

Implication of Functional Discourse Grammar in Teaching

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Abstract— English learning has always been a big issue to be discussed. Many methods have been researched and applied in learning and teaching English so as to achieve the best results. The methods applied in teaching vary from that of teaching and learning four skills to teaching and learning three language areas. In terms of language areas, the most to be paid attention in school, especially in Vietnam, is grammar. Teachers always try their best to help students learn grammar well. However, it seems not to have as much improvement as expected. This paper aims to find a new way and new kind of grammar to teach so that students can improve their grammar not only in school but also in students' own lives. The paper also gives an example of a grammar lesson from grade 10 textbook and shows how grammar is used in class in a new way.

Keywords—functional discourse grammar, teaching English, teaching grammar, high schools, Vietnam.

I. INTRODUCTION

There are a lot of methods to teach language skills and language areas. Each has its own merits and defects. Therefore, which method to use depends on different situations. However, when it comes to grammar, reality shows that many schools today, especially in Vietnam still use traditional grammar to teach to students. It is obvious that traditional grammar have its own attraction and influence without much change from the past (McCarthy, 2001). He also ensures that the grammar students learn in school is much likely the traditional one instead of many other types of grammar. However, people don't really pay attention to the grammar they choose to teach – whether it is useful for students or not. Students learning this kind of grammar can do grammar exercises on structures in the tests very well and with flying colors, but not all of them can actually use those structures in their real life, especially when communicating with other people.

There have been a lot of empirical studies to find out new effective ways of teaching grammar. The one that I think can be the best replacement for traditional grammar is functional discourse grammar. Functional discourse grammar has some characteristics that can fill the gap for traditional one to help students easily apply in real life situations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Grammar

Grammar is familiar to all language learners. However, not all really understand that term. Grammar has a lot of definitions and it somehow makes people confused. As DeCarrico and Larsen-Freeman stated that with different people, grammar doesn't

mean the same things but different (2002). To some people, grammar means the rule helping them to use correct form of I instead of me. To others, it simply means the rules in which the verbs are influenced by the subjects. According to Johnson and Zelenski, grammar is “a powerful tool for describing and analyzing languages. It is a set of rules by which valid sentences in a language are constructed” (2008). There are more than one types of grammar. It can be descriptive grammar which can make distinction between correct and incorrect forms. It can also be prescriptive grammar aiming to describe language as it is actually used (DeCarrico and Larsen-Freeman, 2002). We can easily find some other types of grammar such as formal grammar, textual grammar, systemic grammar, and case grammar, etc. It can be said that whatever type it is, grammar can be divided into two big types: one for forms and one for functions. With the form type, grammar deals with the form or structure system. Chomsky’s transformational-generative grammar (Chomsky, 1957, 1965) is a kind of formal grammar. It provides learners with “a set of abstract rules for generating grammatical sentences” (DeCarrico and Larsen-Freeman, 2002). That is to say, learners can learn the rules to use nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs in the right position in structures or sentences. The other type of grammar is functional grammar. It is concerned with the functions of grammar which means providing learners with how language is used in discourse rather than in sentences only. In this paper, traditional grammar and functional discourse grammar are the main focus.

2.2. Traditional grammar

As mentioned above, traditional grammar nowadays still dominates other types of grammar in school curriculum. With traditional grammar, the core unit is sentence. Sentences play an important role in this type of grammar. Sentences themselves can get their own meaning without any contexts mentioned. Sentences can also show the basic meanings that can be found in all language. According to McCarthy, “the sentence is a universal of human language” (2001), which means that sentences exist in any languages in the world and they somehow share the same characteristics. Therefore, McCarthy also state that people tend to consider sentences as “objects to study” and that sentences are expected to be used in classes and materials (2001). In traditional grammar, learners are taught some components that make up a sentence and how they work together to make meanings. Meanings in traditional grammar are context-free, which means they depend on words making up sentences not the situations in which sentences are spoken. Then, many other structures are taught such as relative clauses, passive voice, and so on.

2.3. Functional discourse grammar

Functional discourse grammar is not just concerned with the form of the language but also with the function, i.e. how language is used in particular contexts. In Connolly’s words, functional discourse grammar represents a “pragmatically-oriented approach” to language (2007:11). Pragmatics relates to the use of language in different contexts or situations in real life – how and when to say what to whom. In this type of grammar, utterances was produced and interpreted within a context, unlike traditional grammar – out of the contexts. Besides, functional discourse grammar is the one that has top-down organizations (Hengeveld and Mackenzie, 2008). This means that functional discourse grammar deals with the biggest units of grammar then the smallest ones i.e. pragmatics first then other components such as semantics, syntax and so on. This kind of grammar also deals with discourse – a group of sentences in a context, as its name suggests, rather than with sentences themselves.

2.4. Past and current ways of learning and teaching grammar

Grammar, in the past, was learned and taught in a way that focuses much more on form than function. With the use of Behaviorist theory of Watson and Skinner in the early of twentieth century, grammar learning was considered as a process of habit formation. Learners had to remember a list of grammatical structures. At that time, in order to help learners to have a good habit in using grammatical structures, teachers had to conduct a lot of drills such as repetition, substitution, etc. This was to make sure that students overcame the old bad habit in their mother tongue while learning the target language. With this way of learning, learners were just like talking parrots – doing exactly what was told. Later, when generative grammar of Chomsky appeared, grammar learning “was seen to take place through a process of rule-formation” (DeCarrico and Larsen-Freeman, 2002). To teach grammar, teachers gave students written grammar exercises to complete so that students could “induce the grammar rules” from the exercises (DeCarrico and Larsen-Freeman, 2002). By doing this, students were more active in class, not teacher-controlled type as habit formation. Gradually, grammar learning turns to a new page of development. Grammar teaching and learning focuses not only on forms but also on functions. Grammar is taught implicitly, and fluency is paid more attention than accuracy (DeCarrico and Larsen-Freeman, 2002).

However, as I have mentioned in the above session, traditional grammar has such attraction and influence that it is still applied nowadays. Particularly, many high schools still use the old way of teaching forms of grammar. Personally I think it is because

with this way of teaching and learning, teachers can easily control big-size classes where students may not be at the same level. Grammar is taught deductively and explicitly. Students have to learn a lot of grammar structures by heart in order to do well in the exercises and the tests also. The problem is that they can't apply these grammar structures in certain situations in real life. There must be some other ways with which students can both do well in the test and use grammar structures naturally in life.

2.5. The principles for teaching grammar

The current best way for the problem is to change from teaching form to teaching function of grammar. In other words, teachers should try functional discourse grammar to teach students instead of traditional one. As theories above, some principles can be established to be used in new grammar teaching. First, when teaching a grammatical structure, teachers should provide students with its "form, meaning and use" (DeCarrico and Larsen-Freeman, 2002). It is to say, teaching grammar is not only teaching the form but also the meaning of that structure and how and when it is used to say to whom. Second, grammar should be taught inductively and implicitly. By using examples together with situations, students can imagine themselves in a certain context in which the structure is used. After several examples of the same structures, students can induce the form themselves. It'll be better if the grammar is taught without students' consciousness, i.e. they don't know that they are actually learning a new grammatical pattern. Next, teachers should give students some meaningful grammar exercises. Meaningful grammar exercises are ones that can be used in communication. Finally, peer interaction and feedback from teacher are also important in grammar learning. According to DeCarrico and Larsen-Freeman, with peer interaction, students can discover the grammatical patterns for themselves through a set of examples. After inducing the patterns or making sentences, teachers are encouraged to give feedback on students' work. It's a kind of reinforcement: positive one for those who are right and negative one for those who are wrong. Hence, students can know what they can use and what the "exception" is (DeCarrico and Larsen-Freeman, 2002). To sum up, the new way of teaching grammar must ensure that learners have chance to learn and practice grammar in communication not just learn by heart the forms.

III. IMPLICATION

In this session, the paper will take a grammar lesson in grade 10 English textbook as an example of using functional discourse grammar to teach the lesson. In unit 11 of the book, students are going to learn conditional sentence type 3. Before teaching, teacher makes sure that students don't know that they are taught grammar. In the very first step, teacher gives students a situation like this: 'Yesterday, I had a lot of work to do, so I couldn't join my friend's birthday party. I was so sad. I can say that if I hadn't had a lot of work to do, I could have joined my friend's birthday party.' Teacher repeats the last sentence again and asks students to repeat as he/she writes the sentence on the board. Teacher continues with the second and third situations. There are now three conditional sentences on the board.

This time teacher asks one student about what he/she regrets. Then ask other students to make a sentence with If as he/she has done with the first three examples. Do the same thing with another student's story and five sentences are now on the board. In the next step, teacher delivers worksheets to students to work in group of four. In the worksheet, there are many pictures, each of which represents a situation. What students have to do is to look at the pictures and discuss with their partners to make sentences using If. After some time that teacher thinks it's enough for students to do the task, teacher asks representatives of some groups to write their sentences on the board and other groups will give comments. After that, teacher will correct their answers. If they are right, teacher can give bonus to the group. If they are wrong, teacher can draw students' attention to that sentence and explain more clearly.

Next, it's time to give them the form. Teacher asks students to write the form that is induced from the examples and exercises on the board then gives comments. Teacher should also provide students with the meaning of conditional sentence type 3 and its use. Finally, to help students sum up the point and have more chance to practice the structure, teacher ask students to spend two minutes to think of a situation in which If-sentence can be spoken. After two minutes, students volunteer to share the situation with classmates. Other students will use if-sentence to talk about their friends' situations. While students are doing the task, teacher takes notes and then gives feedback to the students' mistakes if necessary. If that mistake hinders students' understanding, teacher must give comment right away to help the task continue to the last minute.

In this grammar lesson, students have learned the form, meaning and use of conditional sentence type 3. They also have chance to put the structure into real situations from their friends and teacher. Peer interaction and teacher's feedback are also given to students which help them to know what should and shouldn't use.

IV. CONCLUSION

Teaching grammar by using traditional grammar can be good to some extent as it helps teacher easily control the class, especially when there are more than 30 students in a class. Yet, it should be change into functional discourse grammar so that students can get benefits from this new way of teaching. Through the example lesson above, we can see that students can have opportunity to interact with their friends in communicating and to find the general form for conditional sentence type 3. Besides, students can expose to the real language through real situations form teacher and friends. With the practice inside the classroom, students can easily put it into practice in their own lives and become successful communicators.

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