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The Communicative Approach to Teaching English Grammar

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Abstract

In today's globalized economy, English is essential for communication and career success. However, many Vietnamese graduates struggle with English proficiency, particularly in practical use. To address this, universities are reforming English teaching methods, though most innovations focus on the four key skills-listening, speaking, reading, and writing-while grammar instruction remains overlooked. The communicative approach has proven

effective in grammar teaching, allowing learners to apply grammatical knowledge in real-life situations. A strong foundation in grammar boosts confidence, enhances academic performance, and supports overall language development. Integrating communicative methods into grammar instruction is crucial for improving learners' ability to use English effectively in both academic and professional contexts.

Keywords: English Grammar, Communicative Competence, Communicative Approach

1. Introduction

In today's era of globalization, the importance of foreign languages, particularly English, is undeniable. As the international language of communication, English serves as a crucial tool for connecting nations worldwide. Consequently, educators and language experts have increasingly focused on improving English teaching and learning in schools.

In recent years, English teaching methods have undergone significant positive changes, particularly with the adoption of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. This approach emphasizes language learning for communication, with communicative competence as the ultimate goal. Learning English for communication aligns with Vietnam's integration trends and the National Foreign Language Project (2008-2020), which aimed to equip graduates with the necessary language skills to communicate confidently in multilingual and multicultural environments.

Despite advancements in teaching the four language skills-listening, speaking, reading, and writing-grammar instruction remains underdeveloped. There is a growing need to enhance grammar teaching through communicative methods to ensure learners can effectively apply grammatical knowledge in real-life communication.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Grammar and the role of grammar in English language teaching

According to Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, Richards and Schmidt (1985) define grammar as "a description of the structure of a language and the way in which linguistic units such as words and phrases are combined to produce sentences. Grammar typically considers both the meaning and functions of these sentences within the language's overall system.

Ur (1988:4) similarly conceptualizes grammar as "the way a language manipulates and combines words (or word segments) to form longer meaningful units." This operational definition emphasizes grammar's role in meaning construction.

Further refining this understanding, Brown (2001)^[2] characterizes grammar as "the system of rules governing the conventional arrangement and relationship of words in a sentence," highlighting its normative Due to significant differences among teaching methodologies, each linguistics researcher and language teaching practitioner holds distinct perspectives on the importance of grammar in the language acquisition process.

In 1622, Joseph Webbe, an educator and grammarian, asserted: 'No man can run speedily to the mark of language that is shackled with grammar rules' (cited in Thornbury, 1999) ^[9]. He argued that grammar could be acquired naturally through communication and practice across the four skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Since the early 1970s, Stephen Krashen developed the *Theory of Second Language Learning*, in which he dismissed the value of grammar instruction. His theory proposed that adults acquire language through two processes: **acquisition** and **learning**. This perspective implied that grammar instruction was largely ineffective. As Krashen stated, "The effects of grammar teaching... appear to be peripheral and fragile" (Thornbury, 1999) ^[9]. However, in recent decades, substantial empirical evidence has demonstrated that grammar instruction in the classroom

significantly enhances second language acquisition. These findings come from carefully controlled studies conducted in real classroom settings (Cowan, 2008) ^[5]. Therefore, it is inaccurate to claim that grammar teaching is irrelevant or unnecessary in English language instruction. As Brown (2001) ^[2] asserted, "No one can doubt the importance of grammar as an organizing principle of language for communication.

Celce-Murcia (1991) identified six key **variables** that can help educators determine the role of grammar in language teaching. These variables provide a framework for understanding when and how grammar instruction should be integrated into the learning process, ensuring that it effectively supports language acquisition and communicative competence.

	Less Important ←	Focus on Form →	More Important
Learner Variables			
Age	Children	Adolescents	Adults
Proficiency level	Beginning	Intermediate	Advanced
Educational background	Preliterate No formal education	Semiliterate Some formal education	Literate Well-educated
Instructional Variables			
Skill	Listening, reading	Speaking	Writing
Register	Informal	Consultative	Formal
Need/Use	Survival	Vocational	Professional

Fig 1: Variables Determining the Importance of Grammar

(Celce-Murcia, 1991) Celce-Murcia categorizes six common variables from least to most significant in determining the role of grammar instruction. These variables include age, proficiency level, educational background, language skill, register, and need/use. Understanding these factors helps educators tailor grammar instruction to suit learners' specific needs and learning contexts.

Each of these variables plays a crucial role in determining the extent to which grammar instruction should be emphasized in language teaching. Age influences how learners acquire grammar, with younger learners benefiting more from natural exposure and older learners requiring explicit instruction. Proficiency level also matters, as beginners often need structured grammar lessons, while advanced learners focus more on fluency and accuracy. Additionally, educational background affects how easily learners grasp grammatical concepts, with those from strong academic backgrounds typically adapting more quickly. The role of grammar also varies by language skill, as writing generally demands more explicit grammar instruction than speaking. Furthermore, register influences grammatical accuracy, as formal writing requires stricter adherence to rules compared to casual conversation. Lastly, need and use determine the level of grammar instruction required, depending on whether learners aim for academic writing, professional communication, or everyday conversation. By considering these factors, educators can design effective grammar instruction that enhances both accuracy and communicative competence.

2.2 Teaching English grammar at University of Transport and Communications Ho Chi Minh campus

In non-English-major programs at university of Transport and Communications Ho Chi Minh campus, grammar remains a mandatory course, as it plays a crucial role in

language learning. Defined as "the system of rules governing the conventional arrangement and relationship of words in a sentence" (Brown, 2001) ^[2], grammar is an essential component of any language. Therefore, both instructors and students place great emphasis on its teaching and learning, making the search for effective grammar instruction methods a key concern for educators and linguists.

Despite significant advancements in English teaching in Vietnam over the past few decades, many university and college grammar courses still rely on the Grammar Translation Method (GTM). This traditional approach involves presenting grammatical rules, followed by written or spoken exercises, and later applying them in less controlled communication activities. While GTM helps students master grammatical rules, it does not enable them to use these structures flexibly in real-life communication.

The traditional grammar teaching approach presents several limitations that hinder students' communicative competence. First, it is teacher-centered, meaning that most class time is spent on instructors explaining grammatical rules while students passively listen and take notes. Typical exercises include translating sentences between English and Vietnamese, filling in blanks, and correcting errors. Consequently, little emphasis is placed on developing students' communication skills, leaving them with limited opportunities to use English in practical contexts. Second, GTM relies heavily on rote memorization, which often fails to engage students, does not build their confidence, and may even discourage them from learning grammar altogether.

An alternative to the traditional method is the Communicative Approach (CA), which integrates grammar instruction into real-life contexts. This method promotes learning by doing, where students actively participate in group activities and collaborative tasks that require

interaction with peers and instructors. By engaging in meaningful communication, students internalize grammar rules naturally and effectively, enhancing both their grammatical accuracy and overall language proficiency.

2.3 Teaching Grammar Through the Communicative Approach

In traditional language teaching approaches, grammar holds a central position. These approaches typically rely on grammatical descriptions and analyses provided by linguists. As a result, grammar is understood as the set of rules governing how words are combined to form grammatically correct sentences. The linguistic units that constitute grammar include morphemes (the smallest units of meaning), words, word groups, phrases, clauses, and sentences. Traditional grammar instruction often focuses on these elements in a structured and systematic way, emphasizing accuracy and rule-based learning. However, while this approach ensures a solid theoretical foundation, it may not always facilitate natural language acquisition and effective communication in real-world contexts.

The Grammar-Translation Method is a traditional approach where the teacher plays a central role in the learning process. Most classroom time is spent explaining grammatical rules, while students listen, take notes, and complete exercises focused on structure and meaning rather than practical use. Typically, this method follows a sequence where students:

- a. Learn grammar rules explicitly,
- b. Practice them through controlled exercises,
- c. Apply them in loosely structured speaking or writing activities.

However, this approach lacks real-life context, making it difficult for learners to use grammar flexibly and appropriately in communication. As a result, students may understand grammar rules but struggle with applying them effectively in spontaneous interactions.

In contrast, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach recognizes grammar as a tool for communication rather than an end goal. Instead of focusing solely on memorizing rules, CLT-based grammar instruction integrates real-world scenarios and interactive activities where learners use the target structures naturally. This "learning by doing" methodology requires students to actively participate in group tasks, discussions, and problem-solving activities, ensuring continuous interaction between students and teachers as well as peer-to-peer communication. Through this process, students internalize grammatical structures more naturally and retain them better for real-life communication.

Brown (2001) ^[2] highlights the importance of integrating grammar instruction with meaningful communication contexts to help learners connect grammatical forms with their communicative functions. When students see grammar as a tool for expressing their ideas and emotions appropriately, they can apply grammatical rules more effectively in different real-life situations.

Brown also outlines five key principles for teaching grammar communicatively:

- a. Grammar structures should be introduced within meaningful communicative contexts. When learners recognize the relevance of grammar in real-world situations, they become more engaged in learning to express themselves correctly.

- b. Grammar instruction should align with learners' communicative needs. Teachers should regularly conduct needs analysis to ensure that the grammatical content taught is relevant to students' actual communication requirements.
- c. Grammar should support both fluency and accuracy in communication. Learners must develop the ability to use grammar correctly while maintaining a natural flow in conversation.
- d. Avoid overwhelming students with technical linguistic terminology. Using simple, accessible explanations enhances comprehension and retention. Instead of focusing solely on rules, instruction should emphasize appropriate and accurate usage in communication.
- e. Grammar instruction should be engaging and dynamic. Presenting grammar in a lively and natural manner helps motivate students to overcome the perception that grammar is a dry and difficult subject.

Cowan (2008) ^[5] further suggests incorporating communicative activities such as games, puzzles, role-plays, storytelling, discussions, presentations, and visual-based problem-solving into grammar lessons. A key feature of communicative grammar teaching is the shift in classroom roles: teachers act as facilitators rather than controllers, while students take on active roles in group or pair work. Instead of passively receiving knowledge, learners interact and communicate to complete tasks, fostering greater language retention and practical application.

2.4 The role of grammar teachers in communicative language teaching

In traditional grammar teaching methods, teachers play a dominant role, controlling the learning process, explaining grammatical structures in detail, and having students complete exercises based on those rules. However, in the Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT), teachers no longer hold complete control over classroom activities. Instead, students take an active role by working in pairs or groups, interacting with one another to complete tasks, while teachers observe, guide, and provide solutions when necessary.

In CLT-based grammar instruction, the teacher acts as a facilitator and organizer, ensuring that students engage in meaningful practice. According to Brown (2001) ^[2], effective communicative grammar teaching requires teachers to focus on the following key principles:

- a. Grammar structures must be presented in meaningful communicative contexts: when students see how grammar relates to real-life situations, they become more engaged and motivated to use grammar accurately in communication.
- b. Grammar instruction must align with students' communicative needs: teachers should conduct needs analysis to determine what students require for effective communication, ensuring that grammar instruction is relevant to their practical language use.
- c. Grammar should enhance both accuracy and fluency in communication: students need to develop the ability to use language correctly and naturally in various situations. This means balancing grammatical correctness with spontaneous and fluid speech.
- d. Instructors should not overwhelm learners with linguistic technical terms.

e. Grammatical structures should be presented as vividly and naturally as possible to motivate students in acquiring a subject as dry and challenging as grammar.

By following these principles, teachers in CLT-based classrooms help students internalize grammar in an engaging, interactive, and practical way, allowing them to apply their knowledge effectively in real-life communication.

3. The Process of Teaching English Grammar Using the Communicative Approach

Teaching grammar through the communicative approach focuses not only on conveying grammatical rules but also on enabling learners to use grammar flexibly in real-life communication situations. The teaching process typically includes the following steps:

1. Introducing the Context and Communication Situation

- The teacher provides a real-life scenario or a dialogue that incorporates the target grammar structure.
- Learners are encouraged to observe and infer how the grammatical structure is used within the specific context.

2. Exploring and Analyzing Grammar

- Learners discuss and discover grammatical rules through examples rather than receiving direct explanations from the teacher.
- The teacher provides guidance and support when necessary, helping learners understand the structure and function of grammar in communication.

3. Controlled Practice

- Learners practice using the new grammatical structure in guided exercises, such as fill-in-the-blank activities, sentence transformations, or answering structured questions.
- The goal is to help learners become familiar with using the structure accurately.

4. Extended Practice (Meaningful Practice)

- Learners apply the grammar structure in meaningful communication activities, such as role-playing, group discussions, or writing short passages using the learned structure.
- The teacher encourages learners to use grammar naturally rather than focusing solely on absolute accuracy.

5. Application in Real Communication

- Learners engage in interactive activities such as interviews, debates, storytelling, or essay writing using the grammar they have learned.
- The emphasis is on fluency and effective communication, integrating grammar use naturally into spoken or written exchanges.

4. Conclusion

Teaching English grammar through the communicative approach represents a shift from traditional, teacher-centered methods to a more student-centered and interactive learning environment. Unlike the Grammar-Translation Method, which focuses on rigid rule memorization and isolated exercises, the communicative approach integrates grammar instruction into meaningful contexts, enabling learners to apply grammatical structures effectively in real-life communication.

This approach highlights the role of grammar as a tool rather than an end goal, emphasizing its function in conveying meaning accurately and fluently. By incorporating communicative activities such as role-playing, discussions, problem-solving tasks, and collaborative exercises, instructors can create an engaging and dynamic learning experience that fosters students' linguistic competence and confidence.

To maximize the effectiveness of communicative grammar teaching, educators must adopt flexible teaching strategies that accommodate diverse learning styles and proficiency levels. Understanding students' individual needs and providing varied instructional methods will ensure that grammar instruction is both relevant and accessible. Ultimately, the communicative approach not only enhances grammatical accuracy but also promotes practical language use, preparing students for real-world communication in English.

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