to be more grammar-focused. Another factor is that in communicative grammar lessons, grammar patterns are presented, practiced, and consolidated through practical skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. These facts should be considered during lesson planning.

Combine the Old With the New

For the technical students at PTIT, as well as those at other technical colleges and universities in Vietnam, one main goal of learning English is to read technical books, manuals, and instructions. Understanding grammar structures might be as important to them as producing the patterns in practice. Therefore, a combination of the

grammar-translation and communicative approaches can be considered a good solution to provide learners with the communicative abilities as well as the grammar knowledge necessary for their future jobs.

Conclusion

Our experiment has shown that communicative lessons are more effective than grammar-translation lessons in helping learners raise their ability to produce sentences correctly and appropriately. Learners were more motivated when they experienced more interesting and vivid communicative grammar lessons than their friends did in the control class. Recognizing this, and taking into account problems experienced in Vietnamese contexts, teachers of English should have a more positive attitude towards CLT and should seek to gain more knowledge about it and apply it in their classrooms. ■

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