

INTERPRETATION-BASED APPROACH TO GRAMMAR TEACHING: NEW DIRECTIONS IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract: A substantial body of empirical research has revealed that the application of a purely communicative approach in the EFL setting is inadequate in helping learners attain high levels of grammatical competence. In fact, it has been found in the previous studies that communicative methodology produced learners with low levels of accuracy. Drawing on the contemporary literature related to grammar pedagogy, this article finds it useful to offer an alternative approach to grammar teaching in the EFL setting an approach that is based on task interpretation. This approach emphasizes the learner's comprehension of the specific grammatical features in communicative content. Specifically, it stresses the importance of input processing rather than output processing. In so doing, the approach allows learners' awareness of the grammatical features to develop so as to facilitate and eventually accelerate the acquisition process.

Key words: grammatical competence, grammar pedagogy, input processing, output processing, interpretation tasks

From the historical perspective, English teaching curriculum in Indonesia has undergone five changes with three different approaches (Dardjowidjojo, 2000). In 1945 we employed the Grammar-Translation Approach (GTA). In 1968 and 1975 the government implemented the use of the Audio-Lingual Approach (ALA) or Aural-Oral Approach, and in 1984 and 1994 the Communicative Approach (henceforth CA) was introduced and eventually used. It is only recently that the Competency-Based Curriculum enters our teaching methodology. How-

ever, this “brand new” curriculum can be said as part of the CA since it shares many of its features with the communicative approach (see Setiono, 2004a).

The shift from one approach to another followed the trends of the development of linguistic theories. The changes of philosophical outlook from the Structural linguistics (behaviorist) to Transformational–Generative linguistics (rationalist) in the late 1950s and to the Sociolinguistics/Pragmatic linguistics (experiential) in the 1960s were responsible for the changes our teaching methodology (see Larsen-Freeman, 1991 for a comprehensive historic review of grammar teaching).

The swing of the pendulum, which often gives birth to trendy terminologies, was, unfortunately, welcomed in our teaching methodology without empirical insights as to whether a certain theory (approach) proves to be effective in certain teaching context. We are always tempted by new priorities with their fashionable methodology to believe that magically the new approach offers the best panacea that will help solve the foreign language teachers’ problems. Thus, new approaches to language teaching are always uncritically accepted and prematurely rejected. This was reflected in the Indonesian Minister of Education’s remark, which prematurely claimed that the Audio-Lingual Approach was of a total failure (Sadtono, 1992), and he eventually recommended that the communicative approach be implemented in the 1984 curriculum.

However, CA is not without critics. It has been argued that CA, which employs the notional-functional syllabus, suffers from several flaws. For one thing, the notional-functional syllabus neglects the importance of discourse and strategic competence as the components of communicative competence because it only covers linguistic and sociolinguistic competence; it is just an accumulation of isolated notions, functions, modal categories, and their linguistic realization. Further, the notional syllabus is a collection of form/function correlates. In a natural communication, however, the relationship between them is relatively unpredictable. For another, the predictions of the communicative needs as epitomized in this syllabus, though possible, conflict with the creative aspect of language. The language used and the meaning expressed through it are infinite.

A more recent criticism deals with the syllabus’ negligence of grammar instruction and its inadequacy in producing learners with high-level accuracy. This tends to produce fossilization and classroom pidgin (Skehan, 1996, in Hinkel and Fotos, 2002). A study of university students’ written works (the students are assumed to be taught under the communicative approach) conducted by Setiono (2004b) reveals that the students’ grammatical competence is still low.

Thus, in order to overcome this problem, and at the same time, to promote higher level of grammatical accuracy, this paper proposes an interpretation based approach to teaching specific grammatical features of the target language to EFL learners. Since this approach requires students to interpret and comprehend tasks, it is intended to draw learners' attention to specific grammatical features of the target language in the input. In essence, it is students' comprehension rather than production that becomes central.

This paper begins with a brief survey of the nature and the goal of this approach as well as its theoretical rationale. It then proceeds to the discussion on the general principles for the design of interpretation task. Finally, it presents some empirical evidence supporting the relative effectiveness of this approach.

INTERPRETATION-BASED APPROACH AND ITS THEORETICAL RATIONALES

Interpretation-based approach to teaching grammar was first proposed by Rod Ellis (1995). This approach emphasizes the noticing of grammatical features in the input, the comprehension of their meanings, and the comparison between them with those occurring in the learner output. Its goals are threefold: (1) to help learners carry out a form-function mapping, i.e. to enable them to identify the specific grammatical features with their meanings, (2) to induce learners to notice grammatical features, i.e. to facilitate noticing, and (3) to compare the form-function mappings of the target language, i.e. to notice what gaps still exist between the student's developing linguistic system and the structure of the target language in the input.

Ellis's idea of introducing this approach was based on the assumption that higher levels of grammatical competence can be attained provided that direct intervention of grammar teaching is included in the students' inter-language development, and that acquisition occurs as a result of learners' attempt in processing input (Ellis, 2003). This assumption is, however, incompatible with Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982; 1985), which posits that the acquisition of L2 competence is determined by the exposure to comprehensible, meaningful, or relevant L2 input material. As for the grammatical competence, this hypothesis stipulates that knowledge of grammar is acquired in naturalistic setting, to which learners are exposed, suggesting that direct intervention of grammar teaching is not necessary.

The opposing views concerning whether or not to give grammar instruction to the students are derived from the controversial issue regarding the relationship between the dichotomy explicit and implicit knowledge, that is, whether explicit knowledge can be converted directly into implicit knowledge. There are two stances here: those who adopt non-interface position (i.e. no direct relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge) such as Krashen (1981), Zobl (1995), and Hulstijn (2002) and those who favor a strong interface position such as Smith (1981) and DeyKeyser (1998).

Explicit knowledge refers to a speaker's conscious knowledge about the language and its use. This knowledge typically manifests itself in some form of problem-solving activity, can serve as monitor or linguistic editor, and can be verbalized (Krashen, 1981; Ellis, 1995, 2003, 2004). Knowledge of grammatical rules, for example, can be subsumed under explicit knowledge. Implicit knowledge, by contrast, refers to unconscious knowledge of the language that a speaker manifests in performance. It manifests in some form of naturally occurring language behavior (for example, in a conversation), in which the speaker has no awareness of it (Ellis, 1995, 2003).

Interpretation-based approach adopts neither of the two positions above, but is designed on the basis of so-called weak interface, that is explicit knowledge facilitates the development of implicit knowledge (Ellis, 1995, 2003).

The theoretical rationales of interpretation-based approach owe much to the role of 'consciousness raising' (Rutherford and Sharwood, 1985), as well as 'noticing hypothesis' (Schmidt, 1990), and the central feature of this approach shares with 'input-processing instruction' (Van Patten, 1996). As has been said previously, the primary focus of this approach is to draw learners' attention to the specific grammatical features of the target language in the input in order to interpret and comprehend their forms and meanings. It is apparent therefore that there is a deliberate attempt to make the learners conscious of the features and the meaning. By doing this, it is assumed that learners' consciousness can be raised, and they will eventually be aware of the grammatical features (and their meanings) they are using. It should be noted here that interpretation-based approach is not necessarily synonymous with consciousness raising since the latter emphasizes the forms more than the meanings, and is directed to make learners aware of how some linguistic feature works (Ellis, 2003; see also Ellis, 1991 for the main characteristics of C-R tasks). However, the fact that meanings are the realization of forms, it is not unreasonable to argue that there is a degree of overlap between them.

It is further assumed that once students' consciousness has been raised through explicit formal instruction, they are armed with explicit knowledge, and this knowledge can help them notice linguistic features in the input, and in so doing can help them obtain intake (Ellis, 1995, 2003). The intake can be further enhanced if, as Ellis argues, learners are to compare what they have noticed in the input and what they produce in the output. Ellis calls this kind of comparison as 'cognitive comparison', substituting the commonly used term 'noticing the gap'. The use of noticing activity has been suggested to perform an interfacing function between the development of explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge (Fotos, 1993).

Finally, input processing has become the central tenet of this approach. The idea of input processing was originally introduced by VanPatten (1996). According to him, there are three key components in the input processing: (1) an explanation of a form-meaning relationship; (2) information about processing strategy; and (3) structured-input activities where learners are given opportunities to hear and see a grammatical feature in the input and then use it in the production of meaning. In fact, interpretation-based approach shares its central feature with the third component-structured-input activities. This is to say that the design of tasks in interpretation based approach obligates learners to focus and then process a specific grammatical feature along with its meaning in the input-a task that is also required in structured-input activities (Ellis, 2003). The subsequent section will elaborate the general principles employed in the design of interpretation task.

PRINCIPLES FOR THE DESIGN OF INTERPRETATION TASKS

Ellis (1995: 98-99) lists several general principles for the design of interpretation tasks. We will elaborate each of these below.

1. *Learners should be required to process the target structure, not to produce it.*

Since interpretation-based approach is input-based, comprehension becomes central, and production is deemed unimportant. The reason for this is that, as Ellis (1995) argues, input rather than output readily influences students' interlanguage development. Thus, in teaching of such a grammatical point as *gerund*, the task should require students to comprehend by attending and noticing the *gerund* form and its meaning (probably by asking students to com-

pare it with the present participle). As such, students are encouraged to use bottom-up processing. In this respect, this type of instruction differs from the general grammatical instruction (as it has been widely practiced today), which encourages students to use contextual information, i.e. to engage in top-down processing.

2. *An interpretation activity consists of a stimulus (either spoken or written) to which learners must make some kind of response.*

In the case of teaching *gerund*, for example, input provided for the students can be oral and written. The students hear several sentences containing both gerund and present participle together, and are then asked to identify them by writing the gerund forms only. Or they are provided with similar sentences to above, and are then asked to underline the ge-rund forms. Students' response can take other forms such as indicating true-false, checking a box, drawing a box, performing an action, choosing the correct L1 translation of an L2 sentence, agreeing or disagreeing with statements etc. These types can be employed in finding out whether the students have been successful in processing the target structure in the input. The choices over which types are appropriate depend, to a large extent, upon the nature of the grammatical features taught.

3. *The activities in the task can be sequenced to require first attention to meaning, then noticing the form and function of the grammatical structure, and finally error identification.*

Still in the case of teaching gerund forms, learners first need to comprehend the meaning of the sentences containing *gerund*, and then compare their meanings with sentences containing participles. The next step would be the students are led to attend to the form by noticing it. The final stage is to encourage learners to compare the grammatical form they have produced, as realized in their output, with the grammatical form in the input. In other words, they are to make so-called "cognitive comparison" or noticing the gap. In so doing, learners are made aware of what gap still exists in their development of interlanguage. Gap noticing has been assumed to be beneficial because it can serve as a means of hypothesis testing regarding the correct use of the target language.

4. *Interpretation tasks should require learners to make a personal response as well as referential response.*

This means that while learners have to make objective interpretation of the grammatical features they are learning, they are also provided with opportunities to relate them to their own life experiences. Apparently, this task has a semi-communicative value. Again, taking the example of teaching gerund, we can design a task that requires the students' objective interpretation as follow:

Indicate whether the following sentences are GERUND or *-ING PARTICIPLE*.

Write (G) if it is gerund, and (P) if it is *-ing* participle.

1. It was such an amazing film that everyone likes it very much.
2. Robert always avoids seeing his girlfriend at school.
3. His unexpected coming surprised everybody.
4. We saw our teacher crossing the street last week.
5. Smoking can cause lung cancer.
6. Working diligently on his paper, Susan began to type up the bibliography.
7. His father was unable to stop him from drinking.
8. We heard him crying last night.

This type of activity focuses students' attention on the gerund form by discriminating it from *-ing* participle. Obviously, students are required to make objective interpretation by analyzing the form of gerund construction. This activity can also be extended to consciousness-raising activities, in which the students' attentions are drawn to notice the differences of formal features of gerund and *-ing* participles.

Learners can also be asked to relate the tasks to their own lives in order to reveal something about their personal responses. If the stimulus is written, students can be asked questions by freely choosing the answers that have been provided by the teachers. For example, upon reading sentences such as:

1. What do you enjoy doing?
2. What does your mother/father/sister enjoy doing?
3. What do you dislike doing?

the students are to choose the gerund forms that fit to what they experience in their real life.

5. *Interpretation grammar teaching requires the provision of immediate and explicit feedback on the correctness of the students' responses.*

This might probably derive from the assumption that delayed feedback on the students' incorrect utterances can cause fossilization, or what Skehan (1996), quoted in Hinkel and Fotos (2002), calls 'classroom pidgin'. Given this fact, immediate rather than delayed feedback is considered crucial in order to avoid early fossilization. The teachers' correction on students' ungrammatical utterances can provide 'negative evidence', which is assumed to facilitate learners' noticing of the correct forms of the target language (Fotos, 2001).

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE OF INTERPRETATION-BASED APPROACH

At least two empirical studies are presented here. They have been conducted to prove the relative effectiveness of interpretation-based approach, which stresses the importance of input-processing instruction. One study was carried out by Tuz (1992), quoted in Ellis (1995, 1999). Studying Japanese university students of English with the target structure word order "psychological verbs" (such as like, attract, worry, disgust), Tuz, divided the learners into control group and experimental group. The former was given pictures containing sentences with psychological verbs order as stimuli, while the latter was given similar pictures but used the as a means of comprehension. The findings revealed that the group receiving comprehension-based instruction showed greater gains than those receiving production-based instruction on both a comprehension test and a production test.

Another study was done by VanPatten and Cadierno (1993). They conducted a study on object-verb-subject word order and clitic object pronoun in Spanish and compared the input practice group (comprehension practice) with the output (production practice). The results showed that the input practice group, who was asked to process input by means of interpretation-based grammar tasks, outperformed the output practice group, and they did as well on a production test. They suggest that production-based instruction only contributed to explicit knowledge, and comprehension-based instruction created intake that can lead to implicit knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to propose interpretation-based approach to the teaching of grammar. It is not meant to replace communicative approach, but rather to complement it. This approach is especially congruent with the teaching of grammar in EFL contexts, particularly in Indonesia. As the main objective of teaching English in EFL settings [Indonesia] has been to develop formal accuracy, that is mastery of specific vocabulary items, translation skills, and grammatical structures (Fotos, 2002), interpretation-based approach certainly provides new insights into how teachers can help learners, who are at the interim stages of their interlanguage development, comprehend the grammatical structures of the target language and eventually attain high level of language accuracy. Indeed, the results of empirical research to date have been supportive of input processing instruction (see Ellis, 1999 for a comprehensive summary of research results dealing with input processing instruction). In addition, with its emphasis on input processing (which is drawn primarily from psycholinguistic theory), interpretation-based approach is certainly compatible with and can contribute to current theory of second language acquisition.

However, since this approach is exclusively comprehension-based, and though findings of a number of input processing studies are in support of it, it remains unclear whether the grammatical items that have been noticed or comprehended by the learners can successfully be used in the production of language use. (Clearly, this is an issue that can become a fruitful area of research). Nor can it be warranted that what has been noticed or understood in the input can become intake. The ways the grammatical items pass from input to intake are affected by some factors such as:

1. Complexity: the appropriate level of difficulty of grammatical items.
2. Saliency: the need to notice or attend the grammatical items.
3. Frequency: the sufficient frequency of using the grammatical items.
4. Need: the relevance of grammatical items to students' communicative needs (Richard, 2002:41).

Furthermore, the strong emphasis on input processing may seem to give the impression that output is peripheral. However, although input is indisputably necessary for fostering and facilitating the acquisition of some grammatical features, it is by itself insufficient. Output can indeed play a role as a means of testing students' hypothesis of the target language they are learning and activating

their metalinguistic function, as well as developing automaticity (Swain, 1994; Gaas, 1997; see also Luciana, 1999). As a final remark, in spite of the limitations it suffers, interpretation-based approach can be used as one of the viable alternatives to the teaching of grammar in EFL contexts.

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