GRAMMAR IN TEFL: A CRITIQUE OF INDONESIAN HIGH SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to critically assess the presentation of English grammar in textbooks used in secondary schools in Indonesia. The influence of the Communicative Approach is in evidence in the books examined, and yet the importance of explicit grammar instruction is not ignored, reflecting the view of many today that grammatical forms cannot be successfully learnt merely on the basis of comprehensible input. Despite recognition of its central role, the grammar instruction presented in the textbooks invites questions as to its linguistic adequacy and accuracy. Writers often seem unwilling to take on board the insights recorded in the influential and authoritative descriptive grammars of recent years, continuing to accept tacitly the principles exposed in Traditional Grammar.

Key words: English grammar, Traditional Grammar, Communicative Language Teaching, Indonesia, textbooks

According to Scott Thornbury, in English language teaching "no other issue has so preoccupied theorists and practitioners as the grammar debate, and the history of the claims and counter claims for and against the teaching of grammar" (Thornbury, 1999:14). Those in favor of grammar teaching argue that, amongst other things, it offers the teacher a structured system that can be taught and tested in methodical steps, that learners who receive no grammar instruction fossilize earlier than those who do, and that conscious attention to grammatical form is a prerequisite for acquisition. Those against argue that it cannot simulate the kinds of conditions in which languages are acquired subconsciously, that traditional grammar syllabuses subvert the 'natural' order of acquisition, and that language learning involves lexical chunks which are often not coexistent with grammatical units.

The dominance since the 1970s of Communicative Language Teaching ('CLT') – which underpins the latest Competency-Based Curriculum in Indonesia (see Agustien 2004) – has had a negative impact on grammar instruction (as noted by Sugiharto, 2005:173). Supporters of CLT have generally rejected grammar-based syllabuses and explicit grammar teaching as incompatible with their experiential and communicative ideology. Nevertheless there are some (e.g. Long, 1985; 1991) who, while accepting that communicative activity is the underlying priority of the classroom, advocate a "form-focused" approach involving intervention in the process of interlanguage construction by drawing learners' attention to specific linguistic features. They point to research which suggests that learners who experience only meaning-focused instruction do not achieve high levels of proficiency (Higgs & Clifford, 1982; Swain, 1985; Genesee, 1987), and that learners who are unable to attend to form in meaning-focused instruction may need specific form-focused activities (Van Patten, 1990).

More recently still a model of form-focused instruction known as "focus on forms" (see Sheen, 2003) has emerged, questioning the assumption of Long and his supporters that the treatment of linguistic features within meaning-oriented activities should occur merely in response to learners' difficulties in communication, in an incidental, non-planned, fashion. Proponents of a focus-on-forms approach reject the assumption that grammar can be learnt effectively merely as a by-product of communicative activity, advocating instead the planned selection of forms to be taught in separate lessons, via a range of both communicative and non-communicative exercises. Research by Fotos (1994) suggests that such exercises can significantly increase awareness of the target structure and improve accuracy in its use, as well as providing opportunities for meaning-focused comprehension and production of the target language.

With the emergence of form-focused CLT, grammar appears to be "back in fashion" in TESOL. An increasing number of practitioners accept that without attention to grammatical form learners are unlikely to progress beyond the most rudimentary level of communication. The days have passed when supporters of task-based CLT expressed open hostility towards explicit grammar instruction. In EFL contexts, the form-focused methods of the pre-CLT era were perhaps less adversely affected by the advent of CLT. Here, explicit grammar may have become less visible in school curricula than it was in the days when Grammar-Translation, Audiolingualism and the Direct Method were in fashion, but classroom realities guaranteed continuing support for grammar instruction. These re-

alities include large class sizes mitigating against effective supervision of pair-
or group-practice, assessment-driven curricula focused on preparing learners for
university entrance examinations, and limited opportunities for pursuing com-
municative activities in the target language.

While there may have been a good deal of debate about the role of gram-
mar in TESOL, I believe that there has been insufficient discussion of the nature
of the grammar that is most appropriate in form-focused CLT. In previous sur-
veys of ESL textbooks my colleagues and I (Collins & Hood, 1998; Collins &
Lee, 2005) have identified a good deal of tacit acceptance of outdated descrip-
tive models, with writers apparently unaware of the insights presented in the
most influential and authoritative descriptive grammars of recent years (e.g.
Quirk, et al. 1985; Biber, et al. 1999; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002), and continu-
ing to reproduce the types of descriptions that one might expect to come across
in the Traditional grammars of English published in the first half of the twentieth
century or even earlier. The weaknesses of such grammars are well known in
contemporary Linguistics: their inconsistent handling of form-meaning relation-
ships, their failure to maintain the fundamental distinction between class and
function, their Latinate bias, and their prescriptive content. More than this, my
studies suggest the presence of a good deal of inaccurate description and analy-
sis, and the use of unidiomatic English in exercises and examples.

THE STUDY

In the remainder of this paper I shall examine the presentation of grammar
in Indonesian TEFL using a collection of fourteen current Indonesian High
School textbooks and a grammar reference book, Hartanto et al. (all listed in the
Appendix), using the following eight criteria: analytical soundness; balance be-
tween simplicity and accuracy; reliance on notional definitions; maintenance of
the distinction between grammatical class and function; inclusion of Latin-based
categories; prescriptive bias; factual errors; and unidiomatic/unnatural English.

Analytical Soundness

Grammatical analyses are often presented that are out-of-step with those
now widely accepted in contemporary Descriptive Linguistics. Consider Dju-
harie's claim in (1):

(1)   "*There*, *here*, *where* are never subjects".
     [Djuharie, *Communicative and Interactive English* (Voc Grade 1), p.135]

This claim, which is repeated in the author's Senior High textbook, is a controversial one for existential *there*. Notice that in the two examples that he provides (*There are many students in the classroom*; *There is only one student in the classroom*), a strong piece of evidence for regarding *there* as the grammatical subject is provided by its appearance in the interrogative tags associated with them (*are there?*; *is there?*).

On p.291 of the same book Djuharie classifies the *that* in relative clauses as a pronoun, whereas most contemporary grammarians regard it as subordinator/ complementizer. Interestingly, in his Grade 2 book (p.48) makes two observations – reproduced in (2) – about the distinctive behaviour of relative *that* which are precisely the grounds on which it should be excluded from the pronoun class:

(2)   "We do not use *that* for possessiveness. We do not use *that* when we put a preposition before the relative pronoun."
     [Djuharie, *Communicative and Interactive English* (Voc Grade 2), p.48]

Simplicity at the Expense of Accuracy

Often the fine balance between accuracy and simplicity/pedagogical effectiveness topples in favour of the latter. The danger here is that as the inaccuracy of such rules becomes apparent to learners they will need to unlearn much of what they have been taught at the elementary stage. As an example consider the description of concessive constructions in (3):

(3)   "Concessive relationship, or in bahasa Indonesia: 'hubungan kontra duga', is the relationship of two or more ideas which are combined with the conjunction *although/even though/though despite/in spite of*."
     [Djuharie, *Communicative and Interactive English* (Voc Grade 2), p.215]

This rather circular definition avoids saying anything about the nature of the relationship between the two ideas, which should invoke such notions as 'contrast' and 'unexpectedness'.

Reliance on Notional Definitions

Some of the books surveyed were noted to rely heavily upon notional (solely meaning-based) definitions of grammatical categories, which in the absence of appeal to structural criteria are unable to satisfactorily distinguish these categories from others in the grammar of English. Consider the definition of the subject in (4):

(4) "The subject is the doer/agent of the sentence in active voice"
     [Djuharie, *Communicative and Interactive English* (Snr High), p.121]

This definition overlooks the fact that the person or thing which does the action may not be the subject, as in *Jane was contacted by Peter*, or that the subject need not be a doer, as in *Jane is upset*. The subject function in English is most effectively characterized in terms of a cluster of structural properties (including agreement with the verb, use in interrogative tags, and association with the nominative case).

Maintenance of the Class vs Function Distinction

Another weakness that is evident in a number of the textbooks examined is one that is very common in traditional school grammars: a failure to maintain the fundamental distinction between grammatical class and grammatical function. Consider the class of adjectives, one of whose main functions is that of modifier in noun phrase structure. In (5) it is correctly assumed that this function can also be served by participial verbs such as *carved* and *boiling*, and by nouns such as *steel*, *cigarette* and *book*. However the implication that when used as modifiers such items have switched to the adjective class betrays confusion between the class of adjective and the function of modifier.

(5) "When we describe or modify a noun with more than one adjective, the order of adjective should be as follow:
     11. verb participle form (*carved*, *boiling*)
     14. noun in apposition (*steel*, *cigarette*, *book*)"
     [Djuharie, *Communicative and Interactive English* (Snr High), p.138]

It is a similar sort of confusion between class and function that leads to the misclassification by Basirun in *Speak English First* (p.59) of prepositional

phrases such as *in the classroom* and *in the football field* as adverbs. The typically adverbial function of such phrases resembles that of adverbs, but this does not mean that they belong to the same grammatical class.

Latin Bias

Traditional Grammars are noted for their inclusion of categories which are derived from Latin grammar but which have no place in the grammar of contemporary English. The influence of these grammars is reflected, for example, in the familiar threefold classification of the primary tenses ('present', 'past', 'future') – with *will* treated as a future tense marker – that is found in most of the Indonesian textbooks. Contemporary linguists, by contrast, generally do not regard English as having a future tense and analyze *will* as a modal auxiliary, related to the other members of the modal class by its capacity to express epistemic unassuredness.

Some of the books present a semantically-based Latinate classification of common nouns according to 'gender', even though the English language, unlike Latin, French and German, does not have grammatical gender (see, for example, the classification of *boar* as 'masculine' and *sow* as 'feminine' on p.48 of Hartanto et al.'s, *ABC Grammar*).

Prescriptive Bias

Some of the authors are influenced by conservative prescriptive analyses which are out of touch with the facts of contemporary usage. For example the treatment of *who* as "substitute for subject" and *whom* as object, on p.289 of *Communicative and Interactive English* (Voc Grade 1), is not supported by current English usage. *Who* has become the unmarked form in the pronoun system in Modern English, especially in informal registers, and is certainly not restricted to the subject function. Thus, while the answer anticipated by the author in (6) is *whom*, *who* should also be accepted.

(6) Supply the correct relative pronoun.
     Setiawan is the man _____ we are going to recommend for a job
     Dr Alwasilah is the only doctor _____ I have seen about this problem
     [Djuharie, *Communicative and Interactive English* (Voc Grade 1), pp.294]

Factual Errors

There was an alarming incidence of factual errors in the textbooks examined. For instance the description of an adjective clause in (7) as one that begins with a relative pronoun is inaccurate: in *The man I saw was Prabu* the relative clause *I saw* has no relative pronoun.

(7)　"An adjective clause is a clause that begins with a relative pronoun."
　　　[Djuharie, *Communicative and Interactive English* (Voc Grade 2), p.45]

The account of indirect speech in (8) is erroneous: if the situation still obtains at the time of utterance, it is possible to retain the present tense.

(8)　"When we are reporting something to someone, we need to change these words. E.g. They *are* OK -> He said (that) they *were* OK.
　　　[Djuharie, *Communicative and Interactive English* (Voc Grade 2), p.201]

Non-idiomatic English

The textbooks contained many instances of non-idiomatic English. For example the use of permission *might* and volitional *would* as independent past tense forms as in (9) is ungrammatical.

(9)　a.　*Why may I not go home earlier now whereas yesterday I <u>might</u> do it?*
　　　b.　*I will go to Boston tomorrow. When you saw me at the airport yesterday, I <u>would</u> buy the ticket.*
　　　　　[Djuharie, *Communicative and Interactive English* (Voc Grade 1), p.215]

Many unnatural examples occur in Hartanto's *ABC Grammar*, including *I know all which he said* (p.80), *A prize was given him by us* (p.278), and *He said: "The woman comes."* (p.286).

CONCLUSION

It was pleasing to observe writers supporting the trend towards the context- and discourse-driven approach towards grammatical instruction that has been

popularized in CLT in recent decades. The inductive approach adopted in many of the books, particularly those written for the early grades of secondary school, offered less insight into the type of grammatical descriptions that are being used in the classroom, but if the explicit grammatical descriptions in Djuharie, Basirun and others are anything to go by, then as I have suggested there is certainly room for improvement. The textbooks do not always provide accurate information about the details of English usage, and this is likely have a negative impact on the accuracy of both the teachers' and the students' knowledge of English structure and use. As we have seen, there is evidence of an inadequate treatment of the fundamental relationships between form and meaning, and between class and function, and – most alarmingly – many straightforward factual errors. English teachers and educators in Indonesia therefore, it would seem, need to cultivate a critical stance in assessing the quality of grammar presentation when selecting and using textbooks.

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APPENDIX

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