A CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING (C-R) APPROACH TO TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR

Handoyo Puji Widodo
Politeknik Negeri Jember
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

Although grammar instruction has been de-emphasized in some communicative language teaching (CLT) classes, the need for teaching that skill is taken into account in the teaching of both ESL and EFL. This notion suggests that the issue be not whether grammar should be taught, but the issue be how to teach this skill so as to help learners gain comprehensive linguistic competence (Farrell, 2006). For this reason, one of the attempts to help learners minimize grammatical mistakes is the use of a consciousness-raising (C-R) approach to teaching English grammar, particularly for beginning EFL students.

Keywords: Consciousness-raising, English grammar, EFL

INTRODUCTION

The place of grammar in language teaching has always been a long stand debate among language teachers, particularly regarding the question of whether grammar should be taught. For example, Krashen (1987) argues that grammar is acquired naturally if learners are exposed to sufficient comprehensible input; therefore, it does not need directly to be taught. As a result, grammar teaching has, in some cases, been neglected in English teaching in favor of achieving communicative competence in language, especially in communicative language teaching (CLT) classes. On the other hand, Larsen-Freeman (cited in Mohamed, 2004: 228) argues that ”although grammar is naturally acquired, it does not simply mean that it should not be taught because learners need to have a sufficient knowledge of grammar.” On the basis of the two views, I do agree with Larsen-Freeman’s notion, which implies that teaching grammar is still considered crucial inasmuch as it can be used for a
language preparation or commonly called “pre-communicative activity” as defined by Littlewood (as cited in Richards, 2005) for communicating properly.

In my teaching experience, many students of mine often make mistakes in using proper grammar (e.g., tenses) when they write a composition (i.e., paragraphs or essays). For example, the students use simple present tense when they tell their own experience or past events. Moreover, the students sometimes over-generalize simple past tense verb forms (e.g., hit-hitted*, cut-cutted*, choose-choosed*, and flow-flowed*) in which the correct preterite verbs for hitted, cutted, choosed, and flowed should be hit, cut, chose, and flew respectively. It is widely acclaimed that such mistakes occur due to student native language interference because Bahasa Indonesia has no preterite and past participle verbs. For this reason, in an effort to minimize the second case, I would like to describe how to teach English grammar, particularly teaching simple past verbs using a C-R approach to novice EFL students.

CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING (C-R)

According to Ellis (2002), consciousness-raising (C-R) is defined as an attempt to equip learners with an understanding of a specific grammatical feature (e.g., tenses) and to develop declarative (describing a rule of grammar and applying it in pattern practice drills) rather than procedural (applying a rule of grammar in communication) knowledge of it. Richards and Schmidt (2002), further, provide a practical definition of C-R as follows:

In teaching, techniques that encourage learners to pay attention to language form in the belief that an awareness of form will contribute indirectly to language acquisition. Techniques include having students infer grammatical rules from examples, compare differences between two or more different ways of saying something, observe differences between a learner’s use of a grammatical item and its use by native speakers. A consciousness-raising approach is contrasted with traditional approaches to the teaching of grammar (e.g. drilling, sentence practice, sentence combining), in which the goal is to establish a rule or instil a grammatical pattern directly. (p. 109)
The main characteristics of C-R activities proposed by Ellis (2002) involve (1) there should be an effort to isolate a specific linguistic feature for focused attention; (2) the learners are provided with data, which illustrate the targeted feature and an explicit rule description or explanation; (3) the learners are expected to utilize intellectual effort to understand the targeted feature; (4) misunderstanding or incomplete understanding of the grammatical structure by the learners leads to clarification in the form of further data and description or explanation; and (5) learners are required, though not crucial, to articulate the rule describing the grammatical feature.

In short, in the C-R approach, learners are required to notice a certain feature of language; that is, sentence patterns, but there is no or minimum requirement for producing or communicating the certain sentence patterns taught. In the classroom, C-R activities could be conducted either deductively - sentence patterns are explicitly presented to students and followed by practice applying the patterns or inductively - sentence patterns are implicitly presented with some sample sentences, and learners are asked to induce the rule from the sentences given. Whether a grammatical pattern is taught deductively or inductively depends on the nature of language patterns and learners’ cognitive styles, as Eisenstein (1987) and Brown (2007) point out.

IMPLEMENTING CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING ACTIVITIES IN CLASS

Using the C-R approach, I propose five main model activities in order to able to assist students to internalize past verb forms ($V_{-2}$) and use such verbs properly at a later communicative stage. The five activities include (1) Verb Identification and Differentiation Type 1; (2) Verb Identification and Differentiation Type 2; (3) Verb Checking and Transformation; (4) Verb Transformation through a Crossword Puzzle; and (5) Verb Correction through a Short Passage. All of the activities are briefly described along with sample teaching lessons.

It is important to keep in mind that the successfulness of the proposed activities may vary from one teaching context to another. Understanding the potential strengths and weaknesses of particular contexts allows teachers to adapt such proposed activities in the classrooms.
This idea opens wide doors for teachers to redesigning the proposed activities for teaching English grammar. Another more crucial thing is that before a teacher proceeds to the proposed C-R activities, she or he needs to model how to work on such activities. Such an endeavor can be thought of as “teacher scaffolding,” enabling students to get support from a teacher that assist students in completing particular instructional tasks easily. In short, modeling the C-R activities to our students is a useful form of scaffolding (Yang & Wilson, 2006). Here are the proposed C-R activities that can be used in grammar classrooms.

**Activity 1: Verb identification and differentiation Type 1**

The goal of this activity is to direct the students to differentiate the regular and irregular verbs at an early stage. A teacher asks students to identify and differentiate regular and irregular verbs. These verbs are essential when expressing or constructing sentences using simple past tense. In this respect, the teacher provides two sentences, similar in meaning, but different in their verb forms in that the target is exposing the students to regular and irregular verbs. To facilitate the teaching-learning process, the teacher needs to provide a sample question. Throughout this activity, the students may work in pairs to build their confidence and allow them to share ideas with one another. Look at the sample lesson of the activity.

**Activity 1.** Read each pair of the sentences below and differentiate the underlined words in terms of the verb form. Note that the underlined words are the same in meaning. Work in pairs. Look at the example below.

1. a. Yesterday, we **provided** some dry goods to the tsunami victims.
   b. Yesterday, we **gave** some dry goods to the tsunami victims.

   **Example:**
   - The word ‘provided’ is a regular verb (V₁: provide)
   - The word ‘gave’ is an irregular verb (V₁: give)

2. a. The earthquake **affected** some buildings.
   b. The earthquake **hit** some buildings.
3. a. We visited our grandmother last week.
   b. We saw our grandmother last week.
4. a. She purchased a lot of clothes.
    b. She bought a lot of clothes.
5. a. My uncle accompanied me to the airport.
    b. My uncle took me to the airport.
6. a. They established an orphan foundation.
    b. They built an orphan foundation.
7. a. He asked me to do this job.
    b. He told me to do this job.
8. a. Achmad composed some letters.
    b. Achmad wrote some letters.
9. a. Maria reduced weight by jogging.
    b. Maria lost weight by jogging.
10. a. John comprehended this text well.
    b. John understood this text well.

Activity 2: Verb identification and differentiation Type 2

In the second activity, the teacher has the students identify and differentiate verbs (i.e. $V_1$ and $V_2$). The goal of the activity is to direct the students to comprehend the irregular verbs, which do not change anymore both in the first and second forms. In doing so, the simple present verbs using singular subjects are used as a clue for the students to identify and differentiate $V_1$ and $V_2$. In this instance, the students work individually. It is important to note that the simple present tense should earlier be taught so that the students have no difficulty doing the activity. The following sample lesson of the second activity is:

**Activity 2. Read these pairs of the sentences and differentiate the words typed in bold in terms of the verb forms. Note that**

1. a. This bus ticket costs me 10 Singapore dollars.
    b. This bus ticket cost me 10 Singapore dollars.
2. a. My mother cuts some bushes every month.
    b. My mother cut some bushes last month.
3. a. Our today’s profit hits five million rupiahs.
    b. Our last profit hit five million rupiahs.
4. a. Bill often **hurts** everyone.
   b. Bill **hurt** Maria yesterday.
5. a. He **lets** us go first.
   b. He **let** us go first.
6. a. Nora always **puts** the flower vases in the backyard.
   b. Nora always **put** the flower vases in the backyard.

**Activity 3: Verb checking and transformation**

This activity reinforces the first and second activities previously done. In this regard, the teacher asks the students to check whether the verbs given in the column are regular or irregular. To assure the students’ comprehension about the verbs learned (e.g., regular and irregular verbs), the teacher, further, asks the students to change the irregular verbs. In short, the goal of this activity is to get the students to be more aware of the regular and irregular verbs. Here is the sample lesson:

**Activity 3.** Check (✓) whether the words below are regular or irregular in the simple past tense. If irregular, change the verbs into the correct forms. Look at the example (Number 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Regular</th>
<th>Irregular</th>
<th>Change of Irregular Verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>become</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>became</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>bet</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>choose</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>compare</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>flow</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>fly</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>look</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>observe</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>pull</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>see</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>sing</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>try</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Activity 4: Verb transformation through crossword puzzle**

This activity is an alternative task for the students. The goal of the activity is similar to that of the Activity 3. This activity provides the students a chance to do a more challenging C-R-based activity through a crossword puzzle. To be interactive, the teacher can ask the students to do the activity in pairs and under time pressure. For example, the teacher gives the students 5–6 minutes to complete the puzzle. The winners are
appreciated by giving a reward (e.g., an extra credit for a grade), and the losers are punished by asking them to sing a song to entertain the winners, for example. Here is the sample lesson.

**Activity 4. Fill out this crossword puzzle. Work in pairs.**

What is the past tense of these verbs? Look at the example (Number 1).

![Crossword Puzzle](image)

---

**Activity 5. Read the following short passage. Underline the incorrect verbs and correct them. Look at the example. Work in pairs.** Share your answers with others.

The vacation that I **take** in San Diego at Thanksgiving is enjoyable. When I first **arrives**, I visited the museum. I see American Indian costumes, paintings of the war between the Indians and the Mexicans, and weapons used by both of the Indians and the Mexicans. Next, I **visit** the zoo; I **see** many kinds of animals and birds like deer, elephants, monkeys, foxes, and snakes. It is fun to see their movements and their colors. I watching not only the animals but also the other people who are visiting the zoo; how nice it be to see so many people enjoying themselves as I am! Finally, I **return** to my hotel; that evening I **watched** television until I fall asleep. The next day, I **take** a bus tour of the city and look at the high buildings, some open markets, and many restaurants. In the evening, I returned to the airport, and while I was waiting for my plane, I watching the people saying “hello” and “goodbye.” After my plane comes, I **climb** onto it, **sit** down, and feel happy; my trip had been peaceful and interesting, and it had left me with a pleasant feeling.
CONCLUSION

The activities described above are sample C-R ones for teaching English grammar, which can further be developed into more various activities. Although the C-R-based activities are much time consuming, and with this approach the learners are the recipients of the rule, such an approach is believed to be useful to internalize the rule into their comprehension about the sentence patterns taught (Widodo, 2006). Furthermore, the effort to do this is intended to prepare the students for working on productive activities (e.g., expressing or constructing grammatically correct sentences). For this reason, a teacher needs to be critically aware of which parts of grammar should be done through such an approach. It is also suggested that a teacher need to know when the students work individually or in pairs. If the exercises require complex cognitive skill, the teacher should get the students to work on the exercises given collaboratively in order to possibly reduce the student workload.

REFERENCES


