Program Evaluation: English Grammar in the Language Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The present study wants to find out the reasons for choosing the current methods/techniques for teaching grammar and it also wants to investigate whether there is a relation between teachers' thinking and their actions in the class or not. For this reason, four language teachers were selected. The subjects were selected by non-random sampling. They were chosen purposefully (case study). The data collection was done through observations and interviews. An inductive thematic analysis was used to find out the subjects' underlying concepts and themes frequently mentioned. These general themes and underlying concepts were put in some categories. Then, these categories were organized in a coherent and meaningful manner. The findings of this study revealed that the subjects (four English teachers) taught English grammar by referring to their experiences.

Keywords: *Method, Technique, Grammar*

INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant parts of learning a foreign language is learning its grammar. Learning long lists of words seems useless if one does not know how to put the words together to make a correct sentence. It is obvious learning grammar is crucial, but it is not sufficient. The most important challenge is related to applying the grammatical rules. Since the growing public concern, in a second or foreign language field, is communication, therefore, knowing the basic grammatical rules and the ability to apply them is vital.

Native speakers naturally acquire the grammatical rules. Maybe they cannot explain the rules of their language but they can produce correct sentences. They can speak correctly, but if they are asked to explain the function of words in the sentence or why they use one word instead of another, they cannot explain. But non-native speakers do not naturally acquire the grammatical rules. They must learn the grammar. When the word "learn" is heard, the first thing that comes to mind is teaching. Hence, for learning grammar of another language, teaching is needed.

There are many different definitions for grammar, method and technique, but here the most common ones are presented. Vossughi (2000) stated, "Grammar is sometimes defined as the way words are put together to make correct sentences" (p. 241). He believed this is an over-simplification, but it is a good starting point. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), "method is an overall plan for orderly presentation of language martial…is based upon selected approach…a method is procedural" (p. 19). A technique is implementation, something that actually happens in the classroom, a particular trick, stratagem or contrivance used to accomplish an immediate objective (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

For many years, teaching of grammar has been debated; the place of grammar in the teaching of foreign languages is controversial (Ur, 1996). Teaching grammar looks like a pendulum; it has two extreme ends. On one side stand the advocates of teaching grammar and on the other side, their opponents. Their different opinions result from the different methods of teaching introduced at different times. The pendulum swung as a result of new methods of teaching being introduced. But, grammar teaching has now gained its status in the language-teaching field. Nowadays, many teachers and researchers believe that teaching and learning grammar play an important role in every English class (Dadvand & Azimi, 2009).

However, learning grammar is not enough. Students should not only be able to produce grammatical structures, but they should also be able to use them meaningfully and appropriately as well (Mirzaee & Fatemipour, 2000). Therefore, the ability to apply grammatical rules is as important as learning grammar. But the most important question is, how can English teachers teach grammar more effectively and how can they help students to apply their knowledge?

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The aims of the present study are as follows:

1. To find out the reasons for choosing the current methods/techniques for teaching grammar

2. To investigate whether there is a relation between teachers' thinking and their actions in the class or not

Teaching is done through methods/techniques, and these methods/techniques stemmed from a theory. English teachers play an important role in selecting the methods and techniques for teaching grammar (Dadvand & Azimi, 2009). Kumaravadivelu (2003) points out "it is generally agreed that teachers' classroom practice is directly or indirectly based on some theory". On the other hand, Larsen-Freeman (1998) believes that teachers teach according to their experiences in the class instead of their knowledge. Larsen-Freeman (1998) points out that "experience is the only real reference point teachers share: experiences as students that influence their views of teaching, experiences in professional preparation, and experience as members of society" (p. 10). Kumaravadivelu (2003) also believes teaching is a subjective activity. Teachers choose how to teach grammar according to their experiences, level of the students' proficiency and materials. For this reason, the probability of making mistakes is high. Therefore, describing these methods and techniques and finding the reasons for choosing current methods/techniques seem a necessity.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects and Procedures

The first objective is to find out the reasons for choosing the current methods/techniques for teaching English grammar. Therefore, a series of direct observations was done. All the observations were done by the researcher and the role of the researcher was just observer in the class; she went to the field and collected the data in the setting (fieldwork). Four classes in an English institute, in Mashad, Iran, were selected for observation. The selection was done purposefully. These subjects were selected because they could give the most useful information for in-depth study; since grammar is not taught in most language centres in Iran. The major focus is on speaking and listening. The majority of language centres ignore grammar teaching. The selected language center is the only one that has grammar classes in Mashad. The observations were done in the classes during one semester (one month and a half, three days a week, with every session taking two hours). Generally, there were 22 sessions. The 11th and 22nd sessions were devoted to mid-term and final examination, respectively. Therefore, these two sessions were excluded from the series of observations. Some 20 sessions out of 20 were observed to find out the reasons for choosing the current methods/techniques for teaching English grammar. It must be mentioned here all subjects participated in this study voluntarily, and they could drop out from the study at any time they wanted.

It was done through a qualitative description design about teaching methods and techniques for teaching English grammar in Iran. A series of observations (20 sessions out of 20) was planned to be administered to find out the reasons for choosing the current methods/techniques for teaching English grammar, in Mashad, Iran.

After finishing the series of observations, the teachers were interviewed in order to find out why they chose that method/technique for teaching grammar. It was planned that interviews with teachers lasted up to 45-60 minutes each. The questions started with general questions about the teachers, and then they moved toward the selected methods. The rest of the questions were made according to the teacher's activities in the class (using the observations). All the interviews were conducted by the same researcher. All interview sessions were recorded and were subsequently transcribed.

The materials required for this study include: observation and interview:

Observation: To study actual behavior, observation will be done. Creswell (2005) defines observation as follows: "observation is the process of gathering open-ended, firsthand information by observing people and places at a research

site" (p. 211). According to Creswell (2005), descriptive analysis is done to identify general trends. Therefore, to explain the general picture, observation was done about the methods and techniques of grammar teaching.

Interview: The questions were semi-structured. Subjects were interviewed in Persian. The interview was done with English teachers to find out why they selected the current teaching method. The interviews were semi-structured because, in qualitative design, the interviews should be informal, free and without a special structure. It must be like a friendly chat (Mirzaee & Fatemipour, 2000). Interviews were done face to face, separately, and they were recorded.

Kvale (1983) defines the qualitative research interview as "an interview, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena" (p. 174). To answer the second research question, depth-data is needed. Since, in face-to-face interview, there is no delay between questions and answers, interviewees answer spontaneously, it is supposed that their answers exactly reflect their opinions (Mirzaee & Fatemipour, 2000). Furthermore, interviewers can observe facial expressions. The survey instruments for this study were developed by the researcher.

Data which were gathered from these two instruments were evaluated to ascertain whether there is any compatibility between teachers' thinking and actual behaviors in the class.

An inductive thematic analysis was used to find out the subjects' underlying concepts and themes frequently mentioned (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These general themes and underlying concepts were put in some categories. Then, these categories were organized in a coherent and meaningful manner.

Observation: the important issues of observation were put in some categories which reflected the frequent themes.
Interview: responses to the interviews were classified, general concepts and key ideas were put in different categories.

The key ideas in each category were coded. In addition, a brief profile was prepared for each subject that reflects her central themes or subjects. These issues were put in the appropriate category if they were new.

The next step was a review all the categories in order to find commonalities and differences. The similar categories overlapped each other and became one category. Then a list of categories was prepared. To arrange the list, prioritizing must be done. The next step was member checking; the thematic analysis (list of categories) was returned to a few subjects. Then, the result was demonstrated in report form.

Inductive thematic analysis was chosen to analyze the data of the present study because, according to Boyatzis (1998), this study involves a "data driven approach", that is, by using raw answers, some codes and themes will be made. According to Ekrami (2001), thematic analysis is inductive, that is, the researcher does not impose the themes; rather, they emerge from the data. Since the nature of this study is the same, choosing inductive thematic analysis is appropriate.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study revealed that the subjects (four English teachers) taught English grammar by referring to their experiences that they had got from the training class. Larsen-Freeman (1998) believed that teachers teach according to their experiences in the class instead of their knowledge. Larsen-Freeman (1998) pointed out "experience is the only real reference point teachers share: experiences as students that influence their views of teaching, experiences in professional preparation, and experience as members of society" (p. 10).

But, there was an interesting point: they did it unconsciously; they believed in some language theories and they thought they taught according to it. It means that teachers believe in something, but they do another thing unconsciously. The observations revealed their actual teaching in the class and the interviews showed their opinions. It means that there is no a relation between the methods/techniques used for teaching English grammar and the reason for selecting them and there is no relation between teachers' thinking and their actions in the class, too.

Argyris and Schön (1984) introduced the "Action Theory" regarding this issue. They believed that all persons have a mental map in their minds. Although they are unaware of it, they practice according to it; the mental map guides their performance instead of the theories they assert to believe (Argyris, 1980). The Action Theory divides theory into two parts: espoused theory and theory in use. If people are asked about their action under certain circumstances, they explain their behaviors according to the espoused theory. Nevertheless, everybody behaves according to the theory in use. Sometimes, there is no compatibility between two theories and persons are not aware of it (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Generally speaking, it can be concluded that there was no congruence between their espoused theory and theory in use. They were not aware that their espoused theory was not the same as their theory in use. They believed in something, but they performed the other thing in the class. Therefore, they were unable to obtain effective results.

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