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- CURRENT
- ARCHIVES
- ANNOUNCEMENTS

Home > Archives > Vol 4, No 1 (2016)

Vol 4, No 1 (2016)

Table of Contents

Articles

THE NARRATOR'S VOICE OF FREEDOM IN RALPH ELLISON'S INVISIBLE MAN: A STUDY OF POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE	PDF 1-9
<i>Khotimatul Khusnah</i> (IKIP PGRI Madiun) <i>Vita Vendityaningtyas</i> (IKIP PGRI Madiun)	
10.25273/etj.v4i1.4355 Abstract views : 304	
THE BLUE ALIEN IN KOI MIL GAYA FILM: POPULAR LITERATURE	PDF 10-20
<i>Luluk Hanikmah</i> (IKIP PGRI Madiun)	
10.25273/etj.v4i1.4356 Abstract views : 447	
CHRIS KYLE AS A HERO IN AMERICAN SNIPER: A STUDY OF POPULAR LITERATURE	PDF 21-32
<i>Ruliatul Fatimah</i> (IKIP PGRI MADIUN)	
10.25273/etj.v4i1.4357 Abstract views : 373	
Proposing Structured Input Activities for Communicative Grammar Teaching	PDF 33-44
<i>Sulislyani Sulislyani</i> (Nusantara PGRI Kediri University) <i>Khoiriyah Khoiriyah</i> (Nusantara PGRI Kediri University)	
10.25273/etj.v4i1.4358 Abstract views : 491	
ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS FOR DIFFERENT RACES IN DR. KING'S UTTERANCES OF AVA DUVERNAY'S SELMA MOVIE	PDF 45-53
<i>Meryka Provtasari</i> (IKIP PGRI MADIUN) <i>Dwi Setiyadi</i> (IKIP PGRI MADIUN) <i>Lusia Kristasih Dwi Purnomosari</i> (IKIP PGRI MADIUN)	
10.25273/etj.v4i1.4359 Abstract views : 315	
TEACHING SPEAKING BY USING COMMUNICATION GAMES FOR JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS	PDF 54-63
<i>Samsul Arifin</i> (IKIP PGRI MADIUN) <i>Noviana Tri Purwanti</i> (IKIP PGRI MADIUN)	
10.25273/etj.v4i1.4360 Abstract views : 540	
THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CLOZE STRATEGY TO TEACH DESCRIPTIVE TEXT READING FOR EIGHTH GRADE STUDENT OF SMP NEGERI 1 WONOASRI	PDF 64-78
<i>Diani Rochmawati</i> (IKIP PGRI MADIUN) <i>Brigitta Septarini Rahmasari</i> (IKIP PGRI MADIUN)	
10.25273/etj.v4i1.4370 Abstract views : 187	

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Proposing Structured Input Activities for Communicative Grammar Teaching

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Abstract

Current views of language teaching suggest that grammar is included in communicative activities. The reason is that discrete grammar teaching fails to produce fluent speakers while pure communicative classroom fails to produce accurate speakers. This article aims to share a way of teaching grammar in meaning-focused instruction namely structured input activities consisting of referential activities and affective activities. The activities not only affect learners' input processing strategies but also affect their underlying system in such a way to be able to incorporate the target forms in their output. Besides containing input that facilitates form meaning connections they also force learners to focus on the target structure and to process it for meaning. This practice is expected to provide EFL teachers with useful practical insight to enhance their teaching practices.

Keywords: structured input, grammar, communicative grammar teaching

INTRODUCTION

Grammar as a set of rules for choosing words and putting words together to make sense plays a significant role in language teaching. Grammar is in fact, fundamental to language. Without grammar, language does not exist. It is difficult for students to speak English well without learning English grammar. So, in the formal education, it is inevitable for teachers who teach foreign languages to teach grammar. This is the reason why the teaching of grammar continues to occupy a major place in language pedagogy. Thus, grammar teaching is an essential part of language teaching because mastering grammar is the foundation in the proficiency of a language.

However, misconception occurs in which with the communicative approach introduced in Indonesia, many foreign language teachers gradually decrease the amount of grammar teaching. Grammar is considered not important to be taught. Meanwhile, extensive research on learning outcomes in French immersion programs by Swain and her colleagues showed that, the learners did not achieve accuracy in certain grammatical forms eventhough long-term exposure to meaningful input, (Lapkin, Hart, & Swain, 1991). This research suggested that to develop high levels of accuracy in the target language, some type of focus on grammatical forms was necessary. This means that communicative language teaching should not purely focus on meaning but also accommodate the need of forms. Besides, the

1980s hypothesis reveals that language can be learned without some degree of consciousness has been found theoretically problematic. Tomasello (1998) has presented his findings which indicate that language learners cannot process target language input for both meaning and form simultaneously. They need to notice target forms in input in order that they process input for both meaning and specific forms, not either of them. Thus, noticing or awareness of target forms plays an important role in L2 learning.

In the field of language pedagogy the role of grammar teaching, then, has been controversial. The controversy has always been whether grammar should be taught explicitly through a formal presentation of grammatical rules or implicitly through natural exposure to meaningful language use. The various pedagogical options available to the teacher and the strength and weaknesses of each option have been brought into discussion to seek an explanation on the way to teach grammar. One of the current concerns of applied linguists is centered on the most effective form of grammar instruction while maintaining the nature of language use (Doughty and William 1998; Lightbown 2000; Norris and Ortega 2000). Nowadays, the debate arises around the degree to which teachers need to direct learners' attention to understanding grammar while retaining to focus on the need to communicate.

Currently, there are various options of teaching grammar proposed by linguists. Grammar can be focused on L2 classrooms through processing instruction. Processing instruction is a particular approach to teaching grammar that is based on how learners interpret and process input for meaning (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011, p. 24). This approach rests on the assumption that the role of input is central to language acquisition and that grammar can best be learned when learners attend to it in input-rich environments. In this approach, an initial exposure to explicit instruction is combined with a series of input-processing activities that aim to help learners create form-meaning connections as they process grammar for meaning. The aim of this approach is to help the learner in making form-meaning connections during input processing. Input processing "attempts to explain how learners get form from input and how they parse sentences during the act of comprehension while their primary attention is on meaning" (VanPatten, 2002, p. 757).

Classroom activities that are used in input-processing instruction are called structured input. They are specifically designed to contain input that facilitates form-meaning connections. According to VanPatten (2004), input processing strategies are context neutral, that is, they are not affected by classroom or non-classroom contexts and are used in all circumstances. Therefore, structured input activities are useful for both ESL and EFL contexts.

The optimum combination of form and meaning focus activities in any given instructional setting, however, depends on learner age, nature and length of instructional sequence, opportunities for language contact outside the classroom, teacher preparation, and other factors. This strategy can also have negative effects on learning redundant forms because students may not attend to those target forms (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011: 24). Ideally, as suggested by Ellis et al. (2002), attention to linguistic forms should be briefly drawn during communicative practice. In this way, students learn linguistic form and meaning simultaneously. The students learn the correct forms and use them directly in communicative practice.

This paper is expected to have an essential contribution to the development of language teaching methodologies especially in modeling the teaching of forms in EFL classroom. It will also provide beneficial information for the teachers of English in relation to the importance of teaching grammar and whether grammar should be taught separately or in combination with other aspects of language. The result of this study will become a model of classroom activities for teaching grammar and also become a consideration of material design for teaching grammar.

Communicative language teaching

Richard (2006, p.2) states “Communicative language teaching can be understood as a set of principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom”. The goal of communicative language teaching is the teaching of communicative competence which includes aspects of language knowledge such as knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions, knowing how to vary our use of language according to the setting and participants, knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts, and knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one’s language knowledge, Richard (2006, p.3).

Fluency, one of the goals of CLT, is defined by Richard (2006, p.14) as natural language use occurring when a speaker engages in meaningful interaction and maintain comprehensible and ongoing communication despite limitations in his or her communicative competence. Fluency can be developed by creating classroom activities in which students must negotiate meaning, use communication strategies, correct understandings, and work to avoid communication breakdowns. Accuracy practice, on the other hand, focuses on creating

correct examples of language use. Richard further summarizes the differences between fluency and accuracy activities as follows:

Activities focusing on fluency

- Reflect natural use of language
- Focus on achieving communication
- Require meaningful use of language
- Require the use of communication strategies
- Produce language that may not be predictable
- Seek to link language use to context

Activities focusing on accuracy

- Reflect classroom use of language
- Focus on the formation of correct examples of language
- Practice language out of context
- Practice small samples of language
- Do not require meaningful communication
- Control choice of language

Richard (2006, p. 15-16) recommends that teachers use a balance of fluency activities and accuracy and use accuracy activities to support fluency activities in which accuracy work could either come before or after fluency work. Accuracy work could be assigned to deal with grammatical or pronunciation problems on the fluency performance the teacher observed while learners were carrying out the task. In doing fluency tasks, the focus is on getting meanings across using any available communicative resources which often depends on vocabulary and communication strategies, and there is little motivation to use accurate grammar or pronunciation.

The three different kinds of practice are mechanical, meaningful, and communicative. Mechanical practice is a controlled practice activity which learners can successfully carry out without necessarily understanding the language they are using (e.g. repetition drills and substitution drills). Meaningful practice is then an activity where language control is still provided but learners are required to make meaningful choices when carrying out practice. Similarly, Littlewood (1981, p.20) group activities into two kinds: pre-communicative activities and communicative activities. Pre-communicative activities involve structural

activities and quasi-communicative activities while communicative activities involve functional communication activities and social interactional activities. Functional communication activities require students to use their language resources to overcome an information gap or solve a problem. Social interactional activities require the learner to pay attention to the context and the roles of the people involved, and to attend to such things as formal versus informal language. These requirements have been reflected in CLT activities such as information gap activities, jigsaw activities and other types of activities including task-completion activities, information-gathering activities, opinion-sharing activities, information-transfer activities, reasoning-gap activities, and role plays, Richard (2006, p.19).

Most of the activities in CLT are designed to be carried out in pairs or small groups which provide learners with several benefits that they can learn from hearing the language used by other members of the group, produce a greater amount of language than they would use in teacher-fronted activities, have the chance to develop fluency, and their motivational level is likely to increase.

Grammar teaching

In the past many ESL/EFL teachers have viewed grammar from an exclusively sentence level perspective. It turns out that such a perspective, when applied pedagogically, has had negative consequences for the way in which the grammar of second and foreign languages has been taught and tested (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000: 50). Sentence-based view of grammar is also inconsistent with the notion of communicative competence which includes at least four interacting competences: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence (Canale, 1983).

There are few grammar choices made by speakers or writers that are strictly sentence level and completely context-free, for example: determiner-noun agreement, use of gerund after prepositions, reflexive pronominalization within the clause, and some-any suppletion in the environment of negation. Meanwhile, the vast majority of choices that a speaker/writer makes depends on certain conditions being met in terms of meaning, situational context, and/or discourse context (i.e., co-text). Such grammatical choices are not context-free but context-dependent which enable speakers and writers to accomplish specific pragmatic and discourse forming functions. The rules of English grammar which are sensitive to discourse and context are: use of passive versus active voice, indirect object alternation, pronominalization, article/determiner choice, position of adverbials in sentences, use of

existential *There* versus its non-use, tense-aspect-modality choice, right/left dislocation of constituents, choice of logical connector, and use versus non-use of it clefts and wh-clefts.

Functional grammarians start from a very different position. Although there are different models of functional grammar, functionalists share the conviction that it is the use that determines the form that is used for a particular purpose. Thus, functional grammarians see pragmatics and meaning as central. In Halliday's Systemic-Functional theory, three types of meaning in grammatical structure can be identified: ideational meaning (how our experience and inner thoughts are represented), interpersonal meaning (how we interact with others through language), and textual meaning (how coherence is created in spoken and written texts).

Larsen-Freeman (2001) offers "grammaring" – the ability to use grammar structures accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately as the proper goal of grammar instruction. The addition of "-ing" to grammar is meant to suggest a dynamic process of grammar using. In order to realize this goal, it is not sufficient for students to notice or comprehend grammatical structures. Students must also practice meaningful use of grammar in a way that takes into account "transfer appropriate" processing (Roediger & Gynn, 1996). This means that in order for students to overcome the inert knowledge problem and transfer what they can do in communicative practice to real communication outside of the classroom, there must be a psychological similarity between the conditions of learning and the conditions of use (Segalowitz, 2003). Bearing the need for psychological similarity in mind, Gabonton and Segalowitz (1988) offer "creative automatization." Rather than automatizing knowledge of rules, as was suggested by Gabonton and Segalowitz call for practice that automates control of patterned sequences, ones that would naturally occur in given communicative contexts. Of course, what is practiced and the way it is practiced will depend on the nature of the learning challenge. Some structures may need little, if any, pedagogical focus. With others, when the learning challenge is how to form the construction, it is important that learners get to practice the target item over and over again meaningfully, for example by using it in a task-essential way (Fotos, 2002). When the challenge is meaning, students need practice in associating form and meaning, such as associating various spatial and temporal meanings with prepositions. Finally, when the challenge is use, students need to be given situations where they are forced to decide between the use of two or more different forms with roughly the same meaning, but which are not equally appropriate in a given context. Use would be a challenge for learners, for example, in choosing between the active and passive voices or between English present perfect and past tenses.

Thompson (1996) suggests that wherever possible, learners are first exposed to new language in a comprehensible context, so that they are able to understand its function and meaning. Only then is their attention turned to examining the grammatical forms that have been used to convey that meaning. The discussion of grammar is explicit, but it is the learners who are doing most of the discussing, working out—with guidance from the teacher—as much of their new knowledge of the language as can easily and usefully be expressed.

In conclusion, teaching grammar to language learners needs the teacher to pay attention to its use. Besides, grammar is better taught and learned in context. By this way, learners will notice it as meaningful. Furthermore, the input, in order to be able to easily used, must be comprehensible. Therefore, the teacher should carefully select the techniques that best facilitate student learning.

Input Processing and Processing Instruction

According to VanPatten, (1996), the originator of the PI approach, PI is an input based grammar instruction which aims to affect learners' attention to input data which is in compliance with second language theories and communicative language teaching. This pedagogical approach works with input and with the processes learners use to get data from that input. VanPatten's PI has been proved to be effective. VanPatten accepts the fundamental role of input and uses the term input processing for the cognitive process which occurs when input is understood and integrated into language. The concept of input is single most important concept of second language acquisition.

Van Patten (1996 as cited in VanPatten 2002, p. 758) has presented one model of IP in order to provide the theoretical foundation to it. Processing instruction consists of three basic components: Learners are given information about a linguistic structure or form. Learners are informed about a particular processing strategy that may negatively affect their picking up of the form or structure during comprehension. Learners are pushed to process the form or structure during activities with structured input-input that is manipulated in particular ways to push learners to become dependent on form and structured to get meaning. Learners would work through written and aural activities in which they are pushed to process sentences correctly. These activities are called structured input activities.

Structured input activities

Examples of structured input activities that can be used to provide learners with opportunities to focus on grammar while processing input are modeled after published work in this area, including the works of VanPatten and his colleagues. The examples of this model

are both referential and affective activities. Referential activities are those that involve only one correct answer. Affective activities do not have any right or wrong answer; learners have to simply indicate their agreement or opinions about a set of sentences. Classroom teachers can use these activities separately or in combination.

Referential Activities

The following three activities (adopted from Nassaji & Fotos, 2011, p 30-33) provide examples of referential activities. Recall that referential activities are activities for which there is always a right or wrong answer. They can be used for students in upper-beginner or lower intermediate level classes. The aim of the first two activities is to help learners with the acquisition of English past and future tenses, respectively. The third activity facilitates learning causative constructions.

According to the input-processing model, learners prefer processing lexical items to morphological items. Since tenses in English can be marked both morphologically and lexically, learners may not process the morphological marker if the tense is also marked lexically with a time reference, such as an adverb of time. The goal of activity 1 is to push learners to process the morphological marker -ed, which they may not otherwise notice if the past adverbial is provided.

Activity 1

Instruction: Listen to the following sentences and decide whether they describe an action that was done before or is usually done.

Example:

	Now	Before
1	The teacher corrected the essays.	
2	The man cleaned the table.	
3	I wake up at 5 in the morning.	
4	The train leaves the station at 8 am.	
5	The writer finished writing the book.	
6	The trees go green in the spring.	

Activity 2

Activity 2 focuses on the English future tense. In this activity, the time referent has been omitted from the statements. Therefore, to process the tense of the sentence, the learner must pay attention to the morphological marker. Similar activities can be designed with a focus on other tenses.

Instruction: Read the following statements and decide whether the person is talking about what he currently does or what he will do when he retires.

	Now	Retirement
1	I meet new people.	
2	I will travel a lot.	
3	I will work hard.	

4	I give money to charities.
5	I will be happy.
6	I am a role model.
7	I play soccer.
8	I will hold many parties.

Activity 3

One of the grammatical forms that may be difficult for English language learners is causative construction, sentences in which someone is caused to do something. Examples of such constructions include: “I had my students write an essay” and “I made the man clean the room.” Since these sentences include two agents, according to the input processing model, students may always assign the role of the person who did the activity to the first noun. Therefore, they may have problems interpreting the statements accurately. For example, in the sentence “John had his student write an essay,” students may incorrectly interpret it as “John wrote the essay.” A structured input activity such as the following can be designed to help learners to interpret such statements accurately.

Students’ instruction: Listen to each of the following sentences and then decide who is performing the action by checking the box.

The teacher’s instructions: Read each sentence only once and then, after each sentence, ask for an answer. Do not wait until the end to review answers.

Students do not repeat or otherwise produce the structure.

1. The girl made the man check the house for mice.
2. My dad made my brother babysit the children all night.
3. Mom let the boys go to three different circuses in one week.
4. The boss had the chef prepare several roast geese for the wedding dinner.
5. Jack let Joe collect some of the data required for our project.
6. The professor had the students create hypotheses for their science experiment.

1	Who checked the house for mice?	The girl	The man
2	Who babysat the children all night?	My dad	My brother
3	Who went to three different circuses in one week?	Mom	The boys
4	Who prepared several roast geese for the wedding dinner?	The boss	The chef
5	Who collected some of the data required for our project?	Jack	Joe
6	Who had the students create hypotheses for their science experiment?	The professor	The students

Affective Activities

The following two activities provide examples of affective activities. Recall that affective activities require learners to express their opinion and do not have right or wrong answers. They can be used with students in a lower intermediate level class. The aim of the first activity is to push students to process the present and past participle adjectives. The aim of the second activity is to help learners process the simple past tense. The activities can be conducted orally or in written forms.

Activity 4

Instruction: Read the following sentences and decide whether you agree with the statement.

	Agree	Disagree
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		

Activity 5

Step 1: Read the following activities and indicate whether you did the same things over the weekend.

	Yes	No
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		

Step 2: Now form pairs and compare your responses with your classmate to see whether he or she did the same activities.

CONCLUSION

The way to teach grammar in communicative language teaching has been discussed and that grammar teaching is still important to be taught and in the context of foreign language teaching it cannot be neglected. Grammar can be taught and learned communicatively, and thus, can be included in communicative language teaching. With the development of language teaching methodology, teachers are provided with a number of choices of approaches and methods being the solution of misconception on grammar teaching. Processing instruction with its samples of teaching techniques is readily adopted and practiced in EFL classroom. Teachers, of course, need to consider any factors which may hinder the success of its application such as students' age, preparation, time allocation, and so on. Finally, structured input activities as one the techniques of teaching grammar here are also recommended to EFL teachers who want to improve their teaching practice.

BIODATA

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